

# EU-China Relations: Through the Narrative of China's Media

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## ABSTRACT

China is the second-biggest trading partner of the European Union, and the EU is the biggest trading partner of China. Hence, China and the EU have a close relationship. In this sense, it is vital to find the media perception of the EU and the political ideology behind their relationship. However, most of the existing studies explore China-EU relationship through their trade information, while ignore the role of Chinese media frame of EU. This study believes that China's official media frame offers a strong evidence to understand China-EU relationship. This article aims to examine China's official media perception of the EU by systematically examining the previous study. This study finds that Chinese media frame the EU as an economic and political partner in a positive way but try to avoid mentioning the contradiction and friction, the selective negative issues are mainly for propaganda and conform to Chinese government attitude. Hence, this study discusses that Chinese official media follow the narrative of the Chinese government and reflect the EU-China relationship from the Chinese government perspective.

**Keyword:** Media, China, European Union, media logic

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## ABSTRACT

Cina adalah mitra dagang terbesar kedua Uni Eropa, dan UE adalah mitra dagang terbesar Cina. Oleh karena itu, Cina menambahkan Uni Eropa memiliki hubungan yang erat. Dalam hal ini, sangat penting untuk menemukan persepsi media tentang UE dan ideologi politik di balik hubungan mereka. Namun, sebagian besar studi yang ada mengeksplorasi hubungan China-UE melalui informasi perdagangan mereka, sementara mengabaikan peran bingkai media China dari UE. Studi ini percaya bahwa bingkai media resmi China menawarkan bukti kuat untuk memahami hubungan China-Uni Eropa. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji persepsi media resmi China terhadap UE dengan mengkaji secara sistematis penelitian sebelumnya. Studi ini menemukan bahwa media China membingkai UE sebagai mitra ekonomi dan politik dengan cara yang positif tetapi mencoba untuk menghindari menyebutkan kontradiksi dan gesekan, isu-isu negatif selektif terutama untuk propaganda dan sesuai dengan sikap pemerintah China. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini membahas bahwa media resmi China mengikuti narasi pemerintah China dan mencerminkan hubungan UE-China dari perspektif pemerintah China.

**Kata Kunci:** Media, Cina, Uni Eropa, logika media

## INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) and China are playing a huge role in the world. In the 21st century, China is already becoming the world's second-largest economy in 2010 ([BBC 2011](#)). Meanwhile, after China and EU established their diplomatic

relations on 6 May 1975, they built up a close relationship on diplomatic and trade. China is the second biggest trading partner of EU, and EU is the biggest trading partner of China ([European Commission 2019](#)). Hence, the dialogue between China and the EU is becoming increasingly important to each other. China has significantly enhanced its presence in the EU, “the group of Chinese journalists has become the most numerous in Brussels” ([Orbetsova and Men 2016, 4](#)). Media plays a vital role in forming the country’s image and to know each other, which could influence on countries’ political relationship at official and people-to-people level ([Orbetsova and Men 2016](#)). Media coverage from both the EU and China is playing an important role as an information source for each other since the geographical, cultural and political differences. ([Meanwhile, Men, 2009](#)) and ([Pan, 2012](#)) find that people from China and EU both lack of understanding of each other enough. Hence, media perception is important to each other, as Jervis (1974) suggest that perception is important to explain a country’s foreign policy and behaviors. Especially, in China, the media perception is important. Media content are still highly controlled by state ([Tang and Sampson 2012](#); [Fingleton 2016](#)). Although the media system in China is more globalized and commercialized, Chinese media still need to serve the Chinese Communist Party’s interest ([Yao 2005](#); [Zhang D. 2020a](#)), normally they are characterised by ‘loyal eyes, ears and tongue’ of the Party state ([Chang 1989, 163](#)). More importantly, policy-making process in China is vague, track Chinese media perception is the way to find out the government think ([Zhang 2016](#); [Zhang D. 2020b](#)). Hence, scholars suggest that there is a close relationship between China’s media perception and its international relations with other countries ([Zhang 2011](#); [Liu and Yang 2015](#)). They suggest that analysis media perception is not only value for international relations research ([Liu and Yang 2015](#); [Zhang 2016](#)), but also

strengthen existing analyses of external understandings of the EU ([Zhang, 2016](#)) and avoid potential conflicts by predicting future Chinese foreign policy ([Liu and Yang 2015](#)). Concerning this issue, the research question arises: what is the media perception of the EU in Chinese media, and to what extent Chinese media portrayal is a reflection on the Chinese relationship with the EU. In order to find answer of research questions, the paper will list the previous researches on China-EU relationship, then, examine the Chinese media perception on EU based on existing researches, finally to discuss to what extent Chinese media portrayal is a reflection on the Chinese relationship with the EU.

#### **CHINA-EU RELATIONSHIP**

The relationship between China and EU is a debated topic as previous researches discuss. One on hand, there were several intense diplomatic and trade cooperation between EU and China ([Udroiu 2017](#)), ([Morelli, 2019](#)) suggest that the EU-China relationship begin with economic cooperation, it still become the first priority cooperation issue to each other. Bilateral trade between China and EU amounted approximately 466 billion Euro in 2014 ([Brown and Beatson 2016](#)), which make China becomes EU's second-biggest trading partner. EU and China have close relationship on economic cooperation ([Holslag 2011](#); [Udroiu 2017](#); [Sattar 2012](#); [Morelli 2019](#); [Brown and Beatson 2016](#)). The EU-China Strategic Partnership was established in 2005, which not only include economic and trade, but also include "foreign affairs, security matters and international challenges such as climate change and global economy governance" ([Udroiu 2017, 33](#)). Hence, EU's relationship with China involve political, economic and strategic cooperation. ([Morelli, 2019](#)) also finds China regards EU not only as an economic actor, but also a political actor.

On the other hand, some scholars concern the challenges

for EU-China relationship. It is undeniable fact that China and EU have differences on political ideology and system, understanding on issues related to the problematic regions, culture ([Sattar 2012](#)). ([Meanwhile, Men, 2016, 21](#)) also suggests that political differences between China and EU are in the “norms and values and their different understanding on global governance”. However, previous researches also concern the mistrust between China and EU, since they still have conflicts interests and contradictions on some issues, for example, the relationship with US ([Holslag 2011; Men 2016](#)). ([Holslag, 2011](#)) argues that Europe is still the second importance in China’s foreign policy, also China and EU lack of mutual interest. In conclude, EU-China relationship has both opportunities and challenges.

### **MEDIA PERCEPTION**

When analysis a media perception, in the previous research about concepts media perception into “attention intensity”, “image” and “issue dimensions” ([Liu and Yang 2015](#)). Attention intensity refers to the attention one pays to other, which is measured by high volume of publications implies that actors or issues are being prioritized on agenda ([Zhang and Meadows III 2001](#)). Image is a vital part of perception, which is measured by tones expressed by the publication or media ([Tammen and Kugler 2006](#)). Issue dimensions more likely to be measured by the subject distribution ([Liu and Yang 2015](#)). Hence, the paper focuses on volume, tone and subject distribution to analysis the Chinese media perception on EU, and to compare with previous finding on EU-China relationship to find to what extent Chinese media portrayal is a reflection on the Chinese relationship with the EU.

### **VOLUME**

EU got limited attention from China’s mainstream

media. ([Zhang, 2011](#)) finds People's Daily coverage on EU only occupied three percentages of overall international news over 17 years, which indicates that EU does not attract high media attention in China. Previous researches find the same results as well ([Dai and Zhang 2007](#); [Zhang 2016](#)). ([Dai and Zhang, 2007](#)) finds that EU has low visibility in Chinese media. ([Meanwhile, Zhang, 2016](#)) also finds that compare to EU, China's media give more space to "United States, Russia, Japan and other countries in the region, and international organizations such as the UN, NATO, ASEAN, etc." ([Zhang 2016, 467](#)). On the other hand, it reflects the EU-China relationship. Although they have cooperated on some issues, EU is still the secondary importance in China's foreign policy due to strong cultural and political differences and interests ([Holslag 2011, 309](#)). Behalf, it also reflects China's foreign policy. Previous research finds that People's Daily not only show declining attention to EU, but also reveals a declining pattern to United States and other powerful political actors ([Liu and Yang 2015](#)). This situation may reflect that Chinese government considers weakening importance of great power politics in international relations. ([Liu and Yang, 2015](#)) find that the People's Daily coverage on US is fluctuated, the fluctuation is along with the newsworthy issues, but also shift with Sino-US relationship. Same as People's Daily coverage on EU, it is fluctuated as well. ([Zhang, 2011, 67](#)) finds that the change "driven by the big events in the development of the EU's integration process and newsworthy issues between the EU and China". People's Daily big volume of coverage on EU are driven by the newsworthy issues like EU's passing of the Maastricht Treaty, the Euro, but also because of the high points of cooperation between China and EU ([Zhang 2011](#)). For example, the high volumes of People's Daily coverage on EU represent increase in the number of Sino-European cooperation projects and whether and when the EU lifted

the arms embargo on China (Zhang 2011). Hence, the closer relationship between China and EU, Chinese media cover more on EU, and vice versa. More specially, although People's Daily regards EU as a minor focus when it covers news on Europe (Dai and Zhang 2007), the news about EU is increased among European news in terms of the proportion (Zhang 2011). The People's Daily volume of coverage on EU is low before 1990s, however, since the increasingly more influence after the integration process of the EU, media much more covering on EU instead of member states individually (Zhang 2016). This phenomenon not only indicates that the close attachment between China and EU, but also reflects that China's regard EU as a major force on the world (Brown and Beatson 2016) and a pole in a multipolar world. In other words, to some extent, it reflects China's attitude that EU as a whole, and EU as an economic, trade and political partner.

According to previous research, it indicates that Chinese media covers less on EU since the geopolitical thinking and the dynamic world affairs environment (Zhang 2016); but on the other hand, China has an expectation that EU as a whole instead of divided into individual countries to play a role in economic and politics in the world.

### COVERAGE THE TENDENCY

The tone of the news coverage plays a vital role in indicating the EU's image in media. Concerning the image, it is usually measured by media tone, which are positive, negative or neutral (Du and Rachul 2012; Zhang 2011, Liu and Yang 2015; Dai and Zhang 2007). (Zhang, 2011) finds that People's Daily mostly cover EU in positive or else neutral or mixed tone, only 13.4 percent of news in negative tone when cover on EU. This result conforms to (Dai and Zhang's, 2007) result that Chinese media frame EU mostly in a positive or neutral tone. However, On Chinese

media perception of United State, ([Liu and Yang, 2015](#)) finds that 22.46% of the coverage on the US in People's Daily is in a negative tone. Hence, it is more likely to reflect that EU-China relationship is more stable and cooperative compare to the Sino-US relationship. It is also worth notice that there was more positive tone when coverage on EU after their comprehensive partnership was built ([Zhang 2011](#)). The same pattern was found by ([Liu and Yang, 2015](#)) that the People's Daily tone of coverage on US is shift along with the Chinese government's attitude towards US. Chinese media are usually defined as "prosperity without freedom" ([He 2007](#)). In China, media are all owned and supervised by the Chinese Communist Party ([Qin, Stromberg and Wu 2018](#)). Hence, there are some Party-Line journalism, the most famous one is People's Daily, one of the biggest newspapers in China, also famous as "Chinese government mouthpiece". Hence, the paper argues that People's Daily tones of coverage on EU reflect the Chinese government's attitude toward EU to some extent.

Although the majority of news coverage on EU from People's Daily is positive or neutral, there are still some negative news coverages. When news coverages relate to European internal economic situation, the tone is negative, "with a focus on the high level of unemployment and slow economic growth" ([Zhang 2016, 470](#)) and debt crisis ([Men 2016](#)). On one hand, Chinese government need it as a tool to propaganda ([Men 2016; Zhang 2016](#)); on the other hand, it reveals the Chinese government's concern on EU's economic, which reflect the Chinese government's expectation on EU to recover its economic buoyancy as EU is China's biggest trading partner.

The positive or neutral tone on coverage on EU from People's Daily on one hand reflect EU-China relationship is relatively more stable than US. For instance, for the case of US, US and China have more conflict interest, there

are more negative tones in People's Daily when the conflicts happen. ([Liu and Yang, 2015](#)) finds that after EP-3 spyplane incident in the spring of 2001, People's Daily articles related to US are narrative in a negativeway; on the other hand, the media discourse also reflects the Chinese government expectation that EU as a "friendly and effective partner of China" ([Zhang 2016, 473](#)). For instance, the media coverage on European internal economic situation is negative, it reflects the Chinese government's concern on EU's capability of economic, since China expect EU could be an effective partner.

### SUBJECT DISTRIBUTION

Research on issue dimensions on a nation are varied (e.g., trade, security, culture, and education) ([Zhang 2016](#); [Zhang 2011](#); [Men 2016](#); [Liu and Yang 2015](#); [Dai and Zhang 2007](#)). ([Dai and Zhang, 2007](#)) finds that People's Daily coverages on EU mostly concerning the EU as an economic power, followed by political power. It may imply the Chinese media not only regard EU as an economic actor, but also regard it as a political actor. This conform to what ([Zhang, 2011](#)) finds, that People's Daily coverages on EU are more likely to cover issue on economic, followed by politics, which reflect the relationship between China and EU. As ([Zhang, 2011, 93](#)) did qualitative interview with Chinese journalists based in Brussel, "In Sino-EU relations, the economic and trade relations are the most important. Compared with the political relations, they are more substantial, more concrete and they are the aspect that people in China care more about..." Hence, the content of coverage reflects the reality that economic relationship between China and EU is the most important.

More specially, ([Men, 2016](#)) also did a qualitative interview with Chinese correspondents based in Brussels, she finds that Chinese correspondents based in Brussels



are more likely to to coverage issue on European debt crisis, Juncker Plan and refugee crisis ([Men 2016](#)), which is also relate to economic and politics. To revisit the relationship between China and EU, ([Men, 2016](#)) believes that the reason why Chinese journalist preference on those three issues is more from economic concern. Hence, it also confirms that economic and traderelationship still play an important role on EU-China relationship.

The Chinese reports on those three issues also reflect the political and cultural differences on governances. ([Men, 2016](#)) suggests those three issues demonstrate the weakness of EU government, which conform to ([Holslag's, 2011](#)) argument that al though China and EU have established specialized dialogue and cooperation, they still have differences on political ideology and governances. The huge political differences offer some challenge for the relationship between EU and China ([Sattar,2012](#)). Hence,it reflects the political and cultural differences on governancesbetween EU and China make then lack of “solid basis of political understanding” ([Men 2016, p.21](#)).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

EU-China bilateral relationship is not only important to their economic and social develop, but also affect world affairs. EU-China relationship is featured as a love-hate trade story by themedia. Previous researches have already revealed that EU andChina have a close economic and trade relationship ([Holslag 2011](#); [Udroiu 2017](#); [Sattar 2012](#); [Morelli 2019](#); [Brown & Beatson 2016](#)). Although EU's relationship with China also involves political, economic and strategic cooperation, pervious researches also concern the ideology, political cultural differences also offer the challenges to EU-China relationship ([Holslag 2011](#); [Men 2016](#); [Sattar 2012](#)). At the same time, media serves an important rolefor each other as an information source for both sides. Especially in

China, ([Hoddie, 2006](#)) suggest that the documenting frequency and content of Chinese media news coverage is an effective means of measuring the current leader's interest and perspective on a particular topic. Especially in China where highly controlled the media. Hence, Chinese media perception is important tool to understand China's relationship with EU.

China's official media perception of the European Union is a complicated issue. The annual intensity of Chinese media attention to the EU is low, reflecting that the EU is still the secondary importance in China's foreign policy ([Holslag 2011, 309](#)). In this sense, the EU, although one of the biggest powers in world politics, is still not the primary target of China. On the one hand, it is not one of the leading 'imagined' enemies with China. Japan and China had had historical conflicts before. Moreover, Japan recently has conflicts on Diaoyu Island with China. The same as Japan that America continually has conflicts with China. However, although the EU and China have small conflicts from time to time, they never had a significant conflict. Hence, the EU is not the major 'imagined' enemy for the Chinese and its government. On the other hand, although the EU and China have a close economic relationship, it never closes since the geographical and ideological factors ([Holslag 2011](#)). In this sense, it is understandable that the EU is the primary target of Chinese media.

However, it is worth noticing that the EU's news is increased among European news in terms of the proportion, reflecting the Chinese government's expectation that the EU should be as a whole rather than divided into individual member countries to play a role in economic and political cooperation. In this sense, it could be argued that the Chinese government is willing to see the European Union's unification. In terms of the positive image and negative image frame of the EU, previous research shows that Chinese

media are most likely to cover the EU positively, which reflects the EU- China relationship is stable. It also implies that the Chinese government is willing to keep a close relationship with the EU in order to expand its economic benefits. Meanwhile, the most like to cover the subject that Chinese media like to cover is economics and trade, which also reflect their close economic and trade relationship. Hence, it could be argued that the Chinese government's main purpose is to keep a close economic tie with the EU rather than expand their relationship in politics and military. Chinese media also negatively frame the EU's economic situation, reflecting the Chinese government's expectation of the EU as an effective economic partner and reflecting political differences between China and the EU. However, it is also worth mentioning that the Chinese government designs Chinese media to express a sense of nationalism. Chinese nationalism is rooted in its humiliating history ([Zhang D. 2020b](#)). Hence, Chinese media usually negatively frame other countries' situation to reflect the 'better' China, which injects a sense of nationalism ([Zhang D. 2020a](#)). Hence, it also reflects that the Chinese government also regards the EU as an economic partner rather than a more all-around friend.

Previous researches find that Chinese media perception of Soviet Union and US can well reflect the Sino-Soviet Union and Sino-U.S. relations respectively ([Xu 1991; Liu L. 1991](#)). However, the paper argues that the Chinese media perception can only partly reflect the relationship between China and EU. Based on the findings, the paper finds that Chinese media frame EU as economic and political actor in the world, and China-EU with stable and health relationship but mostly focus on economic and trade. Meanwhile, the fluctuated volume and varied tone on specific issue shift with the Chinese government attitude toward EU. The Chinese media have a selective agenda, which means choose the topic

which conform to Chinese government taste, Chinese media more likely choose subject relate to economic, but also choosing negative topics in order to facilitate topopaganda ([Zhang D. 2020b](#)). In conclude, Chinese media frame EU as a economic and political partner in a positive way, but try to avoid to mention the contradiction and friction, the selective negative issues are mainly for propaganda and conform to Chinese government attitude. Hence, above analysis conform to the ([Bree and Li, 2013](#)) find that Chinese media news coverage onforeign issue is to be the ears, eyes, throat and tongue for the party, and the portrayal of a foreign nation or international organization in the Chinese media well follow the narrative of Chinese government ([Zhang 2011](#)). Hence, the paper suggests thatto some extent that Chinese media could reflect the EU-Chinarelationship, but only from the perspective of Chinese government. Chinese media perspective of the EU cannot give the full picture of the EU-China relationship. However, the research also has some limitations, since the previous researches mainly focus on People's Daily, there are less research focus on other Chinese media party and commercial newspapers. Meanwhile, there are less researches focus on the TV news in China like China Central Television (CCTV), hence, for the future research, it will be important to include other Chinese major newspaper, and compare the CCTV and newspaper's coverage on EU to analyzed the media perception of EU.

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