



Climate Action: Crossed Perceptions in France and China

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“Climate chaos is breaking new records, but we cannot afford the same old broken record of scapegoating and waiting for others to move first.”

António Guterres, in his speech at the UN General Assembly on September 19, 2023¹, announcing the Climate Ambition Summit prior to COP 28.

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Climate Action: Crossed Perceptions in France and China

1. Introduction

The collective dynamics underpinning climate change mitigation can be compared to a prisoner's dilemma situation. Because action to mitigate climate change has a political and economic cost, the perception of what other countries do, in particular the US, Europe and China, is likely to impact how governments and populations dose their efforts. And this perception is highly influenced by the media.

Media inform and shape public opinion in their country. The subjects they focus on, the issues they tackle and, above all, the way they tackle them, influence their audience's reading of the world.

The purpose of this research is to **analyse the perception in France of China's climate mitigation actions and the perception in China of France/Europe's, as reflected in each nation's media coverage**. Based on a selection of French and Chinese publications, it **compares perspectives, identifies information gaps and highlights potential underreported or misreported topics**. The media treatment of the main components of climate policies and their consequences are analysed successively: public policies, economic dimensions, technology and innovation, international cooperation and public involvement.

Countries are expected to submit their first Biennial Transparency Report by the end of 2024 and issue updated NDCs in 2025. This report provides insights on how to improve the EU-China dialogue on climate change and aims at reinforcing the two partners' mutual understanding and collaboration.

2. Key findings and takeaways

Main findings of the media corpus analysis

- **Chinese readers have the opportunity to hear about EU's climate policies, French ones less systematically so.**

Xinhua and the *People's Daily* offer a factual and systematic monitoring of European climate policies. French media tend to refer to Chinese plans, policies and targets only when covering major events or discussing specific issues. Some climate policy developments seem to fall through the cracks.

- **Chinese readers are exposed to a partial presentation of EU's climate policies.**

The *Economic Daily* and the *Global Times* propose highly critical editorial types of articles, commenting EU's climate policies through the lens of their impact on China and its economy. Analyses depict China as a victim of an economic discrimination and protectionism implemented by Europe, in the name of climate mitigation.

- **French media struggle to get a clear picture of China's trajectory...**

Journalists struggle to decipher Chinese public policies, the reality of what is being implemented, and to what extent these bring the country closer to the 2030/60 targets.

China's concomitant investment in renewable energies and in the coal sector is seen as discrediting China's commitment to fighting global warming.

- **... and mostly associate China's early investment in the green sector action as a source of risk.**

In French media, the dominant analysis is that, thanks to early massive investments in the green tech sector, the size of its domestic market, access to cheap labour and considerable State subventions, China is undermining European enterprises' market position in these sectors, contributing to the emergence of new dependencies.

- **While French media portray China as a key player in multilateral climate diplomacy, Chinese media portray the EU as a passive, hardly audible player on the international stage.**

The Chinese coverage of the EU's or France's international climate action and leadership is non-existent. Even during the COP28 summit in Dubai, Chinese media remained mute on the EU's positions and its role in negotiations.

- **French media depict an active Chinese bilateral strategy, while Chinese media remain mute on Europe's**

In French media, China is described as pushing its advantage on the international stage, building alliances with third countries and securing access to natural resources critical for green tech and products. Europe's bilateral strategy is ignored by Chinese media.

- **Both sides fail to give credit to the other's support to developing countries.**

Cooperation programs with developing countries are never mentioned. In the media, the term « cooperation » is often misused and actually describes commercial operations.

- **Little is said about France/EU-China cooperation...**

Official communication on both sides insists on the alignment of positions, the importance of the France-China and EU-China cooperation on climate change and the multiple opportunities. But journalists very rarely give information about existing (non-business) cooperation and its benefits.

- **... and about what Chinese and French/European people experiment.**

Very few articles on both sides focus on the human consequences of climate change or on the efforts people do to adapt to climate warming and to new climate policies.

Takeaways

Many factors influence how media tell the story of a country's/region's climate actions: access to information, the presumed interest of the readers, and the editorial line set by the instances to which the media are accountable, reflecting the countries' political system. If tracing these factors and analysing the resulting quality of the coverage is out of the scope of this research, its results call for a better informed, less partial media coverage of climate action, which would contribute positively to the global collective engagement for climate change. Better access to information on policies implemented in China, other than those

related to renewable energies and green tech goods, their impact and the challenges met would help give a more accurate picture of the situation in China. Documenting how measures implemented in the European Union are reducing GHG emissions (-32% between 1990 and 2020) could foster a positive dynamic in China, whereas conveying the idea that EU's climate action are purely instrumental casts a cynical light on global efforts to curb climate warming.

Similarly, sharing with media readers the mutual recognition both powers display in international fora and high-level official discussions, would help limit a "politicisation" of the climate change field and potentially contribute to limit the trust deficit which has been tainting the EU-China partnership.

Finally, more character-led stories that can raise the interest and emotions of the readers could help reinforce interest in the topic of climate change, bridge the gap between populations and recall that global warming knows no frontiers.

3. Methodology

Media landscapes in France and China are impossible to compare. So are the journalistic practices and their economic and political constraints. Nonetheless, different as they are, news providers in both countries fulfil the same role of informing and possibly influencing public opinion.

With a view to finding titles as similar as possible in their targeted audience, this research focuses on articles from news agencies, *Xinhua* (新华社) and *AFP*, because they infuse the whole media coverage in their respective countries; articles from the *People's Daily* (人民日报) and *Le Monde*, because they are major national daily papers and both target civil servants, executives, and readers with an interest in public affairs; articles from the *Economic Daily* (经济日报) and *La Tribune*, both widely read by economic actors; and articles from the *Global Times* (环球时报) and *Le Figaro*, to include titles that aim at an audience looking for a more opinionated coverage. All titles from China were analysed in their Chinese version, aiming at a Chinese readership.

Publications from these eight sources were recovered through Europresse database for the French media and CNKI database for the Chinese ones. The selected Chinese articles focus either on France or on the EU, considering that EU policies also apply to France and that, from a Chinese perspective, the EU is probably a more relevant entity to take into account than one single European country. The titles of the Chinese articles had to contain the words France (法国), EU (欧盟) or Europe (欧洲), and the body of the articles included the words coal (炭), carbon (碳), emissions (排放 + 减排), climate (气候), energy (能源), warming (变暖), methane (甲烷), hydrogen (氢能), fossil fuels (化石燃料) or green finance (绿色金融). The same keywords were used in French, with articles including China (Chine) in the title.

All the articles were published in 2023, from January 1st to December 31st. Even though climate change was globally less covered by international media in 2023 than in previous years², the topic still made it to the news through a variety of angles. Climate-connected

events (droughts, heat-waves) raised awareness about the consequences of climate change all over the world. International climate negotiations made the headlines during the COP28 summit in Dubai. Commercial disputes connected to green technologies and involving China and the EU were the focus of mainstream media attention.

In the context of this exploratory research, this one-year period also has the advantage of offering a sufficient number of articles to be representative, and not too many to still allow a deep qualitative analysis. The final selection comprises 58 articles on the Chinese side, 78 on the French. This slight imbalance doesn't necessarily reflect a lesser interest from the Chinese media towards France and the EU, but rather the fact that China often appears in French media as a point of reference or comparison in articles otherwise not fully dedicated to China.

Climate change mitigation is a broad theme that can be covered from several angles: public policies, economic opportunities for companies or competition amongst nations, technological innovation, diplomacy, international cooperation, social consequences... The selected articles have been classified according to their dominant angle, to allow a vision of the prevalent themes, of those present on one side but not the other, and of the missing ones. Each category has then been submitted to a qualitative analysis to compare the messages conveyed by French and Chinese media.

4. Public policies

Chinese and French media both pay a lot of attention to public policies, but the coverage varies between both countries and from one media to the other. It's the gist of *Xinhua's* coverage (11 out of 17 articles) and of the *People's Daily's* (9 out of 13 articles). Even the *Economic Daily*, supposedly more focused on business issues, dedicates more than half of its coverage to French and EU's public policies (5 out of 9 articles). References to Chinese policies can be found in 30 French articles.

However, a content analysis of the corpus reveals quite a few differences in the treatment of the information.

- **Chinese media offer a comprehensive coverage of France and EU's climate policies...**

Xinhua and the *People's Daily* in particular systematically report on France and EU's climate policies. For instance, in 2023, *Xinhua* articles introduced to their readers the EU's Green Deal Industrial Plan in February³; the EU's upcoming ban on the sale of new petrol and diesel cars⁴ in March; a set of measures adopted by the EU's Council on April 25th to reduce emissions (emission quotas, regulations of maritime and air emissions, carbon border adjustment mechanism and climate social fund)⁵; the nature restoration law⁶ and the new EU battery regulation⁷ in July; the proposed Net-Zero Industry Act⁸ in December.

French policies were also widely covered, with Chinese media reporting among others on the "ecological bonus" granted by the French government for the purchase of electric vehicles in September⁹, on the "Green industry law"¹⁰ and the national plan to develop solar

panels¹¹ in October. The *Global Times* even published a brief article on France's "Plan vélo et marche 2023-2027"¹², whose launching barely reached the pages of French national media.

- ... but the treatment varies from factual to vitriolic according to the publication.

The tone and the way institutional news is dealt with vary greatly according to the publication. *Xinhua* and the *People's Daily* adopt a mostly factual and neutral way in their descriptions of French and EU's legislations. While *Xinhua* is facts only, the *People's Daily* provides analysis of the policies, mostly through the lens of international media and Chinese experts. The titles of the articles are mostly descriptive: "The EU launches the Green Deal Industrial Plan"¹³, "France encourages development of green transportation"¹⁴, or "The EU's timetable for the ban on fuel car sales officially becomes effective"¹⁵. Some convey a more sceptical tone about the EU's policies, as exemplified by this *People's Daily* title focusing on the "many challenges" faced by the UE in its carbon market reform¹⁶. But there's a gap between the catchy tone of the title and the reality of the article that is balanced and nuanced. This kind of punchy headline is common in media vying for readers' attention, and this practice can distort perceptions in a negative way with an audience that would simply skim the titles. Other titles actually convey a positive tone and praise French and EU's climate policies as shows the recurrent use of the expressions "努力" (make great efforts, try hard)¹⁷ or "加快" (accelerate)¹⁸. Altogether, the coverage is globally balanced and neutral in these two publications.

The *Economic Daily* and the *Global Times* however adopt a different strategy: their articles look like editorials more than journalistic pieces, and their tone is highly critical of Europe's climate policies. It doesn't really come as a surprise for the *Global Times*, known for its nationalist positions, but it's more unexpected from the *Economic Daily*, China's self-proclaimed "largest economic newspaper group", managed by the Central Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party. This very opinionated treatment is visible in the choice of titles: "The EU's 'Green Deal' is losing its luster"¹⁹, "Why EU energy reform talks are falling apart"²⁰, "EU's new carbon reduction bill criticized for 'protectionism'"²¹. The bodies of the articles are along the same lines: they focus less on the impact of policies on EU emissions and more on the controversies they might raise, within and outside of the EU. The policies are often depicted as mere reactions to the US "Inflation Reduction Act", which conveys the idea of the EU being passive in its climate positions (see part 6). Dissensions between EU States are often pointed²² and the upcoming European elections are introduced as a disruptive element in EU's legislative processes²³. The coverage of these two publications also build a lot on foreign press articles, Western and non-Western, using isolated quotes from sometimes obscure websites, to convey the feeling of a world-wide negative perception of EU's policies²⁴.

But what these vitriolic articles mostly do is an analysis of EU's climate legislations through the lens of their impact on China and its economy rather than an assessment of their contribution to Europe's climate objectives. This bias reinforces the conflictual tone of the Chinese coverage, and becomes all the more obvious when articles focus on economic issues (see part 4). And it's a missed opportunity to inform Chinese readers of policy solutions that could help China better respond to the challenge of climate change.

- **French media refer to plans, policies and targets when covering major events or discussing specific issues...**

French media don't publish articles just with raw information on new laws and policies the way the *People's Daily* or *Xinhua* do. But they still often refer to and provide elements of explanation of new plans and legislations in articles with a broader prism.

In March 2023, during the annual meeting of the National People's Congress, both *Le Monde*²⁵ and *l'AFP*²⁶ released articles on China's dual goals of capping its carbon emissions before 2030 and reaching neutrality in 2060. French articles on green industry²⁷, on energy²⁸ and on greenhouse gas emissions²⁹ all included references to China's climate targets and policies enshrined in the 14th five-year plan issued in 2021. An article on BYD³⁰ mentioned emissions norms for cars; articles on China's energy mix referred to China's roadmap for solar and wind power capacities³¹ and to its carbon market³²; a piece on COP28 negotiations³³ included a description of the country's methane plan announced in November 2023.

- **... but miss some of China's climate policy developments.**

This journalistic treatment means that Chinese climate policies are not systematically reported by French media the moment they are issued; policies that don't find their way into larger themes may drop out of the radar altogether. For instance, a series of laws passed by the central government in July 2023, including three texts directly connected to China's dual carbon goals, were overlooked by the French media in the corpus. The expansion of China's Green Electricity Certificates announced in August 2023 wasn't covered either. These events occurred outside of this study's timeframe, but it's also worth noticing that neither China's relaunching of its voluntary carbon market (CCER) nor the new requirements for listed companies to report on their environmental impact³⁴ made it to the French publications in January and February 2024. These pieces of news might eventually be included in future articles if they are relevant to provide context in broader treatments, but they might as well be fully ignored, thus generating an information gap for the French readers.

This difference in the French and Chinese coverages might be explained by the mere status of the media in the two countries. While the *People's Daily* and *Xinhua* are known to be China government's mouthpieces, and are as such used to doing meticulous institutional reporting, French media are not into these kinds of practices and rarely dissociate a law or a policy from its critical analysis. **Another reason might be the lesser accessibility of Chinese legislations:** their texts are not always or immediately available to the public³⁵, navigating the specificities of the Chinese State with the multiplicity of actors involved (State Council, Ministry of Ecology and Environment, National Energy Commission, National Development and Reform Commission, local level administrations...) is not easy for non-Chinese, and their wording might also be hard to decipher for readers who are not acculturated to Chinese official rhetoric and jargon.

- **In spite of sometimes catchy titles, French coverage is overall balanced and analytical...**

The French corpus does show a few one-sided articles on China's policies³⁶, but they are rare and the whole coverage, when read in length, is balanced across all the selected publications. For instance, whenever the body of the article denounces China's reliance on coal, it also mentions the incomparable scope of its installed renewable capacities. An article published by *La Tribune* in February 2023 is very representative of this trend. Its title, "*Energy Security: in 2022, China has accelerated the construction of coal-fired power plants as never before*"³⁷, suggests a very negative point of view on China's energy transition. And indeed, the body of the article points out that in 2022, China approved "*the equivalent of two large coal-fired power plants a week*", that the government had kept investing in coal-fired electricity, and that these actions would make it "*more complicated and costlier*" for China to respect its emissions targets. But this very same article also dedicates whole paragraphs to China's investments in renewable energies and details its roadmap for solar and wind power production and its target of "*doubling its capacity*" before 2025. It even quotes a newly released report³⁸ by a Finnish research centre (Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air) and an American NGO (Global Energy Monitor) stating that "*the massive additions of new coal-fired capacity don't necessarily mean that coal use or CO2 emissions from the power sector will increase in China*", provided that growth in renewable capacities continues to accelerate and electricity demand stabilizes.

This example is just one among many articles following the same pattern³⁹: a negative or pessimistic title, designed to catch the reader's attention, and a body more balanced than suggested by the title. This practice, also used by Chinese media as mentioned earlier, can give the false impression to readers who would only browse through the titles that China's climate action is lagging far behind its commitments, while the reading of the articles provides a more nuanced vision and reflects the ambiguous messages coming from China.

- **...but conveys a mixed feeling on China's ability to meet its 2030/2060 targets.**

The goal of most of the French articles is to try and decipher the connection between China's announced policies, the reality of what is being implemented, and to what extent these bring the country closer to its climate objectives. But this analysis of China's climate trajectory is obviously a hard one to do when the country both authorizes the construction of new coal-fired plants and manages to become a leader in renewable energies. This title from *Le Monde*, "*China, champion of renewable energies... and a coal addict*"⁴⁰ is the perfect summary of the ambivalence of the perception conveyed by the French media.

So, when it comes to assessing China's ability to meet its carbon emission targets, French articles can go both ways. For example, *Le Monde* article released during China's National People's Congress⁴¹ points that 2022 performances, just released by China's National Development and Reform Commission, suggest that "*China is having the greatest difficulty following the set trajectory*". Carbon emissions per GDP unit decreased by 0,8%, but energy consumption per GDP unit only decreased by 0,1%, far from the five-year objectives of energy intensity reduction (-13,5% between 2020 and 2025) and carbon intensity reduction (-18% in the same period). This doesn't prevent China from having great ambitions for 2023, the article continues, with a target to reduce "*energy consumption per GDP unit by about 2%*".

On the other hand, *Le Figaro* titles on the expected decrease of China's carbon emissions in 2024⁴². It underlines that China built renewable energy capacities "at breath-taking speed", and installed in just one year "the equivalent of France's total electricity consumption". Quoting an expert from the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air, the article explains that these new production capacities "are virtually guaranteed to reduce electricity production from fossil fuels and CO2 emissions by 2024". But the very same article also recalls that China is increasing its coal-powered electricity production capacities, emphasizing once again the mixed perception of China's transition.

5. Economic dimensions

Economic consequences of climate change policies are a major topic both in France and in China. Articles dedicated to the economic dimensions of the climate transition (investments, sectorial analysis, international competition) or exploring the underlying economics of public decisions are almost equally represented in the Chinese (14 articles) and French (19 articles) corpus.

Most of them convey a negative and even conflictual vision of the climate transition. **On economic issues, European readers are fed with pessimistic analyses forecasting the decline of their industries, outplayed by the Chinese competition; the Chinese audience is being convinced that its country is treated unfairly and that its efforts are not recognised abroad.**

- **French media worry about Chinese competition for green technologies.**

In French media, most economic articles reflect the concerns of enterprises and public authorities towards green products manufactured in China reaching the EU market, mainly batteries, solar panels and wind turbines. They highlight the competitive advantages Chinese companies have due to their early start in these sectors, the size of their domestic market, cheap labour and State subventions⁴³. **The dominant analysis conveyed by these articles is that the competitiveness of Chinese products is undermining the development of EU enterprises in these sectors, and creating a dependency on China.** Articles argue that the EU is faced with the difficult task of finding a balance between the protection of its industry and the need to massively install renewable energy capacities to fulfil its decarbonation objectives.

A couple of publications also point the EU's dependence on raw materials coming from China and worry about recent restrictions imposed by Beijing on the exportation of gallium (used in semiconductors, LED and solar panels), germanium (also used in semiconductors and in optical fibre) and graphite (used in batteries), as well as on the exportation of rare earth extraction, processing and smelting technologies⁴⁴. International competition, dependence and sovereignty are the prevalent themes in these articles.

- **Chinese media unanimously denounce unfair European trade practices.**

The Chinese coverage tends to present China as the victim of unfair European commercial practices. Two articles published in two days in the *Global Times* criticise a potential EU investigation into China's wind turbine sectors⁴⁵, and EU's planned sanctions against Chinese

renewable energy products in general⁴⁶. They denounce a “*loose-loose strategy*” and warn that “*if the EU investigates Chinese companies in wind energy, electric vehicles, solar energy and other fields, and then imposes so-called punitive tariffs, it will encounter countermeasures from China and harm the interests of European companies. And it won’t help advancing the EU’s green industry either*”. The *Global Times* also denounces an on-going EU anti-dumping investigation on Chinese biodiesel importations⁴⁷, and labels the potential rise of tariffs as a protectionist behaviour violating WTO rules.

While the very nationalist *Global Times* is the most obvious proponent of this editorial line, a similar article can be found in the *Economic Daily*, rebuking Europe’s CBAM as a measure of “*green protectionism*”, “*probably infringing WTO principles*” and that could “*cause trade chaos and drag down the European economy*”⁴⁸. And when it comes to the issue of electric vehicles, the tone becomes sharp across all Chinese publications.

- **Electric vehicles crystallize tensions.**

In September 2023, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, announced the launching of an anti-subsidy probe into electric vehicles (EV) imported from China. The topic had been floating around for a while, as shows this article from *Le Figaro* in August 2023, titled: “*Electric cars: will China win the day in Europe?*”⁴⁹. The opening of the article conveys the same general pessimistic and alarmist tone as most French economic texts: “*Chinese manufacturers are rubbing their hands. By imposing the electric car as the only solution to the ecological transition from 2035, Europe is giving the keys to its market to these new brands from the Middle Kingdom, most of which are still unknown here. Forty years after the invasion of Japanese manufacturers, there is a real risk that we are heading towards a Sinicisation of the market*”.

After the investigation was announced, French media issued a series of articles detailing the structure of EV production in China and the subsidies and fiscal packages that had contributed to its development. Most quote von der Leyen’s State of the Union Address pointing that “*global markets are now flooded with cheaper Chinese electric vehicles whose prices are kept artificially low by huge State subsidies*”. They provide estimations of the subventions granted to Chinese EV producers: 54 billion euros from 2016 to 2022 according to a private consulting firm quoted by *Le Monde*⁵⁰, around 66 billion euros more planned from 2024 to 2027 according to *La Tribune*⁵¹. This latter article denounces these measures as going against the WTO rules.

French media both welcome the EU’s upcoming investigation, recalling that Europe reacted too late to save German solar panels producers from the Chinese competition in 2012; and worry about the possible Chinese reaction, reminding the pressure imposed by China on Airbus in 2012, following the extension of Brussels’ CO2 emissions trading system to international flights. *La Tribune* also presents the French decision to impose an “*ecological bonus*” on EV sales as a “*weapon that will exclude vehicles produced in the ex-Middle Kingdom*”⁵². It points that “*batteries produced in China have a carbon footprint 1,7 to 3 times higher than their European counterpart*”, but also mentions that cars produced in Poland might be targeted too, due to Poland’s massive use of coal in its energy mix. A fact that the Chinese media totally ignore.

While French coverage still makes a connection between EV and decarbonation targets, Chinese media only focus on denouncing unfair competition, “naked protectionism” and WTO rules infringement. The *Global Times* dedicated four articles⁵³ in a week to criticise the EU’s investigation and France’s “ecological bonus”. The titles get more hostile over time. The simple descriptions of the event of the early days (“*The European Commission announced the launching of an anti-subsidy probe into Chine EV*”) quickly give way to a threatening tone (“*Investigating Chinese EV? ‘This weapon could backfire’*”).

On this same topic, the *Economic Daily* published a searing article signed by the paper’s automotive news editor-in-chief. Titled “*With its anti-subsidiary probe, the EU is shooting itself in the foot*”⁵⁴, the text argues that this investigation is a way for the EU to bar Chinese EV from entering its market: “*to put it bluntly, the EU’s move is to protect its own industry in the name of ‘fair trade’. It’s a naked protectionist act*”. It then argues that Chinese EV sector is the outcome of domestic innovation and local competition, not of “*so-called massive State subventions*”. The text goes on denouncing EU’s own subventions granted to EV cars buyers while claiming that Chinese subventions stopped in 2022, thus mixing in one same argument subventions to producers and to buyers. The author asserts that China’s automotive market is an open one, that foreign carmakers and sellers have always been granted a good environment in China. Barring Chinese EV from Europe would also deprive EU carmakers of a healthy competition and consumers of a better choice of products. “*When someone runs in front of you, if the first thing that comes to your mind is not to do your best to catch up but to tie a sandbag to one’s leg, then it’s unrealistic and unfair*”.

6. Technology and innovation

Climate change mitigation also boosts innovation and opens new markets for specific technologies. French (7 articles) and Chinese (6 articles) media dedicate some of their coverage to the other country’s innovation and new technologies, and these make the most positive articles of the corpus.

- **Both coverages put forth examples of the other country’s innovation.**

*La Tribune*⁵⁵ and *Le Figaro*⁵⁶, for example, issued articles praising the launching of a fourth-generation nuclear plant in Shidao Bay. The event is described as “*a world’s first*”, and “*a major step forward*”, this new technology being “*a tool for decarbonizing the energy mix on a local scale*”, according to an expert from the French Atomic Energy Commission (CEA) quoted by *La Tribune*. Chinese performances in low-carbon hydrogen production are also emphasised in *La Tribune*⁵⁷ and *Le Figaro*⁵⁸, both building on an International Energy Agency (IEA) report stating that by the end of 2023, China is expected to house half of the world’s production capacity and lead the way in a sector that experiences a worldwide slow start.

Conversely, some Chinese articles focus on innovation or specific technological projects initiated in France or the EU. The *People’s Daily*, for example, has been reporting on the “*Battery Valley*” project in the North of France⁵⁹. The article underlines the scope of this French industrial project and the amount of private investments and public subventions dedicated to the development of local electric vehicles, from lithium extraction to the production of batteries, including the training of new workers. In a long and detailed article on a Belgium company that launched a new process to recycle plastic bottles⁶⁰, the

Economic Daily highlights a case of innovation, which exceeds by far regulatory requirements. The journalist praises the performances of this new technology, underlying the fact that it will allow the production of bottles “whose share of recycled plastic reaches 50%, far exceeding the EU’s requirement of reaching 25% by 2025 and 30% by 2030”. The *People’s Daily* also offers a couple of tech-oriented articles on the “Choose France” summit⁶¹ and the “Viva Tech” event⁶², both introduced as part of a governmental strategy to reindustrialise the country.

- **Innovation is also an opportunity for more entertaining articles...**

A long *AFP* dispatch profiling a Chinese company transforming used cooking oil into plane fuel⁶³ was taken up by *Le Figaro*⁶⁴. Based in Sichuan, a province known for its hotpot culinary tradition, the company is collecting used oil from restaurants, cleaning it and exporting it to Europe, the US and Singapore where it’s transformed into “sustainable aviation fuel”. This sustainable fuel represents only 0,1% of aviation fuel, but “it could contribute around 65% of the emissions reduction needed for the aviation sector to reach net zero emissions in 2050” according to the International Air Transport Association quoted by *AFP*. The Chinese company’s ambition is to build its own production capacity, the article continues, at a time when China is also trying to deal with large amounts of food wastes.

Similar to the French coverage, Chinese articles on tech and innovation are the only ones offering more anecdotal stories. A *Xinhua* dispatch reports on France’s planning to “use a wind-powered hybrid ship to transport parts of the Ariane 6 rocket from mainland France to the Kourou Space Centre in French Guiana”⁶⁵. A system that “under certain wind and sailing conditions (...) may save more than 50% of fuel”. In a long article on green transportation in France⁶⁶, the *People’s Daily* dedicates a paragraph to the first tests of the French hydrogen-powered train “Coradia iLint”.

- **...but doesn’t exclude cases of information distortion.**

The *Global Times* misreported on EU’s assessments of geo-engineering solutions⁶⁷, titling “The EU wants to put ‘sunglasses’ on the earth to prevent warming, and critics say it may affect global rainfall patterns.” Inspired by a Bloomberg wire issued a couple of days earlier⁶⁸, the article slightly altered the American title (from “EU looks into” to “EU wants to put”) to convey the idea that the EU was actually considering using the process. This impression is emphasized by the conclusion of the Chinese article stating that “the EU could make radical choices as countries struggle to meet the goal of limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius”. The actual news at that time was in fact that the EU was joining an international programme to assess the risks and viability of geo-engineering solutions.

7. International cooperation

The vision of each actor’s role in multilateral negotiations and of its bilateral climate-related actions with third parties is another crucial topic in the perception of the efforts made, and thus an important one in the climate action prisoner’s dilemma. On this very strategic issue, the unbalance in the coverage is striking: **while French media in 2023 touched upon China’s behaviour on the international climate stage in 17 articles, Chinese media haven’t published a single one about Europe’s or France’s.**

The French coverage of China's international climate actions, whether in multilateral negotiations or within its bilateral relations, is led by AFP (12 articles). But all publications in the corpus dedicated at least one article during the period to China's international role, most of them with a positive vision.

- **French media portray China as a key player in multilateral climate diplomacy...**

French media grant a lot of attention to China-US relationship, and to the bilateral negotiations led by John Kerry and Xie Zhenhua. The AFP covered Kerry's visit to Beijing in July 2023 and the subsequent meeting of the two negotiators in the US in November. The titles of the news wires emphasize the positive outcomes of these meetings, highlighting the "*relaunching of the dialogue*"⁶⁹, the fact that the two countries managed to find a "*common ground*"⁷⁰, that they decided to create "*a joint working group on climate*"⁷¹, focusing on energy transition, methane, circular economy, sustainable and low carbon cities⁷², and that this was a "*significant moment ahead of COP28*"⁷³. The articles focus on the renewed dialogue between the two countries, climate being one of the very few topics on which they can align. China and the US working together on the climate issue is praised as a decisive and positive sign sent to the global community, the promise of possible new commitments supported by two world leaders during COP28. **Wires and articles published by French media during November and December 2023, during China-US negotiations and COP28, all emphasize the leading role of this China-US duo in climate negotiations**⁷⁴.

China's role during the Dubai summit is covered by French media with a general positive view. Even the article published in *Le Monde*, despite its title suggesting China would follow its own agenda without any compromise or room for negotiation⁷⁵, actually opens on Beijing "*multiplying gestures of goodwill and declarations of intent*" and details its newly released action plan on methane emissions. French media vision of China's climate diplomacy follows the same pattern as the coverage of public policies: it's balanced but wavers between positive and negative appreciations, mirroring China's mixed messages on the international stage. The above-mentioned *Le Monde* article, for example, mentions China's ambassador to the EU complaining about the investigations on EV and wind turbines and threatening retaliation during COP28, but underlines that "*nevertheless, China does not intend to directly oppose the West at this conference*". China is described as "*seeking to be the spokesperson for the 'Global South'*", urging developed countries to respect their financial commitments and calling for the promotion of a "*fair green transition*" that would respect each country's national conditions. This positioning is not questioned and appears as a token of China's diplomatic weight in international climate negotiations.

All French coverage is roughly along the same lines, with *Le Figaro's* recounting of China's behaviour during the Dubai summit⁷⁶ being even more positive. The article quotes a variety of experts and politicians praising Xie Zhenhua's commitment to climate action and his "*will and ability to bridge the gap between China and the international community*", underlining China's "*cooperative*" approach in the negotiations on fossil energies, and its "*commitment to keeping the Paris agreements alive*".

Only two wires by the AFP depict a negative role for China in international settings. The first one⁷⁷ focuses on G20 climate discussions in India in August 2023, that failed to reach an

agreement on carbon emissions. The wire conveys both accusations holding China responsible for the failure of the talks, and China's denial of it. The second one⁷⁸ is dedicated to the UN Climate Ambition Summit held in New York in September 2023. The wire titles on the "*absence*" of China and the US: the two countries were deliberately not invited to a summit "*reserved for the top of the class in terms of climate ambitions*". The wire quotes the UN general secretary António Guterres insisting on welcoming only "*actors likely to move the lines at the Climate Ambition Summit*". The dispatch lists China, the US and the UK as "*notable absentees*", while the EU, Brazil, Canada, France and South Africa are part of "*the list of the lucky ones*". The wire is very factual and only relays António Guterres comments and the list of countries invited to the summit. But the topic and the chosen quotes give a less commendable image of China's leadership in international climate negotiations. Contrary to the positive AFP wires about Kerry and Xie meetings, these were not picked up by other media in the corpus.

- **... and describe China's very pro-active bilateral strategy with developing countries.**

Quite a significant share of the French corpus (6 articles over the period) tackles China's negotiations with or investments in developing countries on climate-related themes. **These articles depict a pro-active China pushing its advantage on the international stage, building bilateral diplomatic alliances, securing access to critical natural resources for green technologies.**

Readers from *La Tribune*⁷⁹ and *Le Figaro* learned about China and Russia joint investments in lithium mines in Bolivia: a total of 1,4 billion dollars for two plants with a planned production capacity of 25 000 metric tons a year each. They were also reminded that China had already signed an agreement worth 1 billion dollars with the Bolivian government to open two battery factories and that China is on the global move to "*prospect and exploit new deposits in order to meet the future demand*". *La Tribune* also published an article on China and Saudi Arabia cooperation to build a green steel factory⁸⁰. A 438 billion dollars investment for China in a technology supposed to cut production emissions by 90% compared to a traditional steel factory. And a smart move in a green steel market that is expected to experience a 124% annual growth in the next ten years, according to a consulting firm quoted in the text. The article also underlines the diplomatic benefits China is getting from its increased cooperation with Saudi Arabia: "*A commitment which is also reflected on the diplomatic and geostrategic level at the expense of the influence of the United States*".

This connection between climate bilateral relations and geostrategic benefits for China can also be found in *Le Monde* and the AFP's coverage of Brazilian President's visit to Beijing and Shanghai in April 2023. In a general article about the diplomatic stakes of the State visit⁸¹, *Le Monde* mentions that Lula "*intends to negotiate with his counterpart the sale of 10 billion dollars per year in carbon credits or 'permits to pollute'*". The AFP published a wire⁸² focused on "*Brazil-China joint statement on combating climate change*", issued after the visit. In this text, the two Presidents "*urge developed countries to honour their unfulfilled climate finance obligations*", both countries being "*very concerned that climate finance provided by developed countries continues to fall short the US 100 billion per year commitment*".

These publications picture China's diplomatic efforts to rally influential "Global South countries" behind its climate claims. They underline its insistence in being labelled a

developing country so as to bear less responsibilities and duties in the international fight against climate change. While this is sometimes questioned by French media, the number of articles on China's international actions and their general tone convey the feeling of a country present on all fronts, playing both diplomatic and economic cards to secure and assert its position on the international stage.

To complete the overview of French coverage of China's international role, an *AFP* news wire describes China's achievements in Zimbabwe⁸³, where it financed and built two new power plants that will help remedy the chronic electricity shortages plaguing the country. Interestingly, the article focuses on the benefits for Zimbabwe, and hardly ever mentions that these plants are coal-fired ones: construction had been launched in 2018, three years before China announced it would stop building new coal projects abroad.

- **Chinese media ignore the EU's diplomatic role...**

While French media offer a mostly positive view of China's role in international climate issues and report on its pro-active bilateral strategy, **the Chinese coverage of the EU's or France's international climate action is non-existent. Even during the COP28 summit in Dubai, Chinese media remained mute on the EU's positions and on its involvement in negotiations.** This is all the more surprising that the EU came in force to the summit, attended by Ursula von der Leyen and no less than seven EU commissioners. It launched several initiatives and made important financial pledges. Europe was indeed instrumental in setting the global targets for 2030 of tripling the installed capacity of renewable energy and doubling energy efficiency measures ("Global Renewables and Energy Efficiency Pledge"). EU leaders also announced that a budget of 2,3 billion euros would be allocated over the next two years to support the energy transition worldwide, and an extra 20 billion euros dedicated to the Africa-EU Energy Initiative⁸⁴. None of these were reported by the Chinese media in the corpus. **The EU and its member states pledge to contribute over half of the initial funding of the loss and damage fund wasn't covered either, even though this fund is supposed to be an important stake for China.**

- **... and portray the EU as a passive player on the international stage**

Covering international climate negotiations, Chinese media tend to focus on China's actions and positions⁸⁵, or stick to general titles mirroring official statements and calling for common efforts by the world's community⁸⁶. The only foreign country getting specific attention is the US⁸⁷. These editorial choices convey the feeling that the Chinese media consider the US as the only noteworthy country, the only one with the same international weight as China. Europe is thus indirectly depicted as a passive actor in international negotiations led by China and the US.

This feeling of EU's passivity is reinforced by part of the coverage of Europe's climate legislation and policies. Most articles in the Chinese corpus mentioning the EU's Green Deal Industrial Plan actually depict it not as an EU pro-active decision to lower its carbon footprint, but as a defensive economic reaction after the US launched its "Inflation Reduction Act". **The EU is thus not portrayed as an actor and even less as a model of decarbonation initiatives, but rather as a minor player suffering from international events it has little control over.**

The *People's Daily* considers that the EU plan is designed to reinforce the region's competitiveness and to “counter the bad consequences” for Europe of the US new legislation. The article⁸⁸ underlines that these “impacts are already being felt”, and provides a few examples of delayed or downsized projects, and of European and international investments relocating to the US. Xinhua describes an EU “in shock” after the introduction of the US bill⁸⁹, and having issues finding a consensus among State members on the appropriate counter-measures. The same goes for France's “Green Industry law” issued in October 2023, and analysed by the *Economic Daily* as aiming to “not only provide guidance for its own and Europe's transformation and development, but also to demonstrate Europe's determination to seek independence and break manipulation”⁹⁰.

This contrast in the coverage of China's and Europe's international actions means that French and Chinese readers relying on those media to access information have a very different view of what the other country is doing. **In French readers minds, China is an active player in international negotiations, a key country in the formulation of the global climate agenda, and a State that deploys a worldwide strategy to secure the supply of resources essential to the energy transition. Chinese readers on the other side, have close to no idea of the role the EU is playing on the global stage.** They are not aware that Europe is funding transition and adaptation programs in “Global South” countries, or they are fed with a somehow distorted view of some of the EU's climate legislations. **For the Chinese audience, Europe's voice on the international stage is almost inaudible.**

8. France/EU-China cooperation

Given the little consideration Chinese media have for Europe's climate actions, it doesn't really come as a surprise that climate cooperation between China and Europe would be a missing theme in their coverage. It's more unexpected from the French media, but they don't tackle this issue either. This absence is all the more paradoxical that official statements during bilateral meetings at all levels systematically emphasize and praise China's, France's and Europe's active cooperation on the issue. While these statements are briefly reported in general articles on diplomatic relations, concrete cooperation projects are never covered by the media. **Cooperation remains a blurred official rhetoric.**

- **Media relay some of the official rhetoric on cooperation...**

It has become the unavoidable theme of each speech or joint communiqué. “We will discuss how to continue our cooperation on climate change”⁹¹, said Ursula von der Leyen in her address to Xi Jinping at the December 2023 China-EU summit. Prime Minister Li Qiang, who co-chaired the summit, repeatedly expressed China's will to “deepen a green partnership”, “deepen cooperation in (...) climate change”, “strengthen cooperation on carbon emissions trading” and “support the extension of the MOU on the bilateral carbon emissions trading system”⁹². The EU Commission's President concluded her closing press conference the following day stating that “all in all, climate change is an area where China and the EU are cooperating very constructively”⁹³. French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to China in April 2023 conveyed the same optimistic feeling about climate cooperation: out of the 51 points of agreement listed in the joint declaration concluding the State visit, 14 were connected to climate change⁹⁴.

Chinese diplomatic news wire and articles relay parts of this official rhetoric on the alignment of positions on the multiple opportunities of international cooperation on climate change. A short *People's Daily* publication⁹⁵ reported Li Qiang's declaration during his meeting with French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna: "*In the face of increasing global challenges, China is willing to work closely with France to jointly address pressing issues such as climate change and biodiversity protection*". The *People's Daily* also mentioned a phone call just before COP 28 summit in Dubai, where French and Chinese Presidents both emphasized their will to keep on cooperating on climate change and to promote the Paris Agreement⁹⁶. French media adopt the same treatment, as shows an AFP wire on December 2023 EU-China summit⁹⁷: it mentions Ursula von der Leyen praising "*Beijing's support for global efforts to reduce polluting emissions*", the only positive touch amongst a multitude of conflictual issues.

But those are only brief mentions of vague official declarations, often buried in broader diplomatic papers.

- **... but never get into concrete examples.**

Media coverage in France and China never gets into the details of what this cooperation really entails, even though there has been concrete occurrences of China-EU or China-France cooperation in 2023. The launching of the "China-France Carbon Neutrality Centre", for example, never made it to the pages of the selected publications in either country, despite its mention in the joint press conference held by Presidents Macron and Xi Jinping in April 2023⁹⁸. Likewise, the third Franco-Chinese Carbon Neutrality Forum held in Shanghai in December 2023 stayed out of the radar in both countries, as did the EU-China High Level Dialogue on the Environment and Climate held in July. Again, no mention was found of the launching in May 2023 of the China-France Hubert Curien Partnership Program - Cai Yuanpei Project, designed to encourage scientific exchanges and cooperation on climate change and carbon neutrality⁹⁹. And in 2023, no media paid attention to the longer-term cooperation programs led by the EU delegation in China on energy (EU-China Energy Cooperation Platform¹⁰⁰), on the Emissions Trading System ("a key component of EU-China climate cooperation" since 2014 according to the EU delegation in China¹⁰¹), on water (the China-Europe Water Platform celebrated its 10th year anniversary in 2023¹⁰²)...

There are indeed many cooperation projects or high-level dialogue and partnership platforms on climate change issues between France/Europe and China. But they are underreported in mainstream media in both countries.

- **Cooperation is often confused with economic partnerships.**

The only mentions of cooperation-like activities in the corpus are actually references to joint ventures or to companies operating in the other country. These mentions are rare, and refer to business opportunities more than real cooperation. A *People's Daily* article about France's electric car industry¹⁰³ alludes to a "*cooperation program between a Chinese company and a French company*" in battery production, without further details. It probably refers to the joint venture between Orano and XTC, announced in May 2023¹⁰⁴. Another *People's Daily* text mentions the presence of "*quite a few famous Chinese companies*" at the Viva Tech event in Paris¹⁰⁵. Huawei sponsored the "Digital InPulse" program, offered to about a

hundred French start-ups over the past ten years, but not necessarily in renewable or climate-related technologies. The article goes on describing a couple of other Chinese companies represented at Viva Tech, but doesn't focus on climate-related technologies and favours the description of the opportunities French companies would have in working with their Chinese counterparts. The same logic applies for the *Global Time's* article on the French "battery valley"¹⁰⁶. The final quote of the Chinese expert stating that Europe should try to "cooperate" more with China and the US in renewable energies uses the term "cooperation". But it seems that the real meaning here is that Europe should open its markets to imported products, and buy existing goods rather than try to produce its own.

With the French corpus almost silent on non-business cooperation and the Chinese one using the word in an unappropriated way, the idea that dominates the press coverage is one of economic competition, rather than an alignment on and common efforts to reach climate objectives. It seems as if China and Europe were only engaged in a conflictual relation tainted by business disagreements and didn't share common goals in the fight against global warming, which is a very partial view of the relation.

9. People involvement

Very few articles on both sides focus on the human consequences of climate change or on the efforts people do to adapt to climate warming and to new climate policies. The treatment deals with politics, economics, international relations, as if climate change and global warming were disconnected from the people.

- **The population's involvement is underreported...**

Xinhua and *Le Monde* published one article each on public opinion. In an op-ed written by a marketing professor, *Le Monde* relays the conclusions of different opinion polls showing that "ecological awareness would actually be higher in China than in Europe, and especially than in the United States". *Xinhua* shares the conclusions of a Eurobarometer poll stating that "85% of respondents believe that the EU should invest heavily in renewable energy sources such as wind and solar energy", but the poll is framed in terms of energy security more than emissions reduction.

These two articles bring people back into the climate equation, and touch upon the perception individuals have of climate policies and the efforts they are asked to do to adapt. But they still do it in a general, statistical way, not through character-oriented stories.

- **... a paradox since people are the first affected by climate change.**

Only three articles, two on the French side, one on the Chinese, build on field reports to offer a vision of climate change or climate policies at an individual level. *Xinhua* dedicates a piece to the consequences of temperature rises for the French agricultural sector¹⁰⁷. After quoting official statistics about annual precipitations, heat, drought, and the decrease of crop yields, the report focuses on the impact on wine production and proposes quotes from a producer in Beaujolais. That's one of the very few instances in the Chinese press coverage where citizens are interviewed.

The same assessment goes for the French media, field reports being scarce there too. Only *Le Monde* offers any citizen-oriented piece. One, in Hebei province¹⁰⁸, shows that to cut down emissions and fine particle pollution, villagers had to shift their private heating systems from coal to gas. The article focuses on the consequences of this policy on people and interviews villagers about their understanding and acceptance of the situation. Indeed, the policy succeeded in bringing back blue skies, but the rise in gas prices and the local supply shortages it created left many inhabitants freezing. The other *Le Monde* article¹⁰⁹ tells about apps that can reward citizens if they voluntarily reduce their carbon footprint.

These three articles, partly or fully written from an individual perspective, offer a glimpse of what climate change means for the populations. They make the coverage more “human” and suggest a shared fate across the continents. This kind of personal stories readers can relate to, these individual tales that bring emotion into an otherwise “cold” and institutional coverage are crucial to make the issue of climate change more accessible. **The scarcity of people-oriented articles might be part of the reasons why this topic is not always popular with newspaper’s readers**¹¹⁰. These characteristics, on top of a weak coverage of cooperation programs, don’t help bridge the gap between the populations of the two continents.

10. Conclusions

Many factors influence how media tell the story of a country’s/region’s climate actions: access to information, the presumed interest of the readers, and the editorial line set by the instances to which the media are accountable, reflecting the countries’ political system. If tracing these factors and analysing the resulting quality of the coverage is out of the scope of this research, its results call for a better informed, less partial media coverage of climate action, which would contribute positively to the global collective engagement for climate change. Better access to information on policies implemented in China, other than those related to renewable energies and green tech goods, their impact and the challenges met would help give a more accurate picture of the situation in China. Documenting how measures implemented in the European Union are reducing GHG emissions (-32% between 1990 and 2020) could foster a positive dynamic in China, whereas conveying the idea that EU’s climate action are purely instrumental casts a cynical light on global efforts to curb climate warming.

Similarly, sharing with media readers the mutual recognition both powers display in international fora and high-level official discussions, would help limit a “politicisation” of the climate change field and potentially contribute to limit the trust deficit which has been tainting the EU-China partnership.

Finally, more character-led stories that can raise the interest and emotions of the readers could help reinforce interest in the topic of climate change, bridge the gap between populations and recall that global warming knows no frontiers.

To deepen the analysis:

To get a more precise and detailed picture of these crossed perceptions, and follow up on these recommendations, it would be interesting, in the future, to enlarge the scope of this study in several directions:

- Including specialised press titles would allow a better understanding of specific and technical issues not dealt with by mainstream media: climate finance, carbon trading markets, ESG for example.
- Analysing private press titles and online publications including social media from China would give access to more diversified opinions, even though they might be less representative than the titles selected in this initial research.
- Focusing on European media, and not only on French ones, would allow a European vision of the issue and may reveal nuances amongst countries.
- Increasing the time-frame of the study would allow a long-term analysis and would reduce the impact of conjunctural events like those experienced in 2023: Ukraine war, energy crisis, EV competition.

¹ Full speech in English and French : <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2023-09-19/secretary-generals-address-the-general-assembly>

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https://sciencepolicy.colorado.edu/icecaps/research/media_coverage/summaries/special_issue_2023.html

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⁵ « 欧盟通过多项减排立法提案 », *Xinhua*, April 26, 2023, http://www.news.cn/2023-04/26/c_1129566924.htm

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- ¹⁰⁹ « En Chine, le boom des applications pour inciter les particuliers à réduire leur empreinte carbone », *Le Monde*, March 18, 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2023/03/18/en-chine-le-boom-des-applications-pour-inciter-les-particuliers-a-reduire-leur-empreinte-carbone_6166083_3244.html
- ¹¹⁰ An analysis by Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, titled « How People Access News about Climate Change », reveals that people don't go to print newspapers to get information about climate change. Only 5% of them do. Television is the main source of information, probably due to the impact of the images. <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2020/how-people-access-news-about-climate-change/>
An interview led by the author on February 12, 2024, with a Chinese journalist confirmed this trend for online publications : a well-known financial news website had just decided to stop its section dedicated to China's climate goals because of the lack of readers.