

The Ends Justify the Means: China's Securitization of Climate Change Mitigation

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Abstract

China did a complete turn since the 2015 COP21 meeting in Paris and assumed the position of a leader and “impulse driver” of global climate mitigation. This article examines how – and why – China changed its tune. We acknowledge that the core manifestation of China's new stance is framed by new sociotechnical narratives that have defined the “new normal” that enables China to adopt a more cooperative posture in international climate policy-making. We argue that the key driver of climate policy change is the securitization of climate change. In this sense, China as the agent securitized climate mitigation by actively coupling mitigation technologies with China's global economic competitiveness, whereas new sociotechnical narratives in China have paved the way for new concepts of institutional and functional interactions, such as urban entrepreneurialism and urban clusters (*chengshiqun*).

KEY WORDS: climate change, entry points to mitigation, China, securitization, Copenhagen School

Introduction

Risks are prevalent in the international system. As such, the search for security via the determination of policy priorities and the goal of institutionalizing rules and practices to address them are core features of everyday international relations. The creation of regimes, therefore, is necessary to impact behavior and outcomes. Regimes are defined as “sets of governing arrangements,” including “networks of rules, norms,

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and procedures that regularize behavior and control its effects.”² Likewise, they are “sets of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors’ expectations converge in a given area of international relations.”³ Climate change and the need to mitigate its effects are encapsulated in the international climate change regime, which has evolved since the adoption of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1992. Crucial in the development of this regime are the parallel transformations in China’s role from a major emitter of greenhouse gases to a leader and rule-shaper in climate change mitigation.

As the basic framework of governance in this issue-area, the UNFCCC recognized the gravity of the problem in the climate system and the risks associated with maintaining the same levels of anthropogenic interference.⁴ To this end, the Convention’s ultimate objective was to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations at a level and timeframe that would “allow ecosystems to adapt naturally to climate change, to ensure that food production is not threatened, and to enable economic development to proceed in a sustainable manner.”⁵ Member countries realized the need to expand the scope of the Convention to incorporate stricter parameters and more ambitious mechanisms for reducing greenhouse-gas emissions. By 1995, negotiations on a protocol commenced. The Kyoto Protocol was thereafter adopted in 1997 and entered into force in 2005. A key to the Protocol was its mandatory reduction targets on greenhouse-gas emissions for developed countries through 2012.

In order to decide what to do when the Kyoto Protocol’s first commitment period ends in 2012, the Conference of the Parties (COP15) in 2009 discussed the long-term

² Keohane and Nye 1977, 2.

³ Krasner 1988, 2.

⁴ Bodansky 2010.

⁵ UN 1992.

goal of limiting climate change to no more than 2°C, systems of pledge and review for mitigation commitments and actions by both developed and developing countries, and the significance of financial resources. Although the COP15 resulted only in a political agreement instead of a legally binding instrument, it has clarified important principles, narratives, and goals, such as the 2°C threshold that allows for a more strategic and realistic agenda setting in subsequent climate negotiations. It also confirmed the required unprecedented level of global cooperation to allow the achievements of low-carbon transformation within a very short time.

In close collaboration with the G77 Group, China played an important role in protecting the interests of developing countries. By the time of the COP15 meeting, China was the largest greenhouse-gas emitter with levels growing by 80 per cent since 1990.⁶ Therefore, any tangible and meaningful climate mitigation efforts would require China to be on board. For China, climate change would not only limit its economic development, but would also have negative impacts including droughts that could lead to the undermining of food security, diminishing Himalayan glaciers that could result in water shortages in rural and urban areas, as well as rising sea levels that could potentially threaten coastal industrial centers and cities. Well before the meeting, China understood its climate vulnerability that seemed to run counter its commitment to economic transformation and international responsibility.⁷ Despite this, China's stance was to maintain the same levels of economic growth coupled with a strong domestic environmental regulatory response. In short, China's position at COP15 was driven by domestic politics and internal development: "China is caught in a Faustian policy trap. It needs ongoing domestic economic growth...to sustain social and political stability. Yet

⁶ Christoff 2010.

⁷ Conrad 2012.

such growth will deliver massive ecological and associated social crises and undermine the prosperity and growth [it] is intended to provide....”⁸ It did not help that the negotiating style at the COP15 meeting, i.e., of making compromises at the international level and thereafter persuading and selling the idea to constituents at home, went against every fiber of Chinese policy making.⁹ Hence, China was described at the meeting as “enigmatic and obstructive.”¹⁰ It reportedly delayed moving the discussions to working groups and plenaries, stood its ground in requiring the deletion of certain targets from the negotiating texts, and its top representatives were noticeably absent in some high-level sessions. In the end, the nonbinding outcome of the meeting suited China’s interests because it could neither be required to make extra compromises in terms of new verifiable measures or targets, nor could it be accused of turning its back on international commitments.

By the time of the COP21 meeting in Paris in 2015, China did a complete turn. Overall, COP21 was seen as a success and among the facilitating conditions were underlying economic realities that allowed the change to a lower-carbon world feasible, the spirit of compromise of the member states, and the role played by France.¹¹ By this time, China’s strategy of high investment, strong export orientation, and energy-intensive manufacturing became unsustainable.¹² Environmentally, this exacerbated China’s energy insecurity. Its reliance on imports to run its coal-fired power and heavy industries, not to mention the increase in vehicle use in urban areas meant rising air pollution and the prevalence of haze, all of which have had huge impacts on public health. Economically, the over-capacity in energy intensive sectors diminished returns

⁸ Christoff 2010, 645.

⁹ Conrad 2012.

¹⁰ Christoff 2010.

¹¹ Kinley 2016.

¹² Green 2017.

on capital and thereby undermined competitiveness. Moreover, as the labor force changed as a ripple effect of the previously implemented One Child Policy, a realization that a shift to industries that have higher value-added and higher wages must likewise take place. This means the need to invest more in the services sector. The biggest tradeoff, however, was social because while the export-oriented strategy and the emphasis on heavy industrial sectors lifted people out of poverty, it nonetheless increased urban-rural inequalities and social divisions, as well as inequalities between regions where growth was concentrated in the eastern coastal cities. Against this backdrop, China implemented the “new normal:” an economic strategy focused on better quality growth by implementing structural changes that would permit an estimated 7 per cent growth per annum over the next five years.¹³ The new climate mitigation strategy shifted the balance of growth away from heavy-industrial investment and toward domestic consumption. This also enabled innovation as a means of raising productivity and climbing up the global value chain. Inevitably, this could reduce inequalities, air pollution, and greenhouse-gas emissions substantially. Hence, this new domestic output implied a change in China’s foreign policy: not only did it allow China to adopt a more cooperative posture in international climate negotiations, but it also became the default leader and rule-shaper on climate change. The United States’ withdrawal from the Paris Agreements in 2017 solidified China’s position.

This turn of events then begs the question of why – and how – China changed its tune. We acknowledge that the core manifestation of China’s new stance is the shift to the “new normal.” We argue, however, that the key driver of change is China’s effective securitization of climate change. The concept of securitization is central to the

¹³ Green and Stern 2015.

Copenhagen School and hinges on the rhetorical structure of how an issue is argued and presented as an existential threat. Its main contribution is that it highlights the importance of agenda setting and persuasion. In making climate mitigation the top priority, China has successfully securitized climate change. However, this is distinct from the usual persuasion processes that the Copenhagen School spoke of in that climate change mitigation was not an end goal for China, but only an instrument to promote other policy priorities. Also, China's experience shows that the process did not include (democratic) deliberation, much less the approval of an audience. Our paper examines this "distorted" but no less strategic securitization process and we posit that China managed to put climate change on top of the agenda because addressing the issue allowed it to achieve other security goals.

We develop our argument as follows. The next section puts the concept of securitization into context by looking at it as a pragmatic approach and as a situated interactive activity. The concept is broken down into three "faces:" context, agency, and audience. The theoretical section then forms the backdrop of our empirical case study, which centers on how China's new preferences in the global climate regime, as well as its behavior in environmental and climate policymaking, shape its emerging role in the international system. The empirical part of the article applies the three faces of securitization. In terms of context, we examine the socio-political and socio-linguistic aspects of China's climate mitigation efforts. In this sense, China as the agent securitized climate mitigation by actively coupling mitigation technologies, such as renewable energy and energy efficiency technologies, with China's global economic competitiveness. The same can be said about China's sustainable low carbon transformation or transition process. The audience may be seen here as having been

bypassed or dropped altogether because the emergence of new sociotechnical narratives that promote sustainable low carbon transformation has paved the way for new concepts of institutional and functional interactions, such as urban entrepreneurialism and urban clusters (*chengshiqun*). Hence, the specific circumstances of the context and the active role of the agent converge in the creation of a new set of dynamics, which thereby diminishes the necessity of an audience's approval. We conclude our paper by highlighting that the need for democratic processes has become less relevant because securitization serves the same purpose and function as democratic deliberation, i.e., legitimacy and identity.

Strategic Securitization

The concept of securitization is central to the Copenhagen School whose most well-known application is in *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*.¹⁴ As the Copenhagen School emerged on the heels of the end of the Cold War, its aim was initially to widen the security agenda to include sectors and issues other than the military. The thrust, therefore, was to highlight not only that risks and threats go beyond military affairs, but also that what is at stake or what needs to be protected (the referent object) is not always *only* the state. For instance, in the political sector, it is principles like sovereignty or ideology whose security must be guaranteed. Firms are the most common referent objects in the economic sector, while large-scale collective identities are at risk in the societal sector. Meanwhile, the environmental sector presents a vast range of referent objects, from individual species to habitats to complex ecosystems. Taken together, the logic behind the Copenhagen School is to offer a means

¹⁴ Waever 1989, 1995; Buzan, Waever and de Wilde 1998.

by which threats, whether military or non-military, can be construed and presented as such so that the necessary measures can be taken to address them. This is where the concept of securitization comes in.

Securitization must be understood as an extreme version of politicization. Thinking of a spectrum is useful here. On one end is where issues are non-politicized and are not part of public debate and decision. In the middle is where issues are politicized, which means that they have entered the public domain of public policy and are thus subject to government decision and resource allocations. The other end is where issues are securitized, where they are presented as a clear and present danger (or an existential threat, to use the Copenhagen School's vocabulary). As such, these issues require emergency measures and decisions that go beyond the normal bounds of politics.

How an issue moves from one end of the spectrum to another is the purview of the Copenhagen School. Ideally, issues should remain in the middle of the spectrum where "normal" politics takes place. However, depending on certain circumstances, an agent can present an issue as an existential threat, thereby breaking the "normal" rules of the game and shifting the issue to the securitized end of the spectrum where emergency measures are crucial in order to address the threat. An agent can do this by framing the urgent character of the issue: "If we do not tackle this problem, everything else will be irrelevant (because we will not be here or will not be free to deal with it in our own way)."¹⁵ In this sense, an issue need not necessarily be a real threat, only that it be presented as such. What completes the securitization process is if the audience legitimizes the necessity of launching emergency measures to address the threat.

¹⁵ Buzan, Waever and de Wilde 1998, 24.

The Copenhagen School's rhetoric of existential threat hinges on what in language theory is called a speech act, where "the utterance itself is the act."¹⁶ By designating an issue as a security issue, an agent therefore brings exceptionalist politics into play.¹⁷ The initiation of this move implies two things: that the existing normative order is unable to cope with the existential threat, and that sanctioning emergency and exceptional measures is the only available option. Jef Huysmans describes the weight of speech acts thus: "Speech acts of security enact a sharp distinction between the exceptional and the banal, the political and the everyday, the routine and creative."¹⁸ While speech acts form the backbone of the move towards securitization, it is also the very notion of speech acts that is the Copenhagen School's Achilles heel.

The reliance on speech acts is problematic for several reasons. First, language forms only one part of an entire gamut of means through which meaning is communicated.¹⁹ While some scholars advocate the use of images or visual representation, others urge looking at "little security nothings" or everyday, mundane practices that are involved in the process of securitization.²⁰ Equally important in the form of constructing security is the question of whose voice, whose speech act matters.

Second, for a speech act to resonate, there has to be a set of "felicity circumstances" or facilitating conditions. The inherent logic here assumes a fixed and permanent causality for a given external materiality, which is inconsistent with the supposed role of language in the securitization process.²¹ Thus, the context in which the securitization process is launched is always situated in the moment of intervention.

¹⁶ Ibid., 26.

¹⁷ Huysmans 1998, 2006.

¹⁸ Huysmans 2011, 375.

¹⁹ McDonald 2008.

²⁰ Hansen 2011; Möller 2007; Williams 2003; Bigo 2002; Huysmans 2011.

²¹ Stritzel 2007.

Despite calls to the contrary, the starting point of any analysis involving securitization is therefore only a snapshot, a static picture captured at the right time, instead of a fluid and dynamic process.

Third, the Copenhagen School underspecifies the ability of agents to distort the securitization process. Since agents initiate the process by using speech acts to frame issues as security issues, they can just as easily persuade audiences of certain versions of reality that can suit their (the agents') purposes. Similarly, the Copenhagen School is also ambiguous about frame contests or situations where more than one interpretation is offered on the table.²² In other words, the nature of the securitization process underscores the normative underpinnings of agents' actions. The designation of threats and the call for emergency measures imply the presence and existence of threatening "others," not to mention the perpetuation of arbitrary lines that separate "us" from "them." The Copenhagen School therefore remains committed to "strict boundaries of inclusion and exclusion; to the state and state political leaders' centrality in defining (usually external) threats and responses to them; and to the association of security means and tools with the most significant of 'emergency measures:' military action."²³ The normative problem here is that paradoxically, the Copenhagen School reifies and normalizes the usual statist, exclusionary, and militaristic approaches to security that it purportedly aims to overcome.

Overall, the shortcomings of the concept of securitization are due to its being disconnected from a wider set of dynamics. Moreover, extant literature highlights addressing the existential threat as the end goal of the securitization process. In the case of China and its efforts to mitigate the effects of climate change, securitizing the climate

²² Payne 2001.

²³ McDonald 2008, 579.

was not an end goal but an instrument to promote other policy priorities. This deft maneuver can only be captured if we locate the securitization process as a tool of analysis within a bigger framework that involves not just the agent's use of speech acts, but also the context in which the agent is in contact with the audience. This embedded understanding of securitization is based on Thierry Balzacq's analysis on the three faces of securitization, a pragmatic approach to security that is rooted in the effective integration of the context, the agent, and the audience.²⁴

An integrated approach to security begins with an understanding of the context. However, contrary to the Copenhagen School's focus on an internalist approach, i.e., on the power of language and speech acts alone, a pragmatic framework of securitization combines this with an externalist approach, i.e., that the success of the securitization process is contingent on the environment in which it is launched. This entails looking at the semantic repertoire of security. Holger Stritzel's distinction between the socio-linguistic and socio-political dimensions of context is useful here.²⁵ The former is knowledge of an issue that is acquired through language. This refers to the network of constitutive rules and narratives that are embedded in a speech act. Agents use various methods in this regard – analogies, similes, metaphors, comparisons – in order to frame their arguments. Meanwhile, the socio-political dimension of context concerns the more entrenched structures that place agents in power positions to influence the process of securitization and more broadly, the construction of meaning. In our analysis of the context, we look at the socio-political aspect of China's climate mitigation efforts and find that several factors – including the lack of a trickle-down effect to the masses, the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic in 2003, the economic slowdown

²⁴ Balzacq 2005, 2010.

²⁵ Stritzel 2007.

in 2007, and the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement in 2017 – colored China’s decision to become the leader of the international climate regime. On the other hand, the socio-linguistic context underscores China’s rhetoric of welfare, legitimacy, and eco-civilization, which shaped the direction of the “new normal.”

Second, an approach that integrates the agent must take into account the concept of positional power. Not entirely dissimilar from the socio-political dimension of context discussed above, positional power underscores the extent to which certain agents are in specific positions of power that permit them significant influences in collective meaning constructions. Positional power can be exercised directly, such as in a monopoly of defining meanings within a society, or indirectly through a social or political structure or process. In applying this in our analysis, we examine the dynamics of China’s domestic politics and posit that the “new normal” is an outcome of a power struggle between and amongst the many elements within China. This therefore facilitated the easy coupling of mitigation technologies with China’s global economic competitiveness. The outcome of the power struggle shows the co-benefits of achieving the aims of climate protection. In addition, sustainable development and climate protection have motivated the gradual modification of the social contract, which hinged on sociotechnical narratives.

Finally, the third leg in this triad of an integrated and pragmatic approach to securitization is the audience. Vaguely elucidated in the Copenhagen School but no less important, the audience is far from passively acquiescing to the persuasive powers of the agent. Instead, the audience actively renders two kinds of support: formal and moral. While moral support forms the backbone of formal sanction, and while formal sanction carries more gravitas when it has moral support, the two are not one and the

same. China's experience depicts the absence of formal support, as exemplified by the lack of democratic processes, and the presence of moral support as exemplified by the legitimacy rendered to the current regime despite the prevalence of undemocratic practices. While the clout of moral support is strong, it is insufficient by itself. As such, China needs to find a way to sustain this.

Thus far, the discussion has centered on the Copenhagen School's conception of the process of securitization and its shortcomings. In order to overcome these, a pragmatic approach that integrates the context, the agent, and the audience is better positioned to capture the dynamic process of securitization, as well as China's successful securitization of climate change in order to achieve other policy priorities. It is to this that the discussion now turns.

China and Climate Change Mitigation

China's experience in climate change mitigation is a unique case study that challenges existing views. For example, despite being an authoritarian regime, civil society groups beat the odds and still manage to influence policy making, which implies the decoupling of consensus-building from deliberative democracy.²⁶ In addition, as the Chinese government has discovered the opportunities of integration into global value chains, it aims to contribute to higher value-added production by improving the quality and relevance of innovation in the country, a move that has provided formal and moral support to the authoritarian regime.²⁷ This is again contrary to established notions that legitimacy can only be obtained via the usual democratic processes. By no means does

²⁶ Arias-Maldonado 2007; Baber and Bartlett 2005; Elster 1998.

²⁷ OECD 2017.

this entail a blanket justification for authoritarian regimes around the world. Rather, China's experience seems to validate the Machiavellian adage that the ends do indeed justify the means: civil society participation and regime legitimacy are not necessarily predetermined by democratic structures and practices alone.

A similar logic operates in China's experience with climate change. China effectively securitized climate change, but it did so not necessarily because it champions the protection of the environment. Instead, it engaged in climate securitization because doing so allows it to engineer the next phase of its economic growth. Equally interesting is how China's securitization of the climate was initiated and implemented without the explicitly expressed approval of its domestic constituents, and yet it is still leading the international climate change regime. This is baffling insofar as the Copenhagen School is concerned, not least because the audience plays a critical role in the successful securitization of any issue. The following analysis then is framed against the three faces of securitization in order to illustrate how China managed to combat climate change even at the expense of bypassing the audience.

Context

In order to understand how China securitized climate change, a discussion of the socio-political and socio-linguistic contexts is necessary. The socio-political context refers to structures that color meaning-making in a society. In the context of China and climate change, five factors contribute to the overall socio-political context. First, China's high economic growth has not been translated to the trickling down of wealth to a huge portion of the population. Income inequality has continuously increased and

oftentimes led to popular unrest. Second, the SARS epidemic in 2003 spurred the government and the urban Chinese population to expand the welfare system as the negative externalities of unaffordable healthcare became visible.²⁸ Similarly, around the time of the Beijing Olympics in 2008, the Chinese leadership has recognized the environmental effects of three decades of an economic growth that was built on high carbon energy technologies. The social, economic and health impacts of air pollution in major cities, loss of biodiversity, the water crisis, and soil contamination have created a sense of political urgency. These impacts on environmental degradation, as well as the adverse impacts on climate change are seen as threats to economic well-being. Third, additional concerns have emerged as the pace of China's economic growth in terms of real growth of GDP has slowed down since 2007 (from 14.2 per cent in 2007 to 9.4 per cent in 2009 to 7.9 per cent in 2012 to 6.7 per cent in 2016).²⁹ In light of the 2007 financial crisis and the threat of economic recession in China, the Chinese leadership recognized the necessity to restructure the economy to reduce dependency on export and boost domestic demand. To achieve this, a whole range of policies have been designed and implemented that aim to support economic growth while at the same time producing benefits to social welfare.³⁰

The fourth revolves around the Paris Agreements, which China ratified in September 2016. The Chinese government has identified and centered its policies to reach its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDCs) goals. The important elements of its NDC include peak CO₂ emissions by 2030 or earlier, if possible, the reduction of carbon intensity of its GDP by 60 per cent to 65 per cent below 2005 levels by 2030, the increase of the share of non-fossil energy sources in the total primary energy supply to

²⁸ Li 2013.

²⁹ National Bureau of Statistics of China 2017.

³⁰ Li 2013.

around 20 per cent by 2030, and the increase of the forest stock volume by around 4.5 billion cubic meters (40 million hectares forest coverage) by 2020 compared to 2005 levels. Nevertheless, while the policies and intended actions of the Chinese government can be adequate to enable China to overachieve its NDC as well as its national targets, the Chinese NDC is seen as not ambitious enough to be consistent with holding warming to below 2°C as required by the Paris Agreement, and is instead consistent with warming between 3°C and 4°C.³¹ However, while China is currently the biggest source of CO₂ emissions with around 30 per cent, followed by the United States with 15 per cent,³² its emissions are only half of US emissions on a per capita basis. In addition, most of China's emissions are attributed to manufactured goods exported to the US and other European countries. Moreover, based on historical CO₂ emissions, US climate-damage responsibility is twice as much that of China, even without normalizing for population. Most importantly, China's emissions have been stabilized and are now constant over the last three years.³³

Fifth, despite the withdrawal of the United States from the Paris Agreement, one of the silver linings is that it set the stage for China's commitment. Arguably, with China's current efforts to consolidate itself as a world power, its policies and actions towards low carbon transformation will be more ambitious after the US withdrawal because it can dominate the supply market for low carbon goods and technologies, possibly by defining the rationales behind new standards and indicators of verification

These five elements constitute the socio-political context and set the stage for China's securitization of climate change. On the other hand is the socio-linguistic

³¹ Climate Action Tracker 2017.

³² Marland, Boden and Andres 2017.

³³ Carbon Tax Center 2017.

context, i.e., the series of speech acts and language games that China deployed to make sense of the socio-political context. This is not dissimilar to the concept of a tolerable window, which is a set of rhetoric and narratives that frame actions to help plan, coordinate and evaluate decisions and actions to address climate change.³⁴ The tolerable window is a synthesis of rhetoric and narratives that aim to guide the activities of actors. It also links, for example, climate protection actions to other priority goals, thereby allowing a more comprehensive context.

Linking the need to address climate change with the idea of welfare is one element of the socio-linguistic context. For example, the national development strategy in 2002 shifted the priority from economic efficiency to welfare policies and considerations of fairness.³⁵ In other words, policies that aim to promote sustainable development and climate protection and that are often perceived as undermining economic growth are now getting the attention of reformers.

Another aspect of the socio-linguistic context is the link between climate mitigation and sustaining and enhancing China's global economic competitiveness, which is crucial in rendering the current political regime legitimate. The Chinese government understands that, based on the examples of South Korea and Japan, its next phase of economic development will need to involve a significant upgrading of its capacity to produce advanced and higher value technologies. After decades of seeing climate protection as a stumbling block that undermines its economic development or that emissions are merely a matter of international diplomacy rather than environmental sustainability, China has finally acknowledged that by joining the global

³⁴ Bruckner, Petschel-Held and Toth 1998.

³⁵ Li 2013.

trend of low-carbon transition, it can further expand its political legitimacy.³⁶ A parallelism can be drawn here. After a political crisis in the 1980s when intellectuals were able to draw upon the traditionalist collective narrative of corruption to blame the communist leadership for social problems, the Chinese government and the state-controlled media revised the narratives of corruption. In the 1990s, the role of the state has evolved and was then no longer understood as a moral or ideological leader, but as an economic manager. As Carolyn L. Hsu argues, the Chinese leadership managed not only to control the corruption crisis, but it has also found an effective channel of ensuring political legitimacy – economic prosperity.³⁷ With the slowing economic growth in China by the mid-2000s, the leadership has become more open to new policies that could sustain this economic growth and likewise legitimize the current political order.

The third element of the socio-linguistic context is the concept of eco-civilization, which was introduced in the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China as a new model of modernization of harmonious man-nature development. It sets the new framework for present and future strategies on planning to conform to world trends. China already has the world's biggest installed capacity of wind and solar power, and its climate policies are embedded in its current five-year economic plan. With China's slowing economic growth, the Chinese government has identified the potentials of expanding its dominance in low carbon technologies, which can serve as an engine to fuel the next phase of its economic growth. In 2016, China invested US\$102.9 billion in renewable energy and installed half of the world's new wind power, as its coal

³⁶ Aden and Sinton 2006.

³⁷ Hsu 2001.

consumption has peaked and begun to decline.³⁸ The eco-civilization vision was further translated into action including the restoration of decimated forests, efforts to stop the expansion of the Gobi-desert, and the promotion of electric mobility and eco-friendly urbanization. The most recent plan to realize this vision is the 4,500 km long Green Wall of China, which is a huge ring of newly planted forests. This program is planned to be completed by 2050 and aims to stabilize the soil, retain moisture and act as buffer against further desertification.³⁹

China's reforms and opening-up drive have catalyzed a series of transformations in society, economy and politics.⁴⁰ Massive investments were executed, including in the transport network and urban power supply. It can be argued that this massive investment in the transportation sector has subsequently promoted modes of transportation that are run by electricity. After almost ten years of investment and upgrade of infrastructures, from that point on, policies and decisions tend to favor renewable energies, because renewables are, with the availability of appropriate infrastructures, more attractive than fossil fuels. The modernization of the urban power supply of major Chinese cities has defined a stable and promising domestic energy demand, which increasingly prefers renewable energies.

In addition, with the slowing of the GDP, the Chinese leadership has accepted the need to gradually define economic growth with industrial quality and efficiency promotion to accelerate the adjustment of economic structures leading to the shift from a factor- and investment-driven into an innovation-driven growth.⁴¹ With huge investment and upgrades already conducted more than ten years ago, which effectively

³⁸ Barbi, Ferreira and Guo 2016; Carbon Tax Center 2017; He 2016.

³⁹ BBC 2001; Petri 2017.

⁴⁰ Huang 2014.

⁴¹ He 2016.

disentangled several carbon lock-ins, China can now actively promote the transformation of its economic development pattern, supply-side structural reform of the energy system, and domestic consumption behavior to achieve a sustainable low carbon system while building and further expanding its core competitiveness. Moreover, the central government seeks to address the backward and over capacity of high energy consuming industries.⁴²

In sum, the socio-political and socio-linguistic contexts frame China's efforts to securitize climate change. It is precisely because these structures are in place that significantly shaped the trajectory and eventual success of various agents within the Chinese government and society to place climate change at the top of the agenda. The next section examines the positional power of these agents.

Agent

"Change agents" have found specific positions of power that have allowed them to significantly influence constructions of meanings and new narratives. As the implementation of the "new normal" proceeds, new channels and levels of inclusion of different types of policy entrepreneurs into the country's policy-making emerge. As new impulses enable innovation as a means of raising productivity, the securitization of climate protection as well as of sustainable development has been significantly contingent on providing policy entrepreneurs space without undermining the stability of the Chinese regime.

⁴² Ibid.

Authoritarian regimes are often defined by the exclusivity of important political positions. Eidetic recruitment of the political elite is a major characteristic of their bureaucracies (e.g., a military regime with military personnel holding positions). The selection to the elite is rather defined mainly by political loyalty. While this is in principle also the case in China, where only members of the Communist Party can hold government positions, recruitment to the political elite in China has further developed, where the criteria of selection are now evolving on efficiency while pursuing the inclusion of ethnic minorities into the political elite. There are additional factors that transcend party membership that determine one's recruitment. Furthermore, as Andrew Mertha confirms, the policy-making process in China has become increasingly pluralized with barriers to entry lowered, thereby allowing opportunities for policy entrepreneurs to influence the process by framing issues, identifying agenda for deliberation, as well as providing inputs for solutions.⁴³ In the last three decades, the Chinese leadership has instilled rules and norms into its elite selection process, prioritizing qualification and efficiency through nascent institutional mechanisms.⁴⁴ Such mechanisms include the formal institutionalization of the inclusion of ethnic minority cadres through the Law of Ethnic Minority Autonomous Areas of the PRC. The Law stipulates that the top post in the local government in all ethnic minority autonomous areas (from the township level to the provincial level) should be held by a leader from the same ethnic minority background as the majority of citizens in that area.⁴⁵

The academic literature on the selection of China's political elite identifies *guanxi*, the network-based system of favor exchange, as the major principle that drives

⁴³ Mertha 2009.

⁴⁴ Li and Yiou 2017.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

political, economic and social interactions.⁴⁶ While *guanxi* is a “fixed essentialized phenomenon,” new legal and commercial regimes motivate its adaptation to new social institutions and structures.⁴⁷ In addition to formal rules, there are informal rules particularly when selecting candidates for top positions that intend to circumvent *guanxi*. For example, in the six CCP Central Committees that have formed since the 13th Party Congress in 1987, ethnic minorities have been represented in the committee (between 10 per cent to 11 per cent of the membership). In addition, the seven-member Politburo is itself responsible for selecting new members.⁴⁸ Due to the informal rules adhered to by Politburo members, social connections and personal ties reduce the likelihood of being selected to the Politburo. For example, officials will be required to recuse themselves from evaluating candidates from their own regions or those who have connections to them like college ties.⁴⁹

Reforms in governance and other structural changes have further supported the creation of the new political elite. The concept of elite dualism has defined the Chinese system of governance. The division of labor between the CCP and the government in governance has led to two distinctive career paths. While candidates for elite positions in the CCP are screened for technical qualifications and political credentials, those candidates for government positions are screened more vigorously for their human capital. In addition, promotion in the government system is more dependent on efficiency compared to promotions in the CCP hierarchy.⁵⁰ This elite dualism can be identified as conducive to any transformation process that requires the technical expertise of policy-makers.

⁴⁶ Chen and Chen 2004.

⁴⁷ Yang 2002.

⁴⁸ Shirk 2012.

⁴⁹ Fisman, et al. 2017.

⁵⁰ Zang 2004.

The selection of the political elite in China can be seen as comparable to best practices in democratic countries. While it can be interpreted that these provisions are designed for propaganda purposes, they also promote efficiency as social connections are increasingly limited by both formal and informal practices. In general, this development is not only beneficial in ensuring the long-term political legitimacy of the regime, but this also supports low carbon transformation, as new recruits acting as “change agents” can provide the needed out-of-the-box thinking. China’s new political elite has now a better understanding of politics, economics, social issues and technologies compared with its past leadership.⁵¹

While authoritarian regimes in general dominate institutional, functional and bargaining interactions simply through their omnipresence with government agencies playing a very significant role in planning and implementation of policies in all levels of governance, current dynamics of Chinese politics reveal the development of an enabling environment allowing “change agents” such as NGOs and entrepreneurs to promote transformation towards sustainability. Past reforms have significantly moved China away from a strict center-to-periphery and top-down style of governance. Rather than being a monolithic system, China’s governance of science, innovation, and environmental decision-making has been characterized by fragmented authoritarianism, with protracted bargaining between bureaucracy units, including ministries, advisory bodies and top-level National Leading Groups as well as fragmentation between levels of government.⁵² Moreover, as Guobin Yang suggests, the success of organizational entrepreneurs in mobilizing resources underscores the multi-institutional dynamics of civil society development without underestimating state-

⁵¹ Khan 2013.

⁵² Heggelund 2009; Tyfield, Ely and Geall 2015; Mertha 2009.

centered and market-centered explanations.⁵³ As such, environmental NGOs are able to perform as agents of social change in China. An example of a structural change refers to how local governments have re-invented themselves and how they sought partnership with business companies to promote local development. However, this development in China can also be understood as a measure of regaining competencies that have increasingly been outsourced by the state following the opening of markets to international business actors. Some scholars claim that the formation of city-region governance is a deliberate process of scale building, which involves both state and non-state actors.⁵⁴ Beibei Tang claims that successful village collective shareholding companies in rural areas play a leading role in community governance by providing villagers with economic and social welfare, and subsidizing community administration services.⁵⁵ Moreover, the “not rural but not urban” governance mode of Chinese urban villages illuminates dynamics of state-society relations, allowing “change agents” promoting sustainable development and climate protection to influence the construction of meanings relevant for constituting political rhetoric and narratives. In addition, the re-emergence of city-region governance can be understood as a direct reaction to globalization. As Neil Brenner’s research on state spatiality describes, the rise of regional governance can be broadly understood as a process of state reterritorialization, and the specific form of the city-region as state spatial selectivity, which means that a specific scale has been chosen or built by the state.⁵⁶

In many areas such as Kunshan, a small city around 60 kilometers west of Shanghai, the formation and transformation of urban entrepreneurialism have

⁵³ Yang 1999.

⁵⁴ Jonas and Ward 2016; Harrison and Hoyler 2014.

⁵⁵ Tang 2015.

⁵⁶ Brenner 1999; Brenner 2004.

facilitated economic devolution, paving the way for such areas to break out from the institutional constraint under state socialism and innovatively promoted further devolution formally and informally from the state towards the development zone and town governance.⁵⁷ Local and city governments started to transform themselves into market-friendly agents whose key goals are to form an alliance with more investors to promote local economic development.⁵⁸ The functionality of city governments is changed from mainly social welfare deliverer to economic development promoter. This change has further cemented the prioritization of economic efficiency in the grassroots levels.

Furthermore, as an indirect consequence of increased competition among cities, urban governance has become more cooperative with other neighboring administrations under certain regional coordination by upper-level governments. The concept of urban clusters (*chengshiqun*) has been revived and included as part of the agenda of government policies either to build stronger coalitions for regional competitiveness or to solve the over-concentration of growth in large central cities.⁵⁹ Particularly because of the limits of economies of scale, local governments have opted to share and combine resources to maximize benefits. Interestingly, the resurgence of urban clusters in China has been highlighted as an effective policy to solve environmental problems. For example, in an effort to find solutions to the problems of smog and population over-concentration, Xi Jinping in 2014 suggested a regional approach to the future development of Beijing in the capital region (Jing-Jin-Ji), which led to further discussions about city-region governance.⁶⁰ In March 2015, the central

⁵⁷ Chien and Wu 2011.

⁵⁸ Tang 2015.

⁵⁹ Yao, Chan and Zhu 1992; Wu 2016.

⁶⁰ Wu 2016.

government approved the outline of the Jing-Jin-Ji Collaborative Development Plan, which indicated that the notion of the urban cluster had become an official term in governance and had become popularized. In May 2016, the State Council approved the Yangtze River Delta Urban Cluster Development Plan.⁶¹

This newly evolved state-led coordinative and collaborative urban entrepreneurialism is regarded as one of the most important principles for China's market transition.⁶² While many villages still adhere to strong local corporatism, where family and kin members control local enterprises, the trend demonstrates more leasing of collectively owned enterprises to private actors.⁶³ In addition, in contrast to market logic, Chinese state-owned companies, which account for 80 per cent of the stock market, tend to be more receptive to "indigenous innovation" (*zizhu chuangxin*) mainly because of this state control.⁶⁴ This confirms the limited ability of agents to distort the securitization of climate protection and sustainable development.

As the central, regional, and local governments release new policy goals such as moving up the value chain, state owned companies will tend to be willing to sacrifice profit-making in order to internalize such policy goals. Furthermore, with the reform on elite selection in place, government units are now technically able to effectively design and implement local development. The new self-identification as an entrepreneurial state, the Chinese central, regional, and local governments are not only driving research and development investment in strategic green sectors, they are also constructing a market for innovation and in building the skilled workforce required to

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Oi 1995.

⁶³ Heggelund 2009; Chien and Wu 2011.

⁶⁴ Huang 2014.

serve emerging ideas of eco-innovation.⁶⁵ Furthermore, the asymmetric transformation of the political and economic spheres in China involve the partly decentralization of economic decision-making, while the political system remains centralized and promotion is based on the evaluation of the economic performance of their jurisdictions.⁶⁶

Audience

The socio-political and socio-linguistic contexts on one hand, and the positional power of the state and non-state agents on the other, converge to the extent that the approval of the domestic audience is either bypassed or glossed over. In fact, set against the backdrop of an authoritarian regime like China, one can even argue that the audience be dropped from the analytical picture altogether. Of course, a counter-argument in defense of the Copenhagen School can be that regardless of the authoritarian nature of the Chinese regime, the domestic audience must have nevertheless given their approval to securitize climate change, albeit tacitly. Indeed, it is clear that China's audience has given their moral, but not necessarily formal, support. Even so, the ambiguity surrounding the role of the audience in this instance poses a challenge to the internal logic of the securitization process, something that critics have no doubt pointed out in the past. Hence, the tenuous role of the domestic audience in China's case validates the shortcomings of the linearity of the securitization process.

The vagueness of the role of the domestic audience notwithstanding, the international audience has given their explicit approval of China's "new normal" and its

⁶⁵ Mazzucato 2013; Tyfield, Ely and Geall 2015.

⁶⁶ Chien and Wu 2011.

new role in the international climate change regime. Within the strict parameters of the Copenhagen School therefore, an approval by an audience – no matter how broadly defined – was nonetheless given and hence, China’s experience epitomizes a successful case of securitization. Indeed, even taking into consideration the contributions of the Copenhagen School’s critics, China’s case meets the requirements of a more nuanced and pragmatic version of the securitization process that takes into account the strength of the context, the central role of the agent, and the crucial function of the audience.

Conclusion

The article began with the premise that China shifted its stance from being the biggest polluter to the leader of the international climate change regime. We argued that this change is largely due to its securitization of climate change. Our analysis reveals that China’s securitization is unique in two ways: that it was used as a stepping stone to achieve other policy priorities, and that the crucial role of the audience is bypassed. We conclude by emphasizing that even if democratic processes have not been strictly followed in this case, China has nevertheless achieved regime legitimacy through the moral support of its domestic constituents and the formal support of its international partners. Far from being an apologist of non-democratic regimes, our paper uncovers that all roads, so to speak, lead to Rome. Whatever detours, reroutes, or means China took to achieve the mitigation of climate change becomes, in this context, justified.

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