



# Exploring the Role of Media Framing in Constructing China's Image of Environmental Protection: Taking *China Daily* as an Example

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## Abstract

Media framing is a significant way to construct a country's image, with diverse media frames being utilized in order to achieve specific media effects. This study intends to explore the role of media framing, especially from the perspective of Zang Guoren's three-level news structure, in constructing China's image of environmental protection, from high-level, middle-level, and low-level news structures respectively. Based on the analyses of the retrieved 144 news articles about China's environment protection from each level structure, it can be found that in *China Daily*, China's images of environmental protection, a country taking a leading role in global environment protection, a country seeking green development driven by advanced technologies, and a country upholding global cooperation and unity are constructed positively. This study expands the application of frame analysis in constructing a country's image of environmental protection, which helps deepen our understanding of China's environmental protection actions and enhances our national image self-construction.

## Keywords

Frame analysis; environmental protection; country image; self-construction

## 1. Introduction

On September 22, 2020, at the general debate of the 75th United Nations General Assembly, President Xi solemnly declared, "In order to increase the strength of Chinese autonomous contribution, China strives to peak carbon dioxide emission by 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2060" (from <http://www.gov.cn>). Chinese dual carbon policy contains two ambitious goals, one Carbon Peaking by 2030, which means China's carbon emissions will reach their highest point by 2030 and then begin to decline, and the other Carbon Neutrality by 2060, which refers to the achievement of a balance between carbon emissions and absorption. This Dual Carbon Policy is a Chinese transformative initiative with the potential to reshape its economy and contribute significantly to the global ecological environment, which helps China construct a multi-dimensional and dynamic ecological image.

As a cornerstone of modern society, the media serves as a primary source of information about current events, global trends, and local happenings. It interacts with politics closely, especially shaping a country's image through what it presents and how it frames. Owing to an issue that can be viewed from differing perspectives and constructed with implied values, framing refers to the process by which people develop or adapt a particular attitude to the issue (Chong & Druckman, 2007). The variety of framing always contributes to different framing effects on individuals or groups.

This study intends to explore how China constructs its image of environmental protection with the use of media framing in *China Daily* after the publication of the Dual Carbon Policy.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Media framing

Originating in sociology and psychology, framing theory examined how individuals interpret and organize their experiences through cognitive frames (Goffman, 1974), and Entman (1993) extended this theory to media studies and political communication, claiming that framing entails “selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text”. The many ways that frames are analyzed and used always produce varied media effects. (Scheufele, 2006). Owing to the functions of selection and prominence of particular components of an event or topic, scholars hold that journalists or news reporters deliberately choose and display news by selecting particular news frames in order to influence the public’s cognition (Matthes, 2009; D’Angelo, 2017). The majority of research concentrated on how “media frames” shape public opinion, particularly when it comes to politics (Nelson & Clawson, 1997; Simon & Xenos, 2000; Entman, 2010). In order to examine media effects better, different types of framing should be distinguished and examined, notably (Michael et al., 2015). Frame analysis has developed from the analysis of news text to the exploration of the whole process, including constructing, spreading, and being accepted. Pan and M. Kosicki (2010) regarded news discourse as a sociocognitive process involving sources, journalists, and audience members. Jang and Hart (2015) pointed out the study gap that most studies focus on the role of “media frames” in the formation of public opinions, while little work examines how the public or audience embraces such frames. Zang (1998) combed through previous studies and creatively divided the internal structure of framing into three analytical levels: high-level, middle-level, and low-level structure. Zang’s systematic three-level news frame analysis has been applied to studies in various fields, for instance, the framework of technology reporting in mainland China being explored (Yan et al., 2016) and media image construction of *People’s Daily* on Alzheimer’s diseases (Li & Hao, 2021).

### 2.2 Country’s image construction

A country’s image can be branded like companies and products metaphorically (Van Ham, 2008), promoted by the mobilization of all of a nation’s forces, among which news media acts as an influential instrument. A country’s constructed image is intertwined closely with its politics and national ideologies. The way in which a country reports social events reflects its stance and then makes contributions to construct its national image, for example, reports about the COVID-19 pandemic (Chen & Koo, 2022). Apart from self-construction, Zhang (2010) stressed that in this new era, when people rely on the news media for information, the foreign news media have become influential providers of information on China and shaped its perception abroad, and also inevitably embedded foreign stances and ideologies, contributing to certain stereotypes. Zhang (2010) also pointed out that China’s image of itself and other countries’ views of it are out of alignment. Thus, it is of great necessity for Chinese media to construct an objective and positive image of China.

### 2.3 News coverage about China’s environmental protection

With greater importance and more attention attached to global environmental problems, China has promoted its environmental policies and actions. Pan, Opgenhaffen, and Van Gop (2021) carried out a diachronic framing analysis and suggested that China’s official media, *China Daily*, as an example, underwent a noticeable shift towards climate change. One of China’s innovative environmental steps is the dual carbon policy, which has been praised and followed by many other countries. Wang, Cui, and Qu (2024) investigated how China’s official English-language media frames the dual carbon objectives issue through critical discourse analysis and then revealed a positive image of China. Media discourses regarding China’s environmental efforts were calculated using discourse analysis, fulfilling specific discourse effects (Jiang & Raza, 2023). This content-analysis-focused research aids in our comprehension of China’s environmental protection initiatives and enables us to collaborate on them. However, restricted attention is paid to the construction of China’s environmental image, especially the role of the media frame in these ecological reports. This study intends to explore the role of media frames in *China Daily* in constructing China’s image of environmental protection, deepening our understanding of China’s environmental protection and the self-construction of our nation’s image.

### 3. Methods

To explore China's image of environmental protection, this study analyzes the reports published in *China Daily* (Global Edition), which is one of the nation's leading English-language media. As one of the official windows for the world to know about China, *China Daily* plays a vital role in telling China's story, disseminating China's voice and spreading Chinese culture.

We collected reports related to environmental protection in *China Daily*, 144 news articles in total. The time span was limited from Dec. 1st, 2020 to Nov. 1st, 2024, starting with the launch of the Dual Carbon Policy on Dec. 22nd, 2020 and ending with the 26th COP (United Nations Climate Change Conference) in November 2024. Then we used the advanced research with the keywords "environmental protection" and "carbon", limiting the sources from "China Daily", "Web News" and "Global Edition", which ensures that the selected news is more reliable. Finally, 144 news articles entered the data set after removing some mistaken or improper articles manually.

Following the retrieval of articles, we conducted the first-round examination, categorizing these 144 news articles based on Zang Guoren's three-level news structure. Due to the inevitably subjective nature of categorizing manually, further discussions and reviews are necessary. After finishing classifying, we employed the data-analysis tool AntConc (4.3.1) to analyze the contents of news articles and reached the data tables.

### 4. Findings

Based on Zang's three-level news structure, we conducted descriptive statistics of the 144 retrieved news articles and then analyzed how to construct China's image of environmental protection from three aspects: new topics at the high-level, inner compositional structures of news at the middle-level, and discourse styles at the low-level.

#### 4.1 High-level structure analysis: News topic construction

High-level framing of news articles defines news events and introduces their topics, answering "what's the event". In this part, we examine the topics of the collected news articles and then analyze their high-level structure from news topics, genres, and length.

##### 4.1.1 Topics

The topic is the core of a report, determining the tone of the whole news coverage. In *China Daily*, different topics were set in various news articles. Among the collected 144 news articles, four basic thematic classifications were revealed (Table 1), with "China's actions and achievements in environmental protection" (87) the most frequently appeared topic, followed by "China's environmental legislation and policy" (30), "global cooperation for environmental protection" (22), and "current environmental situations and challenges" (5) based on our data analysis.

**Table 1. Topic distribution**

Topics	Counts
China's actions and achievements in environmental protection	87
China's environmental legislation and policy	30
Global cooperation for environmental protection	22
Current environmental situations and challenges	5

China's effective measures and great achievements in environmental protection were widely presented by *China Daily*, from the government administration to the public in various fields. The joint efforts, including bolstering ecological governance, technological innovation, and financial investment, were spotlighted to the public, which have all taken great strides in environmental protection. Thus, the joint efforts from the whole society present the great importance attached to environmental protection by China, which is strongly willing to contribute to ecological protection.

China's environmental legislation and policy are a vital part of environmental actions categorized separately from another kind of topics. It mainly contains set laws or guidelines and the ministry's call for environmental protection. Calls from the upper ministry are always more effective and realized into practice more easily, for instance, President

Xi's calls for environmental protection. Not only does ecological legislation and policy improve the environmental judicial system, but it also helps upper calls into real actions more effectively.

Another topic that came up a lot was international collaboration for environmental protection, with *China Daily* stating that "cooperation is crucial in protecting the planet". Protecting the environment is a worldwide duty that requires the combined effort of all nations. The collected news articles in *China Daily* stressed the vital role of China in global environmental protection, joining in and even leading global environmental protection cooperation. China is on the right side and is committed to strengthening its cooperation with the global community and consistently taking proactive steps to protect the environment.

The topic of the current environmental situation and challenges counts least, only 5 among the collected 144 news articles. The five news articles indicate the remained environmental challenges, for instance, the climate crisis and wetland protection. The reason why revealing environmental challenges is to add credibility to the news articles and also urge the public to actively participate in environmental protection. But more often than not, as public media, *China Daily* is inclined to choose positive news so as to construct a good image of China's environmental protection.

From the analysis of the topics of the collected 144 news articles, China's responsible and cooperative image of environmental protection is constructed, a nation that has made great contributions to global ecological protection.

#### 4.1.2 Genres

The news style or the genre of news is determined by its content and purpose. According to Zhang (2010), four categories of news genre were identified, containing news reporting, feature, editorial, and advertisement. According to data analysis (Table 2), among the collected 209 news articles, news reporting (105) in *China Daily* counts the most, followed by features (38) and editorial (1), the least.

Table 2. Genre distribution

Genres	News reporting	Feature	Editorial	Advertisements
Counts	105	38	1	0
Percent	72.9%	26.4%	0.75%	0%

News reporting, also called hard news, is the most prevalent news genre, which is characterized by its news value and timeliness. It packs the most news value into a small amount of space and communicates the most recent happenings succinctly. *China Daily* usually employs news reporting when it comes to environmental protection laws or regulations, the opening of environmental meetings, or international discussions. It's common to be noticed that these news reports, with attractive or generalized titles, start with the most crucial details, always including "when", "who", "what", and "where", for instance, "premier Li made a phone conversation with his Mongolian counterpart on Wednesday". This kind of structure helps readers obtain the news information effectively.

Distinguished from news reporting, features specialize in a person, an occasion, or a field and aim more than merely present details. It places greater emphasis on using literary strategies to pique readers' interest. In *China Daily*, the wide use of news features, one is to commend public environmental activities in order to motivate more performance for ecological conservation. The other is to show the successes of ecological conservation, particularly in certain areas or the unique protection of some kind of creature, like mangroves in coastal regions. The wide coverage of environmental protection gives journalists more room to employ diverse constructions and devices to captivate readers.

Apart from these two news genres, *China Daily* seldom makes use of editorial, only counting one. According to Zhang (2010), editorial, always representing the views of the media editorial department, is the soul of the newspaper. Among the collected 144 news articles, the only editorial is the commentary on the imbalance between increasing wealth and climate conditions in some Chinese cities. More than presenting the facts, this editorial has the tendency to express personal concerns about the neglect of environmental protection while developing the economy. *China Daily*, one of China's official propaganda media, serves as the window for China to go to the world and for the world to understand China. Thus, among the collected news articles, the news advertisement genre is not utilized, which helps prove how official the *China Daily* is.

#### 4.1.3 Length of news

News content length is one of the non-verbal messages conveyed by news articles, and the media's control over the

length of news directly reflects the importance attached to the news event and details contained. According to previous studies, which counted an English word as a byte, we set a limit of coverage length, separately being 0-500 words as short news, 500-1000 words as middle news, and above 1000 words as long news. The table of news length distribution is as follows (Table 3).

**Table 3. News length distribution**

Length	<500 words	500-1000 words	>1000 words
Counts	68	55	21
Percent	47.2%	38.2%	14.6%

According to the above table, it's noted that among the collected 144 news articles, nearly half of the news is short news (68) with less than 500 words, followed by middle news (55) and long news (21), the least. The news length distribution is consistent with the previous news genre distribution, with news reporting the most dominant genre. Usually, news features with detailed information are much longer than news reports. The 21 long news articles are mostly news features or speeches. *China Daily* inclines to apply short and medium news to ensure efficient and concise news reporting.

#### 4.2 Middle-level structure analysis: News text construction

Differing from high-level structure, which tells readers "What's presented in news articles", the middle-level structure of news identifies "how to present". Zang Guoren put that the middle-level structure of news coverage is categorized into seven factors, including main event, previous event, history, result, impact, attribution, and evaluation. However, the organization of events is subject to journalistic routines, just as Van Dijk (1985) put it, "the overall meanings of a news text" are the result of "professional routines of journalists in institutional settings". Due to diverse news events and journalistic professional routines, journalists usually combine several schemas practically. This article analyzed the collected news articles based on Zang's seven news schema, with some news texts involving more than one kind of news schema.

From the need of this research, we adjusted Zang's seven news schema, recombining them into five schema: main event, background (previous event and history), result and impact, attribution, and evaluation. We defined each schema based on the retrieved news articles, main event as the issue of environmental laws or policy and practical actions for environmental protection, background as the events happened before some environmental policies and measures, result and impact as the effects of the measures taken for environmental protection, the schema of attribution as the reason of adoption of some environmental measure or of global cooperation, and evaluation as the attitude towards to some environmental practices.

**Table 4. News schema distribution**

Schema	Counts
Main event	119
Background	66
Result and impact	51
Attribution	32
Evaluation	31

Among the 144 retrieved news articles, the schema of the main event (119) appears most frequently. *China Daily* reports the issues of China's environmental laws or guidelines, for example, "China issues white paper on marine eco-environmental protection", which shows that our country has put great importance on environmental protection. On the other hand, public environmental protection practices are reported, for instance, "firms adjust strategies in response to national goal of reducing carbon emissions", "the young spearhead ecological protection in Tibet". It can

be concluded that the entire country, from the government to the public, has taken an active part in environmental protection.

Secondly, *China Daily* also employs background schema (66), which includes the direct previous events and indirect history related to the main event. *China Daily* always presents the current or previous environmental situations first when it comes to the environmental issues or actions. For instance, before it is concerned with China's mangrove conservation strategies, *China Daily* sheds light on the current serious decrease of mangroves.

Additionally, the schema of result and impact (51) contributes to manifesting the great effects from environmental policies and actions, which were described as "take pride in the nation's environmental progress" and "great strides in environmental protection". Consistent with the nature of *China Daily*, the result and impact schema highlights China's environmental protection progress and great contributions to global ecological protection, which help construct a positive and responsible image.

Lastly, the schema of attribution (32) and evaluation (31) were also found in the collected news articles, the attribution schema mainly about the reasons for international cooperation for environmental protection, and the evaluation about environmental actions and global environmental situations. For instance, mangrove rehabilitation and restoration in China is ascribed to "a series of effective regulations and polices"; He Wu's guard of forest is strongly praised.

All in all, more than one schema is employed since each news text may cover a wide range of content. Concluded from the retrieved 144 news articles, *China Daily* mainly follows a coverage structure "background-main event-result and effect", the three widely used in news articles.

### 4.3 Low-level structure analysis: News discourse construction

Zang's low-level structure focuses on the language and symbols in news discourse, including the top word and image. To some degree, low-level structure analysis is similar to news discourse analysis. In this article, we analyze the 144 collected news articles mainly from top words and news images.

#### 4.3.1 Top words

The topic of news can be revealed by the frequency of the words used in the news text. We analyzed the top words in the collected 144 news articles by utilizing AntConc (4.3.1). And then, we filtered out the function words like pronouns, articles, and prepositions, and the table of word frequency was derived.

**Table 5. Word frequency of the retrieved 144 reports**

Type	Rank	Freq
China	1	1201
environmental	2	905
protection	3	807
said	4	774
marine	5	503
have	6	448
development	7	428
environment	8	410
carbon	9	398
national	10	336
eco	11	323
conservation	12	305
river	13	293
year	14	291







**Figure 2. Marine ecological protection.**



**Figure 3. A protester makes a point at a Greenspace climate demonstration in Amsterdam.**

Among the retrieved 144 news articles, 119 were equipped with images, reaching 82.6%. *China Daily* applies various figures so as to present the visualized achievements in environmental protection and express calls for ecological restoration. On one hand, *China Daily* presents the real photos taken to demonstrate the great environmental protection achievements and public practical actions. On the other hand, cartoon figures are also employed along with the collected news articles, which adds more interest to the news. For instance, in Figure 2, we can see the sea or river is filled with litter, implying a worse environmental marine situation. It reminds us of beefing up efforts to tackle environmental crimes. Additionally, some images in *China Daily* seem to be able to “speak”, concluding the topic of the news vividly or providing more information over the news text. For example, in Figure 3, the man wearing an “earth” mask and putting up a “help” implies that the earth is in strong desire for global cooperative help and also stresses that environmental issues are fundamental to globalization.

In *China Daily*, Zang’s three-level news structure, the high, middle, and low levels, all serve to construct China’s image in national and global environmental protection, as China makes great contributions to and plays a leading role in global ecological protection.

## 5. Discussion

Based on data analysis and news interpretation, it can be found that *China Daily* follows its commitment to present China to the world. China is portrayed in the news coverage as a country taking a leading role in global environmental protection, a country pursuing green development driven by advanced technologies, and a country upholding global cooperation and unity.

### 5.1 A country taking a leading role in global environmental protection

China has always assumed responsibility for conserving the environment worldwide, even taking the lead in this regard. Driven by a high sense of accountability, China proposed the “dual carbon policy”, also known as “the goal of 3060”, which indicates that China aims to peak carbon emissions by 2030 and reach carbon neutrality by 2060. Other nations have embraced and even imitated this program, with China serving as a model. Furthermore, President Xi has advocated “lucid waters and lush mountains as humanity’s invaluable assets” and “a community with a shared future for mankind”, elevating the matter of environmental protection to a global consensus.

Erik Solheim, a former UN under-secretary-general, commended China as being at the forefront of the global growth of renewable energy. As the world’s largest developing nation, China has taken the initiative in creating a more sustainable and cleaner world both domestically and internationally. From the collected news articles in *China Daily*, we can conclude that China has implemented successful regional environmental protection initiatives and made every effort to support ecological growth worldwide beyond simple statements or appeals. Being a responsible great country, China will continue to take the responsibility of global environmental protection and make our globe a better place.

### 5.2 A country seeking green development driven by advanced technologies

Green innovation is an essential way to achieve “dual-carbon” goals. With the advancement of science and

<sup>1</sup> These figures were retrieved from *China Daily* (<http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/>).



technology, basic protection and restoration are insufficient, and the application of cutting-edge technologies in environmental protection is necessary so as to make it properly and effectively. All sectors in China, from government management to public and firms, have been active in the application of technologies in their environmental protection actions. The creative efforts can be seen in *China Daily*, the adjustments of their industrial structures and strategies to approach the “3060 plan”, especially reducing carbon emissions. China has gained great achievements in green development, like new energy vehicles and intelligent agriculture, taking the road of high-quality development all the time.

Being increasingly proactive on the world stage, China has made great contributions to global sustainable development, like the great Belt and Road Initiative, helping China transition to greener and more sustainable development. China has always provided Chinese wisdom for the world to deal with global environmental problems.

### 5.3 A country upholding global cooperation and unity

The hopes for unity, inclusiveness, and peace have been embodied in the Chinese people since ancient times. The advocate of “a community with a shared future for mankind” put forward by President Xi has been recognized by almost the world and then transformed from words into practical actions. As the largest developing country in the world, China has taken the initiative to help other countries seek advancement and development. The Belt and Road Initiative is one of the greatest projects in the 21st century all over the world, which has bridged many countries around the world to pursue co-development.

A country upholding or pursuing global unity and cooperation has been constructed in *China Daily*, especially facing the global environmental challenges related to the whole human society. China has strengthened cooperation with many countries all over the world in order to improve the global environment together, and its power will rise.

Thanks to China’s positive experiences and outstanding accomplishments in creating ecological civilization, other countries have learned and imitated China’s practices. China is strongly willing to share with them to create an eco-friendly world.

## 6. Conclusion

With the aim to explore China’s image of environmental protection, this study analyzed the 144 retrieved news articles in *China Daily*, which construct the image of China in different ways. However, this study inevitably has some limitations, especially the subjective categorization of the three levels. Besides, our findings were based on the news articles retrieved from *China Daily*, which is one of China’s official media, thus, the environmental protection image of China is just self-constructed, with the construction from other countries being excluded. In the future, more general and objective analyses from other perspectives can be conducted to explore the wide application of media framing in other fields, which multidisciplinary studies can be reached.

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