



Adaption to authoritarianism: a longitudinal analysis of Dialogue Earth's nonprofit environmental news in China

Zhong Zhang

To cite this article: Zhong Zhang (22 Nov 2024): Adaption to authoritarianism: a longitudinal analysis of Dialogue Earth's nonprofit environmental news in China, Chinese Journal of Communication, DOI: [10.1080/17544750.2024.2430671](https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2024.2430671)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2024.2430671>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



[View supplementary material](#)



Published online: 22 Nov 2024.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 1438



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

Adaption to authoritarianism: a longitudinal analysis of Dialogue Earth's nonprofit environmental news in China

Zhong Zhang

School of Journalism, Media, and Communication, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

ABSTRACT

This article examines how a nonprofit newsroom, Dialogue Earth, reported China-related environmental news during its 16 years of operation in China. To justify its nonprofit status, Dialogue Earth is expected to practice public service journalism and push the boundaries of Chinese environmental journalism. However, the past decade has seen a deterioration in the media environment in China. It remains to be seen how the media can adapt to this change and the degree to which its public service role can be maintained. This research is based on a longitudinal analysis of Dialogue Earth's news coverage from 2006 to 2021, as well as an interview with the organization's CEO. It reveals that although Dialogue Earth is less capable of covering some important news with the decline in press freedom, it maintains a space for monitoring China's environmental performance on the global stage and pushes for more responsible governance. By adapting to China's intensifying authoritarianism, the organization has managed to become a domestic source of critical discourse, while mainstream journalism is now tamed by political power. This article contributes to the current scholarship on both nonprofit journalism and Chinese environmental journalism, by showing the potential of nonprofit journalism to adapt to China's authoritarianism and still make a difference.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 27 April 2024
Accepted 27 October 2024

KEYWORDS

Environmental journalism; nonprofit journalism; authoritarianism; China; computational analysis

Introduction

In the autumn of 2011, the residents of Beijing could easily sense the city's severe air pollution. Thick smog sometimes lingered for the whole day. Stores ran out of face masks due to panic buying (Wong, 2011). However, according to the Beijing official data, the air quality was classified as "qualified" or "mild pollution" (Fedorenko & Sun, 2016). In October, Chinese netizens started posting pictures of the thick smog in Beijing, questioning the reliability of the official data and expressing their concerns about the health effects. In December, a news report published on China Dialogue,

CONTACT Zhong Zhang  zhongzhang.dan@gmail.com  School of Journalism, Media, and Communication, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK.

 Supplemental data for this article is available online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2024.2430671>.

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.
© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

a nonprofit news website with links to the UK dedicated to environmental issues, compared the Beijing official data with the data released by the US Embassy, suggesting that PM2.5 was excluded from the former (Andrews, 2011). After publishing this report, China Dialogue's website received a massive amount of traffic (Boyd & Meng, 2011). The report generated heated discussions both domestically and internationally, becoming a milestone for the online campaign. Under intense public pressure, on December 26, 2011, China's environmental minister announced the implementation of new air quality standards, which included PM2.5 in the monitoring data. The following year, China's State Council approved a national standard for PM2.5, setting the annual average limit at $35 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ (Saikawa, 2019).

This event shows China Dialogue's role in facilitating Chinese environmental journalism. The nonprofit news organization was launched in 2006 and registered in the UK as a charity. In April 2024, it was renamed Dialogue Earth. In China, it used to be registered as a business or foreign nonprofit project, and it maintained an office in Beijing for years. In 2022, the office was closed due to difficulties with the organization's registration. However, its website (<https://dialogue.earth/>) is still accessible in China at the time of writing. This makes it different from other foreign news media, such as the *New York Times* and the *BBC*, which have been blocked in China. Dialogue Earth's continued existence is surprising given that the past decade has seen increased government control of the media and the systematic collapse of critical journalism in China (Tong, 2019). At the same time, as a nonprofit newsroom registered in the UK, Dialogue Earth must ensure its public service journalism, which is normally practiced by pushing the boundaries of mainstream news reporting (Konieczna, 2018). This raises the question of the extent to which Dialogue Earth can maintain its public service role while adapting to China's intensifying authoritarianism. It remains unanswered in either scholarship on Chinese environmental journalism largely focused on the mainstream news industry, or the literature on nonprofit journalism that mainly discusses liberal democratic contexts.

To fill this gap, this research conducts a longitudinal analysis of Dialogue Earth's news coverage from 2006 to 2021 (its years of operation in China), supplemented by an interview with the organization's CEO. Thanks to its long activity, Dialogue Earth enables examining the non-profit news outcomes as the result of adaptation to an intensifying authoritarian context. The results show that although some important news topics have been less covered as the media environment has deteriorated, Dialogue Earth maintains a space for monitoring China's environmental performance on the global stage and pushing for responsible governance. Its ability to mobilize domestic public participation may be weakened, but the adaptation successfully delivers a media discourse that counters China's public diplomacy strategy of "telling China's story well" (Chan & Song, 2020). This is rare for today's Chinese journalism while the mainstream news is generally required to follow the government's official line.

The decline of Chinese environmental journalism

China's economic development has created severe environmental problems, and it is not unusual to see the country's news media expose such problems. Tong (2015) listed the following nine agendas in Chinese environmental journalism: "pollution,

cancer villages, dam/hydroelectric project building, ground collapse, resource exhaustion and depletion, deforestation, desertification, water crisis, and artificial land/island construction" (p. 60). Critical news reporting on the issues once had a role in mobilizing the public, and contributing to the success of environmental movements. Examples include the movement against the Nu River Dam in 2003 (G. Yang & Calhoun, 2007), the campaign against the Tiger Leaping Gorge Dam in 2004 (Geall, 2014), the Xiamen protest against para-xylene chemical factories in 2007 (Chin-Fu, 2013), and the abovementioned actions by Dialogue Earth in 2011. On these occasions, the media published critical news reports, emphasized the environmental costs of the profit-seeking projects, and successfully drew the public's attention. This pressure from bottom forced the government to reassess and sometimes shelve the projects, which demonstrates the watchdog role of Chinese environmental journalism.

However, the space for critical journalism started shrinking in the past decade. First of all, the internet has diverted advertising revenues from legacy news media to digital platforms. As a result, market-oriented newsrooms have lost key resources for investigative journalism (H. Wang & Sparks, 2019). Even worse, many newspapers now rely on advertising funding from the government to survive, which constrains their ability to criticize the political power (D. Wang & Guo, 2021). Furthermore, Xi Jinping's administration has put more emphasis on media's loyalty to the ruling party and its function as an ideological apparatus (Tong, 2019). Xi has successfully implemented a coercive media policy. Repnikova (2018) interviewed Chinese journalists and found that news media under Xi receive "more detailed and frequent censorship instructions than they had in the past" (p. 57). Media organizations renowned for their critical reporting, such as the *Southern Metropolis Daily*, have gone through management shake-ups (Repnikova, 2017). Independent journalists have been censored, punished, and even detained (Davidson, 2023).

These trends have caused Chinese environmental journalism to enter a phase of grave decline. As Liu Hongqiao, a former environmental journalist at the prestigious news magazine *Caixin*, said in an interview,

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

Under such circumstance, this study shifts the focus to Dialogue Earth to examine how its reporting navigates this changed media landscape, and perhaps make positive differences for today's Chinese environmental journalism.

Nonprofit journalism as public service

As a nonprofit organization registered in the UK, Dialogue Earth's reporting can be seen as a form of public service; this sets it apart from Chinese mainstream journalism, which is dominated by party and commercial journalism. In the UK, organizations applying for nonprofit status, including newsrooms, must prove the public benefit of their activities (Barnett et al., 2022). For media organizations, the nonprofit status

means exemption from certain taxes and the possibility to receive donations; however, news nonprofits must ensure that their reporting advances the values of citizenship and democracy. In the literature, journalism based on such charitable goals is defined as public service journalism (Ferrucci, 2017; Konieczna, 2018), which refers to journalistic activities that better inform the public, support civic engagement, hold power to account, and should not be manipulated by powerful institutions or individuals.

In practice, public service journalism usually fills the gaps in mainstream journalism—that is, it covers the stories that the mainstream media overlook. For instance, in the US, most nonprofit newsrooms tend to report on topics or conduct journalistic forms (e.g. investigative journalism) that are marginalized in commercial outlets (Konieczna, 2018). In Europe, Konieczna (2020) found that some nonprofit outlets tended to promote the stronger engagement of news readers during news production, which is a strategy to respond to declining public trust amid rising populism. In some authoritarian countries, nonprofit journalism helps expose critical issues about public affairs given that mainstream journalism is tamed by political power (Ntibinyane, 2018).

Based on both theoretical and practical perspectives, it is reasonable to expect that Dialogue Earth, as a nonprofit newsroom, has the potential to make a positive difference in Chinese environmental journalism. In the Chinese context, the organization's public service practices could consist of exposing overlooked environmental issues, offering views that differ from the party line, and challenging mainstream journalism's discourses.

However, these practices must face China's intensifying authoritarianism. As noted above, the space for public service journalism has severely diminished in the country. This could force Dialogue Earth to compromise its news reporting to survive the heightened political control. In this situation, how to navigate the subtle conflict between the public service promise and the increasing difficulties of doing journalism in China becomes an issue of great interest.

To explore this issue, this article analyzes Dialogue Earth's publications over the course of its operation in China, and investigates to what extent its environmental news coverage has been influenced by the change in political climate. The following two research questions guide the analysis:

RQ1: How have Dialogue Earth's news topics about China's environmental issues changed with the media environment deterioration in China?

RQ2: Have some news topics remained significant for Dialogue Earth over the years and, if so, how can this continuity manifest its public service role as a nonprofit news organization?

Research methods

Data collection

To create a sample, the author scraped Dialogue Earth's website (<https://chinadialogue.net/zh/>)¹ with Python in October 2022. Although the website has versions in multiple languages, the Chinese version was scraped in the belief that it is more influential among Chinese people and thus more likely to be monitored by the government.

The sampling period was from January 1, 2006 (the year Dialogue Earth was established) to December 31, 2021 (the last full year before the research was conducted).

To limit the sampling to China-related affairs, all articles containing the keyword “China” (中国) at least once were collected. Then, documents in which the keyword was mentioned fewer than three times were excluded. The word frequency was set to limit the sample to those stories that were highly focused on China’s issues. However, in this way, some articles covering China might have been missed. For example, articles reporting local affairs may use the names of cities (e.g. Beijing and Shanghai) instead of the word “China” to describe where the events happened. To remedy this shortcoming, the author manually reviewed the excluded articles and reincluded relevant ones. In the end, 3,918 articles were obtained.

Structural Topic Modeling

To analyze this vast sample, Structural Topic Modeling (STM) was employed based on R’s STM package (Roberts et al., 2019). Compared to conventional topic modeling method such as Latent Dirichlet Allocation, STM enables researchers to more efficiently explore the influence of metadata on semantic topics. The corpus was trained by using 13 topics according to the coherence measure and exclusivity (for more details about corpus cleaning and model training, see the supplementary material). To interpret the meaning of each topic, in addition to looking at the keywords grouped under the topics, the author closely read the top 20 articles with the highest coefficient associated with each topic.

After obtaining the 13 topics, the Mann–Kendall test was used on the temporal trends of the topic proportions. As time goes by, some topics may be covered more or less, while some may show no clear change. Such analysis responds to the research questions that seek to understand the degree to which Dialogue Earth’s news content has been shaped by China’s deteriorating media environment.

Interview

After the analysis of the news content, a semi-structured interview with Dialogue Earth’s CEO was conducted to help with the interpretation of the topic modeling results. STM can identify potential changes in Dialogue Earth’s coverage, but it cannot explain why and how these changes happened. The interview goes beyond the broad contextual information pertaining to the change in Chinese media environment, and provides a perspective from inside the newsroom to supplement the news analysis. The interview was conducted face to face on August 11, 2023; it lasted for around an hour, and it was audio recorded. After being transcribed, it was analyzed with NVivo. A few rounds of email exchange were followed to ensure the author did not misinterpret the interviewee’s narrative. The interview mainly touched on the following aspects, which align with the research questions:

1. What difficulties did Dialogue Earth encounter during its years of operation in China?

2. How does Dialogue Earth's CEO perceive the changes of their publications during the years?
3. Why has Dialogue Earth chosen to continue operating in China despite the deterioration of the media environment?

Results and analysis

Dialogue Earth's news topics over 16 years

As shown in [Figure 1](#), 13 topics were obtained from the sample using STM (the keywords and meanings of each topic are given in [Appendix A](#)). The results show that Dialogue Earth covers China's domestic environmental issues, such as "Pollutions" (Topic 11) and "Civic Engagement" (Topic 2), as well as international affairs involving both China and other countries. For example, Topic 3 "Climate Negotiation" deals with how China participates in the international climate talks, while Topic 13 "China's Global Investments" addresses the environmental impacts of the country's overseas investments.

This emphasis on China's international role highlights Dialogue Earth's attempt to facilitate a conversation between China and the rest of the world, as the organization's CEO, Sam Geall, explained in the interview.

The initial idea was, in the west, China was widely used as an excuse for inaction ... people would really see international conversations about climate change as just a way to point the finger at China, to try to dictate the terms of China's development. So, we thought it was a better way through this conversation to get past an impasse by translating Chinese voices for global audiences and global voices for Chinese audiences, and creating a joint exchange around all environmental issues like climate change, pollution and other sustainability issues... Over the years, it [Dialogue Earth] has grown and changed, and the environment that we are in has changed. But the mission is pretty much the same.

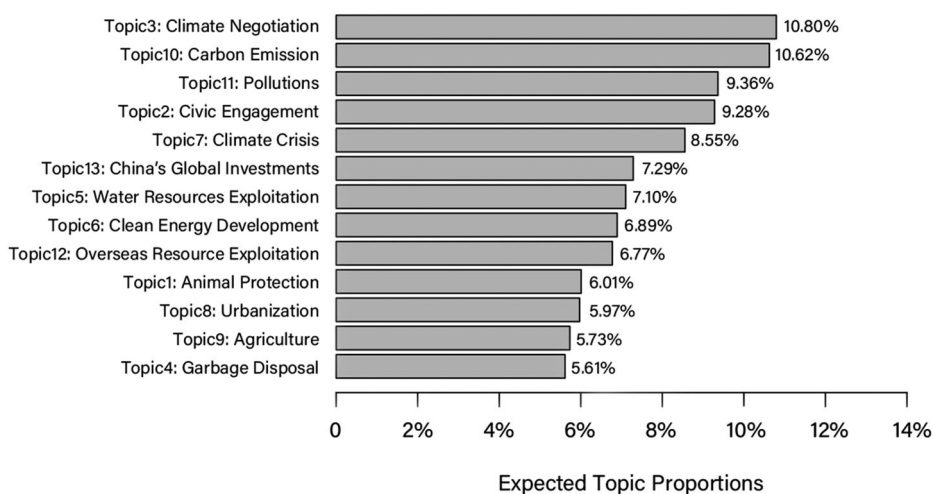


Figure 1. Topic ranking by topic proportion.

Despite the mission remains unchanged, it is unclear whether Dialogue Earth can continue pursuing its mission with the deterioration of China's media environment. Figure 2 presents the temporal change of all the topics during the sampling period, which suggests three patterns: a decrease in the topic prevalence (red), an increase in prevalence (green), and no clear trend (gray). These different patterns reflect how Dialogue Earth upholds its mission in the shrinking space for public service journalism.

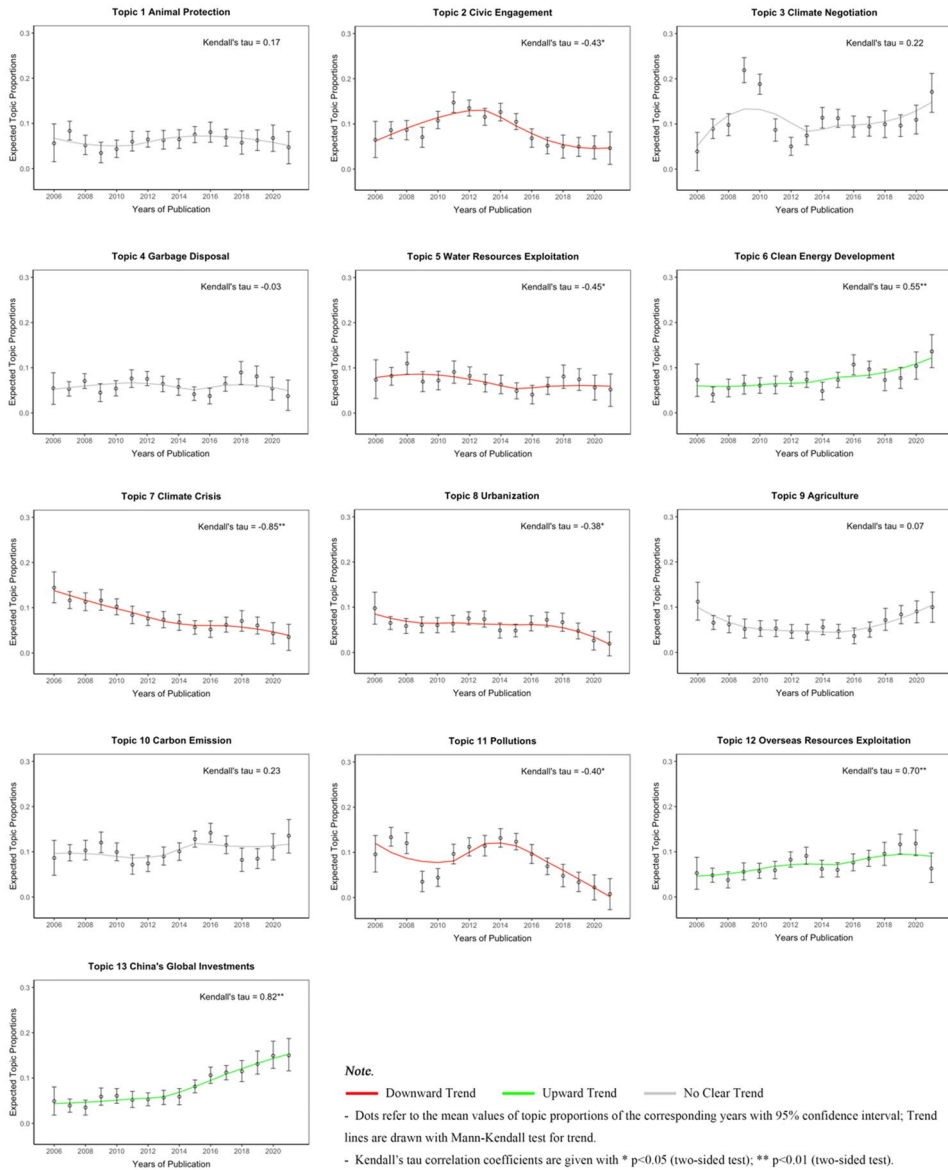


Figure 2. Temporal change of the topics' proportions.

Degradation of news topic diversity

In [Figure 2](#), five topics can be seen to decrease in prevalence over time: “Climate Crisis”, “Water Resource Exploitation”, “Urbanization”, “Pollutions”, and “Civic Engagement”.

Surprisingly, the topic “Climate Crisis” decreases in prevalence while “Climate Negotiation” remains significant throughout the sampling period ([Figures 1 and 2](#)). The former emphasizes the consequences of climate change, such as landslides, desertification, and flooding. The latter pays more attention to how the whole world tackles the climate crisis. This means that climate change is always an important topic for Dialogue Earth, but the focus of the media frames has changed. This may be explained by the organization’s changing its reporting tone, as their recent publications try to be more constructive and solutions based, rather than just stressing the climate crisis, as explained by Geall in the interview.

For other topics, the decrease in prevalence reveals the worrying decline of Dialogue Earth’s public service. For example, “Civic Engagement” (Topic 2) and “Pollutions” (Topic 11) were both popular issues in the organization’s news coverage before 2015; afterward, they drastically diminished. The STM analysis found that the two topics were closely correlated in the news corpus ([Figure 3](#)), which indicates that they were likely to be discussed in the same stories. Put together, the two topics discuss how civic engagement could help address pollution problems. The forms of civic engagement discussed in the news corpus included risky activities in China, such as protests and media advocacy, and less adversarial tactics, such as environmental litigation and the activities of environmental NGOs.

Some may argue that these topics are covered less by Dialogue Earth because of China’s better performance in terms of pollution alleviation (Huang et al., 2019; Zeng et al., 2019) and the tighter control on civil society, which makes civic actions hardly happen today. In other words, the organization may lack the content to report such

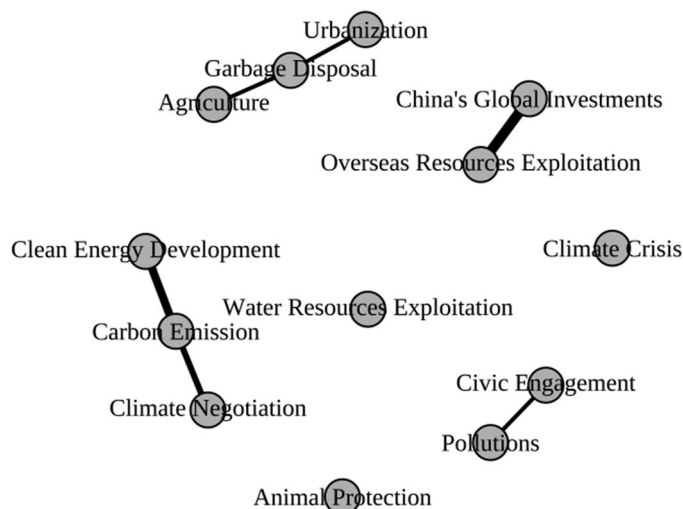


Figure 3. Topic correlations.

Note. Each node represents a topic. Each edge indicates that the connected topics share common keywords and are likely to be present in the same news pieces. The thicker the edge, the stronger the correlation.

stories. However, this argument ignores the complexity of China's current environmental governance. The country's decades of environmental destruction cannot be easily reversed by a few years of better governance. For example, although some air pollutants have decreased, the concentrations of PM10, PM2.5, and O₃ remain much higher than the WHO's guidelines (Zeng et al., 2019). Also, soil pollution tends to be overlooked. As a member of Greenpeace East Asia pointed out, "state spending on soil treatment has lagged behind that on other bigger campaigns such as ending air and water pollution" (Bao, 2020). At the same time, public protests against polluting projects have continued in recent years despite increasing intolerance from the government (Steinhardt, 2019).

Therefore, it is more likely that the diminished presence of the topics in question is related to the rising risk of doing critical journalism in China. Both topics were once significant for Chinese environmental journalism. By reporting pollution problems, the news media revealed the cruel environmental costs of decades of blind economic growth. As pollutants cause health problems, reporting on them is likely to increase public discontent and encourage demonstrations against the official, as shown by the series of Not-In-My-Backyard campaigns that have occurred in China (Johnson, 2010). Reporting on these campaigns is important to force the government to take action (Tong, 2015).

However, the findings suggest that the space for dealing with this kind of news has severely shrunk. First, Dialogue Earth is now more concerned than in the past about being blocked or shut down by the authorities. Due to many journalists working for Dialogue Earth are Chinese and based on China, they could be worried about what they can publish and the punishments they may face for doing so (interview with Sam Geall). This can lead to prudent attitudes toward sensitive issues, such as "Pollutions" and "Civic Engagement".

Indeed, some news stories that were published in the early years of the organization seem impossible today. For example, a 2012 news piece, which was highlighted by the STM analysis as representative of the "Civic Engagement" topic, directly confronted the government for its arrest of Liu Futang (Lin, 2012). At the age of 65, Liu was renowned for his advocacy regarding environmental issues. His exposé of the deforestation incident in Hainan Province in 2011 earned him the "Best Citizen Journalist" in the Environmental Press Award co-organized by Dialogue Earth in 2012 (J. Liu, 2012). However, later that year, Liu was arrested by the Hainan authorities for "illegal business operations." In October 2012, Dialogue Earth reprinted an article from the *Southern People Weekly* in support of Liu (Hai, 2012). The author suggested that the charge against Liu was a political retaliation for his decade-long campaign against environmental wrongdoing, and bluntly stated that the accusation was "absurd" (Ibid). In December, after Liu was convicted, Dialogue Earth declared the following in a news report: "Liu Futang's case has brought shame to China's environmental commitments" (Lin, 2012). These blunt critiques have disappeared in recent years. The STM results show that the top representative article for topic "Civic Engagement" in year 2021 is the one discussing "how to strengthen China's ecological redlines" (C. Wang, 2021), in which some environmental NGOs' operators were interviewed to give advices. The same year, Dialogue Earth did not report the case of the well-known environmental activist Li Genshan, who was sentenced to 54 months in prison for the typical pocket crime² of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" (Yuan, 2021).

Second, it has become more dangerous for Dialogue Earth to dispatch journalists for field investigations of pollution issues. In China, by law, journalists and media outlets are required to obtain official recognition before conducting interviews and reporting news, although this requirement is often not strictly enforced. Dialogue Earth is registered as an NGO rather than a media organization, and with the tightening control of news media, the newsroom is now more reluctant to send out journalists. As Geall explained,

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

Third, the deterioration of the media environment has led to many journalists, especially investigative journalists, leaving the industry (Entwistle, 2023). This trend also poses a challenge for Dialogue Earth in terms of reporting from China. With only a limited number of full-time news editors based in Beijing, many of Dialogue Earth's articles about China are written by freelance journalists. Liu Hongqiao, the famous journalist who used to collaborate with Dialogue Earth on investigations of China's drinking water problems (H. Liu, 2015), also recently left China.

Consistent monitoring of China's Global environmental impacts

Despite the situation described above, Figure 2 shows that some topics have become more prominent in recent years, including "Clean Energy Development", "Overseas Resources Exploitation", and "China's Global Investments". Taken together, these topics deal with China's positive or negative impacts on the global environment in terms of climate change and biodiversity.

For topic "Clean Energy Development", which is closely linked to topics "Climate Negotiation" and "Carbon Emission" (see Figure 3), it discusses China's carbon footprint, its progress regarding clean energy development, and its role in global climate mitigation. Although Xi Jinping's administration seeks to be a leader on climate change and invests heavily in clean energy globally (Myllyvirta, 2024), China still faces pressure to urgently cut its carbon emissions, as it is now the largest emitter in the world. Dialogue Earth's recent emphasis on this issue suggests that there is space to monitor its progress despite the media environment deteriorating. More importantly, Dialogue Earth's reporting on this issue does not solely advocate China's achievements but also points out deficiencies. One representative article from 2021 indicates that although Vietnam benefits significantly from China's investments in solar power, "more than half of the country's planned coal power plants ... are still entering the pipeline, with the majority of funds coming from China" (Pham, 2021). Another representative piece directly points out that "China is the largest public financier of overseas coal plants" (Ma, 2021). Although the author recognizes some positive changes, such as China's increasing investments in overseas hydropower projects, the article's conclusion is explicit: "This has not been enough to slow the acceleration in global temperature

rise—so far.” These news reports prove Dialogue Earth’s continued ability to play a watchdog role regarding China’s climate performance.

Concerning the topics “Overseas Resources Exploitation” and “China’s Global Investments”, which are correlated (see [Figure 3](#)), Dialogue Earth has addressed the environmental concerns resulting from the country’s overseas investments. As China has become more integrated into global markets, it has become not only the world’s factory but also one of the largest global investors. Xi’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was launched in 2013, has further increased China’s overseas investments. The BRI has provided 150 countries with funding for roads, railways, ports, pipelines, power plants, and industrial parks (Green Finance & Development Center, [2024](#)). However, these investments have raised environmental concerns in the countries in question. In addition to carbon emissions, other worries include biodiversity loss, deforestation, and the increased extraction of natural resources (Coenen et al., [2021](#)). Although these projects have faced substantial criticism internationally, relevant discussions are hard to come by in China because they contradict the official propaganda strategy of “telling China’s story well” (Chan & Song, [2020](#)). Prior studies have also indicated that when it comes to climate change, Chinese mainstream journalism struggles to speak with a critical voice because this international issue involves China’s diplomacy (Duan & Miller, [2021](#); Geall, [2011](#); Guo et al., [2023](#)).

In contrast, relevant discussions become significant for Dialogue Earth’s news coverage in recent years as shown in [Figure 2](#). In 2021, an article reported that an irrigation project in Philippine, which has been financed by China’s state-owned bank Export–Import Bank of China, has raised doubts about violations of indigenous people’s rights and ecological damages (Garcia, [2021](#)). Another piece reported that a zinc mine linked to Chinese capital possibly caused risks of water pollution and deadly mudslides (Simangunsong, [2021](#)). Dialogue Earth’s emphasis on these topics indicates their insistence on public service journalism despite press freedom shrinking.

According to Geall, serving audiences in “Global South countries that have a lot of Chinese investment, need to work with Chinese counterparts, and need better ways to understand the challenges they face” is a vital mission for Dialogue Earth. As he went on to explain,

I think we have content that’s really vital for, you know, civil society stakeholders, policy-makers for publics and particularly in those Global South countries. So I think we have an important mission that we need to get the tone right and the angle right, and not alienating news audiences, including Chinese audiences if possible, because I still want to bring Chinese readers in and make sure they actually see this as part of a constructive dialogue, as part of a conversation that they’re included.

Adaptation to involve China in international environmental communication

The changes in Dialogue Earth’s content over the 16-year period under consideration suggest two trends. On the one hand, the newsroom has been less capable of criticism due to the deterioration of Chinese media environment. Some important issues are hard to be covered. Therefore, the organization’s public service role is compromised as it cannot fully inform Chinese readers. On the other hand, there are some reasons for Dialogue Earth to continue to survive.

First, according to the organization's CEO, it is vital to keep the content accessible to Chinese people and facilitate a shared understanding of environmental issues between China and other nations. Dialogue Earth has consistently emphasized China's global environmental impacts, something that is hard to do for Chinese mainstream journalism. Keeping these issues as accessible as possible for Chinese people may not directly bring about policy change, but it is important to better inform the public and facilitate its understanding of these matters.

Second, if Dialogue Earth were to be blocked in China, it would become more difficult for the organization to find Chinese journalists willing to write news stories for it, as working for a blacklisted organization could be sensitive in today's China. As Geall made clear, having Chinese writers is important for Dialogue Earth as the organization wants to convey local voices and issues to the international community instead of relying solely on outside analysis.

Third, if it were to be blocked, Dialogue Earth would be easily regarded as a foreign news media, which could make it more difficult to deliver opinions from China's side. Due to the rising nationalism and xenophobia in China (T. Yang & Fang, 2023), foreign journalists working in the country could be harassed, threatened, and even attacked (e.g. Crossley & Tian, 2021; The Guardian, 2022). Offering information to foreign media outlets can also be a sensitive matter for Chinese people; it can even be regarded as treachery. Under these circumstances, Chinese people have become more cautious in accepting interviews with foreign news media, especially those blocked by China's censorship system. Dialogue Earth values Chinese voices in international environmental communication; for this reason, it tries its best to remain available domestically.

Our overall theory of change for our organization is around trying to build dialogue between China and the rest of the world ... that means it needs to be accessible on the Chinese side, if it is possible. We really need to have Chinese readers. We need to have Chinese writers. It's not really possible for us if we're just completely blocked or shut down in China ... if we were blocked in China or if we had to close our office in China,³ we wouldn't have any opportunity to actually explore that space or to keep it open. So, we were keen to ... try to publish what we could within the constraints. (Sam Geall, CEO, Dialogue Earth)

Indeed, although the chances of publishing some domestic news such as pollutions have diminished, Chinese journalists working with Dialogue Earth continue to cover the issues in less adversarial and blunt ways. A 2021 article about pollution mainly discusses the energy transition of Inner Mongolia (Gao, 2021). The province has long relied on its rich coal reserves for economic development, and its coal exports to other provinces play a significant role in the nation's economic growth. The article contains interviews with energy experts, and strongly urges the local government to quickly phase out fossil fuels. It also argues that not doing so will harm the province's long-term economic growth and generate pollution. In this piece, the journalist does not discuss the damage caused by pollutants in detail, but they explicitly report on concerns about pollution and ways to alleviate the problem. This shows an attempt to push the boundary for critical news reporting even when covering China's domestic issues today.

Discussion and conclusions

The above analysis reveals both challenges and opportunities for Dialogue Earth's public service journalism as a result of China's intensifying authoritarianism. Regarding the former, the organization has had to make concessions to survive in an increasingly controlled media environment. Some domestic topics, such as "Pollutions" and "Civic Engagement", have been covered less often in recent years, despite being still significant for contemporary China. Compared to other environmental issues, these topics are more likely to generate public participation because they easily cause concern about health problems—this has been proven to be effective for public mobilization in China (Johnson, 2010; Steinhardt, 2019)—or because they are linked to civic actions challenging the authorities. These aspects make these topics more sensitive in today's China, where grassroots activism is tightly controlled and top-down governance is favored.

However, while it is more difficult to criticize these domestic issues, Dialogue Earth pays consistent attention to the country's influence on the global environment. This reflects the organization's goal to facilitate a conversation between China and the rest of the world on matters pertaining to nature. By reporting on China's overseas investments in fossil fuel-based plants and construction projects that raise environmental concerns, the news nonprofit could act as a watchdog for China's governance of international issues such as climate change and biodiversity conservation. More importantly, the organization has successfully crafted a discourse countering China's diplomatic guideline that aims to build up a positive image for the country. This highlights Dialogue Earth's resilient public service journalism under increased political control.

It is unclear why Dialogue Earth is able to maintain more space to express a critical voice on international issues. One explanation is that compared to reporting on domestic issues, criticism of China's environmental governance in other countries is less likely to trigger discontent and protests at home. When covering the environmental costs of China's overseas actions, Dialogue Earth emphasizes the benefits to local residents in other nations instead of those to the Chinese people. The Chinese could also pay the price of financing coal-fired power plants abroad, as China is also a fragile nation when it comes to climate change (World Bank, 2022). However, in the short term, the Chinese people benefit from the economic income generated by these investments. This fact is perhaps more easily recognized by the public compared to the environmental damages in question, which could make critical discourses on relevant issues more acceptable to the censorship system.

For Dialogue Earth, talking to the Chinese public and making its website as available as possible is important to improve China's environmental governance. This creates possibilities to impact the government's decision-making processes. Dialogue Earth may not be well known to the majority of the Chinese people, and the findings above suggest that the organization is less likely to mobilize the public compared to, for example, 2011. However, the website is influential among Chinese environmental experts, many of whom were interviewed or published commentary on it. Indeed, according to Dialogue Earth's previous readership investigation, most of their readers in China are from well-educated group such as "environmental professionals,

environmental policymakers, journalists, people in civil society organisations, post-graduate students" (Interview with Sam Geall). These actors possess the resources to influence China's environmental governance and push for change from the upper tiers of society (Teng & Wang, 2021).

Furthermore, Dialogue Earth's oversight of China's international operations demonstrates its public service role to fill the gap in Chinese environmental journalism. As analyzed above, the harsh control by the authorities makes mainstream journalism difficult to express a critical voice on these issues. Even without considering political control, the international issues may be overlooked in mainstream news coverage due to market concerns. According to Tong's (2015) interviews with Chinese environmental journalists, international issues such as climate change may be judged unattractive for Chinese readers as they "seem too far away from the real lives of ordinary Chinese people" (p. 61). Therefore, Chinese mainstream journalism tends to dedicate more resources to reporting domestic issues. Dialogue Earth's consistent reporting on international matters stands in stark contrast with this approach. This is the unique value of a nonprofit news organization for Chinese journalism.

Overall, this article explores the environmental news outcomes commonly shaped by China's intensifying authoritarianism and the culture of nonprofit journalism. Its findings contribute to the scholarship on nonprofit journalism by extending the research scope from liberal, democratic contexts to an authoritarian nation. By examining Dialogue Earth's news coverage over the years, the article shows that despite the inherent conflict between nonprofit journalism culture and China's authoritarianism, the former is able to adapt to the country's stringent media environment. More importantly, this adaptation does not entail only a reactive process, which leads to the weakening of the public service role; it also involves a proactive choice to facilitate environmental communication. Based on these results, future scholars could look at other authoritarian contexts and examine how nonprofit journalists navigate coercive situations to diversify media discourses on various issues.

This article also demonstrates the autonomy and resilience of Chinese journalism. Some of its findings echo prior scholarship that has noted the decline of critical journalism. However, this case study sheds light on the possibility that an alternative journalistic practice can advance mainstream news reporting by actively adapting to increasing censorship. This aligns with Zeng and George (2022) inspiring conclusion that public interest journalism, although facing crackdowns in many countries, "continues to maintain and nurture its support base, preparing for the next resurgence when the environment becomes more favorable" (p. 2063). Even in challenging times, journalists endeavor to preserve the foundations and spaces of independent journalism and deliver critical facts to the society, which could be easily overlooked in the current depressing environment. This proves the significance of changing perspectives and source material when examining today's Chinese (environmental) journalism. While mainstream spaces appear dominated by authoritarian forces, alternative spaces continue to exist (to some extent) and harbor critical voices. As the case of Dialogue Earth shows, these critical voices allow marginalized facts and points of view to be presented to the public. These may not be influential in the present moment, but they may act as starting points for the next stage of discussion and social change (Atton & Hamilton, 2008).

This study has some limitations, which may encourage future research. First, the longitudinal analysis explored the change in the proportion of news topics, but it lacked an analysis on the change in the reporting perspective. Future scholars could examine how a topic can be covered in different ways in the changing media environment. Second, due to the politically sensitive nature of the work in question, only one interview was conducted (with the CEO). In the future, frontline journalists and editors should be interviewed, if possible, as they may provide different outlooks on working in China. Third, it should be noted that the news sample might have missed articles that were published but later deleted. If future researchers were able to dynamically track the news publishing, a more detailed understanding of the interplay between news organizations and China's censorship system could be achieved.

Notes

1. At the time of writing, the website address is <https://dialogue.earth/zh/>.
2. "Pocket crime" in Chinese normally describes some legal provisions that are vague and broad to fit different types of crimes, which easily lead to judicial abuse.
3. However, as noted, Dialogue Earth's Beijing office was closed in 2022 due to problems with the organization's registration.

Acknowledgments

The author is solely responsible for the remarks made in this article. The author would like to thank Dr. Sam Geall for accepting to be interviewed. Gratitude is also due to Dr. Jingrong Tong and Dr. Dmitry Chernobrov, who supervised the research that forms the basis of this article and provided valuable comments on it. Dr. Dani Madrid-Morales and the journal's anonymous reviewers also offered helpful suggestions.

Ethical approval

This study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the University of Sheffield (reference no. 042914). Permission to conduct the interview was obtained by the interviewee, who was fully aware of the purpose of the research and how his answers would be used and stored. The interviewee was given the opportunity to review this manuscript before submission, and he consented to be referenced and named.

Disclosure statement

No potential competing interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Zhong Zhang obtained his doctorate from the School of Journalism, Media, and Communication at the University of Sheffield (UK). His research interests include digital media, Chinese journalism, and environmental communication.

References

- Andrews, S. (2011). Beijing's hazardous blue sky. *Dialogue Earth*, December 5 <https://dialogue.earth/en/pollution/4661-beijing-s-hazardous-blue-sky/>

- Atton, C., & Hamilton, J. F. (2008). *Alternative journalism*. SAGE.
- Bao, H. (2020, October 14). If China is serious about food security, it must tackle soil pollution more seriously. *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3105496/if-china-serious-about-food-security-it-must-tackle-soil-pollution>
- Barnett, S., Murdoch, T., & Townend, J. (2022). Where public interest and public benefit meet: The application of charity law to journalism. *Journal of Media Law*, 14(2), 323–351. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17577632.2022.2141225>
- Boyd, S., Meng, S. (2011). Battle of the blue skies. *Dialogue Earth*, December 21. <https://dialogue.earth/en/pollution/4691-battle-of-the-blue-skies/>
- Chan, S. I., & Song, W. (2020). Telling the China story well: A discursive approach to the analysis of Chinese foreign policy in the “Belt and Road” initiative. *Chinese Political Science Review*, 5(3), 417–437. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-020-00146-1>
- Chin-Fu, H. (2013). Citizen journalism and cyberactivism in China’s anti-PX plant in Xiamen, 2007–2009. *China: An International Journal*, 11(1), 40–54. <https://doi.org/10.1353/chn.2013.0005>
- Coenen, J., Bager, S., Meyfroidt, P., Newig, J., & Challies, E. (2021). Environmental governance of China’s Belt and Road Initiative. *Environmental Policy and Governance*, 31(1), 3–17. <https://doi.org/10.1002/eet.1901>
- Crossley, G., Tian, Y. (2021, July 27). Foreign journalists harassed covering China floods, correspondents’ club says. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/foreign-journalist-s-harassed-covering-china-floods-correspondents-club-says-2021-07-27/>
- Davidson, H. (2023). Chinese journalist arrested on charges of espionage. *The Guardian*, April 25 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/25/chinese-journalist-dong-yuyu-arrested-on-charges-of-espionage>
- Duan, R., & Miller, S. (2021). Climate change in China: A study of news diversity in party-sponsored and market-oriented newspapers. *Journalism*, 22(10), 2493–2510. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884919873173>
- Entwistle, B. (2023, October 30). China reporting in exile: A conversation with Chinese journalists leading from abroad. *Asia Society*. <https://asiasociety.org/new-york/china-reporting-exile-conversation-chinese-journalists-leading-abroad>
- Fedorenko, I., & Sun, Y. (2016). Microblogging-based civic participation on environment in China: A case study of the PM 2.5 campaign. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 27(5), 2077–2105. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-015-9591-1>
- Ferrucci, P. (2017). Exploring public service journalism: Digitally native news non-profits and engagement. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 94(1), 355–370. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699016681968>
- Gao, B. (2021, November 10). Can Inner Mongolia reach peak carbon this decade? *Dialogue Earth*. <https://dialogue.earth/en/energy/can-inner-mongolia-reach-peak-carbon-this-decade/>
- Garcia, G. (2021). China-funded water project meets stiff opposition in the Philippines. *Dialogue Earth*, March 4. <https://dialogue.earth/en/nature/china-funded-water-project-meets-stiff-opposition-in-the-philippines/>
- Geall, S. (2011). Climate-change journalism in China: Opportunities for international cooperation. International Media Support. <https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/ims-climate-change-china-2010.pdf>
- Geall, S. (2014). *Changing political climates: Chinese environmental journalism and sustainable development* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Manchester]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/54f2f8f83f16f37f41c9d75c25a99ca0/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=51922>
- Green Finance & Development Center. (2024). *Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)*. <https://greenfdc.org/countries-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/>
- Guo, J., Huang, X., & Fang, K. (2023). Authoritarian environmentalism as reflected in the journalistic sourcing of climate change reporting in China. *Environmental Communication*, 17(5), 502–517. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2023.2223774>
- Hai, P. (2012, October 31). Accused Chinese environmentalist Liu Futang “tired and unhappy”. *Dialogue Earth*. <https://dialogue.earth/en/nature/5279-accused-chinese-environmentalist-liu-futang-tired-and-unhappy/>

- Huang, Y., Wang, L., Wang, W., Li, T., He, Z., & Yang, X. (2019). Current status of agricultural soil pollution by heavy metals in China: A meta-analysis. *The Science of the Total Environment*, 651(Pt 2), 3034–3042. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2018.10.185>
- Johnson, T. (2010). Environmentalism and NIMBYism in China: Promoting a rules-based approach to public participation. *Environmental Politics*, 19(3), 430–448. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644011003690914>
- Konieczna, M. (2018). *Journalism without profit: Making news when the market fails*. Oxford University Press.
- Konieczna, M. (2020). Reimagining newsroom collaboration: How two European news non-profits are inviting citizens in. *Journalism Practice*, 14(5), 592–607. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2020.1757490>
- Lin, L. (2012, December 10). Liu Futang's verdict causes worry amongst China's green activists. *Dialogue Earth*. <https://dialogue.earth/en/pollution/5467-liu-futang-s-verdict-causes-worry-amongst-china-s-green-activists/>
- Liu, H. (2015, March 5). China set to miss safe rural drinking water targets. *Dialogue Earth*. <https://dialogue.earth.net/en/pollution/7762-china-set-to-miss-safe-rural-drinking-water-targets/>
- Liu, J. (2012, April 11). China's best green journalists. *Dialogue Earth*. <https://dialogue.earth/en/uncategorized/4867-china-s-best-green-journalists/>
- Ma, X. (2021, September 8). China's shifting overseas energy footprint. *Dialogue Earth*. <https://dialogue.earth/en/energy/chinas-shifting-overseas-energy-footprint/>
- Myllyvirta, L. (2024, January 25). Analysis: Clean energy was top driver of China's economic growth in 2023. *Carbon Brief*. <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-clean-energy-was-top-driver-of-chinas-economic-growth-in-2023/#:~:text=China's%20%24890bn%20investment%20in,%25%20year%2Don%2Dyear>
- Ntibinyane, N. (2018). *Investigative journalism in Africa: An exploratory study of non-profit investigative journalism organizations in Africa*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2018-09/Alvin%20Ntibinyane%20paper%20for%20publication_0.pdf
- Pham, L. (2021, June 30). China key to Vietnam's solar success. *Dialogue Earth*. <https://dialogue.earth/en/energy/china-key-to-vietnams-solar-success/>
- Repnikova, M. (2017). *Media politics in China: Improvising power under authoritarianism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Repnikova, M. (2018). Media politics under Xi: Shifts and continuities. *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 38(2), 55–67. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sais.2018.0016>
- Roberts, M. E., Stewart, B. M., & Tingley, D. (2019). Stm: An R package for structural topic models. *Journal of Statistical Software*, 91(2), 1–40. <https://doi.org/10.18637/jss.v091.i02>
- Saikawa, E. (2019). China's continued war on air pollution. In P. Prime & J. Schiman (Eds.), *China currents: Special edition 2021* (pp. 81–86). China Research Center.
- Schoenmakers, K., Liu, H. (2022, May 13). How is environmental journalism doing in China's worsening media climate? *China Media Project*. <https://chinamediaproject.org/2022/05/13/how-is-environmental-journalism-doing-in-chinas-worsening-media-climate/>
- Simangunsong, T. (2021, March 22). Indonesian community seeks World Bank mediation against Chinese-owned zinc mine. *Dialogue Earth*. <https://dialogue.earth/en/business/indonesian-community-seeks-world-bank-mediation-against-chinese-owned-zinc-mine/>
- Steinhardt, H. C. (2019). Environmental public interest campaigns: A new phenomenon in China's contentious politics. In T. Wright (Ed.), *Handbook of protest and resistance in China* (pp. 235–252) Edward Elgar.
- Teng, F., & Wang, P. (2021). The evolution of climate governance in China: Drivers, features, and effectiveness. *Environmental Politics*, 30(sup1), 141–161. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2021.1985221>
- The Guardian (2022, November 28). BBC says Chinese police assaulted and detained its reporter at Shanghai protest. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/28/bbc-says-chinese-police-assaulted-and-detained-its-reporter-at-shanghai-protest>

- Tong, J. (2015). *Investigative journalism, environmental problems and modernisation in China*. Springer.
- Tong, J. (2019). The taming of critical journalism in China: A combination of political, economic and technological forces. *Journalism Studies*, 20(1), 79–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2017.1375386>
- Wang, C. (2021, July 29). How to strengthen China's ecological redlines? *Dialogue Earth*. <https://dialogue.earth/en/nature/how-to-strengthen-chinas-ecological-redlines/>
- Wang, D., & Guo, S. Z. (2021). Native advertising in the Chinese press: Implications of state subsidies for journalist professional self-identification. *Digital Journalism*, 9(7), 974–990. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1968919>
- Wang, H., & Sparks, C. (2019). Chinese newspaper groups in the digital era: The resurgence of the party press. *Journal of Communication*, 69(1), 94–119. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqy061>
- Wong, E. (2011, December 6). Outrage grows over air pollution and China's response. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/07/world/asia/beijing-journal-anger-grows-over-air-pollution-in-china.html>
- World Bank (2022). *China's transition to a low-carbon economy and climate resilience needs shifts in resources and technologies*. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/10/12/china-s-transition-to-a-low-carbon-economy-and-climate-resilience-needs-shifts-in-resources-and-technologies>
- Yang, G., & Calhoun, C. (2007). Media, civil society, and the rise of a green public sphere in China. *China Information*, 21(2), 211–236. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X07079644>
- Yang, T., & Fang, K. (2023). How dark corners collude: A study on an online Chinese alt-right community. *Information, Communication & Society*, 26(2), 441–458. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1954230>
- Yuan, Y. (2021, September 5). Environmental activist sentenced to 54 months in prison. *Sixth Tone*. <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1008437>
- Zeng, Y., Cao, Y., Qiao, X., Seyler, B. C., & Tang, Y. (2019). Air pollution reduction in China: Recent success but great challenge for the future. *The Science of the Total Environment*, 663, 329–337. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2019.01.262>
- Zeng, Y., & George, C. (2022). The ghosts of newspapers past: Public interest journalism as movement. *International Journal of Communication*, 16, 2060–2079. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/18133/3749>