



Media coverage and government policy of nuclear power in the People's Republic of China



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ABSTRACT

China has vigorously pursued nuclear power and has developed a series of ambitious nuclear power policies in the past several years. To smoothly implement these policies, the Chinese government wants to mobilize public support because a high level of public acceptance helps legitimize these policies. Considering that news media can influence public opinion, we analyzed the content of news articles related to nuclear power in two Chinese mainstream newspapers, *The People's Daily* and *The Guangming Daily*, between 2004 and 2013. The results show that the articles in the two newspapers primarily reflected pro-nuclear or informational statements, whereas anti-nuclear opinions were rarely published. Pro-nuclear arguments most often focused on environmental benefits and safety, which have been frequently emphasized in the Chinese government's nuclear power policies. These findings indicate that the mainstream news coverage of nuclear power is highly consistent with the Chinese government's pro-nuclear policies, which suggests that the government had a significant impact on the content reported by the mainstream media in China. Lastly, this study proposes some policy recommendations for nuclear power development in China.

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1. Introduction

To meet increasing energy demands, optimize energy infrastructures, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, some countries have expressed growing interest in developing nuclear power. Specifically, China has markedly expanded its nuclear power program and has made a series of ambitious plans in recent years. In China, 21 nuclear power units are currently in operation, and 28 units are under construction (IAEA, 2014).

China is determined to develop nuclear power for two reasons. First, China wants to develop nuclear power due to its relatively benign environmental impact. For example, the Medium- and Long-term Nuclear Power Development Plan (2005–2020), which was approved by the State Council of China in October 2007, noted that nuclear power has essentially no sulfur dioxide, fuel dust, nitrogen oxide, and carbon dioxide emissions, unlike coal-fired power; moreover, replacing part of the coal-generating capacity by nuclear power is crucial for alleviating the greenhouse gas effect

(State Council of China, 2007). In addition, *China's Energy Conditions and Policies*, a white paper (government document) issued by the Information Office of the State Council in December 2007, declared that environmental protection is the basic state policy because the consumption of coal, the main energy resource in China, increases environmental problems, such as smog, air pollution, and greenhouse gas emission. To fight climate change and protect the environment, developing energy should highlight the importance of minimal environmental impact. Moreover, China signed the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and established the National Coordination Committee for Climate Change. Notably, the white paper advocated the active development of nuclear power in China (State Council Information Office, 2007). According to *China's Energy Policy (2012)*, approved by the State Council of China in October 2012, developing new and renewable energy is indispensable to protecting the environment and fighting climate change. By the end of the 12th Five-Year Plan, the installed generating capacity of non-fossil fuels will account for 30% of China's primary energy consumption (Xinhua News Agency, 2012).

Second, China wants to develop nuclear power due to the proven record in nuclear safety management in China. For instance, the Medium- and Long-term Nuclear Power Development Plan (2005–2020) shows that the safety performance of nuclear power

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plants in China is above average and that the operation level is quite reliable and continuously improving (State Council of China, 2007). Additionally, China's Energy Policy (2012) emphasizes developing nuclear power in a safe way; guaranteeing nuclear safety is essential for nuclear power development. China has carried out comprehensive inspections on the safety of all of its nuclear power plants since the Fukushima accident. The inspection results indicate that the safety of nuclear power plants in China has and continues to provide adequate protection for the health and safety of the public. In the past 20 years, no accident at or above Level 2 has occurred in any operational nuclear power unit in China. Furthermore, the major operating parameters exceed the world's average operating performance, and some indices even reach the world's leading or advanced levels (Xinhua News Agency, 2012).

According to the Nuclear Power Safety Plan (2011–2012) and the Mid- and Long-term Development Plan for Nuclear Power (2011–2020) issued by the State Council of China in October 2012, during the period 2011–2015, no nuclear power projects will be launched in inland provinces, and only a few projects that have passed adequate safety and environmental reviews will be constructed in coastal regions. The world's highest safety standards will be applied to the construction of new nuclear power units, and the principle of 'safety first' must be insisted upon throughout processes, including planning, construction, and operation (Chinese Central Government, 2012).

Based on the series of nuclear power policies mentioned above, we can find that the Chinese central government is in favor of developing nuclear power; specifically, government policies concentrate on the environmental benefits and safety of nuclear power. However, the well-documented potential safety, security, economic, and environmental risks relevant to nuclear power may also lead to a low level of public support (Culley et al., 2010). By selecting which information to include and exclude (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Pan and Kosicki, 1993), the media coverage has a significant impact on public opinion on societal issues (Delshad and Raymond, 2013; Fryberg et al., 2012; Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Hodgetts and Chamberlain, 2007; Markel et al., 2007; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007; Soroka et al., 2013; Vreese et al., 2011; Zhang and Min, 2013). Accordingly, news media can have different impacts on public discourse by applying its media vehicles (e.g., print media) to facilitate understanding and enhance public participation or to form negative stereotypes of marginalized groups (Culley et al., 2010). Considering that the media has an important impact on public opinion and the relevance of the nuclear power debates, analyzing the media portrayal of nuclear power is of particular interest.

This study is dedicated to examining the media portrayal of nuclear power in China, which is one of the most prominent economies in the world. The present study focuses on the content analysis of nuclear power in two Chinese newspapers, *The People's Daily* (Chinese: 人民日报) and *The Guangming Daily* (Chinese: 光明日报), from 2004 to 2013. This study aims to provide descriptive information on the content of media coverage about nuclear power in the Chinese mainstream media to examine exactly which types of information have been transmitted to the public. Previous studies on the media coverage of controversial topics have revealed that manipulation of information in the media generally aims to benefit more powerful groups (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). This suggests that the government mainly decides what the media reports (Takahashi, 2011). Therefore, this study attempts to further examine government's impact on the media. Ultimately, the findings of the current study may have significant implications for future studies on media coverage of nuclear power in other developing countries.

2. Literature review

2.1. Media coverage of nuclear power

Several scholars have studied the news coverage of nuclear power. Culley et al. (2010) examined the news coverage of nuclear reactors in Georgia, U.S., by analyzing the content of news articles in two local newspapers. The analyzed results demonstrate that the majority of articles in the two local newspapers generally reflected balanced arguments. Economic and environmental benefits and risks were most frequently presented among pro- and anti-nuclear arguments, while informational text mainly focused on regulatory processes and financing (Culley et al., 2010). Another scholar, Lazic (2013), analyzed the content of news articles about the Fukushima accident in *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, and *USA Today* to explore how U.S. newspapers explained this accident to the public. The results indicate that these articles focused most heavily on conflict, responsibility, and economic interest (Lazic, 2013). Lastly, Perko et al. (2012) conducted a content analysis of over 200 articles published in spoken and printed media in Slovenia and other countries to examine the media coverage of a nuclear event in Slovenia. The primary research question was whether a nuclear event attracts high media attention, even in the circumstance of a minor event and a transparent communication policy. The findings reveal that even a minor nuclear event will attract a large amount of media coverage and result in heated political debates (Perko et al., 2012).

Previous research on the news coverage of nuclear power is limited, primarily assessing media reporting on nuclear reactors or nuclear risks in Western countries. Very little research has addressed the news coverage of nuclear power in developing countries, such as China.

2.2. Media and policy in China

In Western nations, the mass media closely connects the public and policymakers. On one hand, media reflects public opinion, which can influence policymakers. On the other hand, the media is the main source for the public to gain information on policymakers' activities (Soroka, 2003). In contrast, in China, the primary role of the media, especially the traditional media (e.g., the Party newspaper), is to present and disseminate official policies to the public while integrating regime support (Brady, 2009; Hague and Harrop, 2010).

Before the economic reform, the media was tightly controlled by the Chinese government (Liu, 1971) and was considered the mouthpiece of the Communist Party of China (CPC) (Cheek, 1989; Liu and McCormick, 2011; Siebert et al., 1956; Stockmann and Gallagher, 2011). As part of governmental organizations, media institutions were called 'administrative units' (Chinese: *shiye dan-wei*) and depended on subsidies from the government (Liu and McCormick, 2011). The government's policies were disseminated to the general public by the media (Rawnsley, 2006; Shen et al., 2009). Therefore, the media in China mainly aimed to 'guide' public attitudes rather than to reflect it (Tang and Sampson, 2012).

However, some significant changes have happened to the Chinese media system since the beginning of economic reform in China in 1978 (Lee et al., 2006; Liu, 2010; Pan, 2000; Polumbaum, 1994; Stockmann and Gallagher, 2011; Sun, 2010; Wu, 2000; Zhao, 1998). Commercial interest began to influence the news (Wang, 2009; Zhao, 1998). In 1978, business management was introduced to media institutions by the State Ministry of Finance, particularly focusing on *The People's Daily* and seven other newspapers in Beijing. Although the government still provided subsidies to these media units, they were required to learn how to manage

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