

# CLIMATE NARRATIVES FOR THE CHINESE PUBLIC

## SIX SEGMENTS AND NARRATIVE PRINCIPLES



Center for Climate Communication and Risk Governance  
School of Journalism and Communication, Tsinghua University



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## **Center for Climate Communication and Risk Governance, Tsinghua School of Journalism and Communication**

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Under a Memorandum of Understanding signed between Tsinghua University and the Energy Foundation China, the Energy Foundation China supported the establishment of the Center for Climate Communication and Risk Governance, Tsinghua School of Journalism and Communication. This center is led by Professor Zeng Fanxu, with a steering committee made up of representatives from the School of Journalism and Communications of Tsinghua University and the Energy Foundation China.

The center is committed to enhancing academic disciplinary construction by conducting ongoing research, providing knowledge products and toolkits for practical application in the field, promoting industry capacity building and talent cultivation, and facilitating international knowledge exchange and cooperation to contribute Chinese insights to global environmental and climate communication.

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### **Center for Climate Communication and Risk Governance, Tsinghua School of Journalism and Communication**

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and International Cooperation, NCSC), Deputy Editor-in-Chief Yu Lan (China News Service), Tenured Associate Professor Dai Hancheng (College of Environmental Science and Engineering, Peking University), and Researcher Ma Qiji (National Institute of Advertising, NIA) for their valuable input during the opening, mid-term review, and conclusion phase of the research project, which has helped to broaden the scope of the research.

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## Follow us

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If you have any suggestions for *Climate Narratives for the Chinese Public: Six Segments and Narrative Principles* or Center for Climate Communication and Risk Governance, Tsinghua School of Journalism and Communication, or looking forward to learn more about our future work and research outcomes or establishing a partnership in the field of climate communication, please follow our WeChat official account "Tsinghua CCC" or scan the QR code below to receive more relevant information.



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# SUMMARY

*Climate Narratives for the Chinese Public: Six Segments and Narrative Principles* (hereafter referred to as *Climate Narratives for the Chinese Public*) is a research report on climate communication practice deeply rooted in the Chinese context. The analysis and findings are based on a nationwide survey of 8,077 Chinese citizens and several focus groups and in-depth interviews with experts, climate communication practitioners, and members of the public. Through comprehensive investigation through cluster and narrative analysis of the data mentioned above, the research team was able to produce *Climate Narratives for the Chinese Public* as a result.

The fundamental goal of *Climate Narratives for the Chinese Public* is to address the common challenges and confusions in climate communication practice. Current research findings of international climate communication academia and industries indicate that the life values significantly influence their perception, attitude, and actions toward climate change. Therefore, this report draws on the life values as an underlying logic and categorizes the public into six segments: Backbone Traditionalists, Disengaged Individualists, Passionate Strivers, Easygoing Leisurists, Moderate Pragmatists, and Philosophical Observers. The report then explores the





commonalities and differences among these segments on climate issues, and formulates communication objectives and climate narrative respectively.

The report aims to help climate communication stakeholders (e.g., government agencies, NGOs, media and business sectors, etc.) and other organizations or individuals who wish to work in climate communication in China take a deeper look at the Chinese climate audience, and assist them in mapping out more effective climate communication strategies.

## 1. The six types of Chinese public: an audience segmentation based on the life values

First and foremost, *Climate Narratives for the Chinese Public* classifies the Chinese public into six distinct segments based on life values surrounding the climate issue. By doing so, it aims to provide climate communication practitioners with a fresh, practical, and stable public classification scheme.

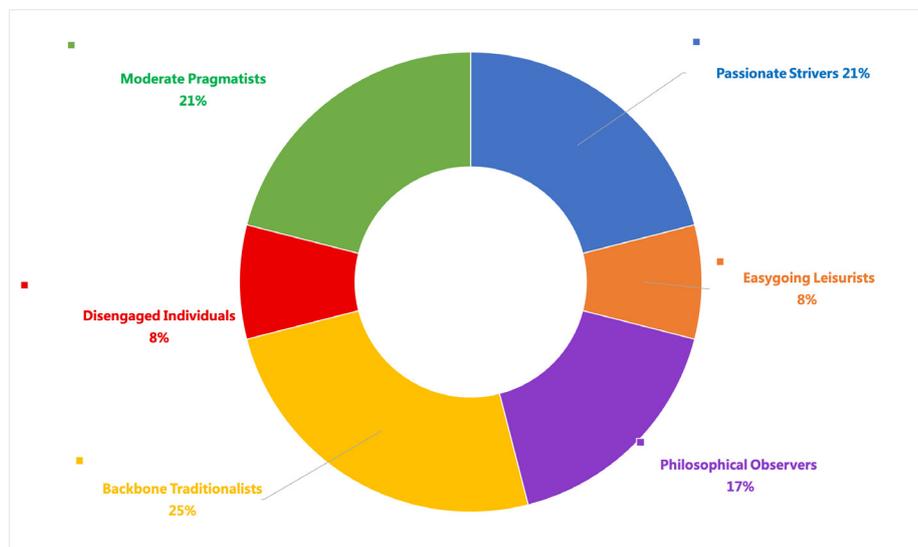


Figure 1: The six types of Chinese public

### ·Backbone Traditionalists

The backbone traditionalists are the largest among all segments, mainly comprised of middle-aged and elderly individuals with lower educational backgrounds. They scored the highest on most life value variables (self-enhancement, conservation, openness to change, nationalism, communitarianism, hierarchy, and fatalism). In a more specific

manner, they have a strong sense of patriotism and national identity, and believe that collective interests come before individual interests. They are willing to inspire others and take on leadership roles while having a high degree of confidence in their ability to contribute to the country and society's development.

#### ·Disengaged Individualists

The disengaged individualists are the least active among all segments and are mainly represented by low-income urban youth. They are the segment with the lowest scores on multiple life value variables (self-transcendence, self-enhancement, conservatism, openness to change, hierarchy, communitarianism, political efficacy). They often have low social status and self-evaluation, feeling that their abilities have yet to reach the level where they can participate in public affairs. As a result, they devote most of their energy to improving their living standards while showing little interest in new things and lacking motivation for self-enhancement.

#### ·Passionate Strivers

The passionate strivers believe that “hard work can change one's destiny” as a life tenet and adhere to such principles in everyday practice. They are represented by middle-aged and elderly middle class living in second-tier cities. Their score on the fatalism variable is significantly lower than those of other segments, while they have the highest scores on self-transcendence and political efficacy. Passionate strivers believe that personal effort is essential to create a better life, and they hope to continuously strive to achieve personal transcendence in ways that meet social expectations. They have a strong spirit of altruism, wanting to help and care for others in need. In addition, they are highly civic-minded and have a strong sense of national identity, proud of their country and nationality, and are confident that they can participate in public affairs and provide influential opinions for government decision-making.

#### ·Easygoing Leisurists

The easygoing leisurists advocate the pursuit of pleasure, living in the moment, and adapting flexibly to various changes in life. They are predominantly represented by well-educated, relatively high-income young and middle-aged individuals in first-tier



cities. They scored very high on fatalism while having the lowest scores on hierarchy and nationalism. They yearn for a peaceful and comfortable life, and do not like to have disputes with others or get involved in arguments caused by differences in positions and attitudes. They long for equality and respect from others, while favoring viewing things with a “respect for difference” over “judgment of superiority and inferiority.”

#### ·Moderate Pragmatists

The moderate pragmatist is the most “moderate” segment, with most of their life value scores closely in line with the average scores of the Chinese public. The segment is represented by young white-collar workers in first- and second-tier cities. Their pursuit of an ideal life is consistent with the mainstream Chinese social-cultural values, which emphasize career success and family harmony. When deciding whether to take action or not, they use the core logic of “Will it bring me practical benefits?” and “Will the cost of action be within a controllable range?” They highly advocate for individuals to form a “herd behavior” by voluntarily adopting pro-climate behavior and starting from doing the small things in daily life, thereby promoting macro-level changes in society.

#### ·Philosophical Observers

"Focused on oneself and carefully considering whether to take action" is the most prominent characteristic of philosophical observers. They have the lowest scores in the variable of fatalism and communitarianism among all segments. Young students who have lived abroad experience are typical representatives of this segment. Generally, they possess strong critical thinking skills, are highly sensitive to their inner worlds, and try to explore diverse options in life. The unique feature is that they rarely lean toward extremes within their life values, and hold a dialectical attitude toward most things. Moreover, they have unique perspectives on social affairs but exhibit a low willingness to take practical action.

## 2. Understanding the commonalities and differences between Chinese public on climate change

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Based on empirical research, the report sums up the commonalities in the Chinese public's understanding of climate change. These shared characteristics provided

a broader picture of the Chinese perspectives on climate change and revealed the opportunities and challenges that climate communication practitioners encounter:

- **The Chinese public generally recognizes that climate change is happening and human activity is a fundamental cause of its acceleration.** Compared with the public in Western countries where “climate skepticism” is prevalent, the Chinese public's stance on climate change is very consistent. All segments believe climate change is happening and agree that human activity is the leading cause. Consequently, the public believes humans are responsible for taking action against climate change.
- **The importance of climate change is widely recognized among the public.** The public fully recognizes the importance of climate change. All segments of the public believe climate change is a global issue that should be taken seriously.
- **Climate knowledge among the public is moderately weak.** The research reveals that there is no significant difference in climate knowledge, with an average score of 2-3 out of 7 points across all six segments. These findings suggest that there is a lack of comprehensive understanding of climate change among the Chinese public, as well as the presence of cognitive biases.
- **The public has high expectations of the role of the state.** Regardless of which segment, the public has high expectations of the state to play a central role in addressing climate change. The public generally favors the state as the primary actor and leader in addressing climate, and believes that the state should arrange and coordinate China's climate actions at the macro level.
- **The economic impact of climate change is a shared concern for the public.** While different segments have varying concerns about the effects of climate change, the impact on the economy has gained widespread public attention. All six segments have expressed varying degrees and aspects of concern regarding the economic impacts of climate change.

In addition to the commonalities, this report further explores the differences among the six segments regarding climate change. These differences form a key to understanding the Chinese public's views and can also be an essential consideration for practitioners when formulating communication strategies:

- **Backbone Traditionalists:** The segment exhibits the highest level of climate concern compared to the other segments, as they view it as a crucial issue that is closely associated with their lives. They have the highest level of risk perception concerning



climate change and are highly motivated to take action. These actions include not only making changes in their everyday lives but also advocating for climate change and encouraging others to do the same.

- **Disengaged Individualists:** In contrast, the disengaged individualists show the least level of concern towards climate change, possess little knowledge of the scientific consensus, and may even intentionally avoid information related to it. They also believe that they neither have the ability nor the obligation to take part in climate action. This makes them the most challenging group to mobilize among all segments.

- **Passionate Strivers:** They demonstrate a high degree of concern for climate change, even though they perceive it as a distant issue. Despite this, they exhibit the highest willingness to take climate action when compared to other segments. They are motivated to engage in climate action for their own benefit and the betterment of the nation and others, and are eager to respond to the national call for carbon peaking and carbon neutrality. Passionate strivers possess a high level of efficacy and believe their actions can positively impact climate change. They are particularly enthusiastic about adopting sustainable practices and advocating for climate policies.

- **Easygoing Leisurists:** The easygoing leisurists exhibit an apathetic attitude towards climate change and only pay attention when obligated to do so due to professional needs or occasional encounters. They acknowledge climate change but perceive the associated risks as relatively low. Additionally, they prioritize present enjoyment and do not excessively worry about issues they view as not significantly alarming. Their willingness to participate in and support climate action is weak. They believe the government should take the lead in establishing social norms for climate action rather than advocating for individuals' spontaneous changes.

- **Moderate Pragmatists:** The moderate pragmatists possess the most comprehensive climate knowledge among all segments. However, their perceptions are based on personal experiences and they tend to understand climate change as abnormal extreme weather. Their strong motivation to participate in climate action is driven by self-imposed moral constraints, but in fact, they do not believe individual actions alone can bring substantive changes to address climate change. They are more inclined to participate in climate action as individuals rather than as organizers, and their willingness to take action is mostly limited to small changes they can make in their daily lives.

- **Philosophical Observers:** They do not consider climate change as a central concern in their personal lives. Compared to other segments, their climate knowledge is relatively

weak, and they believe individual actions have minimal impact on mitigating climate change. They have taken a few practical steps to address climate change. However, they exhibit a strong willingness to participate in climate activities and advocate for NGOs to play an essential role in promoting climate policies, in addition to the government.

### 3. Targeted climate narratives to facilitate China's "dual carbon" goals

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To recognize the key concerns, concepts, and values that unite and differentiate the Chinese public, we need to move beyond traditional climate communication strategies that categorize the public based on simplistic demographic variables. Instead, we need to adopt more effective standards and perspectives to better understand the public. The life values-orientated approach will provide climate communicators with an effective, practical, and operational narrative guideline to facilitate public involvement in climate action and better support China's national strategy of achieving carbon peaking and carbon neutrality goals.

As the research findings of *Climate Narratives for the Chinese Public* demonstrate that the Chinese public has reached an active consensus regarding the reality and importance of climate change, which lays a solid foundation to mobilize the public for climate action. Although the public segmentation identified in this research has distinct characteristics and is mutually exclusive, it is important to note that there is no extreme opposition. Climate change has great potential to become a key public concern for the entire Chinese population.

Furthermore, the research has developed specific and tailored communication goals for each segment based on a multidimensional analysis of their life values, climate cognition, media usage, etc. For example, a critical communication goal for disengaged individualists, who possess a low level of climate awareness, cognition, and willingness to act, is to include them as part of the target audience for climate action. This not only prevents them from becoming climate denialists but also has the potential to increase their climate perception and willingness to act. On the other hand, for philosophical observers with strong critical thinking skills, it is essential to explore their potential to become opinion leaders and play a leading role in influencing other communities. This can be achieved by cultivating their attention and participation in climate change and further nurturing them to become active discussants of climate change.

Based on the tailored communication objectives for different segments, the project further conducted focus groups, in-depth interviews, and climate narrative testing to gain deeper insight into segmented audiences' value orientations, societal concerns,



and narrative preferences. In narrative testing, researchers asked participants from all segments to highlight the sentences in the scripts that they preferred and disliked. Using the testing results, the researchers formed narrative suggestions to be adopted and avoided on the preferences and dislikes expressed by participants in each segment. Based on qualitative interviews and data collected during the research, these suggestions were then incorporated into a set of narrative suggestion tailored to the needs of each segment in climate communication.

In addition, narrative suggestions were developed for the government, NGOs, and companies to communicate effectively on climate change. The recommendations were designed based on the institutional orientation, discourse characteristics, and public perception characteristics identified during the research.

In short, *Climate Narratives for the Chinese Public* categorizes the Chinese public into six segments based on their life values. Although life values are closely linked to demographic variables such as gender, region, educational background, and income, we believe that using life values as the primary starting point can overcome the limitations of using a single demographic variable as a classification scheme. This approach leads to a deeper analysis of the engagement between the Chinese public and climate change, resulting in a more comprehensive and enduring public classification and narrative recommendations for climate communication practitioners.

We hope that climate practitioners will use this report in a dialectical manner, by not only identifying the commonalities of climate issues among the Chinese public but also examining the substantial differences among different segments. This can serve as a communication guide to facilitate more profound engagement with the Chinese public on climate change.