

'Reflexive Expectations' in EU-China Relations: A Media Analysis Approach*¹

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The fast developing relationship between the European Union (EU) and China during the past three decades has been regarded both as indicative of an emerging 21st century axis in the West (Shambaugh, 2004), and as a move towards a mature, healthy and stable state in China (Dai 2005). Although some scholars still doubt how far this strategic partnership is real (Algieri, 2008; Holslag, 2011), there is no doubt that EU-China relations feature prominently in international politics. Nevertheless, since 2006 the partnership has not been going smoothly; it lacks mutual understanding (Men, 2009).

In this context, knowing how each side views the other is highly significant for the further development of bilateral relations. Since the mid-1990s, the EU has published six China policy papers, also known as *Communications* of the Commission, and two country strategies. These policy papers trace the evolution of EU's understanding and interpretation of China's development and change, together with the EU's strategies for its relations with China at the institutional level. But how can we learn China's views of this relationship and its attitudes towards EU's deepening integration process, international role and their partnership? China's two EU Policy Papers, published in 2003 and 2014, are certainly not sufficient to answer this

*1 I would like to thank Professor John Street, Dr. Lee Jarvis, and the three anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions.

question. Scattered speeches by high-level Chinese officials will not allow us to track continuity and change in thinking. In the circumstances, this article argues that for countries such as China, where the policy-making process is opaque, one of our methods can be to use their propaganda to help trace the changes in government thinking. The article aims to track Chinese government's expectations of the EU and EU-China relations through a media analysis approach in the hope of making three contributions to the existing literature: first, theoretically, developing a notion of 'Reflexive Expectations' to help understand the relationship; second, methodologically, demonstrating the value for International Relations of research methods developed within media studies; and third, empirically, complementing existing analyses of external understandings of the EU by providing a longitudinal study of Chinese perceptions.

'Reflexive Expectations' and China's changing national identity

In examining the EU's international role and foreign relations, Hill (1993) argues that the EU's capabilities in the international system are much more limited than the expectations of them due to its lack of substantial resources and problems in its political structure. He characterises this as the 'Capability-Expectations Gap' (CEG), and warned of its dangers (Hill, 1993, p.315). Although the gap was seen by 2008 to have narrowed, Toje (2008) further developed the concept of the CEG by arguing that the primary reason why the EU is still failing to deliver the foreign and security policies expected of it is the lack of decision-making procedures that can overcome dissent; therefore, while the consensus-expectations gap exists, the EU is likely to remain a partial and inconsistent foreign policy actor. The Lisbon Treaty may have

marked a new era in EU diplomacy, but the CEG has not as yet narrowed substantially.

In the case of EU's role in Asia, a rather different gap has been identified. According to Tsuruoka (2008), who examines EU's relations with Japan, the reason why EU-Japanese relations cannot flourish is because Japanese expectations of the EU are *too little*: the EU is perceived to be distant and ineffectual. Tsuruoka calls this the 'Expectation Deficit' (ED). The ED is seen as dominant in many other Asian countries too. In an examination of elite perceptions of the EU in three key ASEAN states, Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam, Wong (2012) maintains that they have a large expectation deficit in the political and military realms, juxtaposed with high expectations of the EU's capability in the economic arena.

The EU's relationship with China, however, is a different case. Like the Europeans themselves, the Chinese people have positive expectations of the EU as an international actor (European Commission, 2005). But this does not necessarily mean that the EU has become a stronger actor on the world stage or a closer partner of China. Regarding the EU as a major force in the world (China 2003) and as a strategic partner, China's expectations of the EU are not in deficit; but in foreign policy terms putting the EU on the secondary level (Yahuda, 1994; Holslag, 2011, p.309) suggests that China's expectations are not high. Most importantly, the expectations of the EU as an actor have constantly been re-examined and changed over time. Based on the social constructivist approach, this study argues that neither

CEG nor ED can directly apply to China's relations with the EU; instead, China holds 'Reflexive Expectations', which from time to time it adjusts.

Social constructivists contend that state identities and interests are central determinants of state behaviour (Wendt, 1992; Finnemore 1996). The identities of states emerge from their interactions with different social environments, both domestic and international (Katzenstein, 1996, p.2). Thus, state identities change and are intersubjective. In relations with the EU, China's national identity shapes how China sees itself and the EU as the 'other'. Since its economic reforms in 1978, China has come a long way, changing from a low-income country to the world's second largest economy, from a revisionist state to a status quo power, and from a passive participator in the world system to an active stakeholder in international society (Wong, 2013; Qin, 2010). As this process has continued, China's national identity has been redefined. Since changes in state identity affect the national security interests or policies of states (Jepperson et al, 1996, p.52), the redefinition of China's identity from an outsider to a participant in international society (Qin, 2010) influences its view and expectations of the EU. This process of developing expectations reflexively reveals how China has seen itself, the EU and the outside world over time; this process has continued to be shaped by China's changing national identity and interests and also by its perception of the EU's capability at various times and in various situations.

Although scholars have paid attention to the construction of China's national identity (see, Li and Xu, 2006; Qin, 2010) and have assessed how the changing identity may

have influenced bilateral relations between the EU and China (see, Men, 2006; Wong, 2013), empirical evidence, particularly from a systematic longitudinal study, has largely been absent. This is partly because the non-transparent political system adds to the difficulty of obtaining the data for international studies. To overcome this, this study suggests using a novel approach to this relationship, and employs a method from media studies. It uses media content and discourse analysis to examine, longitudinally, how the EU as an international actor and as China's partner is represented in its mouthpiece newspaper.

Government views on European countries and the Chinese news media

It has long been assumed that the Chinese news media are the 'loyal eyes, ears and tongue' of the Party-state (Chang, 1989, p.163). Despite globalization and commercialization, and media reform, the *nature* of Chinese media has not changed: they continue to serve the Party initiatives, notably, in terms of reporting foreign relations. Yao (2005, p.7), a former vice editor-in-chief of the Xinhua News Agency, defines the nature of Chinese foreign news coverage like this: '[o]ur foreign news reporting has a political nature, and it should embody the policies of the Party and the state. Above all those policies are diplomatic policy, propaganda policy and other related policies.'

In the past, a change in attitude of the Chinese government to the European Community (EC) could easily be seen through the media. During the first few years after the People's Republic of China was founded, Europe, and the European Economic Community (EEC) in particular, was regarded as a political entity

representing Western imperialist countries; an American ally and tool of the United States under Washington's control; and a political entity in the struggle between the two superpowers, the Soviet Union and the United States (Song, 2008; Editorial Group, 1973). A news story by *Ta Kung Pao* on the formation of the European Common Market reported that China saw it as 'dependent on the United States'.² With the change in geopolitical concerns in the 1960s, China started to see the Franco-German axis of EEC integration in an anti-American light. The *Peking Review* (now called *Beijing Review*) (1962, p.22), China's most reputable English language news magazine, reported this as a move to 'squeeze out US and British influences from western Europe'. After the Sino-Soviet split and above all in the 1970s, Beijing saw a united, militarily strong, US-linked and anti-Soviet Western Europe as a major guarantee of China's own security (Garver, 1993, p.105). The *Peking Review* started to run positive stories on the EEC's consolidation into the EC and on the enlargement into ten member states. For instance, between 1971 and 1973 the *Peking Review* argued that EC enlargement was 'another harsh blow to the tottering hegemony of EU imperialism in Western Europe and ... further isolated it'; it claimed that 'the enlargement of the Common Market is from many aspects a setback for the Soviet Union'; that the proposals on European Monetary Union 'reflect the desire of the West European countries to get rid of superpower domination and interference by strengthening unity', and so on (Scott, 2007, pp.218-9).

² *Ta Kung Pao*, 28 March 1957, cited in Scott (2007), pp.217-33.

With the deepening of EU integration and the EU's global role since the 1990s, how has China's attitude to, and view of, the EEC/EU as an international actor changed over time? With the development of bilateral relations, particularly the building of the so-called 'all-round strategic partnership', how does the Chinese government see this partnership, and what does the state expect from it? Unlike Brussels, politics in China is restricted to a small number of decision-makers, making it difficult to track the changes in the thinking of Chinese government on a regular basis. However, the political nature of the foreign news reporting by the Chinese state media enables us to understand the position that the Chinese government has taken.

Little research has focused on Chinese media representation of the EU, though much attention has been drawn to the perception of the EU among the Chinese public and a variety of other stakeholders (see, Men, 2006; Zhu, 2008; Dong et al, 2013). In 2006, the China work package of the 'EU through the Eyes of Asia' project, funded by the Asia-Europe Foundation and the National Centre for Research on Europe in New Zealand, monitored the coverage of the EU and ASEM in four media outlets, the *People's Daily*, the *International Finance News*, the *China Daily* and one news bulletin from *China Central Television (CCTV-1)*. In this study, Dai and Zhang (2007) found that the volume of EU stories was greatest in the *People's Daily* and smallest in the CCTV1 news bulletin; among those news stories only 18per cent reported the EU in its own context, 42per cent reported the EU in the context of a third country and 40per cent in the domestic context. Another study examined the reporting of the EU in the first half of 2006 by a local television station, and argued that the coverage of

the EU in news and cultural programmes in Shanghai television reflected the Chinese perception of the EU and the state of Sino-EU relations at that time (Li, 2007).

Unfortunately, these studies provided only a snapshot of the media presentation of the EU in China and cannot tell us about the changes, if any, in the media discourse of the EU or the government's expectations of, and attitude toward, the EU over time. The research presented here, in contrast, uses a longitudinal approach and pictures China's shifts in understanding and expectations of the EU by analysing the content of media representations and discourses as it changes over time.

Methodology and data results

The study derives from analysis of the media coverage of EU and EU-China relations in the *People's Daily* for a period of 26 years, from 1989 to 2014. The *People's Daily* is China's most politically important newspaper. Although different Chinese media outlet may yield some variations in the reporting of the EU, only the *People's Daily* can be described as most closely representing the government line. Hence, for the purposes of the study, which is to argue the Chinese government engaged in a 'reflexive expectations' approach to the EU over time, rather than analysing how the EU is represented in the Chinese media, the *People's Daily* was chosen. As Wu, a former senior editor in the International News Department of the newspaper claims, '[r]eaders can comprehend the Chinese government's diplomatic guidelines, foreign policies and the attitude to significant international issues at a certain time period by reading through the *People's Daily*. (2005, p.246)'

This study follows the constructivist approach adopted by Bretherton and Vogler (2006) and considers the three elements in being an actor ('actorness') - **presence**, **opportunity** and **capability** - which combine in varying ways to shape the representation/construction of the EU's external activities in Chinese news media. According to Bretherton and Vogler (2006, p.24), **opportunity** denotes factors in the external environment of ideas and events which constrain or enable actorness; it signifies the structural context of action. **Presence** conceptualizes the ability of the EU, by virtue of its existence, to exert influence beyond its borders. **Capability** refers to the internal context of the EU's external actions, particularly the availability of policy instruments and understanding the Unions' ability to utilize these instruments, in response to opportunity and/or to capitalize on presence.

1989 is chosen as the starting point because EU-China relations deteriorated to their lowest after the Tiananmen Square Incident. After years of downturn, bilateral ties started to warm in 2011 (Li and Ai, 2011), and in April 2014 China published its second EU policy paper. This marks a useful endpoint for the data collection.

The study sampled every 17th days from 1st January 1989 to 31st December 2014. The reason for this sampling interval was that (1) 7 days or multiples of 7 were not appropriate, since 7 days make up a week, (2) 17 days is nearly two and a half weeks; this meant that the research would sample about two days of a daily newspaper's output per month, which allows a reasonable quantity of data to be analysed for the purposes of the study. The sample includes 559 days altogether. Unlike the project mentioned above, the 'EU through the eyes of Asia' (Holland et al, 2007), which used

a key word search concerning the EU and collected all the stories containing the key words, including those only mentioning the EU in passing, this research did not use a key word search. It collected *all* the international news stories on the front page and the international news pages on the sampled days. In Holland and Chaban's project, only 18per cent collected stories reported the EU as their major focus, while the majority reported the EU as their secondary or minor focus, or mentioned the EU only in passing (Dai and Zhang, 2007). This method is of not much help when a discourse analysis is wanted. Therefore, the analysis in this study includes only those with the EU and European countries as their *main focus*.

For its quantitative analysis, the study collected 10,995 international news stories in total; among them 15.2per cent (1669 pieces) reported the EC/EU and its member states as their main focus. Other stories focused on the United States, Russia, Japan and other countries in the region, as well as international organizations such as the UN, NATO, and ASEAN, etc. Stories with the EU specifically and EU-China relations as their primary focus accounted for 3.2per cent (347 pieces) of the total of stories collected. This suggests that the attention drawn to the EC/EU by the *People's Daily* was limited, which is in accordance with the secondary importance given to the EU in China's foreign relations (Yahuda, 1994; Holslag, 2011, p.309). The quantitative media content analysis is limited to the data collected for the purposes of the study, but the qualitative analysis examines a wider range of articles published by the *People's Daily* over the period under survey. Moreover, interviews with Chinese journalists stationed in Brussels for the *People's Daily* and the Xinhua News Agency, and foreign officials on both sides are also used.

The data indicate that in China's most authoritative newspaper the EU has low visibility. This conforms to the findings from the China data in the 'EU through the eyes of Asia' project (Dai and Zhang, 2007), even though the two used different methods of data collection. However, the changing volume of news stories concerning the EU and EU member states in this longitudinal study reveals that, although the overall visibility of Europe (excluding Russia) declined over time, the presence of the EU remained relatively stable. This means that the proportion of EU stories to the total of stories on Europe increased, indicating the growing importance that China attached to the EU. To some extent, this reflects the increased expectation overall that China holds of the EU as a whole (Figure 1). In the next section, I analyse how China's 'reflexive expectations' of the EU are reflected in the *People's Daily* reports over time.

[Figure 1 about here]

Reflexive expectations of the EU as a pole in a multi-polar world

As early as November 1990, the *People's Daily* reported that over 50 Chinese experts in European Studies from academia and governmental institutions had gathered together in Beijing to discuss the structure of Europe after the unification of Germany and the future development of the EEC. Most experts in the conference agreed, according to the paper, that the structure of Europe was in transition and the strength of Europe depended on the deepening integration of the EEC. The

experts, it was reported, believed that with the collapse of the Yalta system and the weakening of the tension between the two superpowers would mean that the bipolar world structure would become multi-polar and Europe, with its increasing political and economic independence, could be one of the poles (Zhang, 1990). That is, the external environment provided an **opportunity** for a united Europe to become an actor in international politics, and China expected a more integrated and independent EEC to fulfil this role. This report to some extent defines the official Chinese view of Europe in the post-Cold War period. The follow-on reports on the EEC in the *People's Daily* strengthened this view. For instance, the Maastricht Treaty, which was designed to set up the mechanism of a political and economic supranational union of Europe, was salient in the 1992-3 coverage. 31per cent of EU reports in 1992 and 22per cent in 1993 related to the Treaty. The news stories also reported the difficulties that the Treaty encountered over the referendums in the member states. But the overall discourse stressed that the implementation of the Maastricht Treaty would make possible the **presence** of the EU as an international actor at the institutional level, and this would be the direction that Europe would take.

The search for a multi-polar world order fitted with China's national interests after the end of the Cold War. Following the Tiananmen Square Incident, the achievement of social and economic development and political stability had become the priority for the Chinese government. At the international level, a peaceful and stable international environment was crucial for China's development. China tried in the 1990s to involve itself in the international system through participation in

international economic, development, trade and financial organizations, such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade/World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the global private financial community (Lampton, 2001, p.9), though when it began, China was only a passive participant (Qin 2003). However, such involvement has not been easy because of the linkage made by Western countries (particularly the US) between trade issues and China's human rights record (see Copper, 1997; Kent, 1995; Baker, 2002). The US, as China's most significant market, a major investor of capital, technology and management skills as well as the single most decisive shaper and definer of the international system, is regarded as the most important country for China's peace and development in the international environment (Gong, 2004, p.168). The Chinese official line sees the source of international conflict as questions of hegemony and big-power politics and the US as the sole superpower acts like hegemony (Chan, 1999, p.131). For China, a better international order would be a multi-polar world, where it is one pole among others, rather than a world order dominated by the US. In contrast to the EU in Japan's expectation deficit (Tsuruoka, 2008), an integrated EU could in the Chinese leadership's eyes be 'a major force in the world' (China, 2003), which could at some future date join with China in resisting US hegemony.

The expectation of the EU's role as one pole in a multi-polar world shapes the media framing of the EU in two main ways: the EU as an economic power and trade actor and the EU as a political actor. These expectations occupy 39.5per cent and 40.3per cent respectively of the coverage across the 26 years under study. The third largest frames the EU as China's cooperative partner (13.8per cent), a prospect which is

discussed in the next section. The rest frame the EU as an environmental actor (3.5per cent), social actor (0.9per cent) and in other roles (2.0per cent). It is worth noting that the political framing of the EU exceeds its economic framing. This may indicate that China has a slightly higher expectation of the EU as a political actor than as an economic one. But this should be examined in more detail by focusing on the tone and discourse of the reporting. Below I examine how China's expectations of the EU's role as an economic power and trade actor and then as a political actor have changed over time, and also how these representations reflect the Chinese government's interests and national identity.

The EU as an economic power and trade actor

Over the period in question, the tone of the EU economic and trade stories varied greatly. China in the early 1990s did not seem to anticipate a fast growing European economy. The EEC's internal economic situation was reported in a negative tone, with a focus on the high level of unemployment and slow economic growth. This coverage, on the one hand, showed Europe's situation at the time, but, more importantly, the negative framing fitted the propaganda needs of the Chinese government. At first, after the Tiananmen Square Incident, all the new cooperative projects between China and Europe were postponed (Baker, 2002, p.49). The economic links between the two parties decreased, and this was not in the interests of either side. A negative media image of the European economy at the time would have been helpful: it might have calmed China's instability after the 1989 turmoil, particularly in a context in which the 'Chinese government takes economic

construction as the central task of the whole country and makes reform and opening up one of its basic state policies' (Ong, 2002, p.23).

Nevertheless, China expected to see the EU strengthened as an economic power and trade actor as a result of its successful economic integration. News stories about the creation of Europe's single market and European Economic Area (EEA) adopted a positive tone; and more than two-thirds of them spoke highly of the launch of the Euro. The *People's Daily* regarded the new currency as a symbol of the success of European economic integration, which, as the reports emphasized, would lead the EU to be the most powerful economic entity in the world. The launch of this unitary currency was not only reported as a crucial step in the development and integration of the EU *per se* (Liu and Yang, 1998), but more explicitly was expected to be of significance to the structure of the international finance system and to challenge the hegemony of the US dollar in the international financial market (See, Zheng and Zhang, 1999; Yao 2002). This expectation has continued and still guides China's holdings of foreign reserves. China, the world largest holder of foreign reserves, has between one-fifth and one-third of its currency portfolio in Euros, according to estimates, though the greatest share, between half and two-thirds, is in US Dollars (Hu, 2010, pp.8-9).

The expectation that the Euro would play a greater role in the world's financial markets faded during the 2008-9 global financial crises, most of all when it came to the Eurozone sovereignty debt crisis. The inconsistency of financial policies among member states was seen to weaken the EU's economic **capability**, whilst in the

meantime China itself rose as the world's second largest economy. The discourse about the EU's economic *presence* changed. Although the EU was still seen as an influential and powerful trading bloc for China and the world as a whole, the *People's Daily* gave the discourse a negative tone after 2008 (Figure 2).

[Figure 2 about here]

Nonetheless, we can see from this newspaper's coverage that China expected the EU to recover its economic buoyancy; it had confidence in the currency and the EU's *capability* to resolve the debt crisis. This crisis was presented only as a problem *within* the EU, not affecting its international role. The EU's various efforts to solve the problem were highly visible in the news. In some accounts, the attitude to the issue tended to be positive. This is shown from their headlines; for instance, 'Coordinating economic policies is fundamental' (Liu, 2010), 'Harmony and unity bring security' (Gu, 2010), 'The EU: first ensure stability, then seek development' (Liu et al, 2010), and so on.

The EU as a political actor

Among all the news stories concerning the EU's political integration, most coverage adopted a positive or neutral tone with only 10.3per cent negatively reporting the debates, arguments and negotiations accompanying the process. For the most of the time since 2001, the EU has represented a political story. This has changed only in the last five years when the focus has been on the Eurozone crisis (Figure 3). The positive media discourses about the Maastricht Treaty, the Amsterdam Treaty and the EU

enlargements portrayed the EU as a developing political union, indicating that internal political integration would strengthen the EU's *opportunity* and *presence* as a player in international politics. China had hopes, too, that the EU's *capability* would qualify it for this role. As a Chinese scholar declared, 'The enlargements of the EU give it new expectations in forming the world order' (Huo, 2004, p.50).

[Figure 3 about here]

From Bosnia-Herzegovina to Chechnya, from Kosovo to Palestine-Israel, from Iraq to Iran, from Libya to Syria, the EU has been highly visible in the news reporting. Positioning the EU as one pole in a multi-polar world, the framing of the EU as a political actor illustrated China's expectation of the EU's *capability*. Not only could the EU's voices frequently be heard, but, more explicitly, the newspaper tended to emphasize the EU whenever it took a different approach from that of the US, while still recognising that they were allies. Stories such as 'Western Countries Oppose US Cuba Sanction' (Xu, 1995), 'Situation in Kosovo: EU Criticizes US to Exaggerate the Crisis' (Zheng, 1998), 'Protocol: EU Asks US to Keep Promises' (Zhou and Zheng, 2001), and 'Latin America-EU Summit: Condemning US Solders' Prisoner Abuses' (Xu, 2004) suggested that China expected the EU to play a different role or to counterbalance the US, albeit to a limited extent, in international politics. 'Strategically, China wants the EU to be more powerful and integrated so that it can become a pole in the world, even though this might not necessarily mean that China and the EU would become politically closer,' said an EU correspondent at the Xinhua

News Agency. He continued: 'However, a powerful EU can dismantle the power of the US in the world.'³

Nonetheless, expectations of actorness are not the same as the effectiveness of actorness. In these stories, the EU had been represented as an *active* player rather than an *effective* player. The **presence** of the EU was often seen as weakened by the lack of consensus among the member states, resonating with Hill's CEG (1993) and Toje's consensus-expectation gap (2008). Although the EU's visibility in international affairs was high, China started to doubt its **capability** and the expectations declined steadily. The media coverage focused mainly on the EU's visibility, especially on the occasions when the EU's voices were shown to be different from those of the US, but China had low expectations of its effectiveness (see, Xu, 1995; Zheng, 1998). After the Lisbon Treaty, the most visible face of the EU even changed from the EU 'foreign minister' Ashton's to the German Chancellor Merkel's (Zhang and Loke, 2011) in the Chinese media representations of the EU.

Furthermore, the 2004 EU enlargement was much more intensively covered than the two earlier enlargements had been, with more background information, in-depth analysis and editorials. The *People's Daily* attached more significance to its political role in advancing the peace and stability of the continent than to its significance in economic terms. It believed that the EU would become a new peace-seeking power in the world. An editorial stated that 'The countries belonging to two former oppositional military blocs are now able to sit at the same table to discuss their

³ Personal interview, 6 July 2007, Brussels.

cooperative development. This is the biggest “political benefit” for the two sides.’ (Yao, 2003)

Nevertheless, the media discourse does not show greater Chinese expectations that the EU would become a stronger or greater actor from its increased number of member states. Only in a long term was enlargement seen as a good way for the EU to function as one pole in a multi-pole world (see, Editorial, 1994; Tang, 2000; Yao, 2003).

Reflexive expectations of the EU as a partner

Since 1988 the EU has been presented in the *People’s Daily* as China’s cooperative partner, when the two built up their partnership (European Commission 1998). In general, this type of framing is prominent in the coverage and closely linked with the development of, and changes in, the relationship of the two. The media discourse shows that expectations of the EU as a friendly and effective partner of China had been growing along with the fast and positive development of their bilateral relations. It reached a peak in 2003, when China published its first EU Policy Paper, as a response to the EU’s publication of its China policy, which was to establish a strategic partnership with China in September of the same year. This intention began to wane in 2006.

Guided by its strategy of ‘cooperative security’ [*Hezuo anquan*] as a national interest and implementing it in its diplomatic activities, China sought to expand its relations, particularly in respect of economic policy, with countries that could help it

modernize quickly during the 1990s (Liu, 2006, pp.33-4). Not only are the economies of China and the EU essentially complementary to each other, but there are no regional conflicts between the two sides, and no complications touching on the issue of Taiwan. China regarded the EU as an ideal alternative to Japan or the US, putting it in a good position to establish favourable trading terms (Klein, 1998, p.135). The fast upgrade of relations with China in EU's external relations between 1995 and 2003 also nurtured China's expectations of this 'full partnership' (China, 2003) as one that might be truly strategic.

Apart from stories of the EU's condemnation of China's human rights record and trade disputes, 85.7 per cent of the bilateral relations stories adopted a neutral or positive tone. They included accounts of bilateral economic and trade relations, speeches by authorities, reciprocal official visits and environmental, technological and information co-operation between the EU and China. 'Because Sino-EU relations are very well developed', a senior editor in the International Department of the Xinhua News Agency explained, 'we usually report the EU in a positive way. A story with a very negative tone will be killed.'⁴

From 1989 to 2005, bilateral economic and trade relations, as well as cooperation on various projects, are the two largest groups in the coverage of EU-China relations (Figure 4). This reflects the *presence* of the EU acting as China's partner. In economics and trade, since 2004 the EU has become China's largest trading partner and China has become the EU's second largest (after the US). On the environment,

⁴ Personal interview, 4 August 2006, Beijing.

the EU has since 2007 become the biggest buyer of Chinese Certified Emission Reduction. The EU funded some of the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) projects in China - by September 2011, 45.96 per cent of all registered CDM projects.⁵ In science and technology, the EU is China's top technology supplier. For instance, the Galileo cooperative plan is treated by China as the 'aircraft carrier' of the scientific and technological cooperation between the two sides (China, 2003). The newspaper gave extensive coverage to this cooperation and stressed that 'China is the first country outside the European Union that has signed this applied project contract with the EU and this is also the biggest external scientific and technological cooperation project that China has ever had'(see, Lv; 2003; Wu, 2005; Lv, 2005). In reporting EU-China co-operation, the news stories have sometimes given detailed information about the projects, sometimes described the cooperative progress and sometimes praised the achievements. The messages sent from the media discourse were that the EU and China had established cooperative partnerships in a great many fields and in numerous cooperative projects; both sides were reported as pleased with the outcomes and benefiting from the cooperation. In the meantime, although friction and disputes have increased since 2005 with the increase of the trade deficit in China's favour, the coverage of this negative aspect has been minimized.⁶

[Figure 4 about here]

⁵ <http://cdm.ccchina.gov.cn/web/NewsInfo.asp?NewsId=5582>, Accessed on 30 September, 2011.

⁶ Personal interview with a correspondent for Xinhua News Agency based in Brussels, Brussels, 1 July 2007.

In 2006, the EU published the most recent statement of its policy toward China, entitled 'EU-China: Closer Partners, Growing Responsibilities'. From the Chinese officials' point of view, the EU's tone toward China seems to have changed. It was not as friendly and cooperative as it had been in the EU's previous policy papers.⁷ China did not respond by issuing a new policy paper, as it did in 2003, which was something of a disappointment to the EU.⁸ Equally, China was disappointed at the EU's negative responses to the two requests that China made in its first EU policy paper, one, in particular, to lift arms embargo against China and one to grant China full market economic status. The arms embargo issue was covered intensively in the *People's Daily* from 2003, when the issue was publicly raised, to 2006, when China became very disappointed. From the standpoint of the Chinese government, the EU's arms embargo against China symbolized 'political discrimination' and was a 'legacy of the Cold War'; to qualify relations with China as 'strategic', the EU would have had to end the embargo, which put China in the same category as Zimbabwe and Myanmar (AFP, 2005). The pending of this EU decision made the Chinese government further realize the *presence* weakness in the political relations between the two sides as well as the *capability* weakness that the supranational and intergovernmental EU has in speaking with one voice when it comes to external decisions. EU-China relations have not been at a strategic level as they are on paper, and many other factors are stronger than the links between them, such as the

⁷ Personal interview with an official in the Mission of the People's Republic of China to the European Union, 19 November 2010, Brussels

⁸ Personal interview with a China policy official in the European Commission, Brussels 6 July 2007

member states factor, US factor, human rights factor, and so on. This echoes Holslag (2011, p.310) who says that 'one cannot expect Europe to foster a strategic partnership if it is hardly considered to be a strategic actor.' Even the European side had noticed a decline in China's expectations. 'For some years, China has appeared to believe more strongly in Europe's role as a serious player on the world stage than we do ourselves. It is difficult to believe that this is still true', said Chris Patten (2005).

Disappointed at EU's consensus-expectation gap at the institutional level, China spoke of the importance, when dealing with the EU, of developing bilateral relations with its member states. Since 2006, reports on the European member states as well as official visits and meetings between China and European countries have increased, resulting in a decline of the proportion of EU news since then (Figure 1). During the past five years China's top leaders have visited nearly half the EU member states and bought national bonds of some of the states they have visited, such as Spain, Portugal, and Ireland, to help with their sovereignty debt crisis and deepen economic and trade cooperation with them. The EU has been moved further down in China's ranking as a strategic partner (Chen, 2006). China started to hold a more cautious and realistic expectation of this partnership, particularly with the changes in China and EU's economic might after the financial crisis. For instance, when reporting the Eurozone debt crisis, China was reported to have offered a 'helping hand' to the European partners and the EU countries were said to have '[boarded] the China Express' in order to extricate themselves from a problematic situation (Lai and Zhang, 2013).

Conclusions

This paper has tracked the evolution of China's attitude toward the EU and the EU-China relations. Its aim has been to understand better the relationship since the end of the Cold War. Based on an understanding of the close media-state relations in China, it has advocated linking the news media, particularly the authoritative Party organ newspapers, with foreign relations as a practical way to trace the changes in Chinese attitudes, policy and strategy in its foreign relations. The study demonstrates that, methodologically, analysing media coverage helps our understanding of international relations, particularly with regard to countries with an opaque policy-making process.

Drawing on Hill (1993) and his Capability-Expectations Gap and the Expectation Deficit of Tsuruoka (2008), theoretically, the study developed a notion of 'Reflexive Expectations' in the Chinese government's behaviour, as neither CEG nor ED can be fully and directly applied to the context of the EU's relations with China. At the macro level, China's expectations of the EU have never been in deficit; on the contrary, it expected a united Europe to be a major force in the multi-polar system that China sought. This expectation has continued even though China has noticed the EU's capability gap. At the micro level, China's expectations of the EU's actorness in terms of *opportunity*, *presence* and *capability* have been reflexively constructed. This 'Reflexive Expectation' is determined by the changing of China's national interests and identity, as well as the development and changes in the EU and in bilateral relations. The government's mouthpiece newspaper reflects how those changes shape China's view of the EU and their partnership. During the 26 years

under study, the EU's economic and political integration process has been reported frequently and positively as a good *opportunity* for a stronger EU, though its *presence* and *capability* constrain China's expectations of the EU and the EU-China partnership from time to time. While the world economy was in recession and the Eurozone was in a severe debt crisis, China sailed through the financial crisis. It regards itself as a responsible big country (Li and Xu 2006) and is becoming an active participator in the international community (Qin 2010). This changing domestic and international profile also influences China's expectations of the EU and their partnership.

A decade has passed since the honeymoon of bilateral relations in 2003. The relationship has cooled down and warmed up. In April 2014, China (2014) published its second EU policy paper defining its EU policy objectives in the new era, drawing a blueprint for China-EU cooperation in the next 5 to 10 years and facilitating greater progress in China-EU relations. Where the future of the relationship will actually go depends largely on how they see each other's interests and what expectations they have for foreign relations strategy. It is hoped that looking at it from the perspective of Chinese media analysis will shed some light on the prospect.

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Figure 1 Changing Nature of European News Coverage in the *People's Daily*, 1989-2014

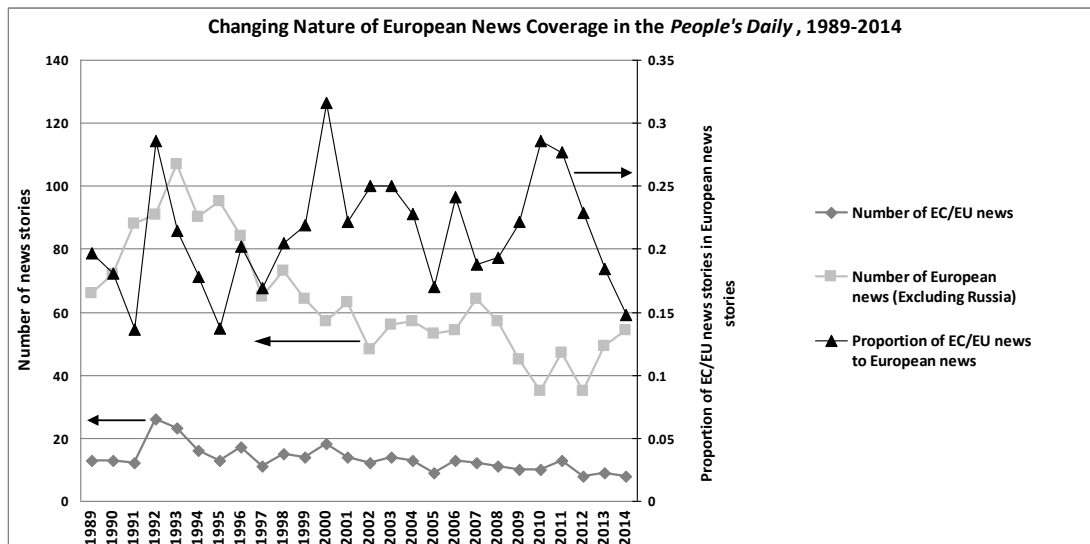


Figure 2 Changing Tone of EEC/EU News Stories in the *People's Daily*, 1989-2014

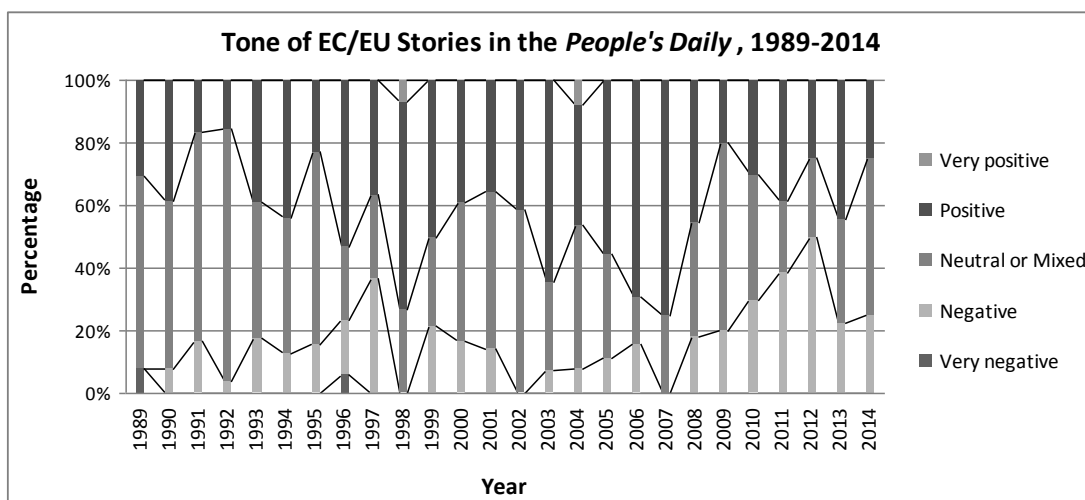


Figure 3 Changing Framing of EEC/EU News Stories in the *People's Daily*, 1989-2014

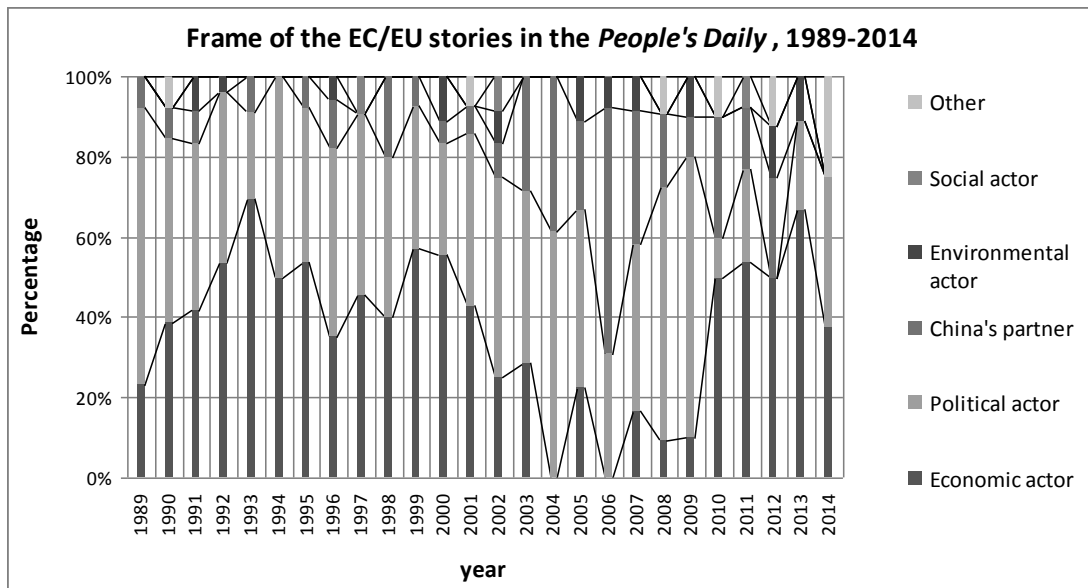


Figure 4 Subject distributions of EC/EU-China Relations News Stories in the *People's Daily*, 1989-2014

