China in International Climate Governance

Policy formation, strategic narrative projection and role reception in European media

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Cover illustration

Picture taken by the author from an anonymous installation art in Ghent City Museum (STAM) on 1st December 2016.

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English summary

The overall research aim of this dissertation is to improve the current understanding of China's position in international climate governance. To be more specific, we frame China's participation in global climate negotiations into three processes: the formation, projection, and reception of both its climate policy and discourse. Towards this end, we have chosen to address different elements of this research in three articles, each one corresponding with one process and a gap in current research. **Article 1** is devoted to the policy formation process, we aim to understand how and under what conditions China constructs its climate policy through the lens of central-local governmental relations. Article 2 discusses the discourse projection process, we systematically analyze China's climate strategic narrative and the discourse coalition, which consists of the government, the epistemic community, and the official media. Article 3 in this dissertation concerns the reception process, we investigate the way that China's conceptions of its own role are received by external audiences. In terms of identifying a counterpart for China in the climate issue, we focus on the European media as the research target.

This article-based form of this thesis allows for the flexible and pragmatic use of different **theoretical and conceptual frameworks** to arrive at a better understanding of China's climate politics. For Article 1, *the system theory*, which stems from the research on central-local governmental relations, is adapted and applied. For article 2, we utilize *Strategic Narratives (SN)* as the main analytical framework. For article 3, inspired by insights from *role theory* in International Relations (IR), a two-dimensional analytical framework to examine China's role and motivation in international climate governance is developed.

This dissertation combines multiple **research methods**. Firstly, the method of *in-depth semi-structured expert interviews* has been applied in the investigation on the central-local governmental interaction in China's domestic politics. Secondly, discourse analysis, or to be more accurate, *critical discourse analysis (CDA)*, is applied in our exploration on how China has discursively constructed the international climate regime and its own position therein. Lastly, on the basis of a systematical examination of how China's climate role is perceived by the European media, we use the method of *framing analysis* in order to create a standard set of frames which can be applied to reliably measure China's role in international climate politics.

This doctoral research has resulted in new insights on the formation, projection and reception of China's climate policy. When it comes to the **formation process,** our analysis of China's central-local governmental relations reveals a trend of re-recentralization. Specifically, we clarify the two trial-and-error processes in the evolution of China's climate change policy. Our research on the **projection process** has identified three phases in the evolution of China's climate strategic narratives at two levels. On the system level, the strict division between developed and developing countries has been replaced by the narrative of 'a community of a

shared future of mankind'. On the national level, China as the victim of 'ecological imperialism' has given way to the new 'torchbearer' narrative. Finally, our research on the **reception process** shows that European media predominantly define China's role as a 'bloc member' and a 'leader', with a clear transition from the former to the latter since 2016. Meanwhile, there has been a continuation in China's ascribed motivations in European media coverage, as material-based factor have remained dominant overtime.

Building on these process-specific findings, **this dissertation argues that the relationship between China's ego role conception and EU's role expectations have moved from 'conflict' to 'consistency' from 2009 to 2018.** However, when it comes to the motivations ascribed to China, there is more dissonance. While China highlights value-based factors when structuring its conception of interests and identity in climate negotiations, the EU pays significantly more attention to material-based factors.

Samenvatting in het Nederlands

Het overkoepelende onderzoeksopzet van deze verhandeling bestaat erin om inzicht te verdiepen in China's positie in internationaal klimaatbeleid. Meer specifiek framen we China's participatie in globale klimaatonderhandelingen aan de hand van drie processen: de formulering, projectie en receptive van zowel klimaatbeleid als discours. We hebben gekozen om deze verschillende elementen aan bod te laten komen in drie artikels, die respectievelijk elk naar een hogergenoemd proces terugkoppelen en een lacune in huidig onderzoek opvullen. **Artikel 1** is gewijd aan beleidsformulering, waarbij we onderzoeken hoe en onder welke voorwaarden China klimaatbeleid vormgeeft, door de lens van centraal-lokale overheidsbetrekkingen. **Artikel 2** bespreekt het discours-projectie proces. In die context analyseren we systematisch China's strategische klimaatnarratieven en de discourscoalitie daarrond, bestaande uit de overheid, de epistemische gemeenschap en de officiële media. **Artikel 3** zoomt in op het receptie proces. Hier onderzoeken we hoe China's eigen rolconcepties rond het klimaatprobleem ontvangen worden door een extern publiek, met een onderzoeksfocus op Europese media.

Deze artikel-gebaseerde thesisvorm laat een flexibel en pragmatisch gebruik van verschillende conceptuele en theoretische kaders toe, die een beter inzicht in China's klimaatpolitiek verschaffen. Artikel 1 maakt gebruik van *systeemtheorie*, met betrekking tot onderzoek rond centraal-lokale overheidsrelaties. Artikel 2 maakt gebruik van Strategische *Narratieven* als analytisch kader. Artikel 3 inspireert zich op roltheorie-inzichten uit Internationale Betrekkingen, om een twee-dimensioneel analytisch kader uit te werken om China's rol en motivaties in internationaal klimaatbeleid te onderzoeken.

Deze verhandeling combineert verschillende **onderzoeksmethodes**. Ten eerste, semi-gestructureerde diepte-interviews zijn toegepast in het onderzoek naar de centraal-lokale overheidsrelaties in China's binnenlandse politiek. Ten tweede, kritische discoursanalyse is toegepast in ons onderzoek naar China's discursieve positie in het internationale klimaatregime. Ten slotte, gebaseerd op een systematisch onderzoek rond hoe China's rol wordt waargenomen in Europese media, gebruiken we framing analyse om een standaard-set frames te ontwikkelen die toegepast kan worden om China's rol in internationale klimaatpolitiek te onderzoeken.

Dit doctoraatsonderzoek biedt nieuwe inzichten rond de formulering, projectie en receptie van China's klimaatbeleid. Wat betreft het **beleidsformulering proces**, toont onze analyse een trend aan richting recentralisering. Meer specifiek verduidelijken we de trial-and-error processen tijdens de evolutie van China's klimaatbeleid. Ons onderzoek rond het **projectie** proces identificeert drie fases in de evolutie van China's strategische narratieven, op twee niveaus. Op het systeem niveau is de stricte scheiding tussen 'ontwikkelde' en 'ontwikkelingslanden' vervangen door een narratief van 'een gemeenschap met gedeelde toekomst van de mensheid'. Op het nationale niveau heeft 'China als slachtoffer van ecologisch

imperialisme' plaats geruimd voor de nieuwe 'torchbearer' narratief. Ten slotte toont ons onderzoek naar het receptie proces dat Europese media voornamelijk China's rol als 'bloc member' en 'leader' benadrukken, met een duidelijke transitie richting 'leader' sinds 2016. Ondertussen is er continuïteit geweest in China's toegeschreven motivaties in EU mediaverslaggeving, met een dominante rol voor *material-based* factoren.

Verderbouwend op deze proces-specifieke bevindingen, stellen we dat de relatie tussen China's eigen rolconceptie en de rolverwachtingen van de EU zijn verschoven van 'conflict' naar 'consistentie' van 2009 tot 2018. Wanneer het aankomt op de motivaties die China worden toegeschreven is er weliswaar meer dissonantie. Hoewel China waarden benadrukt bij het conceptualiseren van belangen en identiteit in klimaatonderhandelingen, schenkt de EU significant meer aandacht aan de *material-based* factoren die op het spel staan voor China.

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List of abbreviations

ADP	Ad Hoc Working Group on the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action
AE	Authoritarian Environmentalism
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
AOSIS	The Alliance of Small Island States
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CAS	Chinese Academy of Sciences
CBDR	Common but Differentiated Responsibilities
CBRC	China Banking Regulatory Commission
CDM	Clean Development Mechanism
CMA	China Meteorological Administration
COP	Conference of the Parties
CPC	Communist Party of China
DE	Democratic Environmentalism
EC	European Commission
EEC	European Economic Community
EP	European Parliament
ETS	Emission Trading System
EU	European Union
ENGO	Environmental Non-Government Organization
FYPs	Five-Year Plans
GHG	Green House Gas
INDC	Intended National Determined Contribution
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

IR	International Relations
MEE	Ministry of Ecology and Environment
MEP	Ministry of Environmental Protection
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MRV	Monitoring, Reporting and Verification mechanism
NDRC	National Development and Reform Commission
NEC	National Energy Commission
NLGCC	National Leading Group on Climate Change
NPC	National People's Congress
REDD	Reducing Emissions from Degradation and Deforestation
SN	Strategic narratives
STA	State Taxation Administration
UN	United Nations
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

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Introduction

1. Research puzzle

Research on China's position in international climate governance is sophisticated, since it combines political and economic questions with ecological change and control over the environment, while taking into account both domestic and international perspectives. This complexity has, on the one hand, made the application of a range of empirical, theoretical, and methodological means possible; on the other hand, it has led to the difficulty of organizing the research program in a comprehensive and coherent manner.

The overall research aim of this dissertation is to improve the current understanding of China's position in international climate governance. To be more specific, we frame China's participation in global climate negotiations into three processes: the formation, projection, and reception of both its climate policy and discourse. These processes are separated for conceptual and analytical reasons. These processes should not be seen as linear, but as mutually (re)constituted. Meanwhile, by putting China at the central stage, this thesis pushes back against Eurocentric tendencies in current academic studies.

For the *policy formation* process, we aim to understand how and under what conditions China constructs its climate policy through the lens of central-local governmental relations. As for the *discourse projection* process, we systematically analyze China's climate strategic narrative and the discourse coalition, which consists of the government, the epistemic community, and the official media. In terms of *reception*, we investigate the way that China's conceptions of its own role are received by external audiences. In terms of identifying a counterpart for China in the climate issue, we focus on the European media as the research target.

These three processes construct China's position in global climate governance. By tracing the formation, projection and reception of China's climate policy and discourse, an improved understanding of how China seeks to pursue policy outcomes, enhance policy and political legitimacy, and hence shape the international climate regime can be achieved. The overall research aim is achieved by answering three research questions, which are elaborated in the next section.

1.1 Research questions

To accomplish the overall research aim, we have chosen to address different elements of this research in separate articles. The article-based structure of this thesis allows for the flexible use of different theoretical frameworks and methods to arrive at a better understanding of China's climate politics. This is achieved by answering three research questions, each one corresponding with one process and a gap in current research:

1) How to understand China's domestic climate policy?
2) How to understand China's climate strategic narratives?
3) How is China's climate role perceived by European media?

Research question 1: *How to understand China's domestic climate policy?*

It is indisputable that China has been a major actor in the international climate regime. Since the 2009 Copenhagen climate conference, China has actively participated in negotiations and has occupied center stage, regardless of whether it is perceived as a negative or a constructive player. On the domestic level, the climate issue has been upgraded from a 'scientific issue' to an 'economic issue' and then on to a 'political issue', which fundamentally influences the ruling legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (Chmutina et al., 2012; Wang, 2013). This new development raises the question of which lens is most appropriate for gaining an understanding of the recent changes in China's domestic climate change policy. This fast-growing process leads to the first research question, looking at which lens is most appropriate for gaining an understanding of China's domestic climate change policy more generally.

In this dissertation, we have adopted the important but widely ignored perspective of central-local governmental interaction. Central-local relations have played an indispensable role in China's politics. The delicate allocation of authority and incentives between different levels of government has dominated policy processes. However, this aspect has been ignored in research on China's climate policy. As a response, instead of focusing on the discerption of China's climate policy and institutional settings, this dissertation aims to shed light on the mechanism that lays the foundation for the initiation, execution and evaluation of China's climate policy. This investigation is relevant for our comprehension of both China's participation in international climate negotiations and its domestic politics. On the one hand, for other countries and for the international climate regime, understanding the mechanisms behind China's domestic climate policy is the first step to making a well-informed decision on whether to engage, to fashioning an effective objective measurement, or at a minimum, to probing the credibility of China's promises; on the other hand, an exploration of China's climate policy contributes to an understanding of the recent re-centralization tendencies in China's politics, which is marked by the concept of a 'top-level design' (Schubert & Alpermann, 2019). This investigation of central-local governmental relations on climate policy works as a window through which the advantages or disadvantages of this more general re-centralization can be observed.

In order to answer this question, we apply an analysis framework adapted from the system theory, which engages with the allocation of power and incentives between different government levels. As such, the two dimensions of this framework, the 'cadre evaluation' and 'administrative subcontract' mechanisms, are investigated in detail.

Research question 2: *How to understand China's climate strategic narratives?*

The inquiry into China's climate policy formation is followed by the second research question, which looks at China's climate discourse projection. **To answer this research question, we focus specifically on China's climate discourse — namely, how it is formed and projected by the relevant actors towards both international and domestic audiences.** Although such an analysis is relatively absent from the current body of academic works, discourse is of high relevance to research on China's climate politics. This dissertation argues that taking the climate issue as a 'matter of nature' that is dominated by physical, technical, and economic aspects could be misleading by failing to capture the diversity, relationships, and intersubjectivity created by social interactions. In line with the constructivism assertion that the social reality is constructed rather than given, there should be more significant interest in how discourses are manufactured and developed in international climate affairs. In other words, climate change itself does not immediately produce (or call for) certain patterns of social change; instead, social change relies on actors' linguistic interpretations and proposed solutions. Discourse is even more relevant in China's context, as it has traditionally played a specialized role in China's socio-political milieu. By determining '(in) appropriate' formulations for discourse (that is, the vocabularies it uses and why it uses them), the Chinese government attempts to regulate what is being said and written — and by extension what is being done within the Chinese political system. These formulations or official terminologies are regarded as particularly useful for defining the government's goals. While this approach has always been common in China's domestic sphere, in recent years China has started to deploy diplomatic discourses in a more sophisticated way for foreign audiences as well, making up a significant part of China's foreign strategy. On realizing the importance of communicating with global audiences, China has attached great importance to strengthening its international voice and winning discursive power globally (Boc, 2015). Thus, understanding the substance behind the government's formulations is fundamental for making sense of the complexity of Chinese politics (Gang, 2012).

Under this context, as an alternative to mainstream research, this thesis turns to the 'matter of discourse' by highlighting the importance of discourses in shaping how the international climate order and actors' position therein is imagined and constructed (Levinger & Roselle, 2017). In line with Hajer's definition, we refer to 'discourse' as a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorizations that are produced, reproduced and transformed through a particular set of practices, thereby giving meaning to physical and social realities.

Research question 3*: How is China's climate role perceived by European media?*

After examining policy formation and discourse projection, this dissertation comes to the last research question on how China's climate role is perceived by the European media. In international climate governance, which has long been replete with implicit concepts

surrounding national roles, states have a host of national and international roles that constitute their identity, regulate their behavior, and shape the international social order (Harnisch & Maull eds, 2011). As one of the world's most influential countries, China is well aware of the importance of communicating its role to both global and domestic audiences to promote a positive image and build the legitimacy of its climate strategy. Its top leaders have repeatedly demanded on various occasions that stories about China be told well and that the Chinese voices be spread widely and internationally (Boc, 2015). Strengthening its voice and winning discursive power has therefore become a significant part of China's political strategy.

However, there remains another question of how effectively these voices are received by the receivers. **To figure out this puzzle, we systematically analyzed how China's climate role and motivations are received by the European media.** Both the European Union (EU) and China are indispensable actors in international climate governance. Over the past two decades, the EU has been the most consistent in not only calling for the establishment of binding international climate agreements but in backing up these calls with its own binding GHG (greenhouse gas) emission-reduction targets (Underdal, 1998; Men, 2014; Schreurs, 2016). It has exhibited a kind of unilateral leadership, 'setting the pace for others to follow'. While the rise of China is affecting many areas of global governance, nowhere is this more evident than in the case of climate change. The country has claimed the role of 'torchbearer' and has committed to more responsibility in international climate governance. Both the EU and China also make the climate change issue a priority in their bilateral relations. EU-China climate relations have also undergone a remarkable evolution over the past few decades. While these relations were mostly confined to the United Nations (UN) climate regime in the 1990s and early 2000s, the bilateral dimension has taken on a greater degree of importance ever since then, especially via the China-EU Partnership on Climate Change.

Guided by insights from role theory in international relations, we have built a two-dimensional analytical framework that focuses on coverage of China's role and motivations in European media (See **section 3.3**). By doing this, we aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of role interaction in international climate politics.

1.2 Research trajectory

This Ph.D. program began in 2013 with the aim to explore the EU and China's role changes in climate change policy alongside EU-China cooperation in the Post-Kyoto era. At that time, in the absence of a legally-binding framework to replace the Kyoto protocol, the main feature of international climate change governance was uncertainty (Schmidt, 2008; Oberthur & Kelly, 2008; Oberthur, 2011). As two main actors, the roles played by the EU and China were undergoing a profound change. The EU saw its leadership role being seriously challenged at the Copenhagen conference; China, meanwhile, seemed to have thrown off its role as a 'laggard' and 'straggler', although its new role in climate change policy was unclear at that time (Groen

& Niemann, 2013). Against this background, this research project had two main aims. Firstly, it aimed to identify and understand the role change of the EU and China in the post-Kyoto era. Secondly, it aimed to examine the interaction between these role changes and EU-China climate change cooperation at both the bilateral and the multilateral level.

After a thorough review of policy documents and secondary literature from both the EU and China, it didn't take long to make the decision to focus on China's domestic climate politics first. This selection was both theoretically and empirically driven. Theoretically, it was identified that one of the shortcomings of role theory is its tendency to 'black box' the state (Brummer & Thies, 2015). Role theorists often assume that there is a national role conception, without paying too much attention to the domestic political processes regarding how a role is selected to represent the state out of a number of potential competing roles. This gap was also confirmed by empirical observation. In the literature review, we found that surprisingly little attention has been paid to China's domestic political processes. Guided by background knowledge on Chinese politics, central-local governmental relations were chosen as the perspective from which a more profound understanding of China's domestic climate politics could be achieved. In 2016, 21 semi-structured expert interviews were launched in China. This field research played an important role in clarifying the analytical framework, which focuses on the allocation of power and incentives between different government levels. This led to the finalization of **Article 1**.

After this investigation of China's domestic climate political process, attention was switched back to EU-China climate relations. Document research using primary and secondary literature concerning bilateral climate relations found that an overwhelming number of studies adopted the approach of policy diffusion (Torney, 2015; Belis & Kerremans, 2016). This approach conceptualized EU-China climate relations as a series of channels through which climate ideas, policies, and institutions diffuse from one jurisdiction to another (Torney, 2015). Under this paradigm, China can do little more than act as a norm/policy taker or learner. However, in previous research it had become clear that China's climate role is formed in a complex process involving both material-based and normative-based considerations.

As a counterweight to the Eurocentric approach taken in most research, we adopted the opposite direction for this research, namely by looking at how the climate roles formed and projected by China are received by the EU. During this exploration, we touched upon studies on the strategic narratives (SN) analytical framework, especially the processes of formation, projection, and reception, which laid the foundation for the design of the other two research articles in this dissertation (Miskimmon et al., 2014; Roselle et al., 2014). Based on positivism research on China's governmental relations, **Article 2** looked at discourse. The construction and projection of discourse on the structure of the international climate regime and China's role therein, which is generated from the interaction between relevant actors in China's discourse coalition, was examined. Although this Ph.D. program didn't intend to 'be'

constructivism or worked from a constructivist framework from the beginning, after having pragmatically researched China's climate policies and discourses and attempted to come to a better understanding of China's international climate politics, it gradually became a constructivism research.

After this exploration of the formation and projection processes of China's climate policy and discourse, my research came to its final stage, which was role reception on the EU side. The main problem at that time was that a standard set of frames which could be used to reliably measure China's climate role was still missing. Insights gathered from role theory in the study of international relations and the research design of some of the framing analysis on climate change have guaranteed that this research is approached in a theoretically and methodologically ordered manner. On this basis, we developed the two-dimensional analytical framework used to measure China's role and ascribed motivations in European media. This framework was then applied in the analysis of selected European media reports, the results of which are presented in **Article 3**.

2. Literature review

The research in this dissertation is part of a wider debate on China and international climate governance; it is located at **the intersection of three broad subjects**: China's domestic climate politics, China's climate diplomacy, and EU-China climate relations. Regarding China's *domestic climate politics*, we go through the existing research on China's climate policies, institutions, and power relations. In terms of China's *climate diplomacy*, we classify the existing literature into five perspectives: interests, institutions, power politics, ethics, and ideas. On the subject of *EU-China climate relations*, we specifically focus on the academic studies that look at the 'role' of China. Literature on China's role in general EU-China relations and in EU-China climate relations are reviewed. At the end of each subject, research gaps which this dissertation aims to fill are identified. The overall structure of all the subjects and research gaps is visualized at the end of this section.

2.1 Domestic climate politics

Most existing research on China's domestic politics look at 'what', 'who', and 'how' questions — namely, the main climate policies, the major government actors, and the power relations between those actors. Two research gaps are identified: firstly, while most research focuses on the positivism perspective, constructivism research on China's discourse is rare; secondly, central-local governmental interaction in China's domestic climate policy processes is ignored.

2.1.1 Policy

China has become a central actor in international politics, making an understanding of its policies on climate change essential. Scholars have been tracing the evolution of China's policy

on climate change, as well as analyzing the main avenues it takes to accomplish its policy targets. In response to multiple environmental stresses, and after nearly three decades of high-speed economic growth powered in part by wasteful energy consumption and uncontrolled GHG emissions, the central authorities announced China's climate strategy in 2007 and introduced a series of initiatives aimed at bringing down emissions levels (Miao & Li, 2017).

The following two groups of policy documents are of special importance to this issue and have attracted scholarly attention. The first group of policy documents are *China's Five-Year Plans* (FYPs). This is a series of social and economic development initiatives that have been issued since 1953; they map strategies, set growth targets, and launch reforms for every region in the country. The FYPs constitute the country's overall development guidelines, and thus are of special importance to research on China's politics. The 11th-13th FYPs (2006-2020) contain targets concerning climate change. The second group policy documents are issued by the functional ministers (normally the NDRC) and are aimed specifically at the climate issue, assessing impacts and proposing strategies. These documents include *China's National Strategies to Address Climate Change* (2007), *National Strategies for Climate Change Adaptation* (2013), *National Plan (2014-2020) to Address Climate Change* (2014), *China's Intended National Determined Contribution* (INDC), and *China's Policies and Actions for Addressing Climate Change* (annually since 2008). Tremendous research has been done on these policy documents. Scholars have evaluated their content (Stensdal, 2012; Barbi et al., 2016), targets (Richerzhagen & Scholz, 2007; Zhang, 2015a), influences (Levine et al., 2009; Dou, 2013), efficiency (Lu, 2012; Betz, 2013; Stensdal, 2014), and more.

Collectively, these documents outline a comprehensive framework for China's national climate policy. Scholars have assessed the major strategies that can be taken to achieve GHG emission mitigation. The first strategy is improving energy efficiency in energy-intensive industries, with manufacturing, construction and transportation as key target industries. Energy-saving and efficiency is the most important measure that can be taken to mitigate GHG emissions; this is especially true during the early phases. Most studies have focused on the main government projects, such as the Top 1000 Energy Consuming Enterprises Program and funding for private investment (Levine et al., 2009; Yuan et al., 2012; Stensdal, 2012; Betz, 2013). The second strategy involves an economic structural transition through upgrading manufacturing technology and increasing the share of low-carbon industries. The main aim here is to improve and modernize the structure of industry, replacing traditional industries with new technology, and promoting tertiary industries. Academic studies have explored the direction, goals, priorities and means to promote the development of a low-carbon economy (Stensdal, 2012; Dou, 2013; Betz, 2013; Zhang, 2015a; Goron, 2018).

The third strategy is increasing the share of renewable energy in the total primary energy mix. China has set renewable energy targets at a national level and promulgated national legislation and regulations to safeguard energy security and to protect the economic and socially

sustainable development of the energy sector. Research has been carried out on the commitments and challenges (Wang et al., 2010), effectiveness (Liu et al., 2018) and international disputation (Hughes & Meckling, 2017) of China's renewable energy policies. The marketization mechanism constitutes the final area of academic research. Putting a price on carbon is considered a crucial step for China to achieve mitigation in a cost-benefit efficient manner. As the largest national source of GHG reduction, the development of China's Emission Trading System (ETS) is extremely interesting for researchers. Attention has been paid to its evolution from local pilot programs to a national market, to the included industries, and to allowance allocation (Chang & Wang, 2010; Hubler et al., 2014). On a deeper level, the tension between the state and markets in China's ETS implementation and its implications are also discussed (Lo, 2013; Goron & Cassisa, 2017).

2.1.2 Institutional setting

This section reviews research studies that focus on the government institutions concerned with China's climate politics. We remain aware that actors outside government system, such as market actors and civil society, are also involved in policy processes. However, the selection of these studies is based on two factors: firstly, the scope of this PhD program is mainly concerned with governments at different levels, and secondly, governments are the most important actors in China's context (this will be elaborated in the next section, which reviews the literature on China's climate power relations).

The National Leading Group on Climate Change (NLGCC) and its local branches

In China's political system, to highlight the importance of a particular issue, the State Council would create *ad hoc* groups consisting of related agencies. The relevant group the climate change issue, the NLGCC, is China's highest body dealing with climate change. Established in 2007, the NLGCC falls directly under the State Council and is led by Premier Wen Jiabao. Other members include 33 high-ranking officials representing almost all relevant ministries and other political organs. The mission of the leading group is to organize the implementation of national strategies and policies on climate change; to design the provinces' actions on climate change, energy saving, and pollution reduction; to review plans for international collaboration and strategies for negotiation; and finally to coordinate key provincial actions on climate change, energy saving, and pollution reduction. In line with its central role in China's climate governance, it has been the main focus of academic works (Richerzhagen & Scholz, 2007; Qi et al., 2008; Stensdal, 2012; Barbi et al., 2016; Stensdal, 2014).

Scholars have also looked into the relationship between the leading group and its local branches (Qi et al., 2008; Heilmann, 2008b; Kostka, 2013; Miao & Li, 2017). They observed that provincial leading groups were created after the initiation of the National Leading Group. And within few months, at the request of the provincial government, prefectures began to organize their own leading groups on climate change. This dramatic institutional development on

climate change — flowing from the central government down to local governments — triggered academic interest and served as an example of China's governmental relations.

The National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) and its local branches

The National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) is the authority with the most comprehensive mandate to address climate change issues. In contrast to the leading group on climate change, the NDRC is in charge of the practical work concerning climate policy. The daily work is carried out by the Climate Department. It is responsible for comprehensively analyzing the impact of climate change on socio-economic development; organizing and coordinating the formulation of key strategies, plans and policies dealing with climate change; taking the lead in the implementation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC); and collaborating with other corresponding parties in international climate change negotiations. As the other main climate actor in China, the structure and function of the NDRC and its relevant department provoked huge research interests (Stensdal, 2012; Liu, 2011; Kuhn, 2015; Hua et al., 2015; Barbi et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2018). It is worth noting here that in the institutional adjustment of 2018, The Department of Climate Change was transferred from the NDRC to the newly created Ministry of Ecology and Environment (MEE). However, the implication of the institutional change still remains to be seen in further research.

Other functional departments

Although the number of studies in this area is quite limited when compared with the amount of research done into the two abovementioned dominant actors, researchers (Stensdal, 2012; Barbi et al., 2016) have noticed that the following ministries are also involved in both leading bodies: Foreign Affairs, Science and Technology, Industry and Information Technology, Finance, Land and Resources, Transport, Water Resources, and Environmental Protection. Additionally, some other organs are represented in only one of the leading bodies – The State Forestry Administration, the China Meteorological Administration, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) are represented only in the NLGCC, while the China Banking Regulatory Commission and the State Administration of Taxation (STA) are represented only in the National Energy Commission (NEC).

2.1.3 Power relations

In addition to the policy and institutional setting, this section reviews the literature on power relations within China's climate politics system. It is argued that the central government has played a key role in defining the appropriate rules, institutions and modes of governance. The central government sets overall targets and goals, and it also acts as a supervising authority, sometimes enabling and at other times constraining the activities of the market and civil society (Miao & Li, 2017). Meanwhile, although operating under strict limitations, local governments

have also been able to leverage climate plans and actions to achieve their own gains. In fact, successful climate initiatives from the central government would inevitably depend on the extent to which its mandates are successfully translated into local practice.

An enormous number of scholarly works have been devoted to this special structure of the Chinese government, which is a unitary system with a strong hierarchy that places the central government at the pinnacle of authority. Theoretical frameworks such as the 'shadow of hierarchy' (Heilmann, 2008a; Heilmann & Perry, 2013; Kostka & Hobbs, 2013; Ran, 2013) or 'authoritarian environmentalism' (Gilley, 2012; Shahar, 2015) have been applied in the observation of China's climate politics. Researchers identified that these power relations have facilitated China's improvement concerning the climate issue on both the international and domestic levels (Beeson, 2018; Li et al., 2019). Internationally, China has shown its firm support for climate mitigation and the potential to be the climate leader following the US's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement; domestically, China has also achieved rapid progress, for example through its investment into renewable energy and the coming into force of the national ETS.

However, even more research has concentrated on the risks of this centralized governance structure (Eaton and Kostka, 2014; Zhu et al., 2015; Burgess, 2017; Tang et al., 2018; Li, 2019). The first problem is suboptimal policy implementation. While the system is deemed effective in terms of policy output, its efficiency in policy implementation is questioned. The aims of eco-elites can be undermined at the implementation stage, considering that being aggressive has no bearing on being effective. The second problem is the lack of public participation. China's citizenry and Environmental Non-Government Organizations (ENGOs) are forced to fulfil their roles and functions within the system's limitations and under the government's control. Most of them carry out complementary and supplementary roles by using informal arrangements. Their participation is limited at upstream stages (knowledge formation and policy opinion formation) and they are relegated to a low level of participation (attending informational meetings).

Looking through the research, it is possible to identify two possible adaptations that are suggested by the scholars. The first possible pathway is to spur public participation by linking climate change with other high-profile issues such as air pollution and land use, which are directly linked to public interests (Ahlers and Shen, 2018). The second pathway is norm diffusion and pressure at the international level (Gilley, 2017). International partners should pay more attention to policy diffusion and learning amongst local leaders in China. Through the 'trickle-up effect', successful local experiences may lead to adaptations at the central level and thereby influence authoritarian environmentalism.

2.1.4 Research gaps

Among the body of research on China's climate politics, two main research gaps can be identified. **The first gap is the failure to account for the influence of central-local governmental interaction in China's domestic climate politics.** Research on China's climate change policies has only recently looked at the central-local dimension, and thus the number of theoretical accounts is limited; likewise, the existing theoretical literature on central-local interactions in Chinese politics has so far not focused on climate change policy. In the Chinese setting, central-local governmental relations play a critical part in almost every policy domain, and climate change is no exception to this (Miao & Li, 2017; Lieberthal & Lampton, 1992; Cho, 2009). Central-local relations is one of the three fundamental types of relations in China's politics, alongside government-enterprise relations and party-government relations. Numerous research studies have contributed to this topic, and the insight generated by them provides valuable perspectives on how more accurate analyses of China's politics can be reached. Research on China's central-local governmental relations began in the 1970s, when economic reforms and the 'opening-up' was launched. The surprising rate of economic growth caught scholars' attention. After building an understanding of the overall structure of China's control-local relations, a series of mid-range theories were developed focusing on the level of (de)centralization in different policy fields. The common feature of these pieces of research is that they did not intend to identify the ideal systems that define China's central-local relations (for example, Chinese-style federalism); instead, they view central-local relations as a principal-agent structure within which factors such as rights, resources, and incentives can be flexibly distributed in various ways to meet the requirements of different fields at different times. By looking at how rights are distributed between the principal (the central government), supervisor (the provincial government) and agent (the local government), these theories provide a more accurate representation of China's governmental relations by distinguishing patterns in the various combinations of how control rights are allocated (for a detailed review of the literature on central-local governmental relations, see Article 1). However, it is surprising how rarely these insights have been applied to research on China's climate policy.

As a response, this dissertation aims to better theorize China's climate policy processes by building an analytical framework that stems from system theory, which is used in the analysis of China's politics. This framework is adapted here to make it more suitable for this analysis. In so doing, we aim to capture the evolution and future development of China's climate policy and to contribute to contemporary paradigm debates between central-local interactions (the 'shadow of hierarchy'), on the one hand, and plural and complex climate governance in China, on the other.

The second gap is the insufficient assessment of the Chinese climate discourse. In the field of modern Chinese studies, discourse analysis has been applied in the sphere of political science (Renwick & Cao, 1999; Gang, 2012; Alvaro, 2013; Boc, 2015); however, analyses in

the areas of climate change or the environment are fragmented and insufficient. There remains the need for a better understanding of the Chinese climate change discourse and its implications for the range of available policy options. Looking through the few research studies that exist on China's climate discourse, it is clear that overwhelming attention has been paid to the media, while the discourse of the government and epistemic community is still unexplored. This type of research has been transferred from the research agenda of developed Western countries — however, applying the same research design to the case of China should be done with ontological and epistemological caution. Firstly, China uses language differently, and the Chinese discourse has evolved in a culture with a completely different background in terms of histories, conditions, problems, issues, aspirations, etc.; secondly, the different formative political environment, and with it the different role of the media, cannot be ignored. To only look at climate discourse in the media is not a problem of incomplete research scope, but rather, it could lead to an adverse understanding of China's political and discursive environment.

The first identifiable piece on this topic is Tolan's (2007) article on the coverage of climate change in the Chinese media. With the aim to explore the influence of the central organs of Chinese media on media coverage and state policy, the author attempted to assess the scope and tenor of news coverage of climate change through an analysis of coverage in both official and independent media. Since then, this approach has been applied by several scholars in the social sciences. There have been numerous single-case studies that focus on China's climate discourse in the media (Wu, 2009; Tseng, 2015; Han et al., 2017; Wang, 2018b; Duan & Miller, 2019). As a typical example, Han et al. (2017) investigated Chinese media coverage on climate change over the period of 2005 to 2015. By analyzing news articles from five mainstream Chinese newspapers, the authors identified how six frames ranging from conflict to collaboration are applied. Other research has been devoted to the substantial differences in reporting styles between party-sponsored media and market-oriented media in China (Pan & Chan, 2003; Luther & Zhou, 2005; Duan & Miller, 2019). Since climate change is a topic rife with contested discourses involving governments, scientific communities, industries, and nongovernmental organizations, researchers assume that the various types of interaction between ownership and the media production process might result in more diversity in climate change reporting. The results revealed that there are significant differences, with market-oriented newspapers including more diverse viewpoints, conflict frames, and environmental nongovernmental organizational sources, while party-sponsored newspapers employed more domestic political viewpoints, science, and scientific uncertainty frames.

To fill this research gap, this study goes beyond a pure analysis of media reports. By identifying and highlighting China's 'discourse coalition', we try to establish the grounds for research on China's climate discourse. In contrast to the relatively separated roles of the government, the media, and the epistemic community in liberal democracies, these three actors form a 'discourse coalition' in China. This coalition provides a textual corpus based on which a deeper and more culturally informed understanding of China's strategic narrative on climate

issues can be gained. In this dissertation, particular attention is paid to the relationship between, and the functions of, the main actors in this coalition during the formation and projection of China's climate discourse (**Article 2**).

2.2 International climate diplomacy

This approach looks at China's climate politics from an international perspective. Given the country's increased importance in international governance in general, and in the international climate regime in particular, China's climate diplomacy has drawn much attention, and a variety of explanations of its approach to climate issues have been put forward in the current literature. In this review, these various perspectives are summarized into five branches: interests, institutions, power politics, ethics, and ideas.

2.2.1 Interests

The dominant perspective on China's climate diplomacy is the rationalist interest-driven perspective (Lewis, 2008; Rong, 2010; Moore, 2011; Gong, 2011; Wu, 2013; Never & Betz, 2014; Li, 2016; Hilton & Kerr, 2016; Dong, 2017; Howard, 2018). Research in this strand assumes that each country rationally seeks wealth and power by comparing the cost and benefits of alternative courses of action (Sprinz & Vaahtoranta, 1994; Moore, 2011). The four main concerns in this regard are economic development, energy security, technological and financial support, and vulnerability to climate change.

The foremost concern is **economic development**. Climate change is an area where the conflict between poverty and sustainable development is apparent, as the issue is closely linked to economic development, resource management, poverty alleviation, and energy use (Heggelund, 2007). Thus, although attention to climate change has increased, climate change has not surpassed economic development as a policy priority (Lewis, 2008; Christoff, 2010). This cost-benefit calculation has to a large extent shifted since it was first introduced in the 12th Five Year Plan Period (2011–2015). China's economic policies have prioritized a transition from energy-intensive growth based on heavy industry, exports and investment, to a more balanced economy characterized by slower growth, an increasing role for services and domestic consumption, and a focus on innovation and low-carbon technologies. This transition has given China the opportunity to re-formulate its priorities in international climate negotiations (Moore, 2011; Never & Betz, 2014; Hilton & Kerr, 2016; Dong, 2017).

The link between climate change and the core interests of the Chinese government is even clearer in the realm of its energy policy, particularly surrounding **energy security**. In its search for growth and macroeconomic stability, China has grown increasingly concerned about its growing dependency on imported oil. China's leaders view improved energy efficiency and the use of renewable energy as a crucial component of its strategy to redress climate change and improve energy security at the same time (Heggelund, 2007; Lewis, 2008; Moore, 2011).

Technological and financial support constitutes another incentive for China to take part into international climate negotiations (Delman, 2011). These have long been the two most highly valued benefits that China has sought through international climate change negotiations. Since the beginning of the negotiations over the Kyoto Protocol, China has insisted that technology transfer and financial assistance from developed countries to developing countries should be a prerequisite for the latter to take action toward mitigation (Wang, 2009; Rong, 2010; Wu, 2013; Wu, 2016).

Lastly, China's **vulnerability to climate change** is an emerging issue in the country and could contribute to elevating the climate change issue on China's international and domestic agenda in the future (Rong, 2010; Li, 2016; Dong, 2017; Harris, 2017). China has suffered from various ecological issues due to climate change, including reductions in agricultural outputs, sea-level rise, and climate-related natural disasters. China thus has strong incentives to promote alternative sources of energy and energy efficiency.

2.2.2 Institutions

The third strand of research focuses on institutional explanations (Jeon & Yoon, 2006; Christoff, 2010; Conrad, 2012; Ong, 2012; Kwon & Hanlon, 2016; Huan, 2017; Howard, 2018). This thesis argues that the influence of domestic political institutions and political culture on China's climate foreign policy must be considered. Tensions exist within the Communist Party over which path will best sustain China's political stability and economic growth, as well as over the practical limits of energy/climate policy innovation and implementation (Christoff, 2010). Thus, it is important to consider the role of bureaucrats, who have substantially constrained China's policy options in addressing climate change due to hierarchical divisions in the bureaucracy.

In a seminal work by Jeon and Yoon, the authors noticed a **hierarchical division of bureaucracy** (Jeon & Yoon, 2006). The Chinese bureaucracy under the socialist system is characterized by high politicization and division between hierarchies. As a bureaucratic socialist state, China has depended on a hierarchic structure of political elites in the decision-making process. This hierarchical bureaucratic system, however, has been accompanied by the dominance of conservative bureaucrats, who are dependent on the institutional inertia of the traditional authoritarian mechanism. The complex features that stem from such a politicized and hierarchic system in the Chinese bureaucracy have limited the potential for horizontal contacts among political authorities. As a result, China's main policies concerning issues such as economic development or state sovereignty can easily precipitate political cooperation, while policy tuning based on functional cooperation and exchange, as is the case with environmental protection measures, has often been overlooked (Conrad, 2012; Kwon & Hanlon, 2016).

Another aspect is China's **socialist market economy**, in which relations between the energy industry and the market, between the state and enterprises, and between different administration levels are three important factors. Firstly, in spite of a reform-driven partial market economy, the energy industry has been largely controlled by the government in terms of national policy; secondly, the relationship between the state and enterprises has been reshaped by reforms and the open-door policy, yet this also distorted the market-price structure by uniting many contradictory factors, such as 'planned' and 'market' mechanisms; lastly, under administrative decentralization, institutional dislocation within different sectors and the administrative isolation of local authorities have further distorted the energy problem (Jeon & Yoon, 2006).

Institutional factors outside the government system also attract scholarly attention, among which the **civil society** has been the most prominent. Recent studies have noted that when the ever-enhancing eco-awareness of civil society reaches a point strong enough to cause a comprehensive policy-reorientation, China will perform more strongly in international climate negotiations — until then, its performance will be much weaker (Never & Betz, 2014; Huan, 2017; Howard, 2018).

2.2.3 Power politics

The last group of research explains China's climate diplomacy from a power politics perspective (Terhalle & Depledge, 2013; Belis, Kerremans & Qi, 2015; Hochsettler & Milkoreit, 2015; Schreurs, 2016; Gupta, 2016). Research studies in this strand make the point that the governance-related processes of institutionalization and norm diffusion have failed to socialize China into the existing world order. Thus, they argue that the complex politics of climate change cannot be properly understood without reference to deeper **geopolitical trends** in the wider international system (Terhalle & Depledge, 2013). The slow progress of climate change negotiations is not only due to the politics of the issue itself, but also to the absence of a new political arrangement regarding material power structures, normative beliefs, and the way that order is managed amongst great powers. Without such a grand political bargain, which could be promoted through a forum of major economies whose wide-ranging remit would go beyond any single issue, the climate change regime is only ever likely to progress in a piecemeal fashion (Depledge, 2006).

The common standpoint of scholars in this branch is their acknowledgment of the impact of changes in the **balance of power** and of diverging **normative world views**; however, their opinions diverge when it comes to their perception of China's position in the international climate power structure. Some studies consider China to be one of the most decisive actors, alongside the US and the EU. The most significant evolution in global climate politics in recent years has been the redefinition of power relations, which has affected the three actors that are in many respects the most powerful and influential: China, the United States and the European

Union (Belis, Kerremans & Qi, 2015; Schreurs, 2016). Studies have explored how a mix of power politics, economic interests and normative environments are shaping and re-shaping multiple bilateral relationships between the US, China and the EU. Tentative steps toward stronger collective action, featuring a more decentralized but potentially more inclusive approach, have also been identified.

Other scholars position China as an emerging power within the global North-South context (Hochsettler & Milkoreit, 2015; Gupta, 2016). They maintain that emerging powers are transforming the institutions and habits of global climate governance. There is no doubt that emerging countries are seeking and gaining new influence on global rulemaking. Since the Copenhagen negotiations, groups of rising powers (such as the BASIC countries) have begun to coordinate their positions and have made their first promises to reduce at least the pace of the rise of their greenhouse gas emissions. Thus, examining their evolving positions regarding their own responsibilities and capacities provides important insights into the role of emerging powers in global climate governance.

2.2.4 Ethics

Another school of scholars seeks to explain China's involvement in the international climate regime from an ethics perspective (Tian & Whalley, 2008; Delman, 2011; Hallding, 2011; Stalley, 2013). The principle of **emission equity** has been high on China's agenda. Equity is more than just convenient rhetoric. Discussions around this topic may well represent an attempt by China to operationalize the differentiated responsibility principle. Scholars argue that it is important not to underestimate the strength of the normative component – the notion of basic fairness and equity – as a fundamental driver for China. The normative influence of equity goes back further than and runs wider than climate change negotiations (Hallding, 2011; Delman, 2011). The importance of equity originated from a sense of inequality and of being peripheral to the world's political and economic systems, which became linked with a worldview in which inequality is seen as a dominating feature. Concepts of sovereignty and non-intervention are also important norms for China's foreign policies, particularly for the many relationships with roots in colonial histories (Hallding, 2011).

Under these circumstances, focusing on narrow economic interests misses a critical part of the story. It is worth noting that **environmental justice** arguments are critical to understanding China's behavior in international climate negotiations, such as its opposition to emission targets and its resistance to taking on more costly commitments. China has used arguments about environmental justice to pursue its own interests, and correspondingly, beliefs about environmental justice also structure its conception of its interests. In practice, China's pursuit of equity is reflected in its interpretation of the Common but Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR) principle. Since its initial interpretation of non-participation in the Kyoto Protocol, the connotation of the CBDR principle has undergone a profound change. The principle only

loosely addresses asymmetric responsibilities and participation without spelling out specifics, and as a result there has been ongoing debate surrounding its interpretation (Tian & Whalley, 2008). In this context, scholars argue that the interpretation of CBDR that is agreed upon by parties to the negotiation is therefore the key to the level of China's participation in the post-Bali process (Stone, 2004; Delman, 2011; Hallding, 2011; Stalley, 2013).

2.2.5 Ideas

The ideational perspective mainly includes considerations of international image/status, sovereignty, and legitimacy (Heggelund, 2007; Wang, 2009; Delman, 2011; Christoff, 2010; Wu, 2016; Harris, 2017). China's stance in international negotiations is influenced by its pursuit for a positive **international image**. There have been growing aspirations within China to be recognized internationally as a global superpower. China's desire to enhance its status as a responsible great power has made it sensitive to pressures stemming from international climate change norms, as well as to the potential negative impact on its reputation that results from its isolation in climate negotiations and social opprobrium from its free-riding behavior (Heggelund, 2007; Wang, 2009; Wu, 2016; Harris, 2017). The rigidity of China's negotiating stance can be seen as a forceful and nationalistic assertion of its **sovereign rights**; this is in keeping with its growing confidence in its global identity and is consonant with its strong responses to perceived challenges from the US, other Western countries, multinational corporations and international civil society groups on issues such as human rights, trade, currency revaluation, Tibet and internet freedoms (Christoff, 2010). This is especially the case when considering China's humiliating history of foreign invasion and the long period of isolation by Western powers that it endured (Wang, 2009). China's climate diplomacy also links to considerations of **legitimacy**. The Chinese leadership uses its engagement with climate change to garner both national and international legitimacy for its 'radical' national climate policies and its approach to global climate governance architecture, which are aligned with a paradigmatic shift towards a more sustainable growth strategy (Delman, 2011).

2.2.6 Research gap

In addition to the research gap that exists on the domestic level, attention paid to China's discourse from an international perspective is fragmented and insufficient as well. As demonstrated above, most research has contributed to a positivism approach to the interests, institutions, and power politics and so forth — however, discourse is to a large extent ignored. The few exceptions to this focus on a comparison of climate discourses between China and other countries (Midttun et al., 2015; Hochsettler & Milkoreit, 2015; Xie, 2015; Pandey & Kurian, 2017; Pan et al., 2019). The scope of these research studies is rather narrow. They only delved into how China and other countries constructed the concept of 'climate change' discursively, leaving the diagnostic and prognostic mechanisms unexplored. Scholars have highlighted the value of comparative research for discovering similarities and dissimilarities in

climate change information that people receive in various countries. It is argued that only through mutual understanding can the barriers confronting international climate negotiations be removed and potential paths forwards be achieved. There are comparisons between China and other countries that exhibit similar tendencies. For example, Hochsettler & Milkoreit (2015) examine the BASIC countries' own joint statements and their individual and collective submissions within multilateral climate negotiations, and by so doing they identify the rationalist and principled arguments that these countries have made about the climate burden-sharing requirements that developed countries, developing countries, and they themselves should face in terms of global climate governance. More research on comparisons between China and other countries focus on different cases, such as the global North and South, established and emerging economies, etc. Lei (2015) systematically examined and compared how US and Chinese newspapers portrayed climate change. The results showed both convergent and divergent pictures from the two countries' newspapers, noting that these pictures were distinctly shaped by the sociopolitical realities of each country. The author also cautioned against making simplistic explanations of the results and offered culturally informed interpretations.

As a response to this gap, this dissertation thoroughly explored China's climate discourse. *On a national level,* we look at China's climate identity, including its role, values and goals in international climate affairs; *on a systems level,* we analyzed China's perception of the international climate regime and its strategic intention to influence this system according to its interests. Guided by the analytical framework offered by the strategic narrative (SN), this analysis combines diachronic and synchronic dimensions. We critically analyze China's climate strategic narratives at different phases, and additionally we zoom-in on critical moments that potentially challenge the country's existing narrative positions. In doing so, this dissertation contributes to existing literature by providing a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of China's climate change narratives, with a specific focus on the strategic narrative produced by the discourse coalition.

2.3 EU-China climate relations

2.3.1 China's role in general EU-China relations

Mainstream academic attention has been paid to China's general role as it is perceived by the EU in their bilateral relations. The success of the European Economic Community (EEC) in establishing official relations with China in 1975 was acclaimed as 'probably the most far-reaching event to take place in the field of the Community's external relations' and considered 'a development of prime importance in world politics' (European Parliament, 1975). Since then, scholars have noted the fast progress that has been made in bilateral relations, especially in the fields of trade and economy (Shambaugh, 2004; Scot, 2007a; Griese, 2006; Men, 2012). With the coming into force of the EC-China *Trade Agreement* in 1978 and the

updated *Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement* in 1985, economic relations between the two have developed dramatically. By 2004, total trade volume had grown forty-fold, reaching 175 billion Euros since the official relations were built up.

This achievement boosted China's role so that it became a comprehensive and strategic partner of the EU — 'the increasing maturity and growing strategic nature of the partnership' was noted in the 8th EU-China Summit in 2003 (the European Commission, 2003). This landmark EU-China strategic partnership has occupied the central stage of academic research. Scholars have highlighted the prominence of this landmark partnership for bilateral relations (Scott, 2007b; Casarini, 2012; Maher, 2016; Michalski & Pan, 2017). Firstly, this partnership indicated a comprehensive relationship that extends beyond prosaic trade and investment issues to address some of most pressing global political and security challenges that the two entities face (Maher, 2016); secondly, it marked the first time that the EU had attempted to act strategically with regard to China by going beyond its traditional role as the junior partner of the US; and lastly, it represented an effort to make a shift from traditional state-to-state relations to relations at the European level (Casarini, 2012).

During the early years of the EU-China strategic relationship, China was commonly viewed as a **student**, while the EU took on the role of **normative teacher** (Scott, 2007b). The EU believed that China would be easier to manage and that the chances of it becoming a revisionist power would be much diminished if China became enmeshed in the full panoply of international institutions (Shambaugh, 2004). Thus, the EU's strategies toward China were summarized by the researchers as fourfold: first, to engage China further, both bilaterally and on the world stage, through improved political dialogue; secondly, to support China's transition to an open society based upon the rule of law and respect for human rights; thirdly, to encourage the integration of China into the world economy by bringing it fully into the world trading system, as well as by supporting the process of economic and social reform that is ongoing in China; and fourth, to raise the EU's profile in China (Griese, 2006; Michalski & Pan, 2017).

However, this 'honeymoon' was soon disrupted by unsatisfactory developments in certain issues in bilateral relations, such as disputes over market access, market economy status (MES), and an arms embargo. Scholars began to question whether the EU-China partnership could be considered as 'strategic' in practice (Geeraerts & Holslag, 2007; Narramore, 2008; Geeraets, 2011; Gonçalves, 2012; Men, 2012; Wouters & Burnay, 2012). The conflict between EU's value-based normative role and China's interest-based pragmatic role gradually became evident. The EU and China remain divided over their core political values, geopolitical priorities, and conceptions of the world order. *Politically,* China rejects many of the norms, principles and values that the EU embraces and seeks to promote around the world, including Western-style constitutional democracy, the rule of law, and the existence of an independent news media. *Secondly,* the main strategic and security interests of the EU and China do not quite overlap, with China mainly focused on the Asia-Pacific region while the EU prioritizes

Russia's new assertiveness, the fragile economic and political situation in Ukraine, and its immediate Eastern neighbors. *Lastly*, the EU and China do not share a common vision for the composition and management of the current international order. It is uncertain to what extent a growing China will continue to accept the main rules and institutions of the current global order. Motivated by its dual identity, which combines the reality of it being a developing country with its aspirations to be a world power (Geeraerts & Holslag, 2007), China has not only changed the distribution of power in the international system but also the distribution of identities therein, and in so doing challenged the EU's assumption that China can be socialized and persuaded to adopt Europe's post-modern values (Geeraets, 2011).

Starting in the mid-2010s, under the ideological concept of 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation', China began to create its own set of multilateral initiatives and institutions — such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the New Development Bank — to support its role as an increasingly important actor. For EU-China relations, these initiatives have reflected China's ambitions to gain access to the European market and to a secure home for its investment through the expansion of transport volumes and infrastructure across Eurasia. This new situation has provoked a scholarly discussion on how these actions have led to a transformed perception of China's role (Maher, 2016; Smith, 2016; Godement & Vasselier, 2017; Yu, 2018; Baark, 2019). Regardless of their likely economic benefits, these Chinese strategies sound a cautionary tone that China was developing China-centered institutions that it could use to impose its own standards in relations with EU, while at the same time ignoring EU norms (Godement & Vasselier, 2017; Baark, 2019). China has shown the potential for transforming its role from that of a **reformist** who wants to renegotiate its position within the current international order and acquire more respect to a revisionist power that seeks to initiate a contest over the existing global order's basic rules, practices and principles (Maher, 2016).

2.3.2 China's role in EU-China climate relations

In addition to the EU-China relationship in general, an increasing number of research studies have covered different aspects the bilateral relationship, among which economic and trade (Scott, 2014; Smith, 2014; Grosse, 2014; Wigell, 2016; Wu & Jensen, 2017) relations, political relations (Sautenet, 2007; Song, 2010; Men, 2011; Men & Pardo, 2014; Christiansen et al., 2019), and security issues (Stumbaum, 2007; Kirchner et al., 2016; Ghiasy & Zhou, 2017; Dorussen et al., 2018) are the most prominent fields. **However, EU-China relations on the climate change issue has received monotonous and insufficient academic attention.** Very few studies have attempted to underpin China's climate role with adequate theoretical frameworks or empirical evidence.

This is quite surprising since the climate issue plays an important role in EU-China relations and on each party's respective policy agenda. For the EU, climate leadership has been widely

recognized as being one of the sources of its attractiveness (Holslag, 2010); for China, climate change is an important area in which it can co-determine international norms, practices, rules, and power distribution from the start, as opposed to being a rule-taker in existing, Western-dominated areas (Belis et al., 2015). In bilateral relations, the EU and China have made solid progress on climate cooperation, culminating with the China–EU Partnership on Climate Change, which sparked further cooperation on climate change issues (Carrapatoso, 2011).

Most research on EU-China climate relations is limited to the empirical level (Scott, 2009; Holslag, 2010; De Matteis, 2010; Romano, 2010; Men, 2014; Biedenkopf & Torney, 2014; Yan & Torney, 2016). For example, Belis & Schunz (2013) have traced the historical dynamics of the relationship between China and the EU through three time periods: the early days of the United Nations (UN) climate regime (1992-2001), the road to the Copenhagen summit (2001-2009) and the post-Copenhagen phase, featuring the launch of the Durban Platform (2009-). The authors found that the EU and China are gradually emerging as strategic partners in global climate governance, but that severe uncertainties regarding the future of the climate regime persist. Torney's (2014) article on the EU's institutional setting surrounding the climate issue is another typical example of this. That study noted the EU's limited impact in the contemporary international politics of climate change, which, to be more specific, results from its insufficient ability to achieve a deeper strategic understanding of China's preferences with respect to a climate change policy, and of the domestic politics and institutional actors underpinning those preferences; the author tried to find an explanation for this by looking at the EU's institutional arrangement. Vertical and horizontal fragmentations were identified: vertically, there is little coordination between the activities of the Commission and the Member States, while horizontally, ongoing dialogues between the EU and China are separated into multiple ministerial or senior-official level connections in different policy fields, such as climate change, energy, the environment, forestry, etc.

The only studies that tried to theorize EU-China climate relations took an approach of policy diffusion (Carrapatoso, 2011; De Cock, 2011; Torney, 2012; Torney, 2015; Belis & Kerremans, 2016). This approach conceptualizes EU-China bilateral climate relations as a channel through which climate ideas, policies, and institutions can diffuse from one jurisdiction to another (Torney, 2015). Under this scheme, the EU's strategy vis-à-vis China is to act as 'a catalyst' by trying to speed up impending policy changes in China that are in line with the EU's priorities (De Cock, 2011). Meanwhile, Chinese authorities are deemed to have strong incentives to absorb the expertise of, and attract investment from, the EU. Therefore, China has been keen to learn from the EU and obtain the latter's assistance, both in terms of technology-sharing and policy design, for its low-carbon transition (Liu et al., 2019). While this approach undoubtedly captures some of the issues facing EU-China climate relations, it missed an important factor influencing the effectiveness of bilateral relations — namely, the specific situation of China.

For example, De Cock (2011) focused on the bilateral dialogue between the EU and China on energy and environmental issues. Built on the assumption that norms and socialization processes lead to normative change in international politics, this research found that the EU helped to overcome the traditional understanding in China of the environment and the economy as competing concerns, thereby enabling the elaboration of the 'business case' for a low-carbon economy. Similarly, Torney (2015) had focused on EU-China bilateral intergovernmental climate relations. His study drew on research concerning the diffusion of norms, policies, and ideas to advance a fine-grained understanding of the nature and extent of the influence of the EU in climate change politics. By emphasizing the importance of material and ideational domestic factors in shaping diffusion processes, it addressed the question of whether and under what conditions the EU has succeeded in diffusing climate policies and institutions to China. Instead of looking at an overall picture, Belis and Kerremans (2016) looked at the clean development mechanism (CDM) within EU-China climate relations over four periods. Setting out from the hypothesis that material incentives associated with the CDM have contributed to the internalization of climate protection norms in China, this research identified a discernible effect of the EU's CDM on socialization-related phenomena such as raising climate change awareness in emerging economies in China.

2.3.3 Research gaps

In the body of research on EU-China relations, overwhelming attention has been paid to China's general role in EU-China bilateral relations, while very few studies have attempted to understand China's climate-specific role with an adequate theoretical framework and empirical evidence. Within the few existing research studies on the topic, most have taken the perspective of norm diffusion. This approach conceptualizes EU-China bilateral climate relations as a channel through which climate ideas, policies, and institutions diffuse from one jurisdiction to another. Under this scheme, the EU's strategy vis-à-vis China is to act as 'a catalyst' by trying to speed up impending policy changes in China that are in line with the EU's priorities. We argue that this approach is Eurocentric and has to a large extent oversimplified both China's role itself and the underlying explanations for it, which should combine a specific mix of politics, economic interests and normative environments.

As a counterweight to this Eurocentric approach, this thesis attempts to remove itself from the norm leader/taker division that dominates research on EU-China climate role relations. This research comes to terms with China's changing role in global climate politics, and better appreciates the different contextual and structural factors that define China's position. This is accomplished by opening up to a wider range of role concepts, with the key roles being 'braker', 'bloc member', 'bridge-builder', and 'leader' (**Article 3**). By focusing on China's climate role as it is perceived by the EU, this dissertation contributes to another current research gap concerning China's role in a broader sense. To be more specific, most current research utilizes either single-case studies or longitudinal cross-country studies that compare China with

other countries, but few scholars look at how China's climate roles are perceived by other countries. This dissertation holds the point that role reception not only reflects the structure of expectations of the wider international environment, but that it also has a constructive power with regards to China's own role conception and performance (Benes, 2010; Harnisch, 2011; Wehner, 2015). Hence, the effects on China of role reception by other countries should be an area for exploration. By looking into China's counterpart in international climate governance, this research on role perception in the European media would contribute to filling this research gap.

In summary, the research gaps that this dissertation aims to fill are visualized in **Figure 1**.

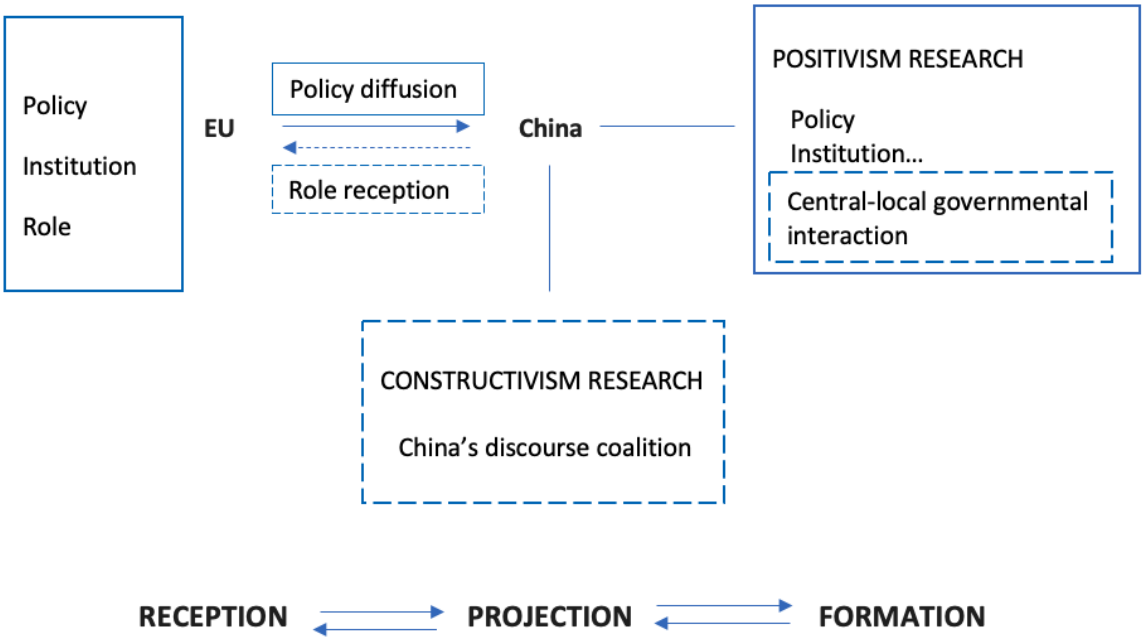

Figure 1: *Literature on EU-China climate relations (note: dotted lines mark the contribution of this PhD program)*

3. Analytical frameworks

This section puts forwards the analytical frameworks applied in the thesis. The article-based form of this thesis allows for the flexible and pragmatic use of different theoretical and conceptual frameworks to arrive at a better understanding of China's climate politics. For Article 1, which focus on China's climate policy formation, system theory, which stemmed from the research on central-local governmental relations, is adapted and applied. For the second article on China's climate discourse projection, we utilize Strategic Narratives (SN) as the main analytical framework. Finally, in the research on role reception in the EU media, the two-dimensional analytical framework used to examine the role and motivations is to a large extent inspired by insights from role theory in International Relations (IR).

3.1 System theory

In the analysis of China's climate policy formation, system theory is adapted and applied (Zhou, 2007; Zhou, 2014; Zhou, 2016). Originating from the research on China's central-local governmental relations, this framework addressed the insufficient level of theorization that has been conducted surrounding China's climate policy formation (See **2.1.4 Research gaps**). We have adapted this framework to fit the case of climate policy better. As one of the three fundamental types of relations in China's politics research (alongside government-enterprise and party-government relations), research studies on central-local governmental relations have a long-standing history. Research dates back to the 1970s, when the launch of economic reforms and the opening-up triggered a surprising rate of economic growth despite violating the traditional Western advice that was contained in plans for rapid stabilization and privatization (Qian & Xu, 1993; Maskin et al., 2000). Since then, it has provided a valuable perspective on how more accurate analyses of China's politics can be reached (Zhou & Lian, 2012; Chung, 2016). However, it is surprising how rarely these insights have been applied to research on China's climate policy. As a research study with an International Relations (IR) background, this thesis uses this mechanism as a starting point for the exploration and calls for a deeper engagement with China's local theories, which are relatively ignored in the current research.

In the analysis of China's climate policy formation, the relation between central and local governments is theorized into a 'principal-agent' structure, within which factors such as rights, resources, and incentives can be flexibly distributed according to the requirements of different policy fields under different situations. In practice, the central government assigns multiple tasks to local-level governments. The central government holds the power of governing the cadre system and can use rewards and punishments within that system as leverage; correspondingly, as the agent, local officials must respond to the tasks assigned by the central government so that they can fulfill their political career prospects by doing a good job within the cadre evaluation system. This governmental interaction is modeled into an analytical framework which bring together two core dimensions. The first dimension is the allocation of power, which is represented by the level of administrative subcontracting; the second is the allocation of incentives, which seen in the strictness of the cadre evaluation system between the central and local governments. Based on these two dimensions, it is possible to build a matrix that allows for more accurate observations of China's climate policy formation mechanism (**Figure 2**).

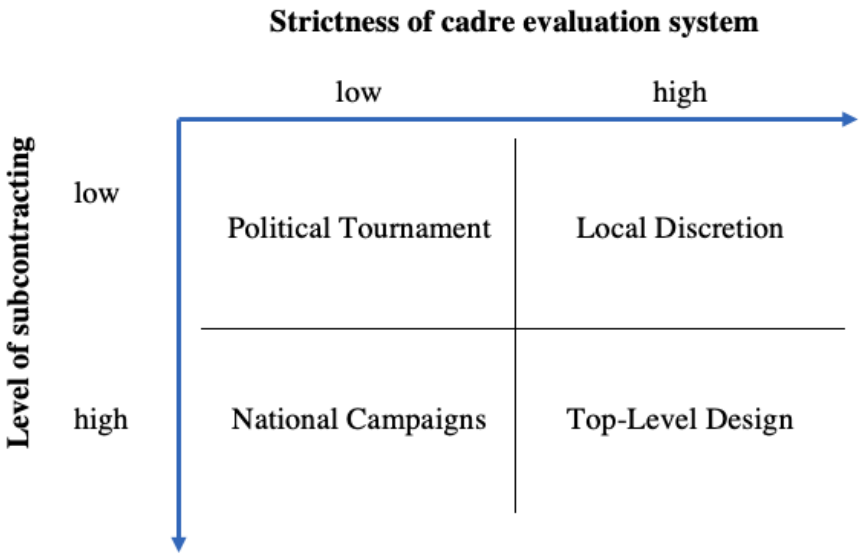

Figure 2. *The allocation of power and incentives between central and local governments.*

3.2 Strategic narratives

To answer the second research question of how to understand China's climate discourse, we analyzed both the discourse itself and the institutional context, which co-determines what can be said meaningfully. For the analysis on discourse, we applied the theoretical framework of strategic narratives. By definition, strategic narratives are representations of a sequence of events and identities, a communicative tool through which political actors attempt to give determined meaning to the past, present and future in order to achieve their political objectives. These narratives are 'strategic' as they suggest short- and long-term goals or desirable end-states and how to get there; this is based on representations of the situation, the key actors, and 'causal beliefs' about how social and political processes operate and thus how certain actions could be expected to play out (Antoniades, Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2012: 5). This analytical framework helps to achieve a balance between constructivism and positivism in research on China's climate policies (See **2.1.4 Research gap**). We will elaborate China's climate strategic narratives at both the system level and the national level. System narratives are about the nature of the international relations structure. Actors use a system narrative to describe how the world is structured, who the players are, and how political interactions work (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle, 2014). For the system narrative, we pay particular attention to China's perception of the international climate regime and its strategic intention to influence this system according to its interests. National narratives, meanwhile, indicate the role nations should play in the world, and the kinds of interests worth pursuing. Conceptually, they are highly related to a nation's identity, which is based on its beliefs, position, reputation, prestige, credibility, etc. (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle, 2014). In terms of national strategic narratives, we specifically look at China's climate identity, including its role, values and goals in the international climate regime.

In addition to the discourses themselves, the institutional context of these discourses is also analyzed. Discourse does not take place in a social vacuum, but in the context of existing institutional practices. It is important to analyze the practices in which discursive dominance is based and by what means specific contentions are furthered. In other words, institutional arrangements are seen as pre-conditions for the process of discourse-formation (Hajer, 1996). Based on the existing literature (Ellermann, 2013; Zeng, 2016) and our own empirical observations, we look at the concept of China's climate discourse coalition, which consists of the government, the epistemic community, and the media. We elaborate the function of these actors in the projection of China's climate strategic narratives by figuring out three questions: how China's top leaders initiate its climate strategic narrative through consensus-building at the central level; how the epistemic community legitimizes the leaders' strategic narrative and subsequently fills in the vagueness of this narrative in an incremental manner; and how the full-fledged concepts are distilled by the official media and fleshed out in controlled discussions and reports. In summary, this analytical framework is visualized in **Table 1**.

Dimensions	**Levels**	**Description**
Structural	System narratives	China's perception of the international climate regime and its strategic intention to influence this system according to its interests.
	National narratives	China's climate identity, including its role, values and goals in international climate affairs.
Agency	Top leaders	How China's top leaders initiate its climate strategic narrative through consensus-building at the central level.
	The scientific and policy community	How this community legitimizes the leaders' strategic narrative and subsequently fills in the vagueness of this narrative in an incremental manner.
	The official media	How the full-fledged concepts are distilled by the official media and fleshed out in controlled discussions and reports.

Table 1: *Analytical framework of the analysis on China's climate strategic narratives.*

3.3 Role theory

In **Article 3,** which explored the portrayal of China's climate role in European media, we integrate insights from role theory to better capture the external perception of China's climate

role. In international climate governance, which has long been replete with implicit national role concepts, states hold a host of national and international roles that constitute their identity, regulate their behavior, and shape the international social order (Harnisch & Maull eds, 2011: 1). With these circumstances in mind, we take the 'role' as a crucial notion and the point of departure for empirical-based theoretical role analyses. In line with the social constructivist approach, a 'role' is conceptualized as a social position that is constituted by ego and alter expectations regarding the purpose of an actor in an organized group (Thies 2010). Here we refer to the 'alter' part of role conception — in other words, the role prescription — to conceptualize how China's climate role is perceived. According to Holsti (1970: 239), 'role prescription' is defined as the norms and expectations that cultures, societies, institutions, or groups attach to particular positions. Based on the role conceptions offered by existing role theory research (Holsti, 1970; Le Prestre, 1997; Elgstrom, 2007; Harisch & Maull, 2011), we differentiate four role prescriptions: 'leader', 'bridge-builder', 'bloc member', and 'braker'. Moreover, in order to better capture the complexity around China's climate role, we also categorized the ascribed motivations according to material-based factors which include political and economic considerations, as well as norm-based factors which consist of ideational and environmental considerations. By doing this, not only is the research question on China's climate role reception clarified, but the foundation is also set for future research on the conflict/consistency between China's ego and alter role concepts, and hence its effect on global climate governance (See **2.3.3 Research gaps**).

In this thesis, the media is taken as the medium for China's climate role reception. This is based on the consideration that the mass media has been described as an important arena whereby media companies are agents in the production, reproduction, and transformation of the meaning of climate change (Carvalho, 2010) and climate governance (Schafer & Schlichting, 2014). For the public, the mass media is the central agent for raising awareness and disseminating information; for the decision makers, the mass media constitutes a central forum for the discussion and legitimization of climate governance. Mass media debates indicate the importance of the topic and related societal views and preferences. Therefore, media coverage of climate change creates a situation that is conducive for governments to act, or hard for them not to act in the face of perceived pressure to initiate a policy response (Schmidt et al., 2013). Thus, as an importance source of alter role prescription for both the public and decision makers, the way that the media frames the main actors' roles is highly influential on the public and decision makers' perceptions and policy choices concerning China's participation in international climate governance.

4. Methods and data

4.1 Methods

This dissertation worked with flexible and pragmatic theoretical frameworks, and adapts them using several different methods, which this section describes and justifies in broad terms. This section provides detailed insights into the choice and execution of methods used for each particular part of the research. In the following sub-sections, we elaborate the methods used to approach the data in each article.

4.1.1 Expert interviews

The method of **in-depth semi-structured expert interviews** has been applied in **Article 1** and **Article 2**, which focus on central-local governmental interaction in China's domestic politics. In this instance, 'expert interviews' is the qualitative research method that uses experts as an information source. The aim is to discover interviewee's explicit, tacit, professional or occupational knowledge and experiences, which result from the actions, responsibilities, and obligations of their specific functional status within an organization/institution (Bogner & Menz, 2009). Since the research question of **Article 1** is concerned with the analysis of a specific configuration of knowledge combined with, sometimes behind the scenes technical and process-related details from multiple groups of actors, thus, from a methodological perspective and as a result of their specific interpretive knowledge ('know why') and procedural knowledge ('know how'), experts are of relevance to this exploration within China's political system.

The semi-structured interview format has allowed the inquiry to be both consistent and flexible. Semi-structured interviews are sufficiently structured to address specific dimensions of the research question as they are informed by a corpus of key questions that determine the course of conversation, while also leaving space for the study participants to offer new meanings to the topic of study (Galletta, 2013: 2). This advantage facilitates the application of multiple probing techniques by the interviewer to obtain more information or additional clarification on certain answers (Barriball & White, 1994). It is also important that close contacts with the Chinese scholarly community have made the expert interview process more applicable for this research program. It would less promising to embark on fieldwork research in China without a proper set of connections, cooperation partners and affiliations with trusted and valued organizations. The connections that were built over the course of seven years of study and academic activities have broadened the pool of interviewees to include many other academics, policy makers, and stakeholders.

For **Article 1** and partly for **Article 2**, we conducted **21** in-depth semi-structured expert interviews through fieldwork in Beijing from 12 April to 27 May 2016. Government branches, official think tanks, universities and research institutions, environmental NGOs, and state-

owned emission enterprises were covered through this fieldwork. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling strategies was applied. We handpicked the informants to be included in the sample on the basis of a judgement of their diversity and typicality. Contacts were made with a range of institutions beyond those, including immediate connections and the small climate policy circle that is centered in Beijing. By doing this, any bias towards a certain constituent group or school of thought was avoided. The primary contacts who responded to an interview invitation were asked to identify further individuals or institutions that could contribute additional insights. Through referrals and introductions by these 'gatekeepers', it was possible to get access to other individuals whom it would have been impossible to contact directly by phone or email. The sampling process came to an end when the saturation point was reached. All the interviews were conducted in a face-to-face manner, with only one exemption (in which the interview took place via telephone).

The interviewees included 5 (former) officials, 3 government consultants, 4 scholars, 4 experts from environmental NGOs, and 5 managers of state-owned emission companies. To better extract the experts' knowledge according to their respective areas of expertise, four versions of interview guidelines were designed, with separate guidelines for officials, scholars, NGOs, and practitioners. Of the **officials**, three are or have been involved in China's international climate negotiations, while the other two work at the intersection between local and central policies in China. For the **government consultants and scholars**, this dissertation prioritized two groups of informants. The first group consists of experts on China's climate policy; they work in China's top universities and government-backed think tanks. All interviewees were involved in China's climate policy processes in areas such as law making, international negotiations, policy evaluation, etc. The second group included political scientists whose research mainly focuses on China's central-local governmental relations. They provided theoretical and practical insights. Hence, both groups are well informed about the policy dynamics and evolving thinking in this field. **Environmental NGOs** are gaining influence in today's plural and complex governance structure. Although their operations are under strict government management and they are not directly involved in the policy processes, they are equally important for the investigation. Information obtained beyond the government-originated rhetoric is a main triangulation tool for reviewing official narratives. **Emission companies** are at the frontier of policy implementation. We interviewed five managers who are responsible for GHG emissions in a Fortune 500 state-owned mineral company, in order to observe more closely how the central and local governments interact in practice. By doing this, the interviews incorporated each of the core components of China's climate politics.

All of the interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the informants and were then transcribed manually by the lead author. After a thorough reading of the transcripts, the data were coded under five themes: the evolution of China's climate policy, the criteria of the theoretical framework, the emissions trading system, the impact of international climate negotiations, and future developments. The findings are then conceptualized and interpreted in

light of the selected theoretical concepts and approaches. The interviews are also triangulated using a thorough analysis of primary and secondary literature, which allows us to achieve a greater depth of answers in terms of penetration, exploration and explanation, and thus an insight into governance dynamics can be generated.

For the ethical considerations, an informed consent form — which includes the researcher's background, the research purpose, the interview guide, and confidentiality conditions — were presented to all the interviewees in the contact stage. It was guaranteed that information gathered during the interviews will be used solely for the purposes of the Ph.D. project and that any references to the interviews will only be made anonymously, without revealing the identity of the sources.

4.1.2 Critical discourse analysis

The method of discourse analysis, or to be more accurate, critical discourse analysis (CDA), is applied in Article 2, which explored how has China discursively constructed the international climate regime and its own position therein. While most research on China's climate policy were from the normative and empirical perspective, this article aimed to provide a comprehensive study on China's climate strategic narratives. As a social constructivism study, we hold the ontological stance that discourse is a form of social practice which both constitutes the social world and is constituted by other social practice. Under this circumstance, we are specifically inspired by the CDA as it contributes a particular focus on discourse and on relations between discourse and other social elements. In line with Hajer's research, we do not simply analyze what is being said, but also the include the institutional context in which this is done and which co-determines what can be said meaningfully (Hajer, 1996). In terms of discourse, we adapted and applied the analytical framework originated from the strategic narratives (SN) and examined China's climate discourse from the system/national levels and synchronic/diachronic dimensions. For the social context, we are interested in China's unique discourse context. In the article 2, we noticed the intimate bound between the government, the epistemic community and official media, towards which we assigned the concept of 'China's climate discourse coalition'. We also investigated how China's climate discourse has been dominantly produced by this discourse coalition and relatedly, how the counter-discourse is suppressed by sidelining the green public sphere.

Since CDA is a loosely interconnected set of different approaches, there is no single theory or method that is uniform and consistent throughout it (Gee & Handford, 2013). For the sake of consistency, we begin this section by giving definitions of concepts and their relevance to the methodology adopted in this dissertation. Of the many possible definitions, this thesis takes **discourse** as the general idea that language is structured according to different patterns and that people's communications may be different when they take part in different domains of social life (Jogensen & Philips, 2002: 1). According to Hajer (1996: 44), Discourse is defined

as a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities. On this basis, **discourse analysis** is taken to be the study of language in use. It is the study of the meanings that people give language and the actions that people carry out when using language in specific contexts. Discourse analysis is also sometimes defined as the study of language above the sentence level, or of the ways sentences combine to create meaning, coherence, and accomplish purposes (Gee & Handford, 2013: 1). Hence, discourse analysis is not only a branch of linguistics but also a contribution to the social sciences, taking into consideration that it involves studying language in the context of society, culture, history, institutions, identity formation, politics, power, and all the other things that language helps to create and that, in turn, render language meaningful in certain ways and able to accomplish certain purposes. Here discourse analysis primarily aims to understand why a particular understanding of the problem at some point gains dominance and is seen as authoritative, while other understandings are discredited (Hajer, 1996: 44). As one of the most influential approaches of discourse analysis, **critical discourse analysis (CDA)** brings the critical tradition of social analysis into language studies and thereby contributes a particular focus on discourse and on relations between discourse and other social elements, such as power relations, ideologies, institutions, social identities, and so forth (Fairclough, 2001).

Research studies that apply CDA usually set out from the identification of social problem (Fairclough, 2013). After conducting the research on China's domestic climate policies (in Article 1), it became clear that China's climate politics are surrounded by multiple paradoxes — to name a few, this includes the inconsistency between its radical domestic policy and its conservative negotiation strategy (Conrad, 2012; Hilton & Kerr, 2016), as well as the contradiction between self-perceived and alter-perceived images (Lynus, 2009; Xinhuanet, 2009). To reach a better understanding of these problems, we selected discourse as the 'point of entry'; this entails selecting and analyzing relevant texts and addressing dialectical relations between semiosis and other social dimensions. The research object is China's discourse concerning the global climate regime and its position therein. To avoid any potential bias that may influence researcher due to an ideological position, resulting in a selection for analysis of only texts supporting this position (Schegloff, 1997; Widdowson, 2000; Slembrouck, 2001), this thesis examines a rather general scope of discourse. **Four different types of discourse** are analyzed: first, speeches made by national leaders at international and domestic events; second, statements made by Chinese negotiators at the UNFCCC Conferences; third, climate experts' opinions as expressed in different kinds of media; and fourth, coverage from official newspapers and their online content. Inspired by the CDA idea that a research object should be operationalized by engaging with relevant theoretical frameworks, we structured and analyzed China's discourse through the division of system and national narratives. The 'system narratives' refer to China's perception of the international climate regime and its strategic intention to influence this system according to its interests, while the 'national narrative' is

defined as China's climate identity, including its role, values and goals in international climate affairs. The research design combines the diachronic dimension, which focuses on the evolution of China's climate discourse, and the synchronic dimension, which zooms-in on critical moments that have the potential to challenge the existing climate discourse. In doing this, a better understanding of how and why China's climate discourse has come into being, and its implications for broader global climate governance, is hoped to be reached.

In addition to the discourse itself, we also analyzed **China's unique discourse context**. Here we share the ontological stance of CDA that discourse is a form of social practice which both constitutes the social world and is constituted by other social practices. The discursive struggle does not take place in a social vacuum but in the context of existing institutional practices. One should analyze in which practices discursive dominance is based and by what means specific contentions are furthered. In other words, institutional arrangements are seen as the pre-conditions of the process of discourse-formation (Hajer, 1996). China's climate politics are partly discursively constituted, but at the same time, it is also an object with concrete practices, pre-existing relations, and identities. In other words, it is firmly rooted in and oriented toward real, material social structures. Its climate politics brings together a great variety of actors who not only all have their own legitimate orientations and concerns but have their own modes of talking too (Hajer, 1996). Accordingly, this dissertation also investigates a group of actors who play an important role in deciding how China's climate discourse ought to used and what things ought to mean within that discourse. We take into consideration four actors: the governments, the epistemic community, the official media, and the green public sphere. Here the green public sphere refers to a space where different publics gather to articulate environmental issues, produce and consume green discourse, and rely on media for dissemination (Sun, Graham & Broersma, 2018). It is also taken into consideration since it fosters political debates and pluralistic views about environmental issues. The features and interactions of each of these in the formation and projection of China's climate discourse are analyzed.

Lastly, it also should be made clear that the method of CDA involves both a normative critique and an explanatory critique. While some versions of critique are only normative or moral, as one of the few research studies that focuses on discourse in China's climate politics, this thesis also highlights the value of explanatory critique, which offers an explanation of how and why social realities have come into being. It is one thing to critique China's climate discourse on the grounds that it is problematic, but it is another more valuable thing to explain why and how these problems emerge or become problematic.

4.1.3 Framing analysis

The method of framing analysis is applied in **Article 3**, which focuses on how the European media perceives China's role in international climate negotiations. The selection of framing analysis was based on the research aim and gaps in the existing academic works. Instead of

mainstreaming single-case studies and multiple-case comparisons, the article 3 was among the few exploring research that focused on the 'alter-prescription' in international climate governance. Under this context, our aim was to build a standard set of frames which can be used to reliably measure China's role in international climate politics. In achieving this target, our research has benefited from the rigorous sampling, categorization, coding, and analyzing processes offered by the framing analysis. We found the framing analysis is perfect in making replicable and valid inferences from texts. It helped to clarify what roles exactly were received in the European media and how this evolved over the time. We also enjoyed the abductive analysis approach, which involves the continuous interaction between theory and empirics. Instead of trying to impose an abstract theoretical template (deduction) or 'simply' inferring propositions from facts (induction), the aim is to reason 'at an intermediate level' (abduction). This made it possible for us to combine the existing role concepts in the role theory and our own empirical observation based on filed research and detailed reading of the media reports. In the following paragraphs, methodological considerations will be elaborated. We will start with a content analysis, which works as the upstream concept for a framing analysis; this is followed by the definition of a framing analysis and its added value; lastly, we will look at the way that the main elements in the operationalization of the framing analysis of European media (namely sampling, coding, and analyzing) are dealt with.

By definition, **content analysis** is a research methodology used to make sense of the (often unstructured) content of messages – be they texts, images, symbols or audio data. In short, it could be said that this methodology tries to determine textual meaning. In more technical terms, it is a research method for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) with respect to the contexts of their use (Krippendorff, 2018: 3). This stresses the inferential nature of content analysis: the fact that through an inductive, deductive or abductive process, conclusions are drawn from certain premises. Content analysts therefore typically use some rules of inference (based on existing theories, previous research or experience) and strict procedural (coding) rules to draw answers to their research questions from unstructured text (White & Marsh, 2006).

Before we move on to a definition of framing analysis as a main branch of content analysis, a clarification of the terms 'frame' and 'framing' needs to be made. According to Gamson et al. (1992: 384), a **frame** is a central organizing principle that holds together and gives coherence and meaning to a diverse array of symbols. Here, a frame is viewed as an underlying idea that directs the construction of texts. Accordingly, '**framing'** is the discursive process by which actors 'select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation' (Entman, 1993: 52). On this basis, a **framing analysis** rests upon the assumption that any issue in discourse can be approached from different perspectives and attributed different meanings, which in turn can make it appealing to specific sets of values or audiences. Starting from this social-constructivist

assumption, this research takes framing analysis as a discourse analysis method that is principally concerned with dissecting how an issue is defined and the effect that this has on the broader discussion of the issue (Fletcher, 2009). Thus, a framing analysis can add more qualitative elements to content analysis by going beyond merely counting results, but also reading, interpreting and categorizing inductively. Content analysts usually code positive and negative positions, adding them up and drawing conclusions from the absolute sums. However, if informed by a theory of framing, content analysis would avoid treating all these instances as equally salient and/or influential (Entman, 1993)

This investigation into China's climate role in European media, which applies a framing analysis as the main research method, starts with the **sampling** process. Data comes from three European online media sources: Euractiv, Politico, and EUobserver. We collected the data from 1 January 2009 until 31 December 2018. The sampling units came from a Boolean query of 'China' AND 'climate' toward each media's website. This resulted in 1361 cases from Euractiv, 921 cases from Politico, and 295 cases from EUobserver (2577 in total). Based on an in-depth reading of all the reports, we only kept the reports that mentioned China's climate role and/or ascribed motivations, which finally generated 222 coding units, of which 100 are from Euractiv, 41 are from EUobserver, and 81 are from Politico.

The following **categorization** process was launched in an abductive manner, which involves the continuous interaction between theory and empirical evidence. This research set off from an empirical observation of all the sampling units, after which the problem definition relating to China's role was made clear. We then connected this empirical observation with existing concepts from role theory in International Relations (IR). This finally generated a two-dimensional analytical framework concentrating on China's role and ascribed motivation, respectively. For the role frame, we distinguished four role concepts: 'leader', 'bridge-builder', 'bloc member', and 'braker'. For the motivational frame, we looked at political, economic, ideological, and environmental factors. This abductive approach has allowed us to engage in research without being constrained by theoretical straightjackets and also without getting lost in the empirical observations. We see its value especially in building a standard set of frames that can be used to reliably measure China's role in international climate policy.

The **coding** process followed clear rules. For the role frames, a series of 16 questions were presented, for which the coder had to give a yes (1) or no (0) answer. Each question was meant to measure one of the four role frames. For the motivational frame, coders need to answer yes (1) or no (0) to judge whether a certain frame was mentioned. Based on this coding rule, a yearly index which indicates the prominence of each frame was calculated, and then **analyzed** in a later stage. Two coders were involved to ensure inter-coder reliability. The author coded all the units to ensure the highest possible reliability, while another coder checked a sample containing 10 percent of the units. Where discrepancies arose, the coders discussed the examples to resolve disagreement.

4.2 Data

4.2.1 Interviews

Over the course of the research process, 21 in-depth semi-structured expert interviews were launched, involving government branches, official think tanks, universities and research institutions, environmental NGOs, and state-owned emission enterprises. These interviews work as the fundamental data set for **Article 1** and also triangulate the findings in **Article 2,** which were generated mainly from document research. All the interviews were conducted in a face-to-face manner, with only one exemption (in which we corresponded with the interviewee by telephone). Detailed information of all the interviews can be found in the **Appendix**.

4.2.2 Official documents

In this dissertation, the official documents consist of China's climate-related policies and speeches and/or statements made by national leaders and lead negotiators at key international and domestic occasions. The policy documents covered by this research range from overall guidelines for economic and social development (e.g. the Five-Year Plans) to the country's specific measures on climate change mitigation and adaptation. Government policy documents are mainly analyzed in the investigation of central-local governmental relations (See **Article 1**). They are of direct relevance to this research in two ways. Firstly, they have set the stage through providing background knowledge on the complex relationship between governments at different levels. Hence, they have inspired several interviews with different groups of experts. Secondly, they are also an important source for triangulating data gathered from interviewees in various ways, such as by cross-checking some of the claims made by interviewees, by filling in some of the specifics that respondents might not be able to recollect during the course of an interview, etc. The list of utilized policy documents, their issuing departments, and the dates of issue are listed below. The speeches and statements made by China's top leader and negotiator, both internationally and domestically, are the main source of data for **Article 2,** which applied a critical discourse analysis to China's climate discourses. All the official documents are listed in the **Appendix**.

4.2.3 Media reports

Reports from European media served as the data source for the **Article 3**. These reports came from three online media outlets: Euractiv, Politico and EUobserver. Through these selections we aim to represent the diversity in the European media landscape and cover the entire territory in the best possible way. The selection was made using criteria that considered the extent to which the outlets are professional and influential. Firstly, each of these are independent pan-European media networks that provide both daily reports and in-depth coverage on international affairs related to the European Union. Secondly, they are influential among both the public and decision makers. These three online media outlets play a vital role for public

debate and democracy. Moreover, according to a media survey, they also tended to be the preferred source of news for EU officials, and thus they are considered to be media that influences the influencers. We collected data from 1 January 2009 until 31 December 2018. The year 2009 was selected as the starting point because the Copenhagen COP15 Conference provoked unprecedented global attention in the issue, and its failure to reach an agreement for a post-Kyoto regime cast a long shadow over subsequent attempts to move climate diplomacy forward. The data then covers the critical moments in international climate politics, such as the creation of the Durban Platform, the Paris Agreement, the US's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, and so forth.

5. Overview of articles

This doctoral dissertation is comprised of three stand-alone journal articles that were written over the course of the PhD program.

Article 1 analyzes the complex allocation of power and incentives between the central and local governments. Methodologically, this research is based on expert interviews with relevant officials, negotiators, scholars, climate NGOs and emitter companies. The analysis reveals that the evolution of central-local relations has been a non-linear process that has been substantially influenced by central-local governmental interactions. Specifically, two trial-and-error processes are identified in the evolution of China's climate change policy.

Article 2 provides a comprehensive study of China's climate strategic narratives on both the systematic and national levels. Theoretically, this article situates itself in the 'narrative turn' in International Relations. This article develops an analytical framework that combines theoretical insights stemming from the strategic narrative with our own identification of the unique features of China's discourse context. This is applied to China's climate strategic narratives by examining China's climate 'discourse coalition', which consists of the government, the epistemic community, and the official media. In doing so, this article adds to the current research, which mainly focuses on the mass media. Overall, three phases of China's climate strategic narratives are identified. On a system level, the strict division between developed and developing countries has been replaced by the narrative of 'a community of a shared future of mankind', while on the national level, China's narrative of being the victim of 'ecological imperialism' has given way to a new 'torchbearer' narrative. This research also contributes to a broader understanding on China's domestic politics and its position in global governance.

Guided by a framing analysis, **Article 3** developed a novel analysis framework which measures four role frames and their ascribed motivations in three European media. The results show that the 'bloc member' and 'leader' roles are dominant and that there is a clear transition from the former to the latter. Meanwhile, there has been a continuity of treating the material-based factor

(political and econoic considerations) as the major ascribed motivation in media coverage. An overview of the three articles is offered in Table 2.

	Article 1	***Article 2***	***Article 3***
Title	China's climate change policy: central-local governmental interaction	Strategic narratives in China's climate policy: Analyzing three phases in China's discourse coalition	China's role in international climate politics: A framing analysis of the EU media
Research questions	How to understand China's domestic climate policy?	How to understand China's climate strategic narratives?	How is China's climate role perceived by European media?
Process	Policy formation	Discourse projection	Discourse reception
Empirical focus	Central-local governmental relations	China's climate discourse	China's climate role in European media
Method	Semi-structured expert interviews	Critical discourse analysis	Framing analysis
	Document analysis	Semi-structured expert interviews	
Data	Interviews (expert)	Leaders' speeches and statements	European media (Euractiv, EUobserver, Politico)
	Policy documents	Interviews (expert)	
Theoretical framework	System theory	Strategic narratives	Role theory
Main findings	Adaptation in the allocation of power and incentives between the central and local governments in China's climate policy.	Postulating China's 'climate discourse coalition', composed of the government, epistemic community and official media.	Transformation between two dominant roles, from 'bloc member' to 'leader', and between two minor roles, from 'braker' to 'bridge-builder'.

	Two trial-and-error processes of policy change.	The evolution of China's climate strategic narratives in three phases.	Continuity of ascribing material-based motivations and ignorance of value-based motivations.
Contributions	Theoretical: building an analytical framework that stems from system theory for analyzing China's politics.	Theoretical: developing a theoretical framework that combines the insights from strategic narratives with the authors' identification of the features of China's discourse context.	Theoretical: developing a standard set of role frames which can be used to reliably measure China's climate roles and ascribed motivations.
	Empirical: identifying two trial-and-error processes in China's domestic climate politics that have arisen since 2006.	Empirical: examining China's climate discourse coalition, going beyond a pure analysis of media reports.	Empirical: identifying the evolution of differnet roles ascribed to China in EU media (changes in role concept and continuities in ascribed motivations).
Publication status	Published in *Environmental Policy and Governance* (Early view).	Published in *The Pacific Review*, 2019, 1-28	Unpublished

Table 2. *Overview of the research articles*

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Article 1

China's Climate Change Policy: Central-Local Governmental Interaction

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It is indisputable that China has been a major actor in climate change. This raises the question of which lens is most appropriate to gain an understanding of the recent changes in China's domestic climate change policy. While there is insufficient attention paid to political science accounts of central-local relations in climate governance, this article aims to contribute to the theoretical research on Chinese climate change policy by developing and applying a theoretical framework. Using this novel theoretical framework based on system theory, this article analyses the complex allocation of power and incentives between the central and local governments. Methodologically, this research is based on expert interviews with relevant officials, negotiators, scholars, climate NGOs and emitter companies. Our analysis reveals that this evolution has been a non-linear process that has been substantially influenced by central-local governmental interactions. Specifically, we find two trial-and-error processes in the evolution of China's climate change policy. We conclude with some reflections on the wider implications of this recentralization trend for the long-term sustainability of China's climate change policies.

Key words

Climate change, Chinese politics, central-local relationship, emission trading system

1. Introduction

In recent decades, we have witnessed the rapid development of China's domestic climate change policy. In its political system, climate has been upgraded from a 'scientific issue' to a 'economic issue' and then a 'political issue', which fundamentally influences the ruling legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (Mei, 2009; Chmutina et al., 2012; Wang, 2013). This process is reflected in several landmark events. In the successive 11th (2006-2010), 12th (2011-2015) and 13th (2016-2020) Five Year Plans, action on energy efficiency/GHG emissions is classified as a compulsory target. To better fulfill this target, the National Leading Working Group on Addressing Climate Change (NLGCC), directly led by Premier Keqiang Li, was established within the National Development and Reform Committee (NDRC). In 2017, China launched the National Carbon Emission System. This was the first time that China adopted a marketization measure in its climate policy.

This fast-growing process raises the question of which lens is most appropriate to gain an understanding of China's domestic climate change policy. This article argues that central-local governmental interactions play an important role in China's climate policy. From this starting point, this research will make theoretical and empirical contributions. Theoretically, it builds an analytical framework that stems from system theory, which is used in the analysis of China's politics. It is adapted here to make it more suitable for this analysis. Empirically, we contribute to the research on China's climate policy by focusing on the central-local governmental interaction, identifying two trial-and-error processes since 2006. Methodologically, this article is based on 21 semi-structured and in-depth expert interviews, triangulated by a thorough review of the primary sources and secondary literature.

The next section comprises a brief literature review on China's climate policy. Subsequently, we build the theoretical framework and elaborate on methodology. The theoretical framework is then applied to analyze the evolution of China's climate policy. The final section summarizes the findings and reflects on wider implications of the recentralization tendencies.

2. Literature review

Climate change is a relatively new topic for China and systematic policy was not carried out until the 'China's National Climate Change Program' initiative in 2007. Since then, academic attention has increased. This brief literature review will highlight that, on the one hand, research on China's climate change policies has only recently looked at the central-local dimension and the number of theoretical accounts are limited, whereas on the other hand, the existing theoretical literature on central-local interactions in Chinese politics has so far not focused on climate change policy.

Theoretical studies on Chinese climate change policies are rather scarce. They have to a large extent focused on the role of the central government (Vandenbergh, 2007; Wiener, 2007; Gilley,

2012; Meidan et el., 2009; Tsang & Kolk, 2010). For example, Gilley (2012) theorized China's climate governance as 'authoritarian environmentalism', in which authority is concentrated in the hands of a few executive agencies manned by elites seeking to improve environmental outcomes. Richerzhagen and Scholz (2008) researched climate-relevant policies in China and the structural determinants underlying these capacities. More attention has been paid to the lower government levels in recent years. This includes studies on the local policies, such as low carbon cities and the local emission trading pilots (Tang & Zhan, 2008; Carraro and Massetti, 2012; Zhang et al., 2013; Carter & Mol, 2013; Mai & Francesch-Huidobro, 2014). The majority of these studies focus on case studies and are empirically driven (Francesch-Huidobro et al., 2012; Miao & Li, 2017; Westman & Broto, 2018). More theoretical contributions include Qi et al. (2008), who found that the mandate from the central government, internalized needs, and the international market are three primary factors that transformed local governments' responses to climate change. Another example is Schreurs's (2017) research on how climate governance works in China's multi-level governance structure. Besides the central government's ambition, Schreurs looks at several local experimentations and highlights the importance of policy implementation at the local level. Westman and Broto (2018) also research the prevalence of partnerships in environmental governance on an urban level.

However, theoretical and political science accounts of central-local relations in climate governance remain rather scarce. This article aims to contribute to scholarship on Chinese climate change policy by developing and applying a theoretical framework. This framework will build on the longstanding literature on central-local relations in Chinese politics, which has not yet focused on climate change policy. In the Chinese setting, central-local governmental relations play a critical part in almost every policy domain and climate change is no exception (Miao & Li, 2017; Lieberthal & Lampton, 1992). They work as one of the three fundamental types of relations in China's politics beside government-enterprise and party-government relations. Numerous researches have contributed to this topic and the insight generated provides valuable perspectives on how more accurate analyses of China's politics can be reached. However, it is surprising how rarely these insights have been applied to research on China's climate policy.

Research on China's central-local governmental relations began in the 1970s when the economic reform and opening-up was launched. The surprising rate of economic growth caught scholars' attention. Many researchers have tried to explain China's unique central-local governmental relationship. The M & U form model is among the earliest contributions (Qian & Xu, 1993; Maskin et al., 2000). This model differentiated the U and M forms as the two basic organizational structures between the central and local governments. It argues that compared with the U-form, which manages the central-local relations based on the functional or specialization principle, China's M-form structure, which features decentralization along regional lines, has increased the authority and incentives of local government and spurred the economic take-off. Similarly, the local state corporatism theory digs deeper into China's local

government (Oi, 1995; Walder, 1995). The main argument is that local governments are not just administrative-service providers but, rather, fully-fledged economic actors who make cost-efficiency calculations and display entrepreneurship.

In this context, several scholars have examined China's economic development from a local-central government perspective. To assess the center's adaptive capacity in local governance, Chung (2016) systematically examined the instruments deployed to govern the regions and localities. He found that the marketization of China has drastically altered the overall context of local governance and the instruments applied by the central government have also changed accordingly. Another school of scholars has appealed to the theory of Chinese style federalism (Montinola et el., 1995; Qian & Roland, 1998). They argue that sticking to the conventional wisdom of political reform generated from the western experience could be misleading in research on China's politics. Instead, they identify three features of China's central-local arrangement: political decentralization, ideological change from the Maoist to a pragmatic market-orient approach, and economic opening-up. These factors have resulted in a new political system, market-preserving federalism, which, with its Chinese characteristics, has protected China's economic reform.

The above-mentioned theorists have built the overall structure of China's central-local relations. However, the level of centralization/decentralization varies and there is no unified yardstick that can be applied to every policy field. Hence, a series of mid-range theories on central-local relations in specific policy fields have been developed. These mainly include system theory (Zhou, 2007; Zhou, 2016), and the control right theory (Zhou & Lian, 2012; Zhou, 2014). The common feature of these pieces of research is that they did not intend to identify ideal types that define China's central-local relations (for example Chinese style federalism etc.); instead, they take the central-local relations as a principal-agent structure within which factors such as rights, resources, and incentives can be flexibly distributed according to different fields at different times. For example, the control right theory differentiates three dimensions of control right (including the rights of goal setting), inspection, and incentive provision. By looking at how these rights are distributed among the principal (the central government), supervisor (the provincial government) and agent (the local government), this theory provides a more accurate presentation of China's governmental relations by distinguishing patterns of control rights combinations. These theories have been applied to China's domestic politics in general (Feng et al., 2010; Liang, 2010), but has never been used specifically to analyze climate policy.

Building on these theoretical advances, the next section will develop a theoretical framework that can be applied to analyze China's climate change policy from the central-local governmental perspective. In doing so, we aim to capture the evolution and future development of China's climate policy and to contribute to the contemporary paradigm debates between central-local interactions (the 'shadow of hierarchy') and plural and complex climate governance in China.

3. Theoretical Framework

In the previous section, we demonstrated the importance of political science theories on China's central-local relations and how these have been ignored in existing research on climate policy. To fill this gap, we aim to better theorize China's climate policy process. By 'theorizing', we mean building a conceptually sound analytical framework with which policymaking can be analyzed that can inform the investigation of agenda setting, design, implementation and evaluation, and the thinking and behavior of the actors involved (Schubert & Alpermann, 2019). We do not aim for a 'grand theory' but rather plead for a middle range theoretical framework that goes beyond but integrates system theory (Zhou, 2007; Zhou, 2014) and the different typologies of central-local interactions offered so far (Qian & Xu, 1993; Oi, 1995; Qian & Roland, 1998).

Our theoretical framework is inspired by Zhou's system theory, which we have adapted to better fit the case of climate change by adding factors such as career demotion and financial incentives to the dimension of the cadre evaluation system. One major feature of China's political system is the principal-agent relationship between the central and local government. The central government normally assigns multiple tasks to its local level, for example targets for GDP growth and family planning. As leverage, the central government holds the power of governing the cadre system through rewards and punishments; in this way, the central government aims to ensure that its multiple targets are achieved in the most cost-effective way (Cao, 2011; Zhou & Lian, 2012). As the agent, the local officials must respond to the tasks assigned by the central government and fulfill their political career prospects by doing a good job in the cadre evaluation system. This relationship between the central and local government can be further theorized in accordance with two dimensions, each of which can be operationalized along three indicators (**Table 3**).

First, the level of administrative subcontract describes the allocation of power between the central and local government. The concept of an administrative subcontract is borrowed from the firm theory in economics (Coase, 1937; Grossman and Hart, 1986). Zhou was the first to introduce this concept into research on China's politics. As an ideal type, the administrative subcontract refers to the subcontract system within the government, representing a hybrid governance structure between a bureaucracy in the Weberian sense and a pure subcontract, which occurs among independent entities without any hierarchical relations.

There are three indicators for the administrative subcontract system (Zhou, 2014): authority relations, financial allocation, and internal control. With respect to *authority relations*, the administrative subcontract features an allocation of authority between the principal and agent, where the principal has the formal authority and residual control rights (such as the authority to approve/remove, supervise and monitor subcontractors), and the agent, by way of subcontracting, enjoys considerable discretion and de facto power to do things in his own way.

With regard to *financial allocation*, unlike the Weberian bureaucracy, the administrative subcontract shows the defining feature of a high-powered incentive in that the agent's income is positively linked to the quality of the service that he offers and the level of his endeavor. The revenue is allocated between the principal and agent based on a specific formula that ensures that the agent is the residual claimant over the budget money or revenue. In terms of *internal control*, the administrative subcontract shows two characteristics: firstly, it is outcome-oriented rather than procedure-oriented. Usually, compared to the capability and executive procedures of the local governments, the policy result is the most important standard. Secondly, it is personalized rather than institutionalized, which means that the local administrative chief is responsible for almost all of the policy targets within his domain.

Second, the strictness of the cadre evaluation system portrays the allocation of incentives between the central and local government. It should be made clear that, in Zhou's system theory (Zhou, 2007), this dimension is originally defined as a 'promotion tournament'. The hypothesis was that in a competitive bureaucracy system, only a limited number of officials from the same administrative level will be promoted to the upper level. The central government applies yardsticks such as GDP performance or investment attraction to decide who should be promoted. This explains local officials' enthusiasm for improving economic performance. However, the original promotion tournament theory only identifies career promotion as the incentive. In practice, punishments such as demotion or even dismissal also constitute incentives for the local cadres. Besides career prospects, financial rewards or sanctions also work to incentivize local officials. Therefore, a cadre evaluation system based on career promotion/demotion and financial reward/punishment is more suitable than the original promotion tournament.

As a concept, cadre evaluation is not very different from personnel evaluation in any large bureaucracy (Wang, 2013). It is reminiscent of personnel evaluation in large corporate hierarchies, with staff throughout the organization being held accountable in regard to profit and other targets. China's Communist Party adopted this hierarchical and umbrella cadre management system (Mei, 2009) based on the principle of 'Party manages cadres'. In this system, not only officials working in the party apparatus, but almost all elites holding positions are sponsored by the regime (Mei, 2009).

The indicators for the cadre evaluation system are performance targets, career regulation, and economic incentives. In terms of *performance targets*, the central government gives its local subordinates comprehensive evaluation targets. The different targets are clearly labeled as soft targets, hard targets and veto targets to show their relative importance. Veto targets are the most important ones; failure to meet them automatically results in punishment. Hard targets are also mandatory, while soft targets are lower priority objectives (Burns and Zhiren 2010). The *career regulation* is another important cadre management mechanism in China's bureaucratic system. Promotion/demotion is based on officials' performance in the cadre

evaluations which consist of an ordinary assessment, special assessment, annual assessment, and term assessment. The final score is decided based on officials' performance in regard to morality, capability, diligence, achievement, and probity. Officials with a grade of 'excellence' will enjoy priority over competitors, while officials with a grade of 'incompetence' will be demoted to a lower level (Central Office of CPC, 2019). *Economic incentives* consist of personal incentives and collective incentives. The former includes the qualification to enjoy material rewards such as an annual assessment bonus and promoted salary level, while the latter include the qualification of the locality to enjoy preferential financial policies. For instance, government officials' performance on the energy intensity target is directly related to the approval or cancellation of the high-energy consumption program, which decides the local governments' income.

Based on the two dimensions identified above, we build a matrix (see **Table 3**) that allows to locate all policy fields in China.

Strictness of cadre evaluation system

Indicated by performance targets, career regulation, and economic incentives

Level of subcontracting (Indicated by authority relations, financial allocation, and internal control)	High	Low
High	**Political Tournament** GDP performance Investment promotion Family planning	**Local Discretion** Medical system Education Social security Food security
Low	**National Campaigns** Cultural Revolution Great Leap Forward Patriotic Public Hygiene Campaign	**Top-Level Design** Ecological civilization Economic 'New Normal' Institutional reform

Table 3: *Combination of horizontal subcontract and vertical cadre evaluation, Source: Author's adaption of Zhou 2014*

The matrix consists of four quadrants. Firstly, in *the political tournament* quadrant, the central government subcontracts the policy target to the local level. At the same time, the strictness of the cadre evaluation is also high, which is reflected in the labeling of the targets as 'hard' or 'veto' in the evaluation system. Through formal and informal decentralization, the high level of the administrative subcontract offers the local governments a *de facto* control right and abundant action space. Meanwhile, the strictness of the cadre evaluation, by offering strong competitive promotion regulation and relevant performance evaluation, creates a strong incentive scheme for local officials (Zhou, 2014). The complementary effect of the two dimensions is thus maximized.

Secondly, *the local discretion* mode refers to the situation in which policy targets are subcontracted to the local level; however, these targets are labeled as 'none' or 'soft' in the cadre evaluation system. In other words, while giving the local government formal authority, the central government does not offer enough incentives for the local officials to act according to its instructions. Therefore, local officials are reluctant to take action; they even sacrifice these policy fields for other hard or veto targets. Policies falling in this category show a clear property of public good that necessitates action from the national level; however, they are all subcontracted to the local level. This mismatch between power and incentive leads to a negative result in these policy fields.

Thirdly, by definition, a *national campaign* means mobilization by different levels of government in order to reach certain political, economic or even social objectives (Feng, 2011: 73). Normally, national campaigns are launched when the central government faces strong social reform or performance legitimacy pressure. Their spectrum varies from high political campaigns (such as the Cultural Revolution) to productive campaigns (for example, the Patriotic Public Health Campaign). During the campaign period, the evaluation strictness of the local government is extremely high, but it is up to the central government to set the campaign targets, by way of motivation and procedures. Traditionally, national campaigns have been non-institutionalized, non-conventional and non-professional (Feng, 2011), which is why they are currently very rare.

Lastly, *the top-level design* represents the opposite side of the local experiment, in which the central leadership is responsible for devising a systematic overall plan for the nation's reforms from a strategic perspective, with the aim of better allocating all of the resources required and ensuring the efficient realization of its goals. There is a considerable degree of centralization (hierarchization) and agenda-setting and policy formulation are streamlined at the top. The leeway afforded to local leaders for policy innovation and implementation is severely restricted by revitalized ideological control, institutional centralization, and changes in the cadre evaluation system, which assign more value to subjective assessments of local officials' superiors than to measurable indicators (Schubert & Alpermann, 2019: 204).

4. Methodology

Applying this theoretical framework to understand central-local interaction in the formation, development and implementation of China's climate policy, this study adopts a two-pronged qualitative research strategy. In-depth semi-structured expert interviews, triangulated by a thorough analysis of primary sources and secondary literature, allow us to achieve a depth of answers in terms of penetration, exploration and explanation, and thus an insight into governance dynamics can be generated.

We conducted 21 semi-structured expert interviews, in which government branches, official think tanks, universities and research institutions, environmental NGOs, and state-owned emission enterprises were covered. The interviewees included 5 (former) officials, 3 government consultants, 4 scholars, 4 experts from environmental NGOs, and 5 managers of state-owned emission companies. The interviewees were selected by the authors based on prior studies and through 'snowball' sampling until saturation point was reached. Three officials are or have been involved in China's international climate negotiations, the other two work at the intersection between local and central policies in China. We prioritized two groups of scholars/experts. The first group consists of experts on China's climate policy. They work in China's top universities and government-backed think tanks. All interviewees selected were involved in China's climate policy processes such as law making, international negotiation and policy evaluation etc.. The second group included political scientists whose research mainly focuses on China's central-local governmental relations. They provided theoretical and practical insight. Both groups form part of the epistemic community on climate issues in China, hence they are well informed about the policy dynamics and evolving thinking in this field. Environmental NGOs are gaining influence in the contemporary plural and complex governance structure. Both international and domestic ENGOs were interviewed to obtain information beyond the official rhetoric. Emission companies are at the frontier of policy implementation. We also interviewed five managers who are responsible for GHG emissions in a Fortune 500 state-owned mineral company, in order to observe more closely how the central and local governments interact in practice. By doing this, we incorporated the core components of China's discourse coalition on climate and therefore better revealed the official views of China. Our analysis targeted not only experts' explicit specialist knowledge, but also their tacit specific interpretive knowledge (know-why) and procedural knowledge (know-how) obtained through (professional) practice. Four versions of interview guides were tailor-made for the officials, scholars, NGOs, and practitioners. The interviews were conducted under the promise of confidentiality by the lead author (Beijing, 12 April - 27 May 2016). For the interviewees that were unavailable to be interviewed in person, the first author corresponded with them by telephone.

In the initial explorative phase of the research, we applied the method of thematic content analysis when dealing with the data gathered from the interviews. All of the interviews were

audio-recorded with the permission of the informants and transcribed manually by the lead author. After a thorough reading of the transcription, the data were coded under five themes, namely the evolution of China's climate policy, the criteria of the theoretical framework, the emissions trading system, the impact of international climate negotiations, and future developments. These themes were then triangulated through comprehensive document research. We reviewed primary sources such as government policy documents at the central and local levels and also secondary literature such as academic articles and independent reports. Primary and secondary documents provided the essential background information and helped identify gaps to be filled by the empirical data, and the insight from the interviews shed light on our latter theorization and analysis regarding the central-local interactions in China's climate policy.

5. Analysis: Two Trial-and-Error Processes

Based on the theoretical framework and methodology, this section analyzes the evolution of China's climate change policy. We argue that the policy change has not been a linear, one-directional procedure; rather, it reflects the complex adaptation of the allocation of power and incentive between the central and local governments. Specifically, we summarize this complexity through two trial-and-error processes (policy failure and policy response).

5.1 From 'local discretion' to 'political tournament' (2006-2010)

Under the first trial-and-error process (2006-2010; see **Table 4**), we observe a shift from the 'local discretion' to the 'political tournament' mode.

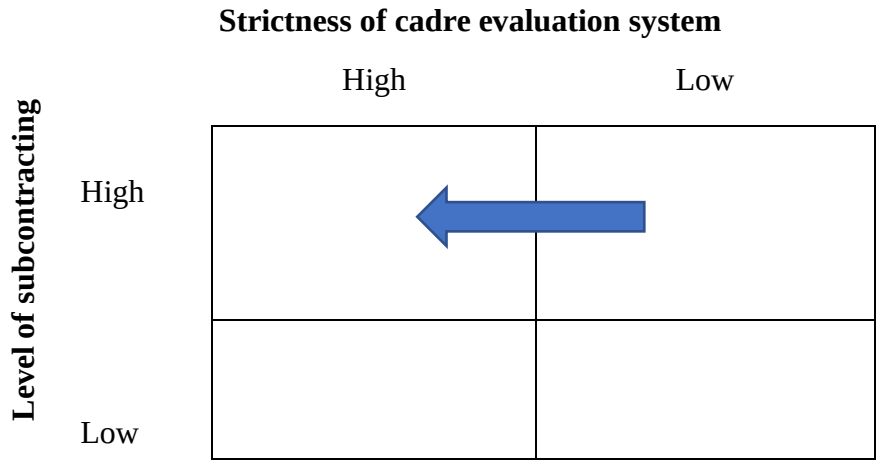

Table 4: *The first trial-and-error process, Sources: Author's table based on interviews and theory adaption.*

5.1.1 Policy Failure

In the early 2000s, climate policy fell into the 'local discretion' category, in which the authority dealing with climate change was subcontracted to local government. However, the central government did not offer enough incentives for local governments. Climate targets were vague and labeled as soft in the cadre evaluation system (Interview 1, 2, 3, 5, 10, 14, 16). In contrast, the most important targets were related to economic, social stability and family planning (Wang, 2013). This priority appears from official documents and also reveal in the official promotion practice. This preference was well received by local officials: in a survey launched in nine cities, 78.1% of local officials regarded economic development as the top priority. In contrast, only 5.8% chose environment protection (Mei, 2009).

Under this arrangement, the local government gave more attention to hard or veto targets while ignoring or even sacrificing the soft targets (Interview 2, 8, 15). The bureaucratic systems acquiesced to this pattern, as one paragraph in a formal document mentions (Mei & Pearson, 2014: 9):

"*We should protect the competent cadres. For those cadres with outstanding 'achievement' but stained with some 'errors', we should use special caution to treat them and should refrain from "removing them from office for these minor transgressions*".

Although this document does not specify what constitutes an 'outstanding achievement' or 'some errors', its objective to "speeding up 'reform and openness" suggests that it was the cadres with achievements in promoting economic growth who were considered 'competent' and therefore should be protected. What makes this more ironic is that statistically, a higher level of environmental investment negatively correlates with the odds of the cadres being promoted (Zhang and Qi, 2010).

During this phase, China became the world's biggest GHG emitter in 2006 and its incremental CO_2 emissions accounted for more than one half of the world's total annually (IEA, 2010). This massive GHG emission increase has caused various problems such as an adverse impact on the country's ecosystems, agriculture, water resources and coastal zones. This emission boom also endangers the Communist Party's regime legitimacy. The foundation of the Party's legitimacy lies in economic development and social stability (Gilley, 2012), while the emission boom erodes both. As regards economic development, China's current coal-dominant energy structure and reliance on high-emission industries, which has caused the emission surge, hampers its economic performance (Interview 3, 5, 10). Moreover, social stability has weakened by the public unrest regarding the deteriorating environment caused by GHG emissions.

5.1.2 Policy response

Against this setback, the central-local combination has adapted from the 'local discretion mode' to the 'political tournament system'. While keeping climate targets subcontracted to the local level, the climate *performance target* has changed to a hard or even veto level in the cadre evaluation system (Interview 1, 5, 8, 14, 15, 16). With the adoption of the 11th Five Year Plan (2006), energy saving and emission reduction targets were designated as 'binding' for the first time. The most prominent goal was to reduce energy intensity by 20% by the year 2010 compared with the 2005 level. In July 2006, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) signed the 'energy saving responsibility contract' with all of the provinces and 14 state-owned companies. Later, in September, the State Council approved 'the local energy consumption per GDP reduction plan during the 11th Five Year period'; the national target was assigned to the provincial level.

However, only 13% energy intensity reduction was achieved in 2006, which endangered the overall target of the 11th Five Year Plan. Under this circumstance, in November 2007, the State Council issued three successive plans concerning the implementation, supervision, and assessment of the energy intensity target (The State Council, 2007a; 2007b). These arrangements meant that the energy intensity and emission reduction were officially listed as a veto target in the cadre evaluation system. This time the local officials' *career regulation* and *economic incentive* are more strictly decided by their performance on the relevant targets (Interview 2, 6, 13). In the accountability system, a total of 100 points are assigned to nine sections concerning target achievement, institution building, technology development and promotion, energy saving R&D etc.. The assessment results in four degrees, including over excessive completion (95 points and above), completion (80-94 points), basic completion (60-80 points), and non-completion (under 60 points). Government officials who fail the assessment are deprived of the qualification of any honorary title and any high-energy consumption program at that locality is halted. They are also required to draft a written report on the time-limited rectification plan by the State Council.

In sum, the first trial and error process featured the adjustment of a dimension of the cadre evaluation system. The targets on energy saving and emission reduction were clearly labeled as veto and were directly related to local officials' political careers. This adjustment in the cadre evaluation system marked two points (Interview 1, 2, 14, 16). Firstly, by ranking climate targets as compulsory, this mechanism shows the central government's policy priority to the local level; secondly, the cadre evaluation easily motivates the officials in the principal-agent structure (Wang, 2013). These measures have, in practice, increased the completeness of the energy intensity target (18.93% reduction in 2007, 25.26% reduction in 2008, and 26.37% reduction in 2009) and led to an overall 19.1% reduction in energy consumption per unit of GDP by 2010, which basically fulfilled the target in the 11th Five Year Plan (20%).

Relating to the *administrative subcontract* dimension, during the first trial and error process, the mode of subcontracting remained. Applying the framework, we distinguish between authority relations, financial allocation, and internal control. Regarding *authority relations*, the energy saving and emission reduction target was still a top-down political mission in which the central government was responsible for making the target and the local governments enjoyed a *de facto* control right regarding its implementation. This was a typical command-and-control process backed by the absolute authority of the central government. Like other policy issues under this pattern, faced with strong administrative pressure, the short-term policy effect was high. However, without further institutionalization and multiple policy tools, the long-term self-enforcing mechanism is questionable (Interview 1, 6, 7, 10, 11).

As for the *financial allocation*, our field research confirmed that during the first trial and error period, there was no central financial budget for climate mitigation and adaptation (Interview 5, 13, 14, 15, 16). There are some subsections in the central government's revenue and expenditure classification system that are partly related to climate change, for example environmental protection. However, the central government's expenditure is overwhelmed by the local governments with a ratio of 6.25:1, and even this limited central expenditure has an overall downwards trajectory (UNDP, 2015).

In terms of *internal control*, on the one hand, the energy saving and emission reduction target was clearly outcome-oriented rather than procedure-oriented. From the central to the local government, attention was paid to the 20% energy intensity target in itself rather than how to achieve it (Interview 2, 4, 15). This is reflected in the national 'power cut campaign' that took place when the deadline of the 11th Five Year period was approaching. In provinces including Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Shanxi, Hebei and Hainan, not only were energy-intense companies shut down, but the power supply to civilian facilities such as schools, hospitals and traffic lights was also stopped. This triggered huge economic losses and public unrest. On the other hand, the responsibility for energy saving and mitigation reduction was personalized rather than institutionalized. Instead of professional institutions, it was the administrative chief at all levels who took full responsibility. Under this internal control arrangement, problems such as illegal mitigation measures, local collusion, and statistic falsification were caused. This setback concerning the administrative subcontract dimension constituted the context of the second trial and error process.

5.2 From 'political tournament' to 'top-level design' (2010 onwards)

Although the policy targets of the 11th Five Year Plan were achieved in terms of the administrative subcontract dimension, the role distortion between the central and local governments was reflected in several problems in climate policies. In response to these problems, the central government initiated the second trial and error process (see **Table 5**).

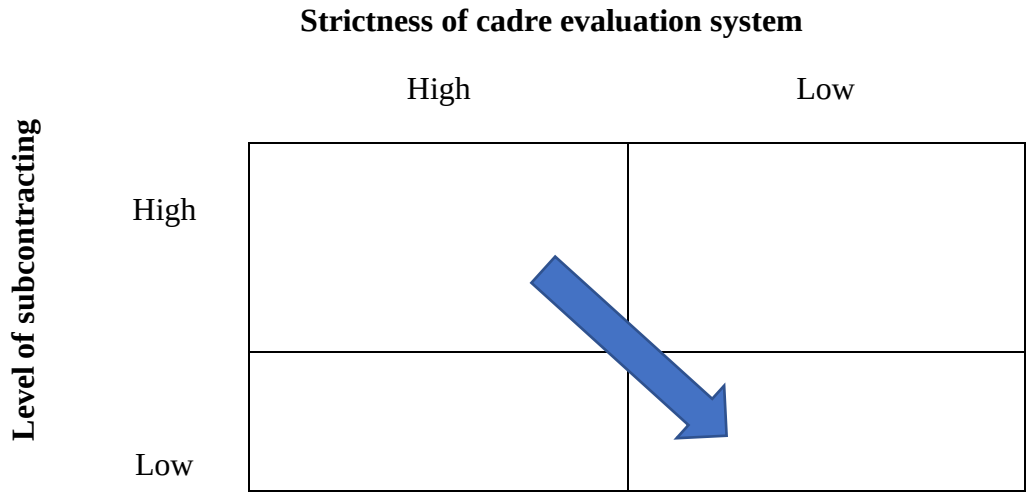

Table 5: *The second trial-and-error process, Sources: Author's table based on interview and theory adaption.*

5.2.1 Policy failure

The first trial-and-error period entailed a distortion of the roles of the central and local governments. The division of rights and responsibilities between both levels was unclear. A negotiator pointed out in the interview that

Local governments were both the 'athletes' and the 'referees'. In terms of the central government, they were the 'athletes' who were responsible for completing the targets. However, in terms of the emitter industries within their domain, the role of the local governments changed to 'referees', who allocated allowances to emitter companies and supervised them as they reached the target (Interview 16).

This role distortion revealed the problems in terms of target allocation, target implementation and target verification. Concerning target allocation, the current climate change target is largely based on central-local political negotiations (Zhang et al., 2014). As we identified in the interviews, *the domestic bargaining on allowance allocation is just like a copy of the international climate negotiation* (Interview 1), and *the allowance between provinces is allocated according to the CBDR principle based on different development stages* (Interview 11). This bargain exists not only in the target allocation process but also in the following implementation procedures. For example, Jilin province's energy intensity target in the 11th Five Year Plan was 30%, but after the bottom-up bargain, the target was adjusted to 22% in 2008 and it kept changing over the following years (Mei and Liu, 2012: 129). This reveals that the target allocation is not rigorously based on professional principles such as benchmarks, which could reduce the policy effectiveness.

Regarding target implementation, the main approach to achieving the climate targets under the 11th Five Year Plan was to shut down low-efficiency industries and decrease overcapacity (Interview 5, 11, 16). This has caused several problems. Firstly, the large scale phasing out of inefficient manufacturing implies a sharp increase in the unemployment rate. The job losses have mostly affected low-skilled workers in less developed provinces (Li and Wang, 2012). Secondly, faced with cadre evaluation, many local officials have applied desperate or even illegal measures such as randomly closing down power plants and stopping the electricity supply to all customers, including households and hospitals. The state media has reported that last-minute forced power outages have 'spread to many provinces around China' (the National People's Congress, 2011). These shutdowns across a number of provinces to meet energy intensity targets have generated unexpected social impacts and triggered public unrest.

In terms of target verification, the defects mainly include data fraud and collusion. Because of information asymmetries between the central and local levels and the complete absence of legal deterrence for falsification, the emission data provided by the local governments is questionable. Researchers reported a 1.4 gigatonne gap in carbon dioxide emissions as reflected in discrepancies between the national and provincial energy statistics in 2010 (Guan et al., 2012). Our interviews with an emission company identified the same problem in practice (Interview 17-21); in some extreme cases, local governments falsify the emissions statistics without collecting data from the emission companies (Interview 16). The central-local arrangement also leads to collusion. Faced with evaluation by their superiors, local officials are motivated to collude with officials at the lower level and emitter companies within their domain. Interviews showed that when the verification group is due to pay a visit, the local officials will inform the company in advance so that the company has time to shut down its plant in order to pass the evaluation (Interview 17-21).

5.2.2 Policy response

To overcome these perceived drawbacks, the central-local relationship concerning climate policy was re-adjusted from a 'political tournament' to a 'top-level design' mode. This features an increased streamlining of policy formulation and monitoring at every level of the state hierarchy, with less discretion being allowed for the local adjustment of policies and curtailed open experimentation. Empirical observations also support this trend. The decentralized initiative at the lower levels of government has hugely decreased. Chinese data shows that new local policy pilots dropped from more than 500 in 2010 to below 100 in 2016 (Heilmann, 2016: 19).

The main feature of the second trial and error process is the re-centralization on the administrative subcontract dimension. This all-round re-centralization is reflected on the ideological, institutional and policy levels. On the ideology level, climate policy has been integrated into China's ideological top-level design of the ecological civilization.

Institutionally, the Department of Climate Change was transferred from the NDRC and integrated into the newly created Ministry of Ecology and Environment. On the policy level, in this period China initiated the Emission Trading Scheme (ETS) which is designed, shaped and operated by the central government. Emissions trading has become the preferred type of policy instrument for China's climate change action and its importance will only increase in the coming years. While the current initiating phase solely covers the power sector, the ETS will cover up to eight of China's top carbon dioxide emitting industries in the near future, including steel, chemical, non-ferrous metal, and pulp and paper industries (the State Council, 2017). Whereas our analysis is mostly based on the developments related to the ETS, literature on other climate-related policies indicates that our finding is not only valid for the ETS as studies in the fields of renewable energy (Chen & Lees, 2016; Hochstetler & Kostka, 2015; Li & Yilmaz, 2019; Wu et al., 2018) urbanization (Chen & Lees, 2018), pollution control (Van Rooij et al, 2017), environmental financial regulation (Naughton, 2017), and land use (Chen & Lees, 2018) have pointed at similar tendencies of re-centralization.

Concerning the administrative subcontract dimension, re-centralization can be distinguished on all three indicators of our framework. First, in terms of *authority relations*, the allocation of power has, to a large extent, been re-centralized. The trend of a top-level design in recent years has streamlined the agenda-setting and policy formulation at the central level. The leeway afforded to local leaders for policy innovation and implementation has been severely restricted by revitalized ideological control and institutional centralization. In China's context, this re-centralization is firstly enabled by the top-level design on ideology level, since the CPC uses ideology as a practical device for issuing pertinent policy directives to party cadres and other administrators. It is extremely important in cultivating consensus and cohesiveness in areas where there is disagreement, for example the climate issue during the first trial and error phase.

The climate debate come to China from foreign policy channels and was framed as a development issue (Interview 1, 2, 3, 10, 12, 15). Environmental NGOs in China mainly work on issues that directly influence people's wellbeing, such as pollution, and habitant resettlement. This framing has strengthened, rather than weakened, the government's authority when dealing with climate change. During the second trial and error period, climate mitigation was merged into the central government's ideology top-level design of 'ecological civilization'. According to the officials' discourse, Xi Jinping's thoughts on ecological civilization now constitute China's strategic guidelines in regard to its deep participation in international climate governance and leadership in the climate negotiations.

Ecological civilization is based on natural respect and protection. It aims for a harmonious symbiosis between humans, nature and society through the creation of sustainable production and consumption patterns. This concept was initiated at the 18th National Congress of the CPC in 2012. Ecological civilization was listed after economic, political, cultural and social civilization and thus as the fifth fundamental goal of China's overall development plan. It was

considered vital to sustain Chinese development. This is a strong political signal since the National Congress is the highest body in China's political system and its statements determine the ideological blueprint for the following years. After its initiation, ecological civilization was further strengthened and completed at China's ideological top-level design through a series of documents issued by the central government[1].

Second, the national ETS has also changed the landscape of China's *financial allocation* on climate issues. Other than the previous budgetary division between the central and local governments, this is the first time that China has introduced a market-based measure in order to achieve the emissions reduction goal in a cost-effective, innovative, and flexible manner (Interview 5, 6, 8, 12, 14). From the Chinese government's perspective, the emissions trading program can, on the micro-economic level, help minimizing the costs of GHG emissions reduction, developing new business opportunities, promoting business engagement, and establishing links with international carbon markets. At a macro-economic level, it will contribute to China's transformation to a low-carbon economy and its role in the international climate change negotiations (Lo, 2016).

Direct and strong central government intervention is a key feature of China's carbon market (Lo & Howes, 2013). As the interviewee pointed out 'China's ETS is a political market which firstly relies on the central government's policies' (Interview 11). This market is primarily designed, shaped, and operated by the central government and supported by governments at the local level, the third-party verification institutions and business organizations with government backing. China's emissions trading system was designed by the central government through a series of regulations. It was initiated in the 12th Five Year Plan (2011-2015). In October 2011, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) published the *Notice on Carbon Emissions Trading Pilots*, in which five cities (Beijing, Tianjin, Chongqing, Shanghai, Shenzhen) and two provinces (Hubei and Guangdong) were assigned as the local ETS pilots. They were strategically selected to represent a relatively large geographic distribution, and differ in terms of their economic scale, GDP per capita, and emissions per capita. The 13th Five Year Plan (2016-2010) further confirms the national ETS as the most important measure to decrease China's GHG emissions. On 19th December 2017, the NDRC issued *the Development Plan for the National Carbon Emission Trading Market (Power Sector),* which finally marks the beginning of China's national ETS. Currently, the national ETS covers the power sector. Businesses with an annual energy consumption of more than 10,000 tonnes of standard coal will be included (NDRC, 2017). According to this threshold, the marker scale will reach around 1700 companies with 3.5 billion of CO_2 emissions, which make it the world's biggest carbon market. The development of this carbon market has also been shaped by the central government. It comprises three stages: the first stage (2014-2016)

[1] See *the Decision on Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening Reforms* (November 2013), *the Opinions of the Central Committee of the CPC and the State Council on Further Promoting the Development of Ecological Civilization* (April, 2015), and *the Integrated Reform Plan for Promoting Ecological Civilization* (2015).

focused on institution building. The main object was to prepare for the nation-wide carbon market, including laws and regulations, supporting rules, and technology standards. During the second stage (2017-2020), national ETS should be expanded to other industries, thereby improving allowance management and carbon trading. In the third stage (after 2020), a stable and active carbon market with multiple trading models and broad coverage should be built, and links with international carbon market should be explored (NDRC, 2017).

Third, China's *internal control* concerning climate policy also showed the clear feature of a top-level design mode by adjusting its institutional setup. The Department of Climate Change was transferred from the NDRC to the newly created Ministry of Ecology and Environment (MEE). According to the 2018 State Council's institutional reform plan (The State Council, 2018), the original Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP) was upgraded to the Ministry of Ecology and Environment (MEE). Besides the functions inherited from the previous MEP, this new comprehensive ministry also integrated relevant duties from other Ministries such as the Ministry of Land and Resources, the Ministry of Water Resources, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, and the State Oceanic Administration.

The purpose of this institutional reform, according to the Minister of MEE, was to strengthen the top-level design in the climate policy (Huanqiu net, 2018). The previous arrangement had suffered from a leadership vacuum and accountability deficit. The Department of Climate Change used to be affiliated under the NDRC, whose main function was to formulate and implement strategies for national economic and social development. The China Meteorological Administration (CMA) was in charge of coordinating with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC); the Ministry of Foreign Affairs worked in climate negotiations; and the State Forestry Administration participated in negotiations on reducing emissions from degradation and deforestation (REDD). Now, by incorporating the Department of Climate Change into the powerful MEE, it is hoped that this institutional fragmentation will be fixed. The responsibility to initiate the formulation of key strategies as well as plans and policies to tackle climate change and greenhouse gas emissions will be synergized. Along with other government departments, it will participate in international negotiations on climate change and carry out China's role in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

A partial adjustment of the cadre evaluation dimension can be observed. We distinguish the non-ETS sectors and sectors that are covered by the ETS. The former has kept the previous high strictness of cadre evaluation, however for the latter, the introduction of the national ETS has decreased the strictness of official assessment. China's ETS adopts a dual-track management strategy (see **Figure 3**). The dominant central government is responsible for the top-level design, while the auxiliary provincial governments are only in charge of execution within their domain. Specifically, the central government sets the threshold for the key enterprises covered by the national ETS and allocates the allowance. It identifies the allocation method and standard, builds and manages the carbon registry system, and examines the

certification and third-party verification institutions. The provincial governments implement the central decisions according to the local situation (UNDP, 2017).

Under this new arrangement, the previous command-and-control relation between central and local gives way to the marketized mechanism. In this context, first of all, *the performance targets* related to ETS building have not been incorporated into China's cadre evaluation system. It is also foreseeable that the responsibilities will mostly fall on the central government, which is in charge of the designing, shaping and operating the carbon market. Secondly, the local officials' *economic incentive* is replaced by the carbon transaction in the ETS. For the allowance allocation, China's ETS adopts a combination of benchmarking and the historical emission principle. As the completion of climate targets relies on the cap-and-trade principle, local officials' economic incentive is largely unhooked from mitigation performance. Lastly, the incentive of *career regulation* has also decreased significantly, because part of the responsibility has been transferred from the local government to the third-party verification institutions and emission companies. Local officials only play the role of 'referees' who are responsible for the proper operation of local ETS, they are no longer 'athletes' that are in charge of completing the emission targets. The right of verification has now been transferred from the local government to the newly created third party verification institutions. These independent institutions have been designed as a separate statistics platform between the government and emission companies.

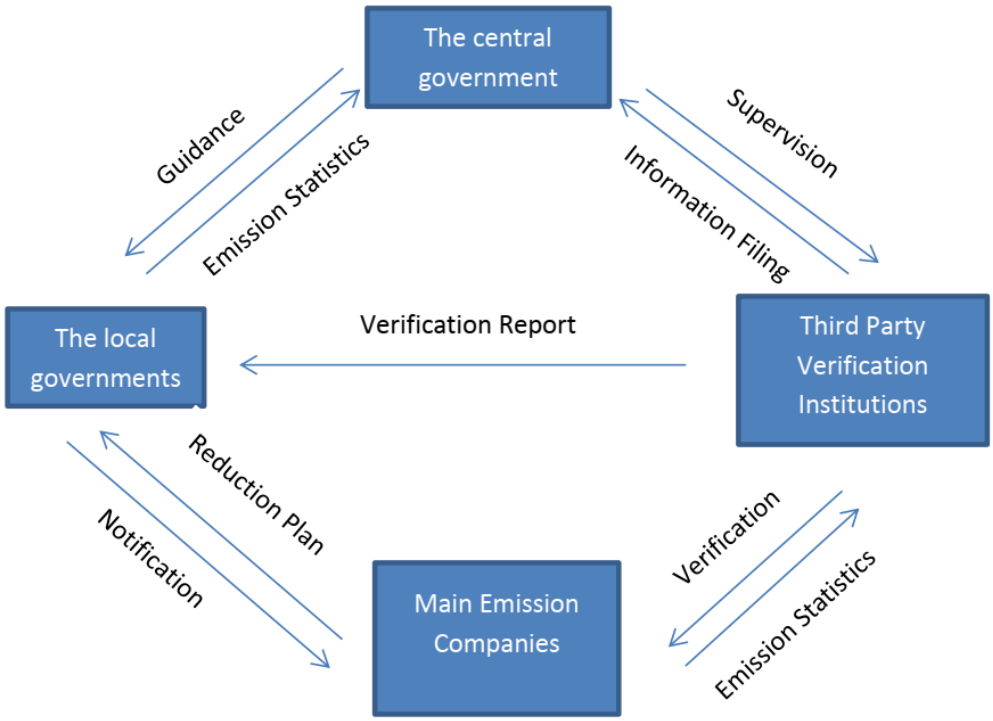

Figure 3: *The dual-track management strategy of the National Emission Trading System, Sources: Author's figure based on interviews and policy documents.*

6. Conclusions

This article has analyzed China's climate policy from the perspective of central-local governmental relations. We aimed to make a theoretical and empirical contribution to existing literature by, respectively, refining the central-local government framework for the purpose of examining climate change policies, and applying it to China's policies over the past 15 years. We found that China's climate policy has been influenced substantially by central-local governmental interactions and, more specifically, the power and incentive allocation between the two levels. Specifically, we identified two trial-and-error processes. The first occurred from 2006 to 2010 with the adaptation of the central-local arrangement from the 'local discretion mode' to a 'political tournament system'. The second trial and error period has started in 2010; this time the 'political tournament system' was adapted to a 'top-level design' mode. Based on policy documents and field research, we find that China's climate governance is undergoing a process of re-centralization. We have demonstrated that the room for local experimentation and innovation has been severely reduced not only through ETS (cap-and-trade) policies but also through revitalized ideological control and institutional centralization.

More broadly, our research reflects recent re-centralization tendencies in China's politics. This recentralization is marked by the concept of a 'top-level design', which has been highlighted since Xi Jinping took the office. The re-centralization trend that we have observed may have the advantage that enables Chinese leadership on climate change governance at the international level, following the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, as well as swift decision-making on issues such as renewable energy investment and the ETS at the domestic level. However, as pointed out by the literature on 'authoritarian environmentalism', of which China is a prime example, it is highly uncertain whether such a centrally steered policy can be sustainable in the long run (Gilley, 2012; Li et al., 2019). As opposed to democratic environmentalism, it tends to stimulate risk aversive behavior and hinder high-quality implementation of environmental policies at local levels (Tang et al., 2018). Moreover, limited participation of citizens and NGOs could in the long run undermine legitimacy, credibility and trust in China's environmental policies and institutions (Burgess, 2017).

Therefore, in terms of policy advise, it may be necessary for China's climate policies to include elements of democratic environmentalism. This may be achieved, of instance, by seeking synergies between climate change policies and 'traditional' environmental issues that directly link to public interests, such as air pollution and land use. In addition, more flexibility for domestic and international NGOs working on climate issues could be pursued. While it is uncertain if this is politically feasible, it is equally unlikely that continued centralization of China's climate policies will bode well for an effective implementation in the long run. Therefore, we may well witness further experimentation with different governance modes in China's climate policy.

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Article 2

Strategic narratives in China's climate policy: Analysing three phases in China's discourse coalition

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During the past decade, we have witnessed a transformation in the role played by China in international climate negotiations, which has provoked increasing academic and policy interest. While most of the current research focuses on normative or empirical analyses of policies, this article provides a comprehensive study of China's climate strategic narratives on both the systematic and national levels. Theoretically, this article situates itself in the 'narrative turn' in international relations. We develop an analytical framework that combines theoretical insights stemming from the strategic narrative with our own identification of the unique features of China's discourse context. We apply this to China's climate strategic narratives by examining China's climate 'discourse coalition', which consists of the government, the epistemic community, and the official media. In doing so, we add to the current research that mainly focuses on the mass media. Methodologically, we critically examine four different sources of China's climate strategic narratives, ranging from leaders' speeches to media reports. This data is triangulated with 21 semi-structured interviews. Overall, we identify three phases of China's climate strategic narratives. On a system level, the strict division between developed and developing countries has been replaced by the narrative of 'a community of a shared future of mankind'; while on the national level, China as the victim of 'ecological imperialism' has given way to the new 'torchbearer' narrative. This research also contributes to a broader understanding on China's domestic politics and its position in global governance.

Keywords

Climate negotiations, China, Narrative turn, Strategic narrative, Discourse coalition

1. Introduction

It is indisputable that China has been one of the most important actors in international climate change. This is true due to its roles as a major emitter and a decisive negotiator. Over the past decade, we have witnessed a dramatic change in China's role from a passive participant to a proactive actor (Christoff, 2010; Li, 2016). Accompanying this role transformation, research on China's climate policy has increasingly sparked the interest of the scholarly community (Hilton & Kerr, 2017; Wang, 2018). However, the existing literature mostly concerns normative or empirical analyses of government policies. Research on China's climate narratives is relatively scarce. In line with Wendt's assertion that the social reality is constructed rather than given, there has been a significant interest in how narratives are manufactured and developed in international affairs (Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2017). In this context, we advocate a shift in research from 'policies' to 'narratives'. A comprehensive and in-depth analysis of China's climate strategic narrative is valuable for understanding the global climate order and China's role within it. We depart from the assumption that climate change is not simply a physical event but an inherently discursive phenomenon. Climate change itself does not imminently produce (or call for) certain patterns of social change. Instead, it relies on actors' linguistic interpretations and proposed solutions.

Against this background, this article will provide the first comprehensive study of China's climate strategic narrative. Theoretically, we build on the 'narrative turn' in international relations. We regard strategic narratives as 'speech-acts', discursive processes through which an issue is foregrounded or backgrounded, filtered-in or filtered-out, and through which strategic targets are realized (Nyman & Zeng, 2016: 302). We develop a theoretical framework that combines the insights from the strategic narrative with our own identification of the unique features of China's discourse context. Empirically, we apply this to China's climate strategic narratives by examining the unique discourse context, more specifically China's climate 'discourse coalition', which consists of the government, the epistemic community, and the official media. In doing so, we add to the current research that mainly focuses on the mass media.

Methodologically, we critically examine four different sources of China's climate strategic narratives: first, the speeches made by national leaders at international and domestic events; second, the statements made by Chinese negotiators at the UNFCCC Conferences; third, climate experts' opinions in different kinds of media; and fourth, coverage of official newspapers and their online content. Our analysis follows a triangulation method reflecting ideas that arose during 21 semi-structured interviews (April 12th to May 27th 2016, Beijing) with officials, China's (former) negotiators in the UNFCCC, climate experts from universities and think-tanks, staff from climate NGOs and relevant decision makers in emission companies.

The article will proceed as follows. The next section reviews the current literature on China's climate discourse, thereby illustrating the empirical and theoretical relevance of our contribution. Subsequently, we elaborate our theoretical framework based on the strategic narrative theories. Then, this framework is applied to China's climate strategic narrative. The final section summarizes our findings.

2. Literature review

Looking through research on climate discourse, scholars have argued that climate change is not simply a matter of fact but is also fundamentally socially and politically constructed (Demeritt 2002; Liverman 2013). The available research on developed countries' climate discourses provides us with the background on how climate politics can be understood beyond the usual realist focus. The focus has mostly been on the climate discourse of governments (Hovden & Lindseth, 2004; Fletcher, 2009), the mass media (Aykut, Comby & Guillemot, 2012; Goodman, Littler, Brockington & Boykoff, 2016), and the scientific community (Antilla, 2005; Ivanova, Schmidt & Schäfer, 2013).

In contrast, assessments of the Chinese climate discourse are surprisingly limited and fragmented. Among these limited attempts, most studies focus on the mass media (Geall, 2018; Wang, 2017; Wu, 2009;), analyzing the climate news coverage among influential media or its impact on the public perception. For example, Wang's (2018) research analyzed media reports on climate change in the three most prominent Chinese media around three critical moments. He identified three dominant constructed discourses, namely development, ecological modernization and low carbon, and revealed how these were constructed to become dominant and how some then faded away over time. Some research attempts to make cross-cultural comparisons of climate change representation. Xie (2015) compared how the US and Chinese newspapers portray climate change. He identified both convergent and divergent pictures from the two countries' newspapers, which were shaped distinctly by the sociopolitical realities in the two countries. Only a very limited number of studies have expanded their scope beyond the mass media (Liverman, 2013; Tseng, 2015; Willats 2017). Moreover, these studies are either limited in scope, for example they examine the 'sustainable development' discourse instead of the entire climate discourse, or they do not cover recent developments of China's climate discourse in- and post-Paris.

In conclusion, mainstream research on China's climate discourse has been transferred from the research agenda of western developed countries, which focuses mainly on the climate discourse in the mass media. However, applying the same research design to the case of China should be done with ontological and epistemological caution. First, China has a different use of language, and the Chinese discourse has evolved in a culture with a background of completely different histories, conditions, problems, issues, aspirations etc.. Second, the different formative political environment, and with it the role of the media, cannot be ignored. To only look at the climate

discourse among the media is not a problem of incomplete research scope, but rather, could lead to an adverse understanding of China's political and discursive environment (Liverman, 2013).

In this context, this article aims to make both empirical and theoretical contributions. Empirically, our study of China's climate narratives goes beyond a pure analysis of media reports. By identifying and highlighting China's 'discourse coalition' (Hajor, 2002; Liverman, 2013), we try to build the ground for a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of China's climate strategic narratives. Different from the relatively separated roles of the government, the media, and the epistemic community in liberal democracies, there is a 'discourse coalition' between these three actors in China. This discourse coalition offers us an innovative textual corpus based on which a deeper, and more culturally informed understanding of China's climate strategic narrative can be gained.

Theoretically, by looking at the narrative, our theoretical framework allows us to contribute to the toolkits of current research on China climate policy that mainly focuses on discourse and frames. We argue that it is the temporal dimension that distinguishes narrative from discourse and frames. Discourses are the raw material of communication – bodies of knowledge about science, law, history, theology – that actors plot into narratives. However, discourses do not feature a causal transformation that takes actors from one status quo to another. Frames, on the other hand, refers to the central organising principle that holds together and gives coherence and meaning to a diverse array of symbols (Gamson et el., 1992). As structures present in discourse, frames as analytical units also lack the temporal and causal features that narratives necessarily possess. Strategic narratives, by contrast, provide a means of linking together events according to a desired endpoint by filtering out or selectively structuring the components.

This temporal dimension in strategic narrative compensates for the shortcomings of research that focuses on discourse and frames. To this end, our analysis will combine diachronic and synchronic dimensions. On the one hand, we will critically analyze China's climate strategic narratives in different phases, while on the other, we will zoom-in on critical moments that potentially challenge the existing narrative positions, for example the creation of the Durban Platform, the Paris Agreement, and the recent US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. In doing so, this article contributes to existing literature by providing a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of China's climate change narratives, with specific focus on the strategic narrative produced by the discourse coalition in three phases (from 2009 to 2018).

3. Theoretical framework

This article situates itself in the 'narrative turn' in international relations. This narrative turn is marked by a range of different approaches to understanding how narratives affect international relations (Roselle, 2017). It emphasizes the importance of narratives in shaping how the international order is imagined and constructed, and the recognition that political actors attempt,

under particular circumstances and in different ways, to shape the narratives through which we understand the international system, international relations, and policy (Levinger & Roselle, 2017). However, within research on climate policy, references to narratives, stories, and storytelling are still relatively nascent. There is still much to be gained from more comprehensive research into climate narratives.

The basic assumption is that narratives profoundly shape our view of the world and reality instead of merely being a neutral medium that mirrors it. For the purpose of this research, we define a narrative as the sequencing, structuring, or organization of signs, codes, and events into a coherent order. This provides means of linking together events according to a desired endpoint, usually by filtering out or selectively structuring the components. This filtering and ordering of events can establish causality, meaning and closure, and signal the realization of a goal, and is often of a transformational character (Pamment, 2014). This temporal dimension will be analysed in the article by looking at the critical moments and dividing the three phases of China's climate strategic narrative accordingly. On this basis, the strategic narratives are representations of a sequence of events and identities, a communicative tool through which political actors- usually elites- attempt to give determined meaning to the past, present and future in order to achieve political objectives. They are 'strategic', as they suggest short- and long-term goals or desirable end-states and how to get there, based on representations of the situation, the key actors, and 'causal beliefs' about how social and political processes operate and thus how certain actions could be expected to play out (Antoniades, O'Loughlin & Toselle, 2017: 4). In this research, this strategic feature comes out of our analysis on the discourse coalition, which is the main producer of China's climate strategic narrative.

In the remainder of this section, we develop a novel analytical framework that combines theoretical insights stemming from the strategic narrative with our own identification of the unique features of China's discourse context. Therefore, two analytical dimensions are constructed, namely the structural and the agency dimensions (**Table 6**).

Dimensions	Levels	Description
Structural	System narratives	China's perception of the international climate regime and its strategic intention to influence this system according to its interests.
	National narratives	China's climate identity including its role, values and goals in international climate affairs.
Agency	Top leaders	How China's top leaders initiate its climate strategic narrative through consensus building at the central level.
	Scientific and policy community	How this community legitimizes the leaders' strategic narrative and fill in the vagueness of this narrative in an incremental and subsequent manner.
	Official media	How the full-fledged concepts are distilled by official media and fleshed out in the controlled discussion and reports.

Table 6: *Theoretical framework of our analysis on China's climate strategic narratives.*

The structural dimension consists of a system narrative and a national narrative. The system narrative is about the nature of the international relations structure. Actors use the system narrative to describe how the world is structured, who the players are, and how it works (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle, 2014). It indicates a number of interrelated aspects of the international order such as actors' understandings of polarity and the identification of great powers; it highlights expectations about the behavior of kinds of states, for example great powers and rogue states; it outlines the desirability and possibility of collaboration, cooperation, and integration in the order; it makes predictions about rising and falling powers, threats, enemies, and allies; it assesses the identification of interests; and finally it outlines the scope for the socialization of political actors (Roselle et el., 2014). Therefore, the system strategic narrative is the discursive attempt by actors to produce, maintain, and change the international order. Related to the system strategic narrative, the national narrative sets out what the story of the state or nation is, and what values and goals it has in the international system (Roselle et el., 2014: 76). It is about the identities of actors in international affairs, which are in a process of constant negotiation and contestation. The national narrative also indicates how the state understands the meaning and purpose of regional and international organizations, the role it

should play in the world, and the kinds of interests worth pursuing. Conceptually, strategic narratives on the national level are highly related to the nation's identity, which is based on beliefs, place, reputation, prestige, credibility etc. (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle, 2014).

Besides the structural dimension, China's unique discourse context allows us to also analyse the agency dimension. We argue that strategic narratives must be grounded in domestic beliefs and political culture to have credibility. Strategic narratives play an important role in Chinese politics and function as a form of state power. By determining '(in)appropriate' formulations, the Chinese government attempts to regulate what is being said and written and, by extension, what is being done within the Chinese political system (Scholenhals, 1992). Those formulations or official terminologies are known as tifa ('提法', ways of putting things), and are particularly useful for indicating China's intention towards the international system, and legitimizing and promoting its ideology among both external and internal audiences. Understanding the substance behind these formulations — thus the vocabularies it uses and why — is fundamental for making sense of the 'topsy-turvy world of Chinese politics' (Gang, 2012: 2). This unique discourse environment will be dealt with in the next section by our identification of China's climate discourse coalition.

4. The climate discourse coalition in China

Different from western countries, the relationship between the government, the media, and the epistemic community is relatively close and constitutes the climate discourse coalition (Hajor, 2002; Liverman, 2013). The government plays a central role in this coalition and both the epistemic community and the media form an auxiliary but indispensable part. We also noticed the existence of the 'green public sphere' of environmental discourse, which demonstrates the new dynamism of grass-roots political change, however its relevance to climate issue in the current stage is limited. We argue that this three-fold discourse coalition – government, epistemic community, and media - constitutes the foundation upon which the theoretical framework and empirical analysis stand.

China's strategic narratives are normally proposed by its top leaders. They enjoy great autonomy in the formation and projection of climate strategic narratives. Not being constrained by electoral pressure, China's top leaders have more capability to focus on their own preferences (Lu, 2002; Gilley, 2012; Bondes & Heep, 2013). Thus the making of China's climate strategic narratives is characterized by consensus building at the centre (Gilley, 2012; Qi & Wu, 2013). It is a process of developing a common understanding of the climate issue and then adopting mutually accepted narratives regarding its solution among the top leaders. This is distinctively different from the building or winning of majority electoral support, as is generally the case in western countries. The latter requires closer consultation with non-governmental actors. Anthony Giddens uses the concept of 'radicalism at the centre' to explain the active role that a political leadership can play in promoting policies to address climate

change while exerting steady efforts to shore up public and stakeholder support for them (Giddens, 2009). This is applicable to China, whose climate strategic narratives are also driven by the top leaders, who have used their prerogative to elaborate climate policies and position China in international climate governance (Delman, 2011). As China's chief negotiator Xie Zhenhua illustrated in an interview with the Southern Metropolis, 'all the negotiation strategies are driven by the high level's strong political will' (Xie, 2017d).

The epistemic community also plays an important part in China's climate strategic narratives. While indigenous knowledge production on the anthropogenic and dangerous nature of climate change stimulated the political and popular debate in western industrialized countries, the debate was carried to China largely through foreign policy channels (Ellermann, 2013). The construction of climate change as a sovereignty issue and the Chinese epistemic community's position of supporting this notion is therefore a good example of an alignment of science and politics. Since the 1990s, Chinese research institutions have acted as government-run think tanks and their research has concentrated on providing the moral and scientific support for the government's climate policy and negotiation (He et el., 2000; Hohne, 2011; Liu et el., 2008). Besides this well-recognized function of legitimizing the top leaders' words, this community also fills in the substance of these strategic narratives. In some cases, the new strategic narratives proposed by Chinese leaders are not clearly defined, and lead to overall vagueness in the concepts. This strategic vagueness arises as a result of the need to cover China's inability to elaborate its own concept and allow diplomatic flexibility (Zeng, 2016). However, if China continues to maintain this conceptual vagueness, this may lead to misconceptions among international society with regard to China's strategic intentions. This is where the epistemic community's importance comes in. Enjoying the advantage of a professional reputation or policy authority, this community can enlarge or restrain the scope of strategic narratives. They can also enrich or shrink the content of the discourse initiated by the leaders. Thus the epistemic community is crucial to transforming the abstract concept into a clearer blueprint in order to put the narrative into practice.

China's climate strategic narratives also rely on the official media's projection. The media is an important tool through which China can project its national image outwards and build its identity domestically (Loh, 2017). As the 'tongue and throat' of the Party, the government's strategy of 'conditional public opinion guidance' (Tai, 2014) was directed at China's climate news outlet; the basic guideline was to construct and support a positive image of China as a responsible actor in this regard. The rapid commercialization and technological advancement of the media system since the 1990s have complicated, rather than weakened, the censorship. Instead of publicly criticizing censored content, the authorities now exert 'passive censorship' by which content is taken down "quickly and quietly" without offering free publicity (Zhao, 2004). As China's media coverage is strongly guided by the state, narratives can be partially understood as a strategy of "political communication" to the public (Liverman, 2013). There is no trace of either debate or counter-voice in the state-run media (Alvaro, 2015). The fully-

fledged concepts are distilled by official or semi-official media in numerical mnemonics and fleshed out in controlled discussions and reports. This is one of the most direct, pervasive and instantaneous ways of projecting strategic narratives. China is well aware of the function of the media in communicating with both global and domestic audiences to promote a positive image and build the legitimacy of its climate strategy. Xi Jinping has repeatedly demanded on various occasions that the stories of China should be told well and that the voices of China should be spread widely, internationally (Boc, 2015). Strengthening its voice and winning discursive power has therefore become a significant part of China's political strategy.

Besides the government, epistemic community, and the official media, we also noticed the rise of the green public sphere of critical environmental discourse. This green public sphere refers to a space where different publics gather to articulate environmental issues, produce and consume green discourse, and rely on media for dissemination (Sun, Graham & Broersma, 2018). Its emergence consists of three basic elements: an environmental discourse or greenspeak; publics that produce or consume greenspeak; and media used for producing and circulating greenspeak (Yang & Calhoun, 2007: 212). Thus, a green public sphere fosters political debates and pluralistic views about environmental issues. When the discourse upgrades into actions, it even alters the local governments' policy implementation, as we can see in the cases such as the cancellation of the Nu River's hydropower project (2004) (Yang & Calhoun, 2007) and the halting of petrochemical project in Xiamen city (2008).

However, our empirical analysis shows that the green public sphere only plays a marginal role in climate issues. This is reflected at three levels, namely the discourse, the Environmental Non-governmental Organization (ENGO), and the media. In terms of discourse itself, the greenspeak provoking public discussions relates to issues that directly influence people's wellbeing, such as pollution, and habitant resettlement. In contrast, climate change was carried to China through foreign policy channels and framed as a development and sovereignty issue. This diagnostic framing has strengthened, rather than weakened, the government's authority when dealing with climate change. Secondly, when talking about ENGOs as greenspeak producers, the influence of the government cannot be underestimated. Our interviews towards China's domestic ENGOs confirms that in order to be legally registered, they have to be affiliated to certain government sectors. Following the international non-governmental organization management law, which went into force in January 2017, all the international ENGOs are also under close state supervision. They are required to submit financial and work plans to China's Ministry of Public Security for approval. Lastly, the alternative media and the internet are subjected to official surveillance. The Chinese government continuously adopts new strategies such as computer filtering to deal with the changing internet ecology and to direct public opinion.

To conclude, although the green public sphere provides a political space where citizens can discuss environmental issues and offers a future opportunity to produce and consume more

liberal climate discourse, its influence is currently limited to policy interpretation and implementation without having an impact on the policy-making process. Its relevance with climate issues cannot be improved unless the development and sovereignty diagnostic framing of climate issue would be replaced by more environmental considerations.

5. The evolution of China's climate strategic narratives

We discern three phases in China's climate strategic narratives between 2009 and 2018. Although in reality there is always a mix of different discourses and there is also some continuity throughout the different phases, our strategic narrative analysis allows to identify three 'dislocations' around which the dominant narrative takes a different shape. These changes typically materialize around high-level events of the UNFCCC conferences (Copenhagen, Dunban and Pairs) that receive much attention in the political and public debates. In the initial stage of the research, the phases were assumed deductively from existing literature on international climate change policies, which often uses UNFCCC summits as milestones and reference points (Guo, 2011; Conrad, 2012; Schreurs, 2016). At the same time, the relevance of these three distinct phases became clear inductively from a close reading of speeches and documents from China's climate change discourse coalition. Whereas we also notice some continuity between the phases and some variance within them, the picture emerging from the empirical data shows significant changes in the narratives around climate change around the turning points of the UNFCCC conferences.

5.1 Phase I: from Copenhagen to Durban

During this phase, the intention of China's climate strategic narratives on the system level was to keep the international climate negotiation on two tracks and thus postpone the deadline for China to make a legally-binding reduction commitment. It was hoped that this could be realized by making a strict division between the developing and developed countries and assigning the blame to the latter. Meanwhile, at the national level, the climate narratives strategically framed China as the victim of ecological imperialism, whose national interests as a whole were jeopardized, along with a better quality of life for individual Chinese people.

5.1.1 System narrative: developed versus developing countries

China found the legitimacy for the division between developed and developing countries in the principle of 'Common But Differentiated Responsibility and Respective Capabilities' (CBDR-RC), which is written in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Based on this dual division, China has assigned the blame to developed countries in a twofold manner, seeing them as responsible for historical emissions and for the failure of the current international negotiations. (Hilton & Kerr, 2017). China has highlighted that the concentration of GHG in atmosphere is due to developed countries' historical emissions. At the Copenhagen conference, the then Premier Wen Jiabao stated that '…*developed countries*

account for 80 percent of the total global carbon dioxide emissions since the Industrial Revolution over 200 years ago. It is all too clear who should take the primary responsibility' (Wen, 2009).

China also assigns the blame for the stagnation in the international climate negotiations to developed countries, to be more specific, their low mitigation ambitions and insufficient political will in terms of financial and technical transfer. This assignment of blame is based on the IPCC's report, which asked the developed countries to reduce their emissions by 25%-40% in 2020 compared to the 1990 levels, so that the earth had an approximately 50% chance of limiting the temperature increase to less than 2°C above pre-industrial levels. However, the mitigation made by developed countries in the first commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol resulted in aggregate emissions of 14%-19% in 2020 compared to the 1990 levels, which is well below the range established by the IPCC. Moreover, the absence of the US and other developed emitters made the second commitment period of Kyoto cover only 11%-13% of the world's emissions; China therefore criticized it, stating that it only 'exists in name'(The Sina, 2011). In China's strategic narrative, the insufficient financial and technical transfer from the developed countries is the second reason for the current failure of the international climate regime. China severely questioned the transparency and sufficiency of the 30 billion dollar fast-start fund for the period 2010-2012 and the 100 billion dollars of long-term finance support, which are both written into the Copenhagen Accord. The emotional statement made by China's chief negotiator Xie Zhenhua at the last plenary session of the Durban conference clearly illustrated how China projects this strategic narrative:

'In order to combat climate change, we need to fulfil our promises and take real action. However, we witness now that some countries have failed their commitment. They promise to drastically reduce their emission, did they really make it? They promise to provide developing countries finance and technology, did they provide it? Twenty years have gone but none of these promises are carried out.'

5.1.2 National narrative: China as the victim of ecological imperialism

During this phase, China projected a national strategic narrative that framed it as the victim of ecological imperialism. By definition, ecological imperialism constructs climate change as a strategic topic. The focus is not on how to manage climate change efficiently and effectively; rather it is used as a tool in the strategic considerations of international power struggles. International climate policy is therein described as a tool used by developed countries to suppress China, and to hamper its legitimate efforts to grow as an international political power (Ellermann, 2013). This is reflected in a motion to the National People's Congress (NPC):

'On the one hand, some developed countries want to make the climate change problem a tool and method to suppress the development of China and other developing countries. On the other hand, climate policy has negatively affected the development of Chinas economy and society.'

This victim narrative serves three purposes. Firstly, it creates a negative presentation of the out-group (ecological imperialist) and a hostile foreign enemy for the in-group (Chinese people). Secondly, China is presented as an "innocent victim" of international bullying, which potentially underlines the credibility of the Chinese government's moral role within the international climate negotiations. Thirdly, this narrative consolidates the ruling elite's political legitimacy, authority and continued power by constructing the role of the Chinese government in leading the nation to put an end to this humiliating situation (Schneider, 2014).

The victimhood of China is then further illustrated at two levels: the hampered national interests and jeopardized quality of life of individuals. At the national interest level, emissions mitigation is viewed as a social and economic development issue in which emissions rights are equated to development rights. Under the current sovereignty principle, the international climate arrangement is essentially a solution to distribute the amount of GHG that still can be emitted. For China itself, this means how much energy China can use in the future. Immediately before the Copenhagen conference, Ding Zhongli, the chief scientist and China's core negotiator systematically evaluated all of the mitigation plans. He criticized all of the international GHG mitigation arrangements, stating that they were a 'trap under the discourse of emission mitigation' (Ding, 2010). He went on to say that if these arrangements were adopted, 'it would be one of the most unequal treaties in human history and morally evil' (Ding, 2010). He argued that in these plans, by setting the 2 ℃ targets, the total amount of GHG that could still be emitted from 2006 to 2050 was settled. Although most plans do not force developing countries to make legally binding targets, the emissions commitment made by developed countries lock major portion of this total emission amount and what was left for developing countries was highly unfair. These plans not only ignored the historical emissions from industrialized countries, but also gave them 2.3-6.7 times more per capita allowance than developing countries. For China specifically, its allowance will be exhausted by 2021 at the latest and it will have to buy an emissions allowance after that.

At the individual level, China appealed to concepts such as human rights to show how the international climate regime would jeopardize Chinese people's rights. The Xinhua published an article, which accused the developed countries of hypocrisy:

'In the past, when western developed countries were lecturing other countries, every other word was 'human rights'. But on the topic of emissions reductions – a topic that concerns the wellbeing of all humankind – the western countries are not talking about human rights, are not considering the reasonable appeal of billions of citizens in developing countries for a better life. Isn't this selfish and narrow-minded, hypocritical and arrogant?' (Gong, 2011)

This further materialized in a public speech made by Yu Qingtai, China's then special delegate of climate negotiation, at Peking University (Yu, 2010). He argued that China should make its

national interests the priority in international negotiations. In his speech, the national interest was interpreted as the development right for every Chinese person to enjoy a quality life:

'Government must guarantee the quality of citizen's life, it is totally fair and acceptable if the GHG emission is increased in this process. I told one scholar from a developed country that families from western countries have two cars and they have enjoyed this lifestyle for decades. However, families from China have just bought one car. It is unfair to tell them that it would be environmentally friendly if they could ride the bike.'

5.2 Phase II: From the Durban to Paris

China's strategic narratives aimed at delaying its legally-binding emissions commitment cannot hide the fact that China has been the world's biggest GHG emitter since 2007. In 2011, the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action (ADP) was initiated, and asked to develop a protocol with legal force under the Convention applicable to developed and developing countries. Besides the international pressure, China's domestic situation also underwent a profound change, for example the severe air pollution brought by fossil fuel combustion, and the economic 'new normal' in which low emissions technologies became a pillar of China's strategic emerging industries etc.. These contexts called for an updated strategic narrative to defend China's changing material and ideational interests. We have identified a clear evolution of China's climate strategic narratives on both the system and national levels during this phase.

5.2.1 System narrative: 'a community of shared future of mankind'

During this phase, the dual division between developed and developing countries was largely backgrounded. Although China still mentioned the principle of CBDR-RC, in Xi Jinping's speech at the Paris conference, the international climate system was narrated as a 'community of a shared future of mankind'(ren lei ming yun gong tong ti, 人类命运共同体) in which all parties, no matter how big or small, strong or weak, rich or poor, would all shoulder the responsibility for the win-win outcome of international climate governance. Although hardly any foreign audiences back then noticed the importance of this strategic narrative, the 'community of a shared future for mankind' was an important political signpost, which marked China's transformation from the dual division between developed/developing countries to a multipolar climate governance structure.

This concept was first introduced in the report of the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012. Since then this concept has been mentioned over 100 times in Xi's speeches and worked as China's core principle to deal with the numerous challenges and increasing risks in the era of development and the transformation of international relations. By

definition, the community of a shared future for mankind is a community in which all countries should jointly shape the future of the world, write the international rules, manage global affairs and ensure that development outcomes are shared by all. For climate specifically, this narrative has two meanings. Firstly, for the climate change issue, it is now narrated as a challenge faced by human beings and no country can stand aloof. Secondly, for the distribution of responsibility, GHG mitigation is no longer a problem of developed countries; instead, every country, regardless of its development stage, has its own responsibility. In sum, the promotion of this concept demonstrates China's transformation from the zero-sum game way of thinking, which featured a pessimistic winner-takes-all and beggar-thy-neighbor mentality, to an all-winner game spirit. We argue that China's proposition to build a community of a shared future for mankind aimed at developing an upgraded international climate structure, in which its pursuit of a greater national role was facilitated. This strategic intention was shown in a speech by China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi (Wang, 2017):

'The building of a community with a shared future for mankind make it necessary for China to make practical efforts and set an example, as well as unswervingly pursue a road to a great nation which is different from that of traditional powers.'

5.2.2 National narrative: from 'inability' to 'ability'

The adapted system narrative facilitated China's pursuit of a proactive role in the international climate regime. The point was to present China as a great power, a country in which multifaceted development was rapidly taking place and ambitions and aspirations to combat climate change were growing, rather than a victim of environmental imperialism (Sørensen, 2015).

At the Paris climate conference, Xi Jinping stated that 'China upholds the values of friendship, justice and shared interests, and takes an active part in international cooperation on climate change' (Xi, 2015). In this speech, Xi referred to the concept of a 'correct viewpoint on justice and interests', which indicates the transformed role of China in the international climate regime from taking an interest to taking more responsibility, especially towards other developing countries. The concept of the 'correct viewpoint on justice and interests' was first put forward by Xi Jinping during his visit to Africa in 2013, and since then, this narrative has been mentioned more than 40 times in his speeches and articles. This concept implies that while pursuing one's own interests, it is important to take into account those of others, which at times might mean giving up one's own gains for the sake of justice and fairness (Xi, 2014). By highlighting this concept, China's policy towards other states should politically insist on the principles of justice, fairness, and morality rather than economic interests (Yang, 2013). This 'correct viewpoint on justice and interests' underlines China's determination to take more responsibility for climate issues.

Our analysis shows that this narrative is supported by two pillars, which are China's solid domestic climate policy and its action in regard to the south-south climate cooperation. As for the domestic climate action, in Hu Jintao's statement at the 18th National Congress of the CPC in 2012, ecological civilization was listed after economic, political, cultural and social civilization and thus as the fifth fundamental goal of China's overall development plan. This is a strong political signal that China will continue to deepen its domestic climate action, since the National Congress is the highest body in China's political system which decides on the country's development direction in the following five years. China's proactive role in environment-related issues is perhaps most obvious in the area of climate change. We have analyzed the 'Annual China's Policies and Actions on Climate Change' from 2011 to 2015, which serve as the platform for China to project its climate strategy. The 'domestic climate change action' is the most prominent section and the following policy measures have been repeated in almost every report: the overall target for peak carbon emissions by 2030 or sooner; the target of obtain 20% of China's primary energy from non-fossil energy by 2030; a range of carbon and energy intensity targets in China's 12th Five Year Plan (2011-2015); the introduction of the pilot carbon emissions trading system in two provinces and five cities and programs to promote lower-carbon strategic emerging industries.

The other pillar of China's national strategic narrative is its south-south climate cooperation. The south-south climate cooperation was mainstreamed into China's climate strategic narratives at the 2011 Durban COPs conference. China's chief negotiator Xie Zhenhua systematically stressed the achievement and future design of the south-south climate cooperation (The China News, 2011). A year later, in his speech at the UN sustainable development conference, the then Premier Wen Jiabao promised that China would donate 200 million RMB to help AOSIS countries, LDCs and African countries to deal with climate change (Wen, 2012). In 2014, the then vice premier Zhang Gaoli presented China's decision to build the South-South Cooperation Fund on Climate Change and doubled its financial support from 2015 (Zhang, 2014). This strategic narrative reached a peak during president Xi's speech at the Paris conference, in which he announced that China would launch cooperation projects, including the setting up of 10 pilot low-carbon industrial parks, the launch of 100 mitigation and adaptation programs in other developing countries, and providing them with 1,000 training opportunities focused on low-carbon technologies.

5.3 Phase III: the Post-Paris era

The Paris agreement was a landmark in the international climate regime. It marked the beginning of a new international climate arrangement almost 20 years after the Kyoto Protocol. However, the withdrawal of the US under President Donald Trump has cast a shadow over this newly built climate mechanism. This gridlock in the multilateral climate negotiations has shaken confidence in the UNFCCC as the only negotiation mechanism and created growing scholarly and political discussion regarding the possibility of mini-lateral forums as a

supplement or even substitution. (Falkner, 2016; Hovi, Sprinz, Sælen & Underdal, 2017). In this context, we have witnessed another adaptation of China's climate strategic narratives.

5.3.1 System narrative: defend the Paris Agreement and UNFCCC

In the context of the US's withdrawal, China reiterated its recognition of climate change as a global challenge and the need for multilateral cooperation. On this basis, it projected a clear strategic narrative to maintain the legitimacy and authority of the UNFCCC as the only international climate governance mechanism.

Even before President Trump made his announcement, in response to queries about Trump's opposition to the Paris Accords, sources stressed the "common challenge" posed by climate change and Beijing's willingness to defend the Paris Agreement. As Xi Jinping pointed out in his speech at the UN's office in Geneva (2017): '*the Paris Agreement is a milestone in the history of climate governance. We must ensure this endeavor is not derailed. All parties should work together to implement the Paris Agreement.*'

Following Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris agreement, authoritative sources repeated China's determination to back it. A day after Trump's announcement, the spokesperson of China's Foreign Ministry (Hua, 2017) stated that

'*Climate change is a challenge for the whole world and no country can stand aloof. The Paris Agreement is a hard-won result that represents the broadest consensus of the international community and sets the target for the global campaign against climate change.*'

We argue that this narrative went further than a reaction to the US's decision to withdraw; rather, it reveals China's deeper desire for more influence in global governance in general and in the international climate negotiations in particular. The reason why China highlighted the legitimacy and authority of the Paris Agreement and the UNFCCC is that it views them as the platform from which it can pursue its 'institutional discourse power' (zhi du xing hua yu quan, 制度性话语权). This narrative was initiated in Xi Jinping's speech at the 5th Plenary Session of 18th CPC Central Committee, where he mentioned the intention 'to raise China's institutional discourse power in global economic governance'. The application of this concept soon expanded to other policy fields including climate change.

The institutional discourse power is defined as the discourse power solidified by international institutions. It refers to an actor's ability to understand and apply discourse to persuade other actors and construct the rules and structure of the international governance system (The People's Daily, 2016). In climate governance, institutional discourse power is understood as a kind of discourse power owned by governments or non-governmental organizations in setting agendas and forming decisions, creating and improving rules, interpreting and applying regulations, resolving disputes and managing crises. From China's viewpoint, the collapse of

the international climate regime would weaken its climate institutional discourse power. Thus, by defending the legitimacy of the Paris regime and the UNFCCC, China intends to solidify its discursive power on international climate governance and make its narrative more acceptable to other parties.

We argue here that China's insistence on the Paris Agreement and the UNFCCC aims at facilitating its self-claimed torchbearer role in international climate governance. There is now a greater appetite in China to shape the international climate system and strive for leadership through presenting its ideas and solutions rather than simply taking in the current climate governance system.

5.3.2 China: 'torchbearer' of the international climate regime?

At the 19th National Congress of CCP in 2017, Xi Jinping made a bold statement that positioned China as the next global leader in combating climate change, stating that China will be

'Taking a driving seat in international cooperation to respond to climate change. China has become an important participant, contributor, and torchbearer in the global endeavor for ecological civilization.'

This was a landmark narrative, since China had never previously officially claimed a leadership role in international climate negotiations. This leadership role was further substantiated by the strategic narrative of the 'Chinese solution', which was initiated during Xi's speech on the 95th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party. He asserted that '*the CPC and Chinese people have every confidence in their ability to provide a Chinese solution to aid the exploration of a better social system for humanity*' (Xi, 2016). This served as a political signal that China's has fundamentally shifted its diplomatic strategy from Deng Xiaoping's approach of 'keeping a low profile' towards the current one of 'striving for achievement' (Wang & Zeng 2016). During Deng Xiaoping's administration, China's guiding foreign policy principle was his admonition that China should 'keep a low profile, never take the lead'. By contrast, now under Xi, China has become more confident in promoting its own ideals and therefore shaping the structure of the international system. Similar to China's other strategic narratives in their initial phase, no-one has officially given a detailed definition of the 'Chinese solution'; it still needs to be filled in with scholarly discussion and media projections. However, we can already conclude that this is a rather ambitious scheme. The China's official media mentioned that the 'Chinese solution' is a transcendence of the 'Western Civilization Centralism' and a new approach to realizing development (The People's Daily, 2017).

China's climate policy could be the first template of this assertiveness in practice. When asked about China's negotiation strategy for the post-Paris regime, Xie Zhenhua, the government's special climate envoy, asserted that '*We will propose the Chinese solution to every important*

issue. In the past, China responded to other countries' proposals, from now on, we will put forward the Chinese solution to climate change' (Xie, 2017a). The speech delivered by ambassador Liu Jieyi at a High Level UN Event in 2017 further substantiated the content of the Chinese solution (Liu, 2017):

'*We are preparing Chinese solution on issues relating to the implementation of the Paris Agreement such as transparency and global stock taking with a view to finding a "landing point" and a "common denominator" that are within the comfort zone of all sides*'.

In China's official elaboration, the Chinese solution means 'innovative suggestions that can be accepted by all participants in the international negotiation', especially under the circumstance that one of the most important countries has withdrawn from the Paris Agreement. On the one hand, the Chinese solution is based on China's expertise, which it obtained from its experience in implementing domestic climate policy. 'China cannot offer constructive proposals without summing up its experience and lessons'; on the other hand, it is also based on China's willingness to propose the 'bridge building plan' in future negotiations, which means a solution that is not satisfactory but acceptable to every country (Xie, 2017b).

However, recently we have noticed that there is ambiguity in what the Chinese leadership entails and this uncertainty has cast doubt on the extent to which China can fulfil its 'torchbearer' role and the 'Chinese solution' in the future. In his public lecture at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Xie Zhenhua stated quite bluntly that, 'China does not have the capability to act as the leader in global climate regime. Instead, China should stick to its traditional golden mean and try to be a participant, constructor and contributor'(Xie, 2017c). Also in this line, when faced with a call for China to fill the leadership vacuum left by Trump, Pan Jiahua, the climate expert at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), insisted that the leading role should be interpreted as 'active leading with limited responsibility'. He pointed out that China does not possess the status and way of thinking as a super power. China does not have the responsibility to make a commitment that exceeds its capability; instead, China's leading role should be interpreted as its firm standpoint on combating climate change and its solid domestic contribution. The key point is to improve the climate idea and spur self-dependent innovation such as marketization measurements (Pan, 2017).

Table 7: *the basic content of China's climate strategic narratives.*

	Phase I	Phase II	Phase III
Duration	From 2009 Copenhagen Climate Conference to 2011 Durban Climate	From 2011 Durban Climate Conference to 2015Paris Climate	From 2015 Paris Climate Conference to current
Leadership	President Hu Jintao	The Later Term of Hu Jintao to The Early Term of Xi Jinping	President Xi Jinping
Fundamental event or speech	- President Hu Jintao's Speech at the opening Plenary Session of the UN Summit on Climate Change (2009)	- President Hu Jintao's Statement at the 18th National Congress of the China's Communist Party (2012)	- Ambassador Liu Jieyi's Speech on High Level Event Entitled Climate Change and the Sustainable Development Agenda (2017)
System strategic narratives	Blame the developed countries - The historical responsibility - Responsibility of current stagnant climate negotiation - Low mitigation ambition - Insufficient financial and	A community of shared future of mankind -climate issue as a challenge faced by developed and developing all countries -an upgraded climate regime which facilitate China's pursuit for a bigger role	Defend the Paris Agreement and UNFCCC - Reaction to US's decision to withdraw - Pursuit China's institutional discourse power within international climate regime
National strategic narratives	China as the victim of ecological imperialism - Hamper China's national interest - Jeopardize people's life quality	China from 'inability' to 'ability' -Highlight China's solid domestic action -Stress China's action on South-South climate cooperation	China as the climate leader - The 'torchbearer' in climate governance - The recent bounce back to the dual division

6. Conclusions

This paper examined how China gives meaning to the international climate system and its role within this regime. The theoretical framework of strategic narratives has allowed us to look beyond the usual realist focus on strategic rational calculus and contribute to a deeper understanding of the evolution of China's domestic and international climate policies. By doing this we hope to add a critical case to the current study on climate discourse with regard to how a developing country with relatively low per-capita income and restrictions on domestic political participation forms and projects its climate narratives to influence the climate regime. By linking climate strategic narrative to a broader context, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of politics in China, both in terms of domestic policies and in terms of global governance. Domestically, climate issues are closely intertwined with other core national interests. Exploring China's climate strategic narrative can contribute to a better understanding of this connection and the domestic politics behind it. Therefore, as further elaborated below, the analysis of China's climate narrative has ramifications that are much wider than climate policy. Specifically, it points to China's strategic consideration in relation to energy security, environmental protection, and industrial upgrading.

China's turn to a more aggressive climate narrative reflects its concerns about energy security. The problem of energy insufficiency and dependency is aggravated by China's fast economic development which depends on huge energy consumption. China has highlighted the linkage between climate mitigation and energy security by reiterating that action on climate mitigation is actually for the sake of energy security. It is out of question that China will do this even without international mitigation pressure. It has no choice but to speed up the transformation to zero-carbon energy to guarantee the functioning of economy (Moore, 2011).

Besides energy security, China's climate narrative to a large extent links to the problem of air pollution. China's GHGs emission and air pollution are both caused by its reliance on fossil fuel, unbalanced industrial structure and its extensive development mode. Since 2010, the persistent smog has become the top concern of the Chinese citizens because of its catastrophic effect on public health (Jiang et el., 2013). This unrest put huge pressure on China and prompted it to take more action. In this context, the government promoted narratives such as 'air pollution and climate change share the same root and solution (治理大气污染与气候变化同根同源)' in order to realize the strategy of co-benefit which combines pollution abatement and climate mitigation.

China's climate narrative also reflects its concern on economic transformation and upgrading. China has gone into the economic 'new normal' (Hilton & Kerr, 2017), which requires slowing down the speed of development, optimizing and upgrading industrial structure, and spurring the innovation-motivated development patterns. The climate agenda perfectly feeds into this

radical economic shift. On the one hand, emission reduction measures such as increasing energy efficiency and improving renewable energy would contribute to this more sustainable and balanced economic 'new normal'. In fact, climate strategic narratives such as 'ecological civilization' have already been mainstreamed into the key slogans that inform China's future development direction (Hilton & Kerr, 2017). On the other hand, the increasing alignment between domestic economic and environmental agendas also gives China greater flexibility in international climate policy.

Internationally, our research on China's climate strategic narrative contributes to the broader discussion on China's role in global governance and its attitude toward current global order. China's growing confidence and capacity which we also observed in its climate narrative (Phase III), provoked the concern on whether international leadership is shifting away from the West to China (Chen & Wang, 2018). As a template of this self-assertiveness in practice, our article confirms that China indeed claims a more proactive role in climate politics, from a 'victim of climate imperialism' to the 'torchbearer' of international climate regime. Our research also adds a case to recents debates on the patterns of international power transition (Kristensen, 2017). It confirms that this leadership is shifting by way of abdication rather than a hegemonic clash between rising and declining powers. As the U.S. is constrained by Trumpism and the EU bothered by internal problems such as Brexit, China's leadership is seen to be facilitated by this leadership vacuum.

This proactive role of China has triggered uncertainties on its attitude toward the current international order, since China has projected contradictory claims as a 'responsible stakeholder' under current regime and a 'new type of great power' seeking to reform the existing international order. In the case of climate policy, China's growing self-confidence does not go together with a more 'competitive' approach as seen in the context of the 'trade wars' with the U.S., the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) around China etc. Our study on China's climate strategic narrative shows that China has endeavored to maintain the status quo of the multilateral-based international climate regime, to be more specific, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Agreement. This steadiness on existing climate order is reflected in China's reiterated narrative to highlight the historical importance of the Paris Agreement and the call upon all parties to protect this achievement. As such, China's future role in climate change, and specifically the outcome of its current 'ambiguity' in relation to its 'torchbearer role', might provide useful indications of its general approach to global governance in an area of increasing instability.

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Article 3

China's role in international climate policies: a framing analysis of EU media

Yunhan Zhang

Climate change represents an urgent and potentially irreversible threat to human societies and the planet. The community of nations is confronting the stark reality that there will be no solution without the widest possible level of cooperation. Under this circumstance, the roles played by the world's main actors fundamentally influence the global climate regime. However, as the world biggest emitter, China's climate role, and especially alter perceptions of that role, is to a large extent ignored in the academic world. Guided by a framing analysis, this article aims to fill this gap by developing a novel analysis framework which measures four role frames and ascribed motivations in three European media organizations. The results show that the 'bloc member' and 'leader' roles are dominant and that there has been a clear transition from the former to the latter. Meanwhile, there has been a continuation of the material-based factor being the major ascribed motivation in media coverage.

Keywords

Role, frame, China climate politics, motivation

1. Introduction

As one of the main actors in international climate governance, the role of China has been a main theme in both media reports and academic research. However, most existing research is composed of either single-case studies or longitudinal cross-country studies that compare China with other countries, and few scholars look at how China's climate roles are perceived by other countries. This study highlights that this 'alter-perception' (the perception of roles by outside actors) should be an area for exploration, since it not only reflects the other parties' expectations, but also constructs China's own role conception and performance. Moreover, in terms of EU-China bilateral relations, compared with China's general role frames, little academic attention has been paid to China's climate-specific role using an adequate theoretical framework and empirical evidence.

This article starts from the assumption that climate change should be an indispensable piece of the puzzle for understanding EU-China comprehensive relations, and that the issue of role frames is particularly relevant in this regard. A closer look at China's climate role can contribute not only to understanding the 'more realistic, assertive, and multi-faceted approach' of EU-China relations (the European Commission, 2019), but also to the international climate regime in general. To fill these research gaps, this article tries to open up a full range of China's climate role concepts, covering 'braker', 'bloc member', 'bridge-builder', and 'leader'; it also elaborates both material- and value-based considerations in the three selected European media outlets' coverage of China's participation in international climate politics. In doing so, this study jumps out of the current mainstream approach of norm leader/taker, which potentially oversimplified China's role and underlining explanations.

Theoretically, this research engages in a framing analysis to dissect how China's climate roles are defined, and the effect those defined roles have on a broader discussion of the issue. To accomplish this, a two-dimensional analytical framework which combines concepts from role theory and empirical observation has been built. The first dimension looks at China's role concepts. Four roles are identified: 'leader', 'bridge-builder', 'bloc member', and 'braker'. In the second dimension, four perspectives — 'ideological', 'political', 'economic', and 'environmental' — are looked at to better capture the complexity around China's climate roles in the European media. Methodologically, this is achieved by systematically coding and analyzing reports from three European media sources (Euractiv, Politico, and EUobserver) from 2009 to 2018. To categorize the role frames, we build a multi-item scale to measure the yearly role index, which indicates the extent to which certain frames appear in news reports. Regarding the ascribed motivations, frequency on a yearly base is calculated.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. The next section reviews the current literature on China's role in international climate politics. Two research gaps are identified based on this article's two research areas. This is followed by two sections that discuss the theoretical

framework and methodology. Finally, the results are discussed in detail and the article ends with some deeper reflections on China's participation in international climate politics.

2. Literature review

This section will situate the current research within existing literature on China's role in international climate change and will point out two research gaps. In doing so, the added value of this specific study into the perception of China in the domain of climate change policies will be highlighted. **Firstly, most current research on China's climate role is composed of either single-case studies or longitudinal cross-country studies that compare China with other countries (**Lewis, 2008; Wu, 2013; Hilton & Kerr, 2017**), and few scholars look at how China's climate roles are perceived by other countries.** Scholars have conceptualized China's climate role in different ways. Some studies take a general perspective. For instance, in her studies on China's participation in post-Kyoto climate regimes, Wu (2013, 2016) argues that China defined its role as a 'pragmatic player' which bears both 'proactive' and 'reactive' features. On the one hand, China proactively built new coalitions, such as the BASIC group, while maintaining its traditional coalition with the Group-77 to facilitate its bargaining power with regards to developed countries; on the other hand, China has reactively made significant compromises with its negotiation partners on greenhouse gas mitigation obligations. In a similar vein, Schreurs (2016) identified a major shift in China's climate role around 2015 as part of the Paris regime, as it went from a 'passive participant' to a 'potential leader'. It is stressed that compared with the US and EU, China faces a less strict domestic environment, which could further strengthen its leadership role and thus weaken arguments that major transition countries are not doing their fair share.

Other studies have taken a narrower scope by looking at China's climate role in various negotiation groups (Never & Betz, 2014; Pandy & Kurian, 2017). For example, Hochstetler and Milkoreit (2015) have explored China's role in the BASIC group, which emerged onto the negotiation stage in 2009 with a forceful and united position. The authors systematically compare the member states' stances and their relationship with traditional developing countries. They found that the BASIC countries have oscillated between categorizing themselves as developing countries with a historical and current right to develop and recognizing that their rise has begun to place them in another category of states with different obligations. This new dynamic has signaled a change in the previous North-South dual role paradigm, instead creating a triple role model with the addition of emerging powers as a genuinely new role rather than a subcategory within the developing world.

Secondly, in research on the EU's perception of China, overwhelming attention has been paid to China's general role in EU-China bilateral relations (Scott, 2007; Casarini, 2012; Richard, 2016)**, leaving climate-specific roles relatively ignored.** China's general roles can be roughly staged into 'economic partner' from 1975-2003, 'norm taker' from 2003-2006, and

'reformist' after that. Since diplomatic relations between the EU and China were officially established in 1975, China has been seen as an important trade and economic partner of the EU. Its success in economic sector boosted bilateral relations to the level of strategic partner, which was confirmed in 2003 (the European Commission, 2003). During the early years of the EU-China strategic relationship, China's role vis-à-vis the EU was generally defined as 'student and teacher' (Michalski & Pan, 2017). The EU's strategies toward China were twofold: firstly, to engage Beijing in global multilateral institutions; secondly, to improve China's domestic capacity so that it could manage a range of governance challenges and thus facilitate China's modernization. However, this 'honeymoon' was soon seen as having been disrupted by unsatisfactory developments regarding certain issues in bilateral relations that arose around the mid-2000s. A conflict between the EU's value-based normative role and China's interest-based pragmatic role gradually became evident (Men, 2012; Godement & Vasselier, 2017; Erik, 2019). China rejects many of the norms, principles and values that the EU embraces and seeks to promote around the world, including Western-style constitutional democracy, the rule of law, and the existence of an independent news media; at the same time, as China's strength has grown, it has called for a reallocation of power and authority within the current international arrangement or even the development of a series of China-centered institutions to reflect today's economic and political realities. This has challenged the EU's assumption that China can be socialized into the Europe's values (Geeraets, 2011; Maher, 2016).

This article categorizes roles into two groups: issue-specific ones that are characterized as issue-bound role frames, and general ones that can transcend thematic limitations and be identified in relation to different policy fields. Compared with the general role frames, very few studies have attempted to underpin China's climate-specific role with an adequate theoretical framework and empirical evidence. Within the few existing research studies that do this, the most have taken the perspective of norm diffusion (Torney, 2015; Belis & Kerremans, 2016). This strand of research builds on the EU's norm leadership role in the climate change issue vis-à-vis China, which acts as a catalyst to speed up norm and policy changes. Accordingly, China plays the roles of 'follower' and 'norm taker'.

This article is a response to these two research gaps. *Firstly,* it argues that role reception not only reflects the structure of expectations of the wider international environment, but also has a constructive power with regards to China's own role conception and performance (Benes, 2010; Harnisch, 2011; Wehner, 2015). Hence, the effects on China of role reception in other countries should be an area for exploration. We aim to fill this research gap by systematically exploring how three selected European media organizations have received China's role in international climate politics. *Secondly,* this research contributes to rectifying the insufficient attention that has been paid to the EU's reception of China's climate roles. This is achieved by moving away from the 'norm leader/taker' approach that has dominated research on EU-China climate role relations. We hold the point that this approach has to a large extent oversimplified China's role and the underlining explanations for that role, which combine a specific mix of

politics, economic interests and normative environments. This research comes to terms with China's changing role in global climate politics, and better appreciates the different contextual and structural factors that define China's position. This is accomplished by opening up role concepts to include a more complete range of ‘braker’, ‘bloc member’, ‘bridge-builder’, and ‘leader’.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1 Frames and framing

A framing analysis investigates communications or discourse. It rests upon the idea that any issue in discourse can be approached from different perspectives and attributed different meanings, which in turn can be appealing to actors with specific sets of values or audiences. Thus, in this research, a framing analysis is applied as an analytical framework to unpack the discursive construction of China’s climate role in European media coverage. To do so, a distinction first needed to be drawn between frames (and framings), which makes it possible to grasp the discursive and intersubjective dynamics of role construction. Frames are regarded as a central organizing principle that holds together and gives coherence and meaning to a diverse array of symbols (Gamson et el., 1992: 384). Here, frames are viewed as structures present in discourse. A frame is, in this sense, an underlying idea that directs the construction of texts. Equally, frames can thus also be identified and used by receivers for the decoding of texts (Carvalho, 2000). The world of frames presupposes that meanings are not automatically or naturally attached to objects, events, or experiences, but are raised through interpretative processes produced by social interaction (Snow, 2004). Therefore, those who seek to ‘sell’ their frames must make sense of complex, information-rich environments. This requires selecting and sorting data, then organizing it in such a way that it is palatable, digestible, and filling (Goffman, 1974). According to Entman (1993: 52), the discursive process by which actors ‘select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation’ (Entman, 1993) is called framing.

Starting from this social-constructivist assumption, framing analysis is then taken as a discourse analysis method that is principally concerned with dissecting how issues are defined and the effect that this has on the broader discussion of those issues (Fletcher, 2009). Compared with methods that either bracket the way language is used as an epiphenomenon or assume that the relationship between language and reality is stable, a framing analysis is grounded in the significance and ambiguity of political language, and thus it can widen the scope of what analysts can contribute to understanding a contested and complex issue such as climate change (Fletcher, 2009: 801). The main point of using a framing analysis is thus to unpack how China’s roles in climate negotiations are defined, and how they are interpreted by the European media from the perspectives of ideology, politics, the economy, and the environment. Thus, the

implications of these roles for the broader discussion on global climate governance can be understood.

This article adopts an abductive framing analysis approach, which involves the continuous interaction between theory and empirics (Friedrichs & Kratochwil, 2009). Instead of trying to impose an abstract theoretical template (deduction) or 'simply' inferring propositions from facts (induction), the aim is to reason 'at an intermediate level' (abduction). This has made it possible to engage in research without being constrained by theoretical straightjackets and also without getting lost in the empirics (Delputte & Orbie, 2017). Since a standard set of frames which can be used to reliably measure China's role in international climate politics is still missing, we apply an abductive framing analysis to take advantage of its ability to make new discoveries in a logically and methodologically ordered way (Reichertz, 2004). This study sets off from empirical observation. Firstly, 2,577 news reports that feature the keywords 'China' and 'climate' in the three selected European media organizations are explored. Guided by this first exploration, this article arrived at a problematic definition relating to China's role in international climate politics. We then try to connect this observation with existing concepts from the role theory in International Relations. This makes it possible to narrow the scope to only those reports that mention either China's climate role or the motivations behind this role. Inspired by role theory literature, a second round of empirical study was launched, which generated the two-dimensional analytical framework that will be illustrated in the next section.

3.2 Analytical framework

The field of International Relations has long been replete with implicit national role concepts. States hold a host of national and international roles that constitute their identity, regulate their behavior, and shape the international social order (Harnisch & Maull, 2011). In this article, 'role' is taken to be a crucial notion, and it is the point of departure for our empirical-based role-theoretical analyses. In line with the social constructivist approach, this study adopts the definition of 'roles' as social positions that are constituted by ego and alter expectations regarding the purpose of an actor in an organized group (Thies, 2010). On this basis, 'role conceptions' are defined as the combination of an actor's perception of its position and its perception of the role expectations of others as signaled through language and action (Kirste & Maull, 1996). Four typical role concepts are distinguished: 'leader', 'bridge-builder', 'bloc leader/member' and 'braker'.

Leadership is crucial to determining the success or failure of efforts to address transnational problems and forge global governance arrangements. It is especially important in the area of climate change, where the stakes are high and commitments to act can be blocked by problems with collective action. In this context, a leader can remove uncertainty by making the first move and also by providing a model that others may want to emulate (Karlsson et el., 2011: 93). Different types of leadership have been identified in the current research (Kilian & Elgstrom,

2010; Karlsson et el., 2011). For example, ‘structural leadership’ rests on the ability to take actions or deploy power-resources that create incentives, costs and benefits in a particular issue area; ‘directional leadership’ rests on taking unilateral action and is accomplished by demonstrating effects through leading by example; and ‘idea-based leadership’ (also referred to as entrepreneurial, intellectual or instrumental leadership) is concerned with naming and framing problems and the promotion of particular policy solutions to collective problems.

Compared to a leader, a bridge-builder balances unequal bloc, devotes itself to international integration, and takes intermediate positions in bloc conflicts. This frame highlights agreements, willingness to collaborate, and joint efforts among individuals, groups, parties, or countries (Han et el., 2017). The themes usually imply a communicative function — that is, acting as a ‘translator’ or conveyor of messages and information between people in different camps (Holsti, 1970: 267). In international climate negotiations, governments enacting this role perceived themselves as capable of, or responsible for, fulfilling or undertaking special tasks to reconcile conflicts between other states or groups of states. They also call for joint efforts and a community of interest, and they seek to find compromises in order to reach a negotiated consensus.

The bloc member refers to an actor who tries to improve bloc cohesion and capabilities in international climate politics. International climate negotiations have long featured bloc confrontation. Blocs can be differentiated by multiple criteria, such as development stages (developed/developing countries), geopolitical factors (for example, the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) and the Africa group), negotiation tactics (like the Umbrella Group and the High Ambition Coalition), etc. Collaboration or conflict between these blocs may decisively influence the result of climate negotiations. According to the empirical research, we identified China as a member of the following two blocs: that of developing countries (or the Global South, G77+China, the ‘poor countries’) and that of emerging economies (or the ‘rising economies’, the BASIC group).

According to role theorists, the braker seeks to block an agreement and protect their freedom of action, often with reference to a limited number of issues (Elgström, 2007). For climate politics, the braker frame appeared in news coverage when particular countries or other stakeholders were depicted as playing a negative role in dealing with climate change or taking part in negotiations (Pan, 2019). This research will assign the braker role to China when the country is blamed for the failure to reach an international agreement and/or establish or adapt the international climate regime.

Besides these four roles, this article also looks at how the selected media have elaborated China’s climate role. The author differentiated between material-based factors, which include economic and political perspectives, and value-based factors, which consist of ideational and environmental considerations. Media reports applying economic frames see China’s

participation in international climate negotiations as a way for it to maximize its economic interests at both international and domestic levels. The political frame, however, looks at China's appeal concerning the structure and principles of climate negotiations and its political interest therein. In terms of the value-based cluster, the ideational frame indicates that China's action is driven by normative considerations, including climate ethics, morals and values. The environmental frame, meanwhile, highlights China's consideration of the sustainability of its climate and ecological system.

4. Methodology

4.1 Sample

In this study, the author looks specifically at mass media since it works as an important arena for — and agent in — the production, reproduction, and transformation of the meaning of climate change (Carvalho, 2010) and climate governance (Schafer & Schlichting, 2014). As the nexus between the public and policies, mass media plays a crucial role in framing the scientific, economic, social and political dimensions of issues through giving voice to some viewpoints while suppressing others, and legitimatizing certain truth-claims as reasonable and credible (Carvalho, 2007). The research data in this study comes from three European online media sources: Euractiv, Politico and EUobserver. The aim is to represent the diversity of the European media landscape and to cover the entire EU in the best possible way. The selection was made using the criteria of being 'professional' and 'influential'. Firstly, all three of them are independent pan-European media networks that provide both daily reports and in-depth coverage on international affairs related to the European Union. Secondly, they are all influential among both the public and decision makers. These three online media play a vital role in public debate and democracy. Moreover, according to the media survey, they also tended to be the preferred sources of news for EU officials, and thus they can be considered as media that influences the influencers (Burson-Marsteller, 2016).

Data was collected from 1 January 2009 until 31 December 2018. The year 2009 was selected as the starting point because the Copenhagen COP15 Conference provoked unprecedented global attention in the issue, and its failure to reach an agreement for a post-Kyoto regime cast a long shadow over subsequent attempts to move climate diplomacy forward (Hilton and Kerr, 2017). We then cover the critical moments in international climate politics. To name a few, this includes: the creation of the Durban Platform, which marked the *de facto* merger of dual-track climate negotiations between developing/developed countries; the Paris Agreement, which represented the beginning of a universal bottom-up approach to the international climate regime; and the USA's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. The data ends with the latest updates from the Katowice COPs conference, which set the play book for the Paris Agreement. By doing this, we hope to capture the panorama of media reports that focus on China's roles in international climate politics.

This study adopts a two-round screening procedure. The first round organizes all the media reports and adapts the coding framework accordingly. A Boolean query with 'China AND climate' was submitted to each media website. This generated 1361 cases from Euractiv, 921 cases from Politico, and 295 cases from EUobserver (2577 in total). We conducted an in-depth reading of all the reports to understand how a credible full picture was evoked in EU media reports. This was followed by a second round of screening in which only the reports mentioning China's role AND/OR ascribed motivations were kept. This generated 100 cases from Euractiv, 41 cases from EUobserver, and 81 cases from Politico (222 in total).

The data shows that reports on China's climate role are clearly event driven. The years 2009, 2015, and 2017 constituted three critical moments. The year 2009 corresponded to the Copenhagen COPs Conference, which aimed to generate a framework for climate mitigation beyond the Kyoto Protocol. The Paris COPs conference made 2015 another critical moment, since it was considered the most successful climate change conference ever (Kinley, 2017); 195 countries submitted their Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs), which made climate mitigation firmly founded on national action instead of a top-down Kyoto approach. The announcement from President Trump that the US would pull out of the Paris Agreement on 1 June 2017 also deeply influenced the structure of the international climate regime and China's role within it. The leadership deficit was exacerbated, and many hoped that the EU and China would fill this leadership vacuum. When we zoom in to look at the number of reports in each month (see **Figure 4**), this event-driven feature is even clearer. It shows that China's role in international climate politics was not a prominent theme except for on the dates around each year's COPs conference (the only exception is around June 2017, when Trump announced his decision to pull the US out of the Paris Agreement).

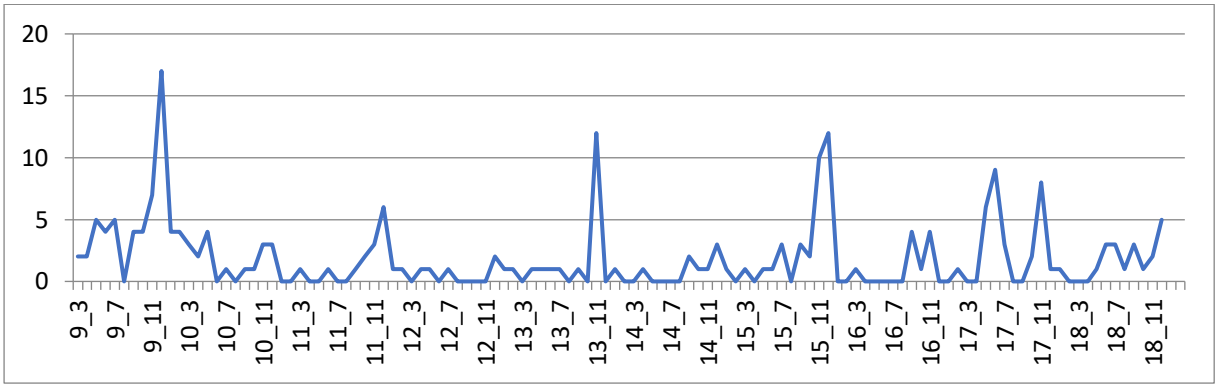

Figure 4. *The number of reports every month from 1 January 2009 to 31 December 2018*

4.2 Measurement

To determine the role frame, a multi-item scale was built to measure the extent to which certain frames appeared in news reports (see **Table 8**). The author developed a series of 16 questions, to which the coders had to answer yes (1) or no (0). Each question was meant to measure one

of the four role frames: ‘leader’, ‘bridge-builder’, ‘bloc member’, and ‘braker’. We chose to use simple yes-no categories to measure the occurrence of frames in the news. The advantage of such a binary coding strategy is that a high rate of inter-coder reliabilities can be guaranteed (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

A. Leader frame

A_1. Does the report suggest China providing vision and inspiration and by constructive formulation problems and solutions?

A_2. Does the report suggest China using its information advantage to lead the climate related techni upgrading?

A_3. Does the report suggest China contributing to the building of international climate regime?

A_4. Does the report suggest China has made ambitious climate targets?

B. Bridge-builder frame

B_1. Does the report suggest China mediating the conflict between different blocs?

B_2. Does the report mention China intentionally blur the difference between traditional negotiation gro (Annex I v.s. non-Annex I; developing v.s. developed; north v.s. south etc.)?

B_3. Does the report suggest China as seeking to find compromises in order to reach negotiation consensus?

B_4. Does the report suggest China to promote communication between groups?

C. Bloc leader/member frame

C_1. Does the report suggest China endeavor in coalition building?

C_2. Does the report refer to China as the force to maintain the cohesion and capability of its own bloc (clearly mentioned China lead the bloc)?

C_3. Does the report suggest China protect the benefit of bloc members?

C_4. Does China blame other negotiation bloc or urge other groups to make promises in the

C_8. Bloc leader/member as SINO-US coalition.

D. Blocker frame

D_1. Does the report suggest China as the reason for the failure to reach international agreement?

D_2. Does the report suggest China veto the institutional progress of international climate regime?

D_3. Does the report suggest China to block negotiation procedure?

D_4. Does the report mentioned China refuse to take any kinds of promises/commitment?

Table 8. *The multi-item scale of role frames (developed using definitions from role theory, adapted based on empirical observation).*

For each coded report, the coders calculated the average score of the four items under each frame category. As a result, the calculated frame score was assigned an ordinal variable out of five possibilities: 0, 0.25, 0.5, 0.75, and 1. Based on the individual score of each report, the coders then formed a yearly role index by averaging the unweighted scores in line with the

number of reports of that year. This time, the yearly role index is a continuous variable ranging from .00 to 1.00, indicating the prominence of any given role frame in that year.

The reason this article developed a multi-item scale instead of simple frequency counting is based on consideration on both the individual and aggregated levels. On the individual level, for each report, the use of five ordinal variables (0, 0.25, 0.5, 0.75, 1) can indicate the intensity of a certain role with better accuracy than counting the frequency, which only differentiate 1 (appearance) and 0 (absence). On the aggregate level, the frequency of a certain role is not necessarily positively correlated with its actual prominence. For example, the frequency of the 'bloc member' role may increase compared to the previous year, but if it only mentions the role in a simple sentence and not discuss its in detail, then we believe that the prominence actually decreases. In this context, a role index can better reflect these trends.

Unlike role frames, motivational frames are not mutually exclusive. In the European media, China's climate roles can be interpreted from multiple perspectives. When measuring the four motivational frames, the coders answer yes (1 as presence) or no (0 as absence) to judge whether a certain frame was mentioned. We then averaged the score by year and thus calculated the frequency of each motivational frame.

5. Results

Data (**Table 9**) shows that the 'bloc member' and 'leader' role frames are dominant, being mentioned 138 (62% of the total number) and 55 (25%) times respectively, while the 'bridge-builder' and 'braker' roles were marginal, mentioned only 15 (7%) and 14 (6%) times respectively.

	Leader	Bridge-builder	Bloc member	Braker
2009	1	0	46	6
2010	3	1	18	4
2011	0	0	12	2
2012	0	1	5	1
2013	0	1	18	0
2014	2	1	6	0
2015	4	8	21	1
2016	10	0	0	0
2017	22	1	7	0
2018	13	2	5	0
Total	55	15	138	14
PCT	25%	7%	62%	6%

Table 9. *The number of role frames were mentioned each year.*

This is confirmed in the index of the four roles (see **Figure 5**). The 'bloc member' role is the main dominant role until 2015, after which it sharply decreased in 2016, only slightly increasing again in the following years. There was a reverse trend for the leader role — since 2016, the 'leader' role has replaced 'bloc member' to become the dominant frame. Compared with the roles of 'bloc member' and 'leader', the 'bridge-builder' and 'braker' roles are relatively marginal. References to a 'bridge-builder' role reached a peak in 2015, after which the number went down, giving way to the 'leader' role frame. Contrary to some analysis (Christoff, 2010; Conrad, 2012), the 'braker' role almost disappeared completely: it occurred 6 times in 2009, but soon decreased, such that it has only appeared once since 2013. In the following two sections, the two main findings concerning China's climate roles will be illustrated — namely, the low level of the two minor roles, and the transformation of the two major roles.

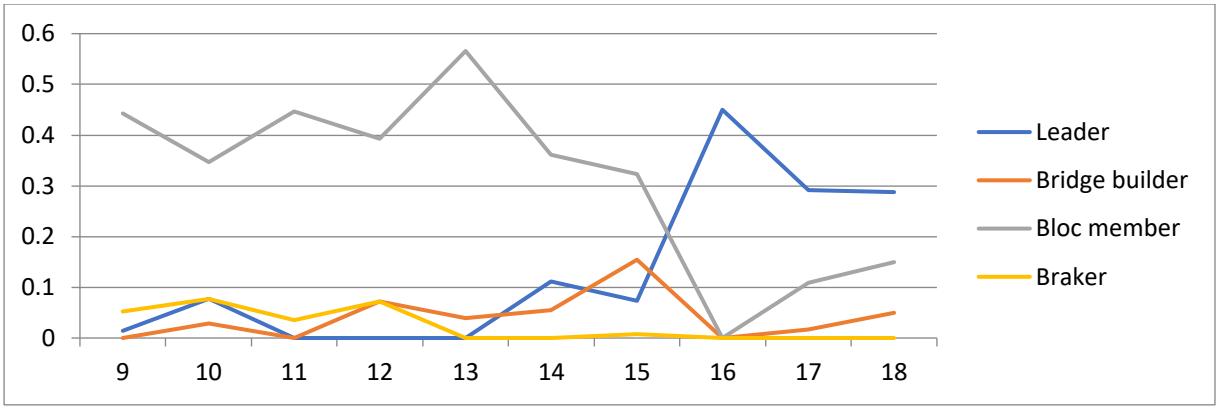

Figure 5. *Evolving role frames (2009-2018)*

5.1 Major role switch: from bloc member to leader

Bloc member (2009-2014)

'Bloc member' was China's only dominant role until 2015, when it was replaced by the 'leader' frame. In the Kyoto Protocol, a distinction was made between developed and developing countries according to the amount of their historical emissions. This division was accepted as a prerequisite for negotiations in the early years. Accordingly, the confrontation between developed and developing countries was a theme in early climate events, which can be seen in the CBDR principle in UNFCCC, the dual-track negotiation mode established in the Bali Roadmap, and the division between Annex and non-Annex countries in the Kyoto Protocol. As a beneficiary of this arrangement, China is perceived as a defender or even leader of the developing bloc, which shares the rejection of a non-egalitarian solution to burden-sharing and a desire for financial and technical transfers. Another feature of China as a member or leader of the developing bloc is that it often takes the lead in debating abstract principles of burden-sharing rather than moving on to set up targets and timetables. This is partly explained by the fact that developing countries have quite different — and even opposing — interests among themselves. For example, the EUobserver reported that 'UN climate talks in Copenhagen were briefly suspended […] as anger bubbled over among developing nations, which accused their richer counterparts of trying to "kill off" the Kyoto Protocol. [...] The poorer nations, gathered together in a grouping that calls itself the G77-plus-China group of countries - actually numbering 130 in total - on Monday broke off negotiations for some three hours in total' (EUobserver, 2009a). This role concept also prevailed in Euractiv news titles such as 'rich and poor still divided over climate pact' (Euractiv, 2009a), 'UN climate talks: China envoy slams rich countries' (Euractiv, 2009b), and 'China chides rich counties' low climate ambition' (Euractiv, 2009c).

This division between developed and developing, between rich and poor, has been questioned since around the year 2013. China's massive GHG emissions, together with its increasing global influence which is mainly powered by its rapid economic growth, make the European

media call for reconsidering the groupings in international climate negotiations. They note that the EU argued that the classification of China as a developing country is outdated and thus asked for a more nuanced distinction that is 'interpreted according to the realities of today' (EUobserver, 2014). Although history connects China with the developing countries and it still has enormous development needs at home, the country's material development has pushed them closer to the developed world. The European media has begun to place them in another category, that of 'states with different obligations'. New role concepts, such as 'emerging economies', 'advanced developing countries', and 'BRICS countries' have been applied to China, which blurs the line between developed and developing countries and increases pressure on China to make further commitments. For example, there was a dispute about whether China should be an obliged climate financier during the Paris Conference. Some European media held the point that China has a growing capacity to provide financial support (Politico, 2015a). Accordingly, they called for 'building a coalition between developed and "progressive" developing countries […] to soften the lines differentiating their responsibilities' (Politico, 2015b).

After the year 2015, China's 'bloc member' role was replaced by the 'leadership' role. China is widely recognized as a leader in international politics, and its former role only arises when the negotiations are stuck due to a dispute over technical details. One example of this is the contention over the transparency framework, in which the US and EU want to impose strong reporting and monitoring rules across the developed and developing worlds, while emerging economies, including China, want looser responsibilities than the rich side (Politico, 2018a).

Leader (2015-2018)

The 'leader' role was rare during the early years, until it overwhelmed the 'bloc member' role from the year 2015, and it has been the dominant role frame ever since. The Paris Conference was a breakthrough moment in China's role transformation. In Paris, China was seen as a pivotal actor for securing a happy ending. Strong leadership (not least within the G-77 plus China) and flexibility were demonstrated by key players on issues such as adaptation, loss and damage, differentiation, and finance (Kinley 2017). This leadership role remained at a high level in the post-Paris regime. Based on our data, this continuity is substantialized by China's domestic low-carbon progress and policy and by the EU-US-China tripolar relationship.

China's solid domestic climate actions are seen by the European media as giving China a growing leadership on the world stage. It has been noted that China has established its climate leadership credentials by improving renewable energy, moving away from its reliance on coal and dominating the world's clean energy build-out. Coal consumption has fallen, and no other country has closed more coal-fired plants than China. Beijing is also on top of the table in terms of investment in solar and wind power (Euractiv, 2018). Among the many domestic areas in which China has seen progress, its Pilot Emission Trading System (ETS) occupies center stage.

China confirmed in its 13th Five Year Plan that the emission trading system is the most important measure for dealing with GHG emissions. Since both the EU and China championed a carbon market as the main measure for cost-effectively curbing emissions and meeting their commitments under the Paris Agreement, China's ETS is its key tool.

Alongside aggressive green investments, China has also retooled its climate diplomacy. Its leadership role is closely tied to that of another important actor in climate politics, the US. During the Paris Conference, cooperation with the US was viewed as a sign of China's directional leadership. According to the Italian Minister of Environment Corrado Clini, this partnership was a 'gamechanger' because it broke the circle of mutual distrust between China and the US ('I will not because you don't') and opened the way for a comprehensive agreement (Euractiv, 2012). By joining the Paris Agreement in tandem, these two leaders reconfirmed their commitment to 'lead by example' (Politico, 2016a), injected momentum into global climate negotiations, and inspired other countries to come forward with ambitious action plans. China's leadership role was further solidified when the US pulled out of the Paris Agreement. When the tag team of the world's two climate diplomacy champions was undone, a leadership vacuum formed. Many hope that China will translate its domestic strides into international leadership and fill this gap.

China's leadership role is also closely related to the EU's expectations. Firstly, this role expectation reflected the dissatisfied mood in European media with the EU's slow speed in addressing the Paris Agreement. As noted by Dutch MEP Gerben-Jan Gerbrandy, 'it's a huge humiliation for Europe' if China leads the approval process and the Paris Agreement comes into force without the EU (Euractiv, 2016). Secondly, facing structural changes in international climate politics following the US's absence, the European media take China to be an important potential partner in co-leading international climate action. This opinion has been widespread since 2016. 'With the US, its [the EU's] closest ally, treating it [the Paris Agreement] as a threat to national security, the EU is looking more and more to China to maintain a rules-based world order'. 'Some Europeans want the EU to be China's new climate dance partner' (Politico, 2016b). EU Climate Commissioner Miguel Arias Canete's speech was also cited by Euractiv: '"others may roll back", but the EU and China will forge ahead with the Paris agreement and the clean energy transition' (Euractiv, 2017a).

This role change from 'bloc member' to 'climate leader' is also recognized by the academic community (Brun, 2016; Schreurs, 2016; Hilton & Kerr, 2017). However, compared with our previous research on China's climate discourse coalition (Yunhan & Orbie, 2019; Yunhan, Orbie & Delputte, 2020), here there is a difference between the European and Chinese discourses regarding how to understand this role change. China has interpreted this mainly from a value-based perspective. Ideologically, China substantializes its leadership role by creating the concept of a 'community of shared of mankind' instead of assigning itself the narrative of being the 'victim of ecological imperialism'. Environmentally, China prioritized

becoming an 'ecological civilization', which is based on respect for and protection of nature, and is aimed at building a harmonious symbiosis between humans, nature, and society through the creation of sustainable means of production and consumption. In contrast, the European media have perceived China's climate role change from a material-based perspective. This will be illustrated in detailed in the next section.

5.2 Minor role frames: 'braker' and 'bridge-builder'

Braker

Contrary to some analysis (Christoff, 2010; Conrad, 2012; Yan & Torney, 2016), the 'braker' role has almost disappeared from the picture entirely. In general, it mainly appears in the early years (2009-2012). Exemptions can be attributed to China's perceived diplomatic obstructionism in the Copenhagen COPs Conference. The EU was extremely disappointed by the Copenhagen Conference. It was excluded from the process of making the Copenhagen Accord, which was based on a proposal put forward by the US-led group of five nations, a group that includes China, India, Brazil and South Africa. Moreover, the EU was also bothered by the Copenhagen Accord itself, which it says is a 'weak and morally reprehensible deal', a 'disaster' and a 'really great failure' that will spell disaster for millions of the world's poorest people (Politico, 2009). The Copenhagen setback finally led to the EU's refusal to increase its commitment to cut carbon emissions from 20% to 30% by 2020.

China has been widely seen as one of the main culprits of blocking a more ambitious result. This is firstly because of Beijing's refusal to adopt any binding commitments. As the German Socialist MEP Jo Leinen, who headed the European Parliament's delegation in Copenhagen, put it, 'China and the US have the main responsibility for the weak outcome of the Copenhagen conference […] China has refused to sign a treaty with international obligations' (Euractiv, 2009d). In the same vain, Swedish Environment Minister Andreas Carlgren made the argument that China needs to deliver 'legally-binding commitments' in order to generate 'the needed political momentum' (Euractiv, 2009e). Secondly, China had also resisted calls for a transparent monitoring, reporting and verification mechanism (MRV) regarding its mitigation policy, based on the consideration that such a measure would breach national sovereignty. This has triggered intense criticisms that China cannot hide behind its status as a developing country. Rather, as the world's largest emitter already and a powerhouse economy to be, China should have its policies measured and verified by international auditors (Euractiv, 2009e).

This has prompted the EU to rethink the way it engages China, taking into consideration its ability to veto anything it does not want. It was suggested by the EU negotiator that the EU should demonstrate solidarity with Africa and vulnerable states in order to isolate the US and China, as well as any other countries unable or unwilling to shoulder their responsibilities within a multilateral regime (Politico, 2011).

Bridge-builder

The ‘bridge-builder’ role frame appeared very rarely in the dataset (only 1 time in the years 2010, 2012, 2013 and 2014 respectively, and not at all in 2009 or 2011). Its index reached a peak in 2015, after which the number deceased again as it gave way to the ‘leader’ role frame. This is echoed by academic research, as few studies have identified China as a ‘bridge-builder’ in international climate negotiations. However, in China’s discourse coalition, this role concept receives more attention. Up until 2017, China still highlighted its diplomatic mission to bridge the global climate agenda by putting forward a ‘bridge-building plan’ (Wang et al., 2015; Xinhua, 2017; Phoenix News, 2019). To deal with differences in the negotiations, China aimed at clarifying the opinions of different bloc and finding the highest common denominator.

In European media, the ‘bridge-builder’ role is reflected in China’s softened line toward both the overall principles and the technical details in climate negotiations. At the most general level, China used to be a country that opposed any kind of commitment, but it was able to accept a legally binding climate agreement that applies to all countries in the Paris regime. Instead of clinging to the decades-old plan to divvy up responsibilities based on rigid definitions of whether countries are developed or developing, China has come closer to agreeing broadly to a ‘form of differentiation which depends on countries’ actual real circumstances’ (Politico, 2015c). Regarding technical matters, take the rule on MRV for example — China gave up its hard resistance to this in exchange for a financial and technological transfer from developed countries. According to a Chinese negotiator in one Politico report, ‘Beijing can accept a common reporting system on emission, if rich countries increase their financial and technological support’ (Politico, 2018b). The climax of the ‘bridge-builder’ role in 2015 is marked by a series of bilateral climate statements China signed with other main actors, as well as the foundational role China played in the subsequent Paris COPs Conference.

Apart from this, China has also signed bilateral climate statements with actors from different negotiation blocs, including the EU, France, Britain, India, Brazil, Denmark, and Chile. With this collaboration, which brings in actors from different blocs aboard, China is portrayed as bridging the profound gap between negotiating parties. This cooperation is considered to provide an important boost to international efforts and to have helped broker the deal at the summit in Paris (Euractiv, 2015a). Taking into consideration that the index for the ‘bridge-builder’ role is very limited outside of the year 2015, when ‘leader’ overtook ‘bloc member’ as the dominant role, we view ‘bridge-builder’ as a transitional role between the two. We will discuss this transition in detail in the coming section.

5.3 Ascribed motivations

The previous section mapped China’s different climate roles in the European media and reached two main findings. Firstly, that ‘braker’ and ‘bridge-builder’ are two minor roles which rarely appeared in media reports during the period covered by this research; secondly, and more

importantly, ‘bloc member’ and ‘leader’ were China’s dominant roles throughout this period, and there has been an progression from the former to the latter, with the 2015 Paris Conference as the turning point. In this section, we take this one step further, and unbox how the European media have perceived China’s changing role when participating in international climate politics. the aim is to integrate both the material-based perspective, which includes China’s concern for its economic and political interests, and the value-based perspective, which focus on China’s ideological and environmental considerations. By doing this, the continuity and transformation of the European media’s perception of China’s climate roles can be better revealed.

5.3.1 The continuity of the dominance of material-based factors

The discussion starts from the frequency table (**Table 10**), which uses the different motivations as the columns and the roles as the rows. Each cell in this table counts the co-occurrence (frequency) of each combination. The conclusion can be reached that the material-based perspective attracts significantly more attention. Political and economic factors are equally prominent, as each appears 72 times and accounts for 38.7% of the total. Within the value-based perspective, the ideological factor appears 28 times (15.1%), while the environmental factor comes in last, only accounting for 7.5% of the motivational frames (N=14).

	Motivation				
Role	Ideology	Political	Economic	Environmental	Active margin
Leader	1	13	10	9	33
Bridge-builder	1	5	2	2	10
Bloc member	25	48	59	3	135
Braker	1	6	1	0	8
Active margin	28	72	72	14	186

Table 10. *the correspondence table between the role and motivational frames.*

Taking into consideration that 2015 was the turning point for China’s role change from ‘bloc member’ to ‘leader’, we also mapped how different perspectives clustered before and after this

critical moment (**Figure 6**). The result showed that, firstly, material-based factors continue to dominate the media reports both before and after China's role change, and secondly, although there has been a continuity in the minority status of value-based factors, environmental consideration has been on the rise since the Paris Conference. However, beneath this continuity, we have also identified shifting connotations within each factor. The following section will briefly analyze this transformation.

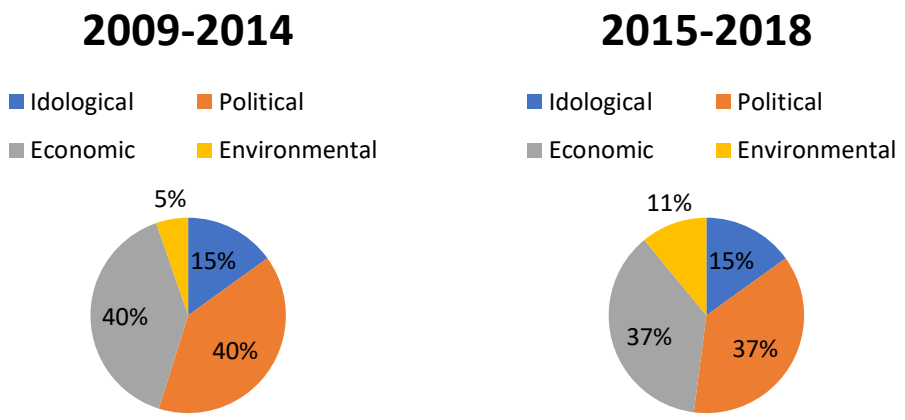

Figure 6. *Percentage of the four ascribed motivations in European media.*

5.3.2 Shifting connotations

Although the dominance of material-based factors over normative-based factors continued throughout the period covered by this article, the connotations within each factor have undergone a clear change. In general, the European media has ascribed more positive motivations to China's climate role. Economically, the European media has perceived climate mitigation as an opportunity rather than challenge for China's development. The media reports have captured China's transforming mode for economic development. Back in 2009, China's economy was characterized by high levels of investment and exports, with a focus on energy-intensive heavy industries (Euractiv, 2005; 2015b). The focus on this fundamentally changed in reports during 2015 Paris Conference, according to which China's economic development model was being adapted to a service- and consumption-driven one, with a focus on low-carbon technologies (Euobserver, 2015; Euractiv, 2017b). This transition in turn has given China the opportunity to re-formulate its position in international climate negotiations. Politically, at the beginning China's role was defined by its appeal to maintain the unity of the developing countries while extracting concessions and benefits from developed countries (EUobserver, 2009b; 2010; Politico, 2016c). However, China's growing GHG emissions have made this position increasingly untenable in international negotiations. Under these circumstances, China's role change from 'bloc member' to 'leader' is understood by the European media as being driven by its softened political goal of maintaining multilateral-based international climate governance and playing a bigger role therein (Euractiv, 2017c).

Although it has received relatively less attention that material-based factors, the transformation towards more positive connotations is also evidenced in the value-based factors. Ideologically, although a wider common but differentiated responsibility (CBDR) mechanism has always been China's core stance in international climate negotiations (Wu, 2013; Wu, 2016), the European media has captured different means of operationalization before and after China's role change. The focus was originally on the 'differentiated' side, which indicates China's strict stance on climate justice (Politico, 2013; 2017; Euractiv, 2017d), and this was at a later stage adapted to the 'common' end, which highlights the shared responsibility of all countries according to the new reality of international climate governance (Euractiv, 2015c). We also observed an increased emphasis on China's environmental motivations (see **Figure 6**). Compared with its former state of ignorance, China has realized the importance of environmental protection. This has been viewed as part of China's leading role in international climate negotiations by the European media (Euractiv, 2018). However, compared with the other ascribed motivations, environmental motives are still rather limited in the EU media.

6. Conclusions

This paper aimed to map China's climate roles and how they are portrayed in selected European media. Moreover, it also looked at the perspectives through which the media have understood these changing roles. Informed by research on climate change frames in the social sciences as well as broader studies on role theory, this study addressed its research questions via an analysis of news coverage in three European online media organizations from 2009 to 2018. Employing a framing analysis, we built a two-dimensional framework which contributes to understanding China's climate role concepts and ascribed motivations. The resulting picture led to two main findings. Firstly, while the 'braker' and 'bridge-builder' roles are relative marginal, 'bloc member' and 'leader' have been two major roles, and there has been a clear transition from the former to the latter since the 2015 Paris COPs Conference; secondly, there has been a trend in the European media to understand China's climate role based on material perspectives. Although there has been a slight increase in the environmental factor in recent years, economic and political considerations have been the dominant ascribed motivations.

These findings suggest that when it comes to the climate issue, there is a consistency between China's role conception and the European media's role prescription. China has already claimed to be an important participant, contributor, and torchbearer in the global endeavor for an ecological civilization, and it will take the driver's seat in international cooperation efforts to respond to climate change (Xi, 2017). This 'leader' role conception is echoed in the European media. However, whether this 'leader' role in climate issue has spread to other policy fields deserve further research. This article has identified signs of incoherence between China's various context-specific roles, both across issue areas and geographical areas. For example, in the EU-China strategic outlook (European Commission, 2019), while China was viewed as a main broker of the Paris Agreement and a strategic partner on climate change and the clean

energy transition, it is taken as an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership and a systemic rival in terms of promoting alternative models of governance (European Commission, 2019). In the same vein, it can also be seen that academic research frames China's role in fields such as business and investment activity negatively since it neglects socioeconomic and financial sustainability, which may compromise efforts to promote good social and economic governance and, most fundamentally, the rule of law and human rights. Building upon the results of this article, the context of specific roles conflicts, how that influences China's general role, and how that further affects EU-China relations could be potential avenues for future research.

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Conclusions

This dissertation starts with the aim to improve the current understanding of China's position in international climate governance. This is addressed through three lines of enquiry, which correspond with the formation, projection, and reception of China's climate policy and discourse:

1. How to understand China's domestic climate policy?
2. How to understand China's climate strategic narratives?
3. How is China's climate role perceived by European media?

The research process is driven by a desire to compensate for scholarly blind spots concerning the research topic (including redressing tendencies of Eurocentrism). *Firstly,* in terms of the formation process, researches often make assumptions on China's climate role conception, without paying too much attention to the domestic political processes that determine how its role is originated; *secondly,* there is a lack of academic attention on how China has made sense of the international climate governance structure, and projected its role therein, from a discursive perspective; *lastly,* most research on EU-China climate relations has adopted a 'norm/policy diffusion' approach — to unravel this Eurocentric perspective, this dissertation explored how China's climate role is received by the EU, as well as what motivations have been ascribed by the EU to these roles.

This research study uses mixed **methods** comprising of semi-structured expert interviews, critical discourse analysis, and framing analysis. These multiple methods made it possible to collect and analyze data from policy documents, leadership speeches, and media reports in a flexible and pragmatic manner. On the **theoretical** level, taking into consideration the integration of pragmatism and the adaptation of theoretical insights from political science, this dissertation builds three novel analytical frameworks for the formation, projection, and reception of China's climate policy and discourse. This innovation on theoretical frameworks guided the empirical investigation, the main contribution of which will be elaborated in the following sections.

The structure of the conclusion is as follows. Firstly, we will briefly go over the main findings of the three academic articles. Then we will synthesize the analytical findings to reply to the overall research aim. This part aims to transcend the contributions of each individual article by combining reflections from three perspectives: ego role conception (on the part of China) and alter role prescription (externally to China), material- and value-based factors, and international and domestic interactions. Subsequently, the broader implications of this research will be discussed. Three points are raised. The first one concerns the legitimization process of China's centralization regarding climate politics. This is followed by a look at the road forward for China's domestic climate governance, including the debate over authoritarian

environmentalism and democratic environmentalism. The last one relates to EU-China climate relations. Based on observations, there is an inconsistency between China's role in the climate issue and in other policy fields with respect to the EU; this inter-role conflict and its implications for EU-China relations will be discussed. Finally, we close the conclusion by suggesting three avenues for future research, from the empirical, theoretical, and methodological perspectives, respectively.

1. Summary of findings

1.1 Formation

In the first article, an analytical framework was developed to operationalize the analysis of central-local governmental relations. The framework consists of two dimensions. *The first dimension* looks at the level of administrative subcontracting, which describes the allocation of power between the central government and local governments. Under this dimension, the Chinese political system was theorized into a principle-agent structure, in which the central government normally assigns multiple tasks to local governments. *The second dimension* dealt with the strictness of the cadre evaluation system, which portrays the allocation of incentives between the central government and local governments. In practice, the central government gives its local subordinates comprehensive evaluation targets. The different targets are clearly labeled as 'soft targets', 'hard targets' and 'veto targets' to show their relative importance. Based on the two dimensions identified above, we built a matrix that incorporates all policy fields in China.

Through the application of this framework, the evolution of China's climate policy, which involves complex adaptations to the allocation of power and incentives between the central and local governments, was elaborated. **This resulted in the identification of two trial-and-error processes.** The first one took place from 2006 to 2010. Previously, climate policy fell into the 'local discretion' category, in which the authority to deal with climate change was subcontracted to local government. However, the central government did not offer enough incentives for local governments to take action. Climate targets were vague and labeled as 'soft' in the cadre evaluation system. Because of this arrangement, local governments gave more attention to 'hard' or 'veto' targets, while ignoring or even sacrificing the soft targets. In light of this, the central-local interaction moved from a 'local discretion mode' to a 'political tournament system'. While keeping climate targets subcontracted to the local level, the climate performance target changed to the 'hard' or even 'veto' level in the cadre evaluation system. These measures, in practice, increased the completeness of the energy intensity target. However, this role distortion between the central government and local governments resulted in several problems in climate policies (such as data fraud and collusion between local governments).

To overcome these perceived drawbacks, the central-local relationship concerning climate policy was re-adjusted from a 'political tournament' mode to a 'top-level design' mode. In

general, the top-level design represents the opposite side of the local experiment, in which the central leadership is responsible for devising a systematic overall plan for the nation's reforms from a strategic perspective, with the aim of better allocating all of the resources required and ensuring the efficient realization of its goals. There is a considerable degree of centralization (hierarchization) and agenda-setting and policy formulation are streamlined at the top. The leeway afforded to local leaders for policy innovation and implementation is severely restricted by revitalized ideological control, institutional centralization, and changes in the cadre evaluation system, which assign more value to subjective assessments of local officials' superiors than to measurable indicators.

For the climate policy specifically, this all-around re-centralization was reflected at the ideological, institutional and policy levels. On the ideology level, climate policy has been integrated into China's ideological top-level design of an 'ecological civilization'. Institutionally, the Department of Climate Change was transferred from the NDRC and integrated into the newly created Ministry of Ecology and Environment. On the policy level, in this period China initiated the Emission Trading Scheme (ETS), which is designed, shaped and operated by the central government. Based on a broader reflection of recent re-centralization tendencies in China's politics, this article suggested including elements of democratic environmentalism as well. This may be achieved by seeking synergies between climate change policies and 'traditional' environmental issues that directly link to public interests and by allowing more flexibility for domestic and international NGOs working on climate issues.

1.2 Projection

Combining theoretical insights from 'strategic narratives' and our own identification of the unique features of China's discourse context, Article 2 developed a novel analytical framework. **Two analytical dimensions were constructed: the structural and the agency dimensions.** The structural dimension consists of a system narrative and a national narrative. The system narrative is concerned with the nature of the international relations structure, while the national narrative sets out the story of the state or nation and the values and goals it has in the international system. In addition to the structural dimension, China's unique discourse context allowed us to also analyze the agency dimension. In this dimension, China's climate discourse coalition, which is consists of the government, the epistemic community, and official media, was studied.

Built on this analytical framework, Article 2 explored the evolution of China's climate strategic narratives, within which **three phases can be discerned between 2009 and 2018.** *The first phase* took place from the 2009 Copenhagen Conference to the 2012 Durban Conference. During this phase, the intention of China's climate strategic narratives on the system level was to keep the international climate negotiations progressing along two tracks, and thus to

postpone the deadline for China to make a legally binding reduction commitment. It was hoped that this could be realized by creating a strict division between 'developing' and 'developed' countries and assigning the blame to the latter. Meanwhile, at the national level, the climate narratives strategically framed China as a victim of ecological imperialism, whose national interests as a whole — as well as the quality of life of individual Chinese people — were jeopardized.

The second phase was from Durban Conference to the 2015 Paris Climate Conference. On the system level, during this phase, the division between developed and developing countries was largely backgrounded. Although China still upheld the CBDR principle, the international climate system was narrated as a 'community with a shared future for mankind' in which all parties, no matter how big or small, strong or weak, rich or poor, would shoulder the responsibility for a win-win outcome in international climate governance. Accordingly, on the national level, supported by its solid domestic policy actions and the South-South Cooperation on Climate Action, China began to narrate itself as a great power, a country in which multifaceted development was rapidly taking place and ambitions and aspirations to combat climate change were growing, rather than a victim of environmental imperialism.

In the post-Paris era, the withdrawal of the US has cast a shadow over the newly built Paris climate regime. Under this circumstance, we have witnessed *another adaptation* of China's climate strategic narratives. On the system level, China reiterated its recognition of climate change as a global challenge and the need for multilateral cooperation. On this basis, it projected a clear strategic narrative to maintain the legitimacy and authority of the UNFCCC as the only international climate governance mechanism. On the national level, for the first time in history, China claimed a leadership role by narrating itself as the 'torch-bearer' of the international climate regime. This article also noted some ambiguity in the nature of Chinese leadership and the extent to which China can fulfil its 'torch-bearer' role — and the 'Chinese solution' for the future is clouded by this uncertainty.

1.3 Reception

Article 3 examined China's climate role and ascribed motivations in three European media organizations. **By using an abduction reasoning process utilizes both literature on role theory and empirical readings of media reports, an analytical framework was built.** *For the role frames*, this article differentiated between four role concepts: 'braker', 'bloc member', 'bridge-builder', and 'leader'. A multi-item scale was built to measure the extent to which certain frames appear in news reports. The result was compiled in a yearly role index. *For the motivational frames*, we grouped four motivations into two groups: material-based factors, which include political and economic considerations, and value-based factors, which include ideational and environmental considerations. In the article, the frequency of each motivation is calculated.

After coding and analyzing 222 samples from three selected media outlets from 2009 to 2018, the article came **to two main findings**. *Firstly*, for the role frames, there are two major roles, 'bloc member' and 'leader', and there is clear transformation from the former to the latter, with the year 2016 as the turning point. Compared with these two major roles, the 'bridge-builder' and 'braker' roles are relatively marginal. *Secondly*, regarding the motivational frames, the article identified a continuity in the dominance of material-based factors. Political and economic factors are equally prominent, as each appears 72 times and accounts for 38.7% of the total. As for value-based perspectives, the ideological factor appears 28 times (15.1%), while the environmental factor comes in last, only accounting for 7.5% of the motivational frame. However, the article also suggested that although the dominance of material-based factors over value-based factors continued during the entire researched period, the connotations within each factor had undergone a clear change. In general, the European media has ascribed a more positive motivation to China's climate role.

2. Synthesis of overarching findings

In this section, we come back to the overall research aim of the dissertation, which is to improve the current understanding of China's position in international climate governance. To reach this end, we integrate the individual formation, projection, and reception processes by inter-relating and comparing the findings in each article. Three perspectives that contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of China's climate role are covered, namely ego and alter role conception, material- and value-based factors, and international and domestic interactions.

2.1 Ego and alter role conceptions

International relations have long been replete with implicit national role concepts. States hold a host of national and international roles that constitute their identity, regulate their behavior, and shape the international social order (Harnisch & Maull eds, 2011). This also holds true in our research on China's climate role and its interactions with its counterpart in global climate governance, the EU. This dissertation takes the concept of 'role' to be one of the key concepts. Before we move to the findings on China's ego role conception and the EU's role prescription, some conceptual standpoints need to be clarified. In line with our social constructivist approach, we define a **role** as a social position that is constituted by ego and alter expectations regarding the purpose of an actor in an organized group (Thies 2010). On this basis, **role conceptions** are referred to as the combination of an actor's perception of its own position and its perception of the role expectations of others as signaled through language and action (Harnisch & Maull, 2011: 8). For some time already, these have been referred to as possible causal variables in the operation of the international system, and have been used in explaining the foreign policies of individual nations (Holsti, 1970: 234). Hence, knowledge of role conceptions provides a rich vocabulary for categorizing the beliefs, images and identities that nations develop for

themselves and others, as well as the type of processes and structures that govern the deployment of roles in particular situations (Thies, 2010: 3).

However, the majority of current research seems to forget that national identity and national roles are not only about the inner experience of domestic state elites (national role conceptions), but also about the structure of expectations of the wider international environment (role prescriptions). This dissertation adopts the definition that **role expectations** consist of norms, beliefs and preferences concerning the performance of any individual in a social position relative to individuals occupying other positions (Holsti, 1970; Thies, 2010). Third-party understandings of an actor and its roles form part of an intersubjective international structure that helps shape the practices of that actor. In a dynamic fashion, it is recognition by others that shapes role performance, in turn affecting future recognition (Bengtsson & Elgstrom, 2011: 114). On the structural level, role expectations provide a conceptual bridge between the individual and the social structure. A symbolic interaction approach connects with those social constructivist perspectives to highlight a state's ability to constitute social identities relationally (Harnisch & Maull, 2011: 8). Integrating Article 2 and Article 3, which contribute to China's ego role conception (Article 2), and the EU's alter role expectations from 2009 to 2018 (Article 3), we develop a symbolic interaction framework to understand the full picture of China's position in international climate governance and the implications of this on both national and international levels (See **table 11**).

		Phase I (2009-2012)	*Phase II (2013-2015)*	*Phase III (2016-)*
China's ego role conceptions		Victim of ecological imperialism	Proactive contributor	Torch-bearer
The EU's alter role expectations	Major role conception	Bloc member	Bloc member	Leader
	Secondary role conception	Braker	Bridge-builder	Bloc member
EU-China role interaction		Conflict	Compromise	Consistency

Table 11: *A comparison between China's ego role conception and the EU's alter role expectations.*

The results suggest that when it comes to the climate issue, the relationship between China's ego role conception and EU's role expectations moved from 'conflict' to 'consistency' from 2009 to 2018. In Phase I, where China and the EU held a pair of conflicting roles, there was a clear intra-role conflict (Harnisch, 2011) between China's ego and alter role conceptions. For China, its main role was as a 'victim of ecological imperialism'. Under this scheme, climate change is constructed as a strategic topic. The focus is not on how to manage

climate change efficiently and effectively; rather it is used as a tool in the strategic considerations of international power struggles. International climate policy is thus described as a tool used by developed countries to suppress China, and to hamper its legitimate efforts to grow as an international political power. The victimhood of China is then further illustrated at two levels: its hampered national interests and the jeopardized quality of life of individuals. At the national interest level, emissions mitigation is viewed as a social and economic development issue in which emissions rights are equated to development rights. At the individual level, China appealed to concepts such as human rights to show how the international climate regime would jeopardize Chinese people's rights. For the EU, we distinguish between the major and secondary role concepts, which represent the two most-frequently cited role concepts in the data collected from European media. During Phase I, the major and secondary role conceptions were 'bloc member' and 'braker', which could also be called a 'negative bloc member'. The EU was extremely disappointed by China's perceived diplomatic obstructionism in the Copenhagen COPs Conference. As the main actor in the developing camp, China was framed as one of the main culprits in terms of blocking a more ambitious result. This is firstly because of Beijing's refusal to adopt any binding commitments, and secondly because China also resisted calls for a transparent monitoring, reporting and verification mechanism (MRV) regarding its mitigation policy, based on the consideration that such a measure would breach its national sovereignty.

This intra-role conflict was to a large extent eased during *Phase II*, in which China pursued a proactive role in the international climate regime. The point of this shift was to present China as a great power, a country in which multifaceted development was rapidly taking place and ambitions and aspirations to combat climate change were growing, rather than as a victim of environmental imperialism. This analysis shows that this role is supported by two pillars: China's solid domestic climate policy, and its actions in regard to the South-South Cooperation on Climate Action. Regarding its domestic climate action, building an 'ecological civilization' was listed after building an economic, political, cultural and social civilization, and thus it was the fifth fundamental goal of China's overall development plan. This is a strong political signal that China will deepen its domestic climate action. Regarding the South-South Cooperation on Climate Action, this was mainstreamed into China's climate strategic narratives at the 2011 Durban COPs Conference, and the country's commitment to it reached a peak during the Paris Conference, in which China announced a series of cooperation projects. This proactive ego role concept was partly confirmed by the EU's alter role expectations. Although 'bloc member' was still the major role, 'bridge-builder' (which could also be called 'positive bloc member') became the secondary role conception. This role was reflected in China's softened line toward both the overall principles and the technical details in climate negotiations. While China used to be a country that opposed any kind of commitment, by this point it was able to accept a legally binding climate agreement that applies to all countries in the Paris regime. In the European media, this role was also driven by a series of bilateral climate statements China

signed before the Paris Climate Conference. With this collaboration, which brings in actors from different blocs aboard, China is portrayed as bridging the profound gap between divided negotiating positions.

There is a consistency between the China's role conception and the EU's role prescription in *Phase III*, as both parties frame China as a climate leader. For China, its top leader claimed to take the driver's seat in international cooperation to respond to climate change. China has become an important participant, contributor, and torch-bearer in the global endeavor for an ecological civilization. This was a landmark discourse since China had never previously officially claimed a leadership role in international climate negotiations. This leadership role was further substantiated by the strategic narrative of a 'Chinese solution', which indicated China's growing confidence in promoting its own ideals and therefore shaping the structure of the international system. From the perspective of the EU, the 'leader' role overwhelmed the 'bloc member' role from the year 2016, and it has been the only dominant role frame ever since. The Paris Conference was a breakthrough moment in China's role transformation. Strong leadership (not least within the G-77 + China) and flexibility were demonstrated by China on issues such as adaptation, loss and damage, differentiation, and finance. This leadership role has remained at a high level in the post-Paris regime. Based on our data, this continuity is substantialized by China's advanced low-carbon technology and solid policy, combined with its place in the EU-US-China tripolar relationship.

To sum up, this research synthesizes China's ego role conception and the EU's role expectations towards China. This approach, using symbolic interaction role theory, has implications at both the national and structural levels. China, while its climate diplomacy is to a large extent driven by internal ideas and processes, is also partly shaped in response to the expectations and reactions of external actors. Others' role prescriptions, which are related to actor characteristics and to the social context at hand, contribute to the development of specific international roles. In fact, material capabilities are not enough for establishing a hierarchical order, as the acceptance of others is a key precondition for a hierarchy to even exist. This is also applicable to the international climate regime, since it has to be conceived in a consensual format. As two decisive actors in global climate mitigation, the (in)consistency between China's ego role conception and the EU's role expectations will to a large extent influence the successfulness of international climate governance. As we witnessed, the Copenhagen Conference suffered a severe intra-role conflict while the Paris Conference benefited from consistency between ego and alter role conceptions.

2.2 Material-based factors and value-based factors

The previous section explored the (in)consistency between China's ego role conception and EU's alter role prescription, and the implication of this on both national and structural levels. This section further discusses **the sources and factors shaping China's role in international**

climate negotiations. This has been a main research theme since the beginning of role theory. In his seminal work, Holsti (1970) differentiated eight sources, ranging from the location and major topographical features of the state to its national values, doctrines, and ideologies. In this dissertation, which utilizes categories in existing literature as well as our own empirical observations, which pay particular attention to international climate negotiations and China's specific context, we differentiated material-based factors, which include economic and political perspectives, and value-based factors, which consists of ideational and environmental considerations.

In terms of material-based factors, it is suggested that China's participation in global climate governance follows the 'logic of consequence', whereby foreign policy and the political order are seen as arising from negotiations among rational actors pursuing personal preferences or interests in circumstances in which there may be gains as a result of coordinated action (March & Olsen, 1998: 949). Economically, China's participation in international climate negotiations is seen as aiming at maximizing its economic interests. On the international level, China's main target is to require financial and technology transfers from industrialized countries; on the domestic level, China has adopted different climate strategies so that it can maintain a high economic development speed, spur the urbanization process, modernize its energy infrastructure, and realize its industrial structural transformation. Correspondingly, the political frame looks at China's political and negotiation appeal in international climate politics. This mainly includes China's preferences for the negotiation process (e.g. a unanimous voting mode) and structure (e.g. separate negotiation tracks for developing and developed countries), through which more advantageous results can be generated.

In terms of value-based factors, in line with constructivism in the field of International Relations, it is argued that China's position in international climate governance is motivated by norms and ideals rather than simply by calculations of interests. This follows a 'logic of appropriateness', whereby states behave in ways they and others consider appropriate for the kind of actor they are (March & Olsen, 1998: 948). Ideationally, it is indicated that China's action is driven by normative considerations from two different perspectives. On the one hand is climate ethics, which is substantialized by the principle of equality and justice in the distribution of (historical) responsibilities, etc.; on the other hand is China's pursuit for a positive international image. This latter desire has made China more sensitive to the pressures that stem from international climate change norms, as well as to the potential negative impact on its reputation that stems from opprobrium on its inaction. Lastly, environmental considerations highlight China's complex and fragile ecological environment. The adverse effects of climate change have posed substantial threats to the country's ecological system, seen for example in the extreme weather and climate disasters and severe air pollution in recent decades. Under these circumstances, environmental considerations have been reported as influencing China's role concept and even triggering role change.

This dissertation suggests there has been a distortion between motivations ascribed to China by China itself and by the EU. Regarding the EU, material-based factors attract significantly more attention than value-based factors in the European media. Article 3 in this thesis shows that a value-based perspective attracts significantly more attention in the European media. Among the 222 coded samples, political and economic factors are equally prominent — each appears 72 times and accounts for 77.4% of the total. As for value-based perspectives, the ideological factor appears 28 times (15.1%), while the environmental factor comes in last, only being covered 14 times and accounting for 7.5% of the motivational frame. This result holds true both before and after the 2015 Paris Climate Conference, which was the turning point for China's climate role change from 'bloc member' to 'leader'. China's climate role, be it framed positively or negatively, is mainly driven by material-based factors. Economically, the mostly frequently cited reasons are poverty eradication, economy reform, and low-carbon technology development; politically, China's role was ascribed by its appeal to maintain unity among developing countries while extracting concessions and benefits from developed countries at the beginning.

However, our exploration of China's climate discourses revealed a reversed picture. Value-based factors are important for understanding China's climate role in two ways. First, China has used them to pursue its own self-interest (Schimmelfennig, 2001; Stalley, 2013). China's behavior largely coincides with the concept of 'rhetorical action', which refers to the strategic use of norm-based arguments. China's rhetorical action strategy has been to frame climate change as a North-South issue, primarily through the promotion of the principle of common but differentiated responsibility (CBDR). Second, China's value-based arguments do not simply flow from its material interests, but also structure its conception of its interests and identity. I will illustrate this by reviewing the two most important value-based considerations in my research, which are 'climate equity' and 'international image'.

Promoting the principle of emission equity has always been one of China's priorities. This is substantialized by China's hard line on the Common but Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR) when taking part in international climate negotiations. The importance of equity goes back further and takes a wider scope than climate change negotiations alone. It originated from a sense of inequality and of being peripheral to the world's political and economic systems, which linked with a worldview in which inequality is seen as a dominant feature. The memory of its 'Century of Humiliation' still echoes in China's diplomacy when vis-à-vis Western countries. Any sign of inequality or exclusion triggers sensitive reactions. This was reflected in China's national narratives around the year 2009, when it portrayed itself as the 'victim of ecological imperialism'. The international climate regime is therein framed as a tool used by developed countries to suppress China and to hamper its legitimate efforts to grow as an international political power. Within this context, it is a matter of principle that industrialized countries should deliver on previous commitments, and equality is seen as a balance between developed and developing countries. This is particularly important as a trust-building process.

China's pursuit for a positive —or even leading — status in global governance is another important driving force for its role adoption in the international climate regime. This is reflected in China's recent claim that it plays the 'torch-bearer' role in climate mitigation. This narrative indicates a political signal that China's has fundamentally shifted its diplomatic strategy from Deng Xiaoping's approach of 'keeping a low profile' to the current one of 'striving for achievement' (Wang & Zeng, 2016). Previously, China's guiding foreign policy principle was Deng Xiaoping's admonition that China should 'keep a low profile, never take the lead'. By contrast, China has now become more confident in promoting its own ideals and therefore shaping the structure of the international system.

The disconnect between the EU's and China's perceptions of the material-value based motivations leads to **two reflections**. *Firstly,* it confirms the dominance of value-based frames for China in international climate negotiations (i.e. the need for historical and moral responsibility alongside China's desire for international prestige, as discussed above). This can be compared to a general discourse of 'spaceship earth' and of climate change as manageable (or to be managed) through markets (ecological modernization) in developed countries (Economy, 2011; Ellermann, 2013). *Secondly*, this diverging perception of motivations, as shown in the case of China, might be one of the central reasons for the bumpy process at the UNFCCC. International agreements and action on climate change mitigation or adaptation not only need to focus on technologically or economically optimal solutions to a natural science problem, they equally need to take into account what drives role-taking in different places. When engaging China in the international climate regime, the strength of the normative component as a fundamental driver for China should not be underestimated.

2.3 Between domestic and international levels

This section elaborates on the research findings in another dimension, namely that of relations between the international and domestic perspectives of China's climate politics. It is not our intention here to offer an answer on the question of whether domestic politics really determine international relations or vice versa. There have been several research studies that argue China's climate diplomacy is determined by its domestic considerations (Wu, 2013; Never & Betz, 2014; Li, 2016; Hilton & Kerr, 2016; Dong, 2017; Howard, 2018) or vice versa (Terhalle & Depledge, 2013; Belis, Kerremans & Qi, 2015; Hochsettler & Milkoreit, 2015; Schreurs, 2016; Gupta, 2016). The two conclusions from these studies seem to be 'both' and 'sometimes' (Putnam, 1988). In this section we do not aim to present a 'definitive' answer, but nevertheless this research generates some insights on the relationship between perspectives on the domestic and international levels.

As the findings in Article 1 suggested, there was a centralization process at the domestic level, which indicated an increasing level of significance for the climate issue in China. In the early 2000s, climate policy fell into the 'local discretion' category, in which both the control rights

and inspection rights were allocated to the local level. As the climate issue gained importance internationally and domestically, the central government took the right of inspection by tightening the strictness of cadre evaluation. Through a series policy documents issued by the central government, 'energy intensity' and 'emission reduction' were officially listed as veto targets in the cadre evaluation system, which means that local officials' career progression and economic incentives are more strictly tied to their performance on these targets. This centralization process is even clearer in the recently adopted 'top-level' design for climate policy, which features an increased streamlining of policy formulation and monitoring at every level of the state hierarchy. This all-round re-centralization is reflected at the ideological, institutional and policy levels. On the ideology level, climate policy has been integrated into China's ideological top-level design as it prioritizes the creation of an ecological civilization. Institutionally, the Department of Climate Change was transferred from the NDRC and integrated into the newly created Ministry of Ecology and Environment. On the policy level, in this period China initiated the Emission Trading Scheme (ETS), which is designed, shaped and operated by the central government.

The comparison between domestic central-local governmental relations and China's climate role on an international level revealed a certain amount of 'jetlag' between the two levels (**Table 12**). Adjustments on the domestic level consistently took place a few years earlier than the corresponding role change in international negotiations. This confirmed China's strategic narrative, as projected by its leaders repeatedly on different occasions, that China's international roles are underlined by its ambitious and solid domestic policies. Take the 2009 Copenhagen Conference as an example. China's domestic actions on tackling climate change pre-date Copenhagen. In 2006, binding national targets on energy intensity and emission reduction were introduced in the 11th Five Year Plan (2006–2010). Then, in 2007, China set up the National Leading Group on Climate Change and issued the first national climate change plan of any developing country. These institutions and policies were broken down and implemented by local governments in the following years. Thus, by the time then-Premier Wen Jiabao came to Copenhagen, he was able to point to a pledge to reduce China's emissions intensity by 40–45% by 2020. Although this was not a commitment to peak or reduce total emissions, it was one of the more ambitious proposals from an emerging economy (Hilton & Kerr, 2017). The influence of China's domestic policy on its international climate role helps to explain the seeming 'contradiction' in China's climate policy found in some studies. For example, Conrad (2012) notes the apparent 'contradiction' between China's domestic ambition with respect to climate policy and its more ambivalent negotiating position on the international stage in 2009. Similarly, Ong (2012) identified a paradox in China's climate-relevant policies between its refusal to commit to any internationally binding emissions reduction targets, on the one hand, and its enormous investment and great strides in renewable energy, on the other. As an explanation, our findings suggested that it would take some time before the country's domestic policy can be transformed into a more active international role. Another implication

of this finding suggests that China's changing role in international climate governance may be related more to internal calculations than to the EU or other international pressure/influence. Domestically, climate issues are closely intertwined with other core national interests. China's turn to a more proactive climate narrative reflects its concerns over energy security, air pollution, and most importantly, the economic transformation and upgrading. China has gone into the economic 'new normal' (Hilton & Kerr, 2017), which requires slowing down the speed of development, optimizing and upgrading industrial structure, and spurring the innovation-motivated development patterns. The climate agenda perfectly feeds into this radical economic shift (detailed discussion see **Article 2**).

While acknowledging the influence of the domestic politics on China's international climate role, this research doesn't take it as a simple one-directional process. Interviews with Chinese experts suggest there are two ways that international factors influenced China's domestic policies. Firstly, international cooperation on climate change provides financial and technological aid to China, which is a positive incentive for both the government and enterprises. The development of the Clean Development Mechanism is the best example of how Chinese energy enterprises are enthusiastic about developing renewable or clean energy with the support of foreign money (interviews 13, 14, and 16). Secondly, the pursuit for a proactive international image also forces China to strengthen its domestic policies.

Year	Before 2006	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016 onwards		
China's role in international climate negotiations *(Articles 2&3)*	**Pre-defined**				**Victim of environmental imperialism**			**Proactive contributor**				**Torch-bearer**		
The development of central-local governmental relations (*Article 1*)	**Local discretion** →	**Political tournament**					→ **Top-level design**							
Main domestic policy measures		Emission reduction target became 'binding' in the 11th Five Year Plan	China's National Strategies to Address Climate Change	Plans concerning the implementation, supervision, and assessment of the energy intensity target issued by the State Council	The initiation of the carbon emission trading pilots	The initiation of the concept of an 'ecological civilization'	National Strategies for Climate Change Adaptation	National Plan to Address Climate Change	Intended China's National Determined Contribution (INDC)	Intended China's National Determined Contribution (INDC)	The initiation of China's national emission trading system	The creation of the Ministry of Ecology and Environment (MEE)		

Table 12: *Comparison between China's international role and the evolution of central-local governmental relations.*

**Arrows represent the two trial-and-error processes in China's domestic policy.*

3. Broader reflections

3.1 The legitimization of China's centralized climate politics

This broader reflection starts with a discussion on **how China has legitimized its centralized climate politics** by adopting a holistic view on climate change that combines various dimensions constituting the ruling legitimacy of the government, including energy security, economic reform, and environmental protection. Firstly, China has linked its climate discourse and policy to considerations on *energy security*. Energy security gained prominence in China when the country became a net oil importer in 1993 (Leung, 2011). Price volatility in the international oil market further intensified public concern for energy security (Dyer & Trombetta, 2013). The problem of energy insufficiency and dependency is aggravated by China's fast economic development, which relies on huge levels of energy consumption. China has highlighted the mutual benefit between climate mitigation and energy security through measures such as those that improve energy efficiency, achieve energy saving, optimize the energy mix, develop low-carbon energy technologies, and so forth.

China's climate policy and discourse also reflects its concern about *economic transformation and upgrading*. With the 12th Five-Year Plan (2011–2015), China initiated the transition towards more balanced economic growth, characterized by the increasing relevance of services and investments in innovation and low carbon technologies. The 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), held in November 2012, signaled a major policy shift in the Chinese economy. By 2015, 'the new normal' had become a popular term in a variety of official documents, particularly those concerning economic planning. This economic 'new normal' requires slowing down the speed of development, optimizing and upgrading the structure of industry, and spurring innovation-motivated development patterns. The climate agenda perfectly feeds into this radical economic shift. Firstly, emission reduction measures such as increasing energy efficiency and improving renewable energy contributes to this more sustainable and balanced economic 'new normal'. In fact, climate strategic narratives such as building an 'ecological civilization' have already been mainstreamed into the key slogans that inform China's future development direction. Secondly, the increasing alignment between domestic economic and environmental agendas also gives China greater flexibility in international climate policy.

Lastly, the climate change issue to a large extent links to *environmental protection*. Climate change proved to be the culprit behind China's air pollution and environmental degradation, including the devastating typhoons in the coastal areas, melting glaciers in Tibet, the decline in sustainable agricultural production, and biodiversity loss (Gilley, 2012). China's GHG emissions and air pollution are both caused by its reliance on fossil fuels, its unbalanced industrial structure, and its extensive development mode, which contributed not only to climate change but also to the country's severe air pollution. Since 2010, the persistent smog has

become the top concern of Chinese citizens because of its catastrophic effect on public health. This unrest put huge pressure on China and prompted it to take more action. In this context, the response offered by the Chinese leadership has been framed around the promotion of the concept of ecological civilization, which is praised as the CCP's wisdom and thus supports its political legitimacy-building agenda (Goron, 2018). One example is Chinese Premier Li Keqiang declared a 'war on pollution' at the annual meeting of the National People's Congress, in which the government promoted narratives such as 'air pollution and climate change share the same root and solution' in order to realize a co-beneficial strategy which combines pollution abatement and climate mitigation. In contrast to the previous perspectives, which mainly focused on the national level, the war on pollution was launched to demonstrate the commitment of the top leadership to address issues that matter to the people. By merging climate change with other perspectives such as energy security, economic transformation, and environmental protection, the central government is framed as the guarantor of growth, security, and sustainability on both an aggregated level (energy security, economic reform) and an individual level (environmental protection). This legitimacy is augmented for what Giddens (2010) called the 'radicals at the center' of the Chinese regime, which explains the positive role that political leadership plays in promoting radical policies to address climate change while continuing steady efforts to shore up public and stakeholder support for them. This is triangulated by major surveys on public awareness about climate change and the need to deal with it, which showed that the central government is the most trusted source of information about climate change; over 95% respondents support the government's efforts to combat climate change on both international and domestic levels (China Center for Climate Change Communication, 2014, 2017). The central government has used its prerogative for 'radicalism' to elaborate comprehensive policies using a top-down approach that emphasizes administrative reforms and increased surveillance while marginalizing the civil society. The findings of **Article 1** on the centralization process in China's domestic climate policy-making confirmed this point.

This centralization is deemed to bring both advantages and challenges for the future of China's domestic climate governance. The next section will reflect on the implications of the centralization process by looking at the academic debate over authoritarian environmentalism and democratic environmentalism.

3.2 The implications of China's centralized climate politics

In existing research on China's climate politics, there has been a resurgent academic debate over authoritarian environmentalism (AE) and democratic environmentalism (DE). By definition, AE refers to a public policy model that concentrates authority into a few executive agencies manned by capable and uncorrupt elites seeking to improve environmental outcomes. Public participation is limited to a narrow cadre of scientific and technocratic elites, while others are expected to participate only through state-led mobilization for the purpose of

implementation. DE can be defined as a public policy model that spreads authority across several levels and agencies of government, including representative legislatures, and that encourages direct public participation from a wide cross-section of society (Gilley, 2012: 288). In this debate, China has been viewed as a typical model of AE (Shahar, 2015; Beeson,2018; Li et al., 2019). This is facilitated by China's recent improvements surrounding the climate issue on both international and domestic levels. Internationally, China has shown both its firm support for climate mitigation and its potential to be a climate leader following the US's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement; domestically, China has also achieved rapid progress, for example through investment into renewable energy and the coming-into-force of the national ETS.

However, despite the seeming advantages of authoritarian environmentalism, this analysis argues that the Chinese authoritarian regime's long-term effectiveness in lowering greenhouse gas emission is uncertain at best. This is based on the problems that stem from this centralized arrangement, which mainly include **suboptimal policy implementation** and **a lack of public participation**.

While it is effective in terms of policy output, the efficiency of the China's authoritarian environmentalism mode for policy implementation is questionable. The aims of eco-elites can be undermined at the implementation stage, with consideration of the fact that being aggressive has no bearing on being effective. First of all, there is the problem of the selective implementation of climate policies (Li et al., 2019). Local governments focus their attention on the attitude of the central government toward that policy because the scope of its reward/penalty system provides a signaling effect for different policies. This selective implementation automatically leads to significant variation in performance and willingness to carry out climate policies, which suggests that risk-adverse behaviors are being caused by this top-down steering mechanism. Secondly, the bureaucratic arrangement under China's authoritarian environmentalism may also hinder climate policy implementation. Frequent cadre turnover (every 3-4 years) is intended primarily to keep local Party secretaries and mayors on the move in order to promote the implementation of central directives — however, officials with short time horizons are likely to choose the path of least resistance in selecting quick, low-quality approaches to the implementation of environmental policies (Eaton and Kostka, 2014). Last but not least important, authoritarian environmentalism also sparked negative policy feedback in the policy implementation (Tang et al., 2018). Being held responsible by their superiors rather than by the public, low-ranking provinces in previous years would strengthen their environmental policy enforcement to a significant level, while high-ranking provinces were more likely to weaken their enforcement.

The second problem concerning China's authoritarian environmentalism is the lack of public participation. China's citizenry and ENGOs are forced to fulfil their roles and functions within the system's limitations and the government's control. Most of them primarily

carry out complementary and supplementary roles by using informal arrangements (Burgess, 2017). Their participation is limited at upstream stages (knowledge formation and policy opinion) by a low level of participation opportunities (attending information meetings). A direct result out of this is the lack of counter-discourses in China's context. Our field research identified some critical voices from NGOs which mainly focused on the current centralized governance mode and asked for more public participation in the whole policy fields. There is also academic discussion on the possible potential producer of climate counter-discourses, for example the research on China's Green Public Sphere which fosters political debate and pluralistic views about environmental issues (Yang & Calhoun, 2007; Sun, Graham & Broersma, 2018). However, these counter-discourses are weak and fragmented. The main reason mainly being, firstly, the strict state censorship on ENGO (both international and domestic ones) and media (detailed discussion see **Article 2**); secondly, while the greenspeak provoking public discussions relates to environmental issues that directly influence people's wellbeing, such as pollution, and habitant resettlement, climate change was carried to China through foreign policy channels and framed as a development right and sovereignty issue (see section 3.1 in the **Conclusions**). This diagnostic framing has strengthened, rather than weakened, the government's authority when dealing with climate change.

Since the public is an essential stakeholder for environmental governance, one which has the advantage of handling informational asymmetry and enhancing social supervision, we argue that a lack of public participation leads to a lack of legitimacy with respect to forming a sound legal basis, transparency, and possibilities for third-party involvement (Zhu et al., 2015). In the short term this might not endanger the effectiveness of environmental policies, but in the longer term this lack of legitimacy might very well undermine environmental effectiveness, and can even backfire by posing wider legitimacy questions surrounding credibility and trust in China's environmental policies and institutions. Moreover, the exclusion of social actors and representatives creates a adverse lock-in effect, in which low social concern makes authoritarian approaches both more necessary and more difficult.

In summary, the likelihood that the Chinese authoritarian regime will be effective over the long term in lowering greenhouse gas emission is uncertain at best (Li, 2019; Gilley, 2017). Authoritarian schemes are prone to failure because of the state's unsuitable simplification of reality; it reduces complex webs of social and ecological relations into abstract quantitative measurements, and this tunnel vision undermines local political support, narrows policy choices and disincentivizes administrative action.

As for **policy suggestions**, we suggest two possible ways to resolve these issues. The first possible pathway is to spur public participation by linking climate change with other high-profile issues such as air pollution and land use that are directly linked to public interests. Climate change is a weak discourse area in China; it is regarded as a foreign policy instrument imposed from the international arena, and this is especially true when compared with other

environmental problems such as air pollution. Public surveys show that air pollution is among the top issues of concern among the Chinese population — it usually only comes in second to corruption (Ahlers and Shen, 2018: 302). By highlighting the synergy between climate change and other environmental issues, public participation in climate issues can be improved. The second pathway is norm diffusion and pressure at the international level. International partners should pay more attention to policy diffusion and learning among local leaders in China (Gilley, 2017). Successful local experiences may be adopted at the central level and thus may impact authoritarian environmentalism through a 'trickling-up' effect.

3.3 EU-China relations

As one of the main findings of this dissertation, we identified a consistency between China's role conception and the EU's role prescription surrounding the climate issue (see **Article 3**). However, this common perception of China's leadership role doesn't spread to other areas. On the contrary, **there has been a conflict between the two parties regarding China's context-specific role across different policy issues**, as is seen in both official discourse and academic discussions. According to the European Commission, while China is taken as a strategic partner to support effective multilateralism and fight climate change, it is viewed as a competitor or even a systemic rival in issues such as human rights, investment, trade, infrastructure and technology (The European Commission, 2019). A deteriorating perception of China in policy issues other than climate change in recent years is also evident in academic research. The relevant discussion covered the topics of economics and trade (Wong, 2017; Curran et al., 2017; Hsueh, 2019), political relations (Yu, 2018; Baark, 2019), security issues (Reiterer & Henokl, 2017; Guilfoyle, 2019), and so forth. It is also important to note that EU-China relations are more strained than ever as a result of the covid-19 crisis. We have witnessed criticism of China's 'politics of generosity' from the EU. This dissertation suggests two possible explanations for this conflict over issue-specific roles. The first one lays in the nature of the climate issue. Climate change represents an urgent and potentially irreversible threat to human societies as a whole, and no solution will be possible without the widest level of cooperation. This stands in contrast with other issues, such as trade and security, which are more easily turned into a zero-sum game as a result of conflicting interests. Secondly and more importantly, this tension is caused by the EU's perception of China's selective engagement with multilateral international structures. For the climate issue, China has clarified its support for the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement as the legitimate regime for international climate governance. However, for other issues, China has shown a different understanding of the current rule-based international order.

These conflicting issue-specific roles reflect the dispute over China's meta-role as a maintainer of the status quo or as a revisionist power, and hence its implication for EU-China relations and the broader existing international order. After more than three decades of high-level economic growth, social change, and the modernization of its one-party state, China

has moved to the center stage of the new global order (Breslin, 2016). This means China has to give up its traditional role as a benevolent bystander in international cooperation, one who learns from its own history, from Western market economies, and from the results of extensive experiments (Heilmann, 2008). *On the domestic level*, in light of China's new international significance, Chinese leaders face the expectation that they will 'return China to its former glory' (Deng, 2008). *On the international level*, China's rise makes earlier debates over whether to contain or to engage the emerging superpower obsolete. Under this new circumstance, taking the reemergence of China as a *fait accompli*, what matters is the nature and purpose of this reemergence. In other words, the real question seems to be whether China will become a responsible stakeholder in world politics (Fredriksen, 2006).

While rhetoric and actions show a certain degree of adaptation to new circumstances, this does not imply that China is adapting unilaterally to an existing set of international institutions, norms, and values. Instead, by joining and creating regional, multilateral, and global orders, China is actively pursuing the recalibration of those orders on Chinese terms (Gottwald & Duggan, 2011). In some policy fields, China has shown its willingness to maintain the existing governance regime. As **Article 2** of this dissertation confirms, for the climate issue, China projected a clear strategic narrative to maintain the legitimacy and authority of the UNFCCC as the only international climate governance mechanism. For example, as Xi Jinping pointed out in his speech at the UN's office in Geneva (2017), 'the Paris Agreement is a milestone in the history of climate governance. We must ensure this endeavor is not derailed. All parties should work together to implement the Paris Agreement' (Xi, 2017). This position is further solidified by US's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. As the 'tag team' of the world's two climate diplomacy champions is undone, a leadership vacuum has been generated. China is hoped by many to translate its domestic strides into international leadership and fill this gap.

However, in other issues, Chinese diplomacy has sometimes been described as challenging, disturbing or disrupting various global governance arrangements (Foot, 2013). Rhetorically, China has projected the discourse of a 'Chinese solution' to multiple issues in a confrontational manner. In his speech on the 95th anniversary of the foundation of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping asserted that '[…] what we are building is socialism with Chinese characteristics, not some other –ism. History has not ended, nor can it possibly end. The CPC and Chinese people have every confidence in their ability to provide a Chinese solution to aid the exploration of a better social system for humanity. (Xi, 2016)' This served as a political signal that China has fundamentally shifted its diplomatic strategy from Deng Xiaoping's approach of 'keeping a low profile' to the current one of 'striving for achievement' (Wang & Zeng 2016). During Deng Xiaoping's administration, China's guiding foreign policy principle was his philosophy that China should 'keep a low profile, never take the lead'. By contrast, under Xi today, China has become more confident in promoting its own ideals and therefore shaping the structure of the international system.

In practice, **China has also adopted a new form of self-assured multidimensional activism in the regional and global political economy.** This can be seen in the successful launch of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB) for the BRICS states; the articulation of what is arguably a global vision with Chinese characteristics that takes the form of the ambitious project to construct the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI); the active promotion of the concept of a new Great Power relationship with the United States; and the prominently announced strategy of constructing a community of common destiny through its regional diplomacy. All these can be counted as part of China's strategically ambitious foreign policy agenda to project the Chinese vision and defend China's core national interests (Zhang, 2016).

This structural change in international relations has profound implications for both the EU and China. For the EU, the rise of China has and will continue to have consequences for the transformative dynamics of the international system, not just in **power-political terms** but also in terms of **normative change**, as it has redefined the global power hierarchy. This will inevitably conflict with the normative power Europe, which promotes core values such as peace, human rights, and democracy throughout the world. In the EU's view, China has been selectively upholding some norms at the expense of others, which has weakened the sustainability of the rules-based international order. On the one hand, China has expressed its commitment to a fair and equitable global governance model. On the other hand, China's engagement in favor of multilateralism is sometimes selective and is based on a different understanding of the rules-based international order. This has already led to a recalibration of China's image from 'developing country' to 'key global actor'. Given this adapted perception, the EU's main concern is whether China's increasing presence in the world, including in Europe, could be accompanied by greater responsibilities for upholding the rules-based international order, as well as greater reciprocity, non-discrimination, and openness of its system.

As a policy recommendation, in this changing world context China will have to fill the 'responsibility gap' that has been created by its current imbalanced ambitions and commitment to global governance. China is clearly determined to take its rightful place at the head table of world politics and enjoy its attendant prerogatives. But its government has not yet formulated a clear view of the country's role as a global power or the commitments that this entails. Chinese leaders are more concerned with their national power aspirations than with global governance. However, the 'great power' status assumed by China should go hand-in-hand with the great responsibilities it is then expected to fulfil in international society (Donnelly, 2006). China cannot continue to act like a small country with little impact on the global system at large (and therefore little responsibility for its actions). As a socially constituted actor playing a particular role in international society, China should make contributions to the achievement of a common purpose and to international order and governance by imparting a degree of central direction to the affairs of international society as a whole.

4. Avenues for future research

The findings of the doctoral dissertation mainly shed some light on the three processes of China's climate policies and discourses: the formation, projection and reception of its role. Yet at the same time, the results point to several avenues where future research is needed or highly desirable. This section will reflect on areas for future research from the theoretical, empirical, and methodological perspectives.

4.1 Theoretical

Role theory has been one of the main frameworks used to navigate this exploration of China's climate role and its reception in the European media. While the main contribution of this thesis is the identification of the evolution of China's role, the study can be extended in two ways.

Firstly, the identification of the evolution of China's role could and should be complemented with studies examining **patterns within this role change**. Breuning's (2011) conceptualization has offered a sound framework for this, according to which patterns could include: *adjustment change,* which is the most limited foreign policy shift, requiring only a quantitative change in levels of effort or the scope of recipients addressed by a policy; *program change,* which involves new instruments of statecraft and is qualitative in nature; *goal change,* which entails a change of foreign policy objectives; and *international orientation change,* which is the most radical and all-encompassing type of change involving the redirection of a state's foreign policy. This dissertation (in Articles 2 and 3) has already identified China's changing climate role — building upon this, further research on patterns within the role change would bring forth a deeper understanding of China's climate politics and how it links to China's foreign policy in general.

Secondly and accordingly, it would be illuminating to further trace **the constitutive and causal modes of role change**. Harnisch (2011) sketched out the repertoire of causal and constitutive modes of role change that are subject to extensive research in FPA and IR literature. The first one is *social learning*. In social constructivism, learning is conceptualized as a constitutive process in which the subject acquires a new role (and identity) in a given or evolving social group. In a more rationalism-focused manner, learning depicts a causal process in which a role-holder changes the structure and content of a role's conception based on new (deviant) information such as experience. As a second mode of role change, *normative persuasion* is by definition directed towards a specific social order that is upheld or sought after by, among others, normative entrepreneurs. Based on Habermas's theory of communicative action, normative persuasion occurs when actors engage in linguistic interaction to assess the appropriateness of roles in situations of uncertainty. Lastly, there is *socialization,* which describes a process by which an outsider internalizes the behavioral rules previously set by a community of insiders. Two avenues of state socialization have been identified in the literature. In the first instance, targets of socialization adopt community standards as a result of socializing

agencies using a strategy of political conditionality based on reinforcement by material reward (Schimmelfennig, 2005). In the second instance, socialization implicates the legitimacy of group norms, either through modus that has been dubbed 'social influencing' or by creating legitimacy through a process of normative persuasion (Flockhart, 2006). In future research, guided by the Harnisch's classification, it is possible to trace the origin of China's role change and reflect on whether it was caused by the international system, by domestic factors or even by the policy-makers.

Thus, research on China's climate role — or even more broadly, on its meta role in international environments — could benefit from a deeper interpretation of the patterns and causal modes of its role change. As an initial attempt toward this, Article 3 in this dissertation has already touched upon the ascribed motivations of China's specific climate role in the European media. On this basis, future research could investigate causal modes of dynamic role change caused by ego-achievement or alter-prescription at international and domestic levels.

4.2 Empirical

In this PhD dissertation, the greatest attention is paid to how China's climate role is perceived by the EU. From the empirical perspective, added value can be gained by launching parallel research at China's domestic level and at the EU-China bilateral level.

Firstly, on the domestic level, more empirical research can be launched with regards to China's '**green public sphere**', which is referred to as a space where different publics gather to articulate environmental issues and produce and consume green discourse; these groups rely on the media for dissemination (Sun et al., 2018). In this dissertation, the main focus is on China's climate discourse coalition, which consists of the government, the epistemic community, and official media. This selection was made based on the finding, from a document study and interviews, that the green public sphere only plays a marginal role in the climate issue. In China, both the ENGO sphere and alternative media are currently under strict regulation. The interviews with China's domestic ENGOs confirm that in order to be legally registered, they have to be affiliated with certain government sectors. International ENGOs, following the 2017 *International Non-governmental Organization Management Law*, are required to submit financial and work plans to China's Ministry of Public Security for approval. This also holds true for alternative media and the internet, which are also subjected to official surveillance. The Chinese government continuously adopts new strategies, such as computer filtering, to deal with the changing internet ecology and to direct public opinion. However, as the previous discussion (see section 5.3.1) has revealed, broad and deep public participation could be a potential trigger for China's transformation from authoritarian environmentalism to democratic environmentalism. In this sense, more empirical research on how a green public sphere could foster political debates and pluralistic views about environmental issues could

contribute to uncovering conflicting themes in public discourse and incoherent actions in a technocratic centralized country with a limited need to ensure domestic support and legitimacy.

Secondly, at **the EU-China relation level**, two pathways are suggested. As a counterweight and complementary view to this dissertation, future research can contribute to how the EU's climate roles are perceived in the Chinese media. Some pioneering work has already been done in this regard. For example, in his series of research studies on EU-China climate relations, Torney (2012, 2015) paid specific attention to China as a 'follower' of the EU's climate leadership. Based on research concerning the diffusion of norms, policies, and ideas, he put forward a more nuanced understanding of the nature and extent of the influence of the EU in global climate change politics. In the same vein, Parker et al (2010, 2011, 2017) also noted the importance of the need for leadership and the presence of prospective followers. It is said that 'leadership is a relationship between leaders and followers. Both parties to this relationship are important for a leadership relationship to come into existence. There can be no leaders without followers.' In light of this, the authors examined the role that EU leadership has played in climate summits from Copenhagen to Paris. The EU's attempts to realize its bid for climate change leadership are scrutinized. The common premise of these studies is EU's leadership role. However, in line with the anti-Eurocentric vision suggested by this dissertation, the questions should firstly look at whether the EU is indeed perceived as the climate leader for third parties. If so, to what extent is the EU actually recognized as a leader by potential followers? What type of leadership is applied by the EU? If not, what other role concepts are prescribed to the EU by other actors? All these concerns remain to be further researched.

Additionally, there could be more empirical research on how China's role in policy fields other than climate change is perceived by the EU. As is discussed here (see **section 5.3.2**), in both the EU's official documents and academic research, there is a conflict between China's roles across different topics. While it is admitted as the (co)leader in international climate negotiations, perceptions of China's roles in other fields are getting more negative in the EU. Evidence of this can be found in: economic and trade policy, such as the uncertain nature of China's Belt and Road Initiative and the lack of reciprocal market access; security issues, such as China's maritime claims in the South China Sea and its refusal to accept the binding arbitration rulings issued under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea; and diplomacy, such as the negative impact of China's actions in Africa in a number of areas, including the environment, labor standards, economic restructuring, democratic development, and human rights. Under this context, an empirical investigation into China's perceived role in different policy fields can compare and triangulate current research and shed more light on the EU's China strategy at both meta and issue-specific levels.

4.3 Methodological

In Article 3, we applied a content analysis to the reception of China's climate role in three selected European media organizations from 2009 to 2018. In future research, it would be valuable if a larger dataset is built, for example by expanding the time frame and media scope. In doing so, the foundation for a more solid quantitative content analysis can be set. Among the multiple possibilities in terms of analytical combinations, a correspondence analysis (CA) on the relation between China's role and ascribed motivations could be the point of entry. As a multivariate exploratory space-reduction technique for a categorical analysis, which reveals frequency-based associations in corpus data, the correspondence analysis could visualize these associations graphically in a multidimensional space, thus facilitating identification. By applying this technique, the relationship between the role and motivations can be clarified. During the course of this research, we have attempted to apply a correspondence analysis to the research data, with the assumption that China's 'leader' role is more driven by value-based factors than material-based ones. However, for the sake of the structural consistency of a research article and the time limit inherent in the PhD program, this is not included in the dissertation, and so future research can take up this initial investigation.

For Article 1, on central-local governmental relations in China's climate policy, semi-structured expert interviews were the main research method. While this indeed works well in discovering the interviewees' explicit, tacit, professional or occupational knowledge and experiences, it reveals the extra added value of having further participant observations at the local governmental level. As a unitary system, China's government consists of five layers, with the central government at the top of the hierarchy and each subsequent layer being embedded with co-equal local governments that are spatially and jurisdictionally exclusive. These layers of subnational governments include provinces, municipalities, counties, and townships. The interviews with emission companies revealed how policies and instructions can be distorted at the local level. Under this circumstance, participant observation offers us the opportunity to gain practical insights that can benefit theoretical and academic debates, to gain access to particular types of data that could not be collected through conventional fieldwork, and, importantly, to access the political decision-making process at the local level in a way that would be very hard to achieve through normal fieldwork channels. This is especially suitable for the context of China, in which a proper set of connections, cooperation partners and affiliations with trusted and valued organizations remains essential to gaining access to important stakeholders and data in the field. Hence, future research informed by participant observation is vital to investigating how the story is told in the at the local government level.

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Annexes

1. Interviews

No.	Affiliation	Interviewee
1	Peking University	Official/Scholar
2	Tsinghua University	Scholar
3	Tsinghua University	Scholar
4	Peking University	Scholar
5	Global Environmental Institute (GEI)	NGO
6	Rock Environmental and Energy Institute (REEI)	NGO
7	Climate Action Network International (CAN)	NGO
8	Greenovation: Hub	NGO
9	University of International Business and Economics	Scholar
10	Institution for Urban and Environmental Studies, CASS	Think Tank
11	Institution for Urban and Environmental Studies, CASS	Think Tank
12	Institution for Urban and Environmental Studies, CASS	Think Tank
13	National Centre for Climate Change Strategy and International Cooperation (NCSC)	Official
14	China Clean Development Mechanism Fund	Official
15	Development Research Center of the State Council (DRC)	Official
16	Energy Foundation	Official
17	Risk Management Division, China Minmetals Corporation	Manager
18	Risk Management Division, China Minmetals Corporation	Manager
19	Risk Management Division, China Minmetals Corporation	Manager
20	Risk Management Division, China Minmetals Corporation	Staff

21	Coke Export Division, China Minmetals Corporation	Manager

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