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**Fighting climate change:  
Human solidarity in a divided world**

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**Coverage of Climate Change in Chinese Media**

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*Coverage of Climate Change in Chinese Media*

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**Introduction**

China is the world's second largest emitter of greenhouse gases, behind only the United States.<sup>1</sup> While China's per-capita carbon emissions remain barely one-tenth that of the U.S.,<sup>2</sup> total emissions in China are expected to surpass U.S. emissions by 2009,<sup>3</sup> and perhaps as early as 2007<sup>4</sup>, shattering earlier estimates that it would not be until 2020<sup>5</sup> for China to become the world's largest producer of greenhouse gases. In addition, by 2030, according to the International Energy Agency, "emissions from China will be

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<sup>1</sup> "China's Energy and Emissions: A Turning Point?", William Chandler and Holly Gwin, Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Chandler and Gwin, citing 2001 data, use a figure of "one twelfth" in their 2004 paper; see also World Bank estimates for 2002 (the most recent data available), which put China's per-capita emissions at about one-tenth that of the United States. Cited in "China's emissions may surpass the US in 2007," *New Scientist*, 25 April 2007. <http://environment.newscientist.com/article/dn11707-chinas-emissions-may-surpass-the-us-in-2007.html>

<sup>3</sup> "World Energy Outlook" press release, International Energy Agency, November 2006, [http://www.iea.org/Textbase/press/pressdetail.asp?PRESS\\_REL\\_ID=187](http://www.iea.org/Textbase/press/pressdetail.asp?PRESS_REL_ID=187).

<sup>4</sup> "China's emissions may surpass the US in 2007," *New Scientist*, 25 April 2007, quoting IEA chief economist Fatih Birol. An official for the China National Coordination Committee for Climate Change objected to Birol's estimates, calling them "irresponsible." <http://environment.newscientist.com/article/dn11707-chinas-emissions-may-surpass-the-us-in-2007.html>

<sup>5</sup> "Is China Taking Actions to Limit Its Greenhouse Gases?," 15 September 1998, Resources for the Future, citing World Bank and World Energy Council Figures. <http://www.rff.org/rff/Publications/weathervane/Features/1998/Is-China-Taking-Actions-to-Limit-Its-Greenhouse-Gas-Emissions.cfm>

growing twice as fast as emissions from all of the OECD countries combined." <sup>6</sup>

This study is an attempt to assess the scope and tenor of news coverage of climate change through analysis of the coverage in the most influential Chinese media – especially official news sources such as *People's Daily*, *Global Times* and Xinhua (New China News Service), which set the agenda for all other media outlets in China, and newer, more independent media such as *Caijing* magazine, whose articles carry tremendous weight with other Chinese media and thus are influential well beyond their numbers.<sup>7</sup> (Many of the Xinhua and *People's Daily* articles cited in this report are archived on the websites of Sohu and Sina, China's largest news web portals, which each get hundreds of millions of hits per day.<sup>8</sup>) The focus on these influential organs of Chinese media thus has two purposes: first, the numbers themselves are significant; second, just as newspapers such as *The New York Times* influence U.S. media far beyond the newspaper's own circulation numbers, so do the aforementioned media bring great influence to other Chinese media, especially radio and television.<sup>9</sup> In addition, interviews with environmental journalists in Beijing<sup>10</sup> will help to underscore several key conclusions in this paper.

The paper will assess overall focus and tone of Chinese media coverage; how, when, and why that focus has changed; and what are the limitations of coverage in state and state-controlled Chinese media.

### ***Climate change coverage in China: A qualitative analysis***

China's stance on global warming is reflected by the main state media

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<sup>6</sup> "China's emissions may surpass the US in 2007," *New Scientist*, 25 April 2007.

<http://environment.newscientist.com/article/dn11707-chinas-emissions-may-surpass-the-us-in-2007.html>

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Orville Schell, China scholar; director of the Asia Society's Center on U.S.-China Relations; former dean, Graduate School of Journalism, University of California-Berkeley.

<sup>8</sup> See the "About Us" sections of the Sohu and Sina web portals.

<http://corp.sohu.com/indexcn.shtml>; [http://corp.sina.com.cn/chn/sina\\_intr.html](http://corp.sina.com.cn/chn/sina_intr.html)

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Orville Schell

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Chinese environmental journalists Liu JianQiang, Wang Yongchen and Wang Yichao, Beijing, coordinated by staff of Chinadialogue.net, 26 March 2007.

organs, such as Xinhua news agency, *People's Daily*, and the Sohu and Sina news web portals<sup>11</sup>, which carry large amounts of news from Xinhua and *People's Daily*. Through analysis of these central organs it is thus possible to discern changes both in media coverage, and by extension, state policy.

In China, where the vast majority of media is state-run and critical articles are subject to scrutiny and censorship, coverage of global warming through 2006 was characterized largely by translated scientific reports or science news reports from the west, often cited matter-of-factly and without comment.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, few if any articles made the link between Chinese carbon emissions and the growing climate change problem.<sup>13</sup> This coverage began to change in some aspects after the release of the IPCC Working Group I report on 2 February 2007 in Paris, and other events at approximately the same time (see discussion in sections *d* and *e* below).

Chinese coverage of global warming, its causes and effects, can be generally described in two distinct phases: before and after 2 February 2007, the date of the release of the aforementioned IPCC report. As of this writing it has been three months since the release of that report, and it appears that the shift in coverage in China has been enough to suggest a genuine change in what China is willing to allow its state-controlled media to report and interpret.<sup>14</sup> This appears in part due to the release of the IPCC report, and in part to official statements and meetings just prior to the release of the report, which, taken together, indicate a shift in official Chinese acknowledgement of concern about climate change contributing, therefore, to an intensification of coverage. (This acknowledgment of concern, however, has not yet led to any change in China's opposition to caps in carbon emissions.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in late April, China, through its state-run newspaper, *Global Times*, accused western politicians of "climate terrorism" in order to undermine Chinese economic prosperity.<sup>16</sup>)

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with Orville Schell.

<sup>12</sup> Review of hundreds of pages from Baidu and Google pages as well as Sina and Sohu web portals; also, interview with Orville Schell from his own extensive review of the coverage.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid; also, interviews with Chinese environmental journalists, 26 March 2007, Beijing.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example' "China accepts fears over climate – but will not cut growth," *Times* of London, 24 April 2007. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article1695706.ece>

<sup>16</sup> As cited in "China's demands dog latest climate talks," *New Scientist*, 3 May 2007.

<http://environment.newscientist.com/article/dn11761-chinas-demands-dog-latest-climate-talks.html>

## *Findings*

According to our review of online archives of Chinese national media, including *China Business News*, *People's Daily*, *Global Times*, *Southcn*, and *Xinhua News Service*, and links to those outlets through Google and Baidu Chinese-language web searches, data indicate:

*a. Most coverage, especially through 2006, has relied on recycled reports from Western science.*

Most coverage (an estimated 90 percent of 1,100,000 web links on climate change<sup>17</sup>) has consisted of translated scientific reports or science-based news reports from the West, a large portion of which focuses on the impact of climate change in remote places, like upon polar bears in the arctic<sup>18</sup>, but less so on its implications for humans, except by implication.<sup>19</sup> Infrequently, stories expressing skepticism about global warming have also appeared. The overall coverage through late 2006 strongly indicated that global warming is a real, if remote, phenomenon<sup>20</sup>. A global warming web page, launched in February 2004 by the Science Section of the *People's Daily*, indicates a growing focus on the issue.<sup>21</sup>

*b. A small percentage of reports has focused on regional impacts of climate change.*

A small number (estimated 10 percent out of the aforementioned 1,120,000 web links)<sup>22</sup> of stories through 2006 describe the impact of global warming on certain climate-sensitive regions (e.g. Tibet with its large glacier, or the biggest Chinese port city, Shanghai)<sup>23</sup>. Some of these are directly

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<sup>17</sup> Estimates from review of hundreds of pages from Google and Baidu web searches.

<sup>18</sup> Google China web searches for “global warming + polar bears,” for example, turned up 39,400 hits.

<sup>19</sup> Estimates from review of hundreds of pages from Google and Baidu web searches.

<sup>20</sup> For example: “Sorrow from the Global Warming Glacier Melt and Drowned Polar Bears” 22 September 2006, *China Daily*; “Bitter Fruit from Global Warming: Polar Bears Exterminated, Migrant Birds Lose Their Paradise” 2 February 2005, Sina Website; “Odd Winter: Globally Scientists Doubt the Coming of Ice Age” *People's Daily*, 6 February 2006

<sup>21</sup> <http://scitech.people.com.cn/GB/25509/35654/index.html>

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<sup>23</sup> “Ten Weather Stations Reported the Highest Temperature in Tibet History,” report from Xinhua: 29 September 2006 [http://news.xinhuanet.com/environment/2006-09/29/content\\_5152401.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/environment/2006-09/29/content_5152401.htm); “Heat

related to coverage of climate-related events, like an especially warm season.

*c. Assessment of blame focuses on other countries.*

Throughout the coverage, at least through November 2006, there has been little attempt to link rising emissions, in China and elsewhere, to the implications of those emissions for humans (be it in China or other parts of the world). In addition, there was little indication that China was prepared to link the rise of its own carbon emissions to the overall problem of climate change. Some articles, unsurprisingly, questioned why the United States had not signed the Kyoto Protocol,<sup>24</sup> or criticized the European Union countries for failing to meet Kyoto emissions targets,<sup>25</sup> or declared that the greater responsibility for reducing emissions lies with the industrialized countries, which have produced far more greenhouse gases in their past industrial development,<sup>26</sup> while asserting that China would nevertheless carry out its own responsibilities under the treaty<sup>27</sup> (however, under Kyoto, which expires in 2012, China, as a developing country, is not required to limit its emissions.<sup>28</sup>)

*d. In late 2006/early 2007, new expressions of concern emerged.*

Over the years, and throughout November 2006, reports in state-run news media only very infrequently included official statements of concern on the effects of global warming or national scientific research on climate change. However, the official concerns of the Chinese government took on new seriousness with the publication, in late 2006, of the statement of Qin Dahe, then-chief of the Chinese Meteorological Administration, who underscored the central government's official concern about global warming

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Wave in Shanghai: Temperature up to 36.9," *Shanghai Morning Post*, 16 July 2004, <http://www.39.net/health/calenture/news/52974.html>

<sup>24</sup> 17 February 2005, the Environmental Protection Section of *The People's Daily*

<sup>25</sup> "EU Fails to Meet Emission Targets," Xinhua, 29 June 2005 <http://tech.sina.com.cn/d/2005-06-29/1349649236.shtml>

<sup>26</sup> "China Calls for the Developed Countries to Fulfill the Kyoto Protocol," 17 February 2005, <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/huanbao/1072/3184108.html>

"Global Warming: Rich Countries Own the Poor Countries," Xinhua, 8 April 2007, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2007-04/08/content\\_5947891.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2007-04/08/content_5947891.htm)

<sup>27</sup> *People's Daily*, 17 February 2005, <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/huanbao/259/4937/index.htm>

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, "China's demands dog latest climate talks," *New Scientist*, 3 May 2007.

<http://environment.newscientist.com/article/dn11761-chinas-demands-dog-latest-climate-talks.html>

and its potential impact on China.<sup>29</sup> This was an indication, according to observers and members of Chinese media, of a possible policy shift.<sup>30</sup> This, taken together with other statements in late 2006, a November 2006 global warming conference<sup>31</sup>, the publication of by the Chinese Academy of Science of a National Assessment Report on climate change in January 2007,<sup>32</sup> and the release of the report of Working Group I of the IPCC, has led to a shift in coverage of the issue in China.

A group of environmental journalists, interviewed by the author in Beijing on 26 March 2007, pointed to one additional factor: increasing evidence of change in the weather was prompting reporters to write more stories. "It has been so hot and so dry," said Wang Yongchen, one of China's most respected environmental reporters. "It's because of climate change. And scientists are saying this now." The reporters cited record temperatures, reports of flowers blooming in winter, exceedingly low levels in the Yangtze River basin, and the driest winter reported in 150 years in some at least one province.<sup>33</sup> Added Liu JianQiang, another leading environmental journalist in China: "In the last year, it's been too hot – 40 degrees plus." In parts of China, he said, "we've had the most serious drought in the last century... We have so many signs," said Liu. "Maybe we can connect the signs to climate change."

*e. The IPCC report made a significant impact on Chinese coverage.*

Following the statements by Chinese officials, especially Qin Dahe, and publication of the CAS report, the IPCC Working Group I released its long-awaited report in Paris on 2 February. Now Chinese media began to more directly assess the impact of global warming within China itself, and, perhaps

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<sup>29</sup> "Qin Dahe: 2006 Another Heavy Natural Disaster Year" (report from Xinhua news service, 29 December 2006), [http://news.xinhuanet.com/environment/2006-12/29/content\\_5545183.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/environment/2006-12/29/content_5545183.htm)

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Chinese environmental journalists, Beijing, 26 March 2007.

<sup>31</sup> The conference was held on 11 November 2006 and was sponsored by the China Meteorological Association.

[http://www.cma.gov.cn/ldzz/qdh/zyhd/t20061107\\_163937.phtml](http://www.cma.gov.cn/ldzz/qdh/zyhd/t20061107_163937.phtml)

<sup>32</sup> "Six Ministries Publish the Climate Change National Assessment Report," *People's Daily*, 4 January 2007. (The summary of the report addressed China's concern about global warming, in particular its projections that the average temperature will increased by 2 to 3 degree centigrade in China by the year 2050.) <http://scitech.people.com.cn/GB/5243205.html>

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Chinese environmental journalists, Beijing, 26 March 2007.

significantly, to draw a link between climate change and China's own emissions.

After 2 February a variety of reports began to focus on the impact of global warming on China,<sup>34</sup> and included additional statements by officials such as Qin Dahe.<sup>35</sup> The examples can be seen in features from Sohu, where a variety of reports feature the impact of global warming on China. A notable sign of a shift in Chinese coverage can be seen in the interview, published in Sohu, with Chen Dongmei, director of global warming and energy programs at the World Wildlife Fund's Beijing office. In the interview, Ms. Chen said that CO2 emissions from China will surpass those of the U.S. by 2009), and that China needs to improve the energy efficiency of industry, construction and transportation fields, and educate Chinese citizens to save energy on a daily basis.<sup>36</sup> Though this was only one interview, with an officer of a foreign NGO, it was not the only time such a connection was made in the Chinese press during this time. It is important to note that this is not China's official view; indeed, given the aforementioned accusations in official Chinese media accusing Western politicians of "climate terrorism" to undermine China's growth<sup>37</sup>, it is clear that China's policy is not at all in line with Ms. Chen's comments linking China's emissions to its policy. However, given the publication of her comments in China, one might expect this connection to be made more frequently.

Also notable was the unprecedented cover story, "Climate Crisis," in *Caijing* magazine, China's leading publication on business and political economy, with a circulation of 120,000, whose influence, as stated previously, goes well beyond its circulation numbers. Here, as with the Sohu interview with the WWF's Chen Dongmei, *Caijing* made a direct link

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<sup>34</sup> See this climate change page on the website of Sohu, one of the largest news aggregators in China: <http://it.sohu.com/s2007/climate-change/>. Among the stories: *Legal System Evening Post*, "UN's Warning on Global Warming: China Faces Severe Water Shortage," <http://news.sohu.com/20070202/n248008026.shtml>; "Greenpeace: Chinese Rivers' Source Will Dry Out Within 30 Years," Sohu, 5 February 2007, <http://it.sohu.com/20070205/n248060390.shtml>; Also, see Sina for general coverage of global warming, and editorial on the IPCC, the science of climate change, etc. <http://news.sina.com.cn/z/qqbiannuan/index.shtml>

<sup>35</sup> "Qin Dahe: Global Warming to Decrease Rainfall in Upper Yangtze River," Xinhua, 6 February 2007, <http://it.sohu.com/20070206/n248080464.shtml>

<sup>36</sup> <http://it.sohu.com/20070131/n247965554.shtml>

<sup>37</sup> As cited in "China's demands dog latest climate talks," *New Scientist*, 3 May 2007.

<http://environment.newscientist.com/article/dn11761-chinas-demands-dog-latest-climate-talks.html>

between global warming and China's high emissions of CO<sub>2</sub>. The article cited a team of 12 national climate change experts who will be studying the issue.<sup>38</sup>

Clearly, and unsurprisingly, there was a spike in the coverage of climate change in the Chinese media following the publication of the IPCC WGI report. However, three months after that report, higher levels of coverage appear to be sustained.<sup>39</sup> A review of Web links over the last five years shows a steady rise through 2006, and a sharp rise in 2007.<sup>40</sup>

Though still the exception, there was also an indication in some coverage of the possible impact of global warming on humans. One article, for example, cited the potential harm of warmer weather, droughts, and infectious disease on Chinese citizens; another described the possible complete inundation of Hainan Island, China's largest after Taiwan.<sup>41</sup>

f. *Despite the shift in coverage, Chinese media continues to reflect the central government's defense of its own policies.*

Despite the shift in coverage, there continues to be little assessment of any responsibility for the problem linked to China's central government, nor any policy shift toward caps in carbon emissions. Chinese media continued to point out (correctly) that the U.S. has not signed the Kyoto protocol, stating China could not be expected to solve the growing problem of global warming.<sup>42</sup>

The environmental journalists interviewed in Beijing made it clear they expected the status quo to remain for some time. "It's a controversial issue, how to cope with climate change," said Wang Yichao, a reporter with

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<sup>38</sup> <http://www.caijing.com.cn/cns/fmwz/other/2007/02/03/1916432.html>

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, "Global Warming's Severe Impact on Human Society," Xinhua, 20 April 2007, <http://tech.sina.com.cn/d/2007-04-20/15441476446.shtml>; or the story carried by Xinhua on 27 March 2007, forecasting the eventual inundation of Hainan Island, China's largest island (not including Taiwan). [http://www.hq.xinhuanet.com/news/2007-03/27/content\\_9626421.htm](http://www.hq.xinhuanet.com/news/2007-03/27/content_9626421.htm)

<sup>40</sup> Rise in weblinks as shown through Google/China pages for "global warming": 156,000 2002; 250,000 in 2004; 294,000 in 2005; 440,000 in 2006; 655,000 in 2007

<sup>41</sup> "Global Warming's Severe Impact on Human Society," Xinhua, 20 April 2007, <http://tech.sina.com.cn/d/2007-04-20/15441476446.shtml>; and Xinhua, 27 March 2007, [http://www.hq.xinhuanet.com/news/2007-03/27/content\\_9626421.htm](http://www.hq.xinhuanet.com/news/2007-03/27/content_9626421.htm)

<sup>42</sup> "Many Countries Under Pressure from IPCC; China Shouldn't be Blamed by West", *Global Times* (international news branch of Xinhua), 8 February 2007. The article stated that developed countries should take more responsibility, rather than blaming developing countries like China.

*Caijing*. "Development is the top priority. So we can't sacrifice economic growth for [addressing the issue of] climate change. That is, we will not stop our development because of climate change. It's a very complicated issue to discuss." Moreover, these journalists made clear, it is extremely rare to read direct criticism of the central government's policies in the Chinese press. "You can't criticize the government about policy," said Wang Yongchen. "If we criticize political issues, we must criticize a company or a factory." "Not the central government," Liu interjected. Still, the three environmental reporters, among the most accomplished and respected in the country, agreed that a shift had taken place in China's policy toward climate change, and therefore the media coverage. All three cited the statement of Qin Dahe, inside the National People's Congress, that climate change represented a significant problem for China. "It's the first time that a senior official mentioned climate change as a problem in such a forum," said Liu JianQiang. "That means the central government wants to do something about climate change." And that, inevitably, is being reflected in the changing coverage.

**Conclusion:** The tenor of global warming coverage is set by Chinese state-owned media. Coverage since 2 February indicates strongly for the first time that the Chinese government is aware of the risk of global warming, such as the impact of increasing drought. But China as before continues to assert that developed nations should take more responsibility and has not signaled any shift in policy.