



CHINESE DISCOURSE POWER: CAPABILITIES AND IMPACT

by **Kenton Thibaut**



The mission of the Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) is to identify, expose, and explain disinformation where and when it occurs using open-source research; to promote objective truth as a foundation of government for and by people; to protect democratic institutions and norms from those who would seek to undermine them in the digital engagement space; to create a new model of expertise adapted for impact and real-world results; and to forge digital resilience at a time when humans are more interconnected than at any point in history, by building the world's leading hub of digital forensic analysts tracking events in governance, technology, and security.

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Cover: China's President Xi Jinping is shown on a screen through digitally decorated glass during the World Internet Conference (WIC) in Wuzhen, Zhejiang province, China, November 23, 2020. REUTERS/Aly Song

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is part of the Digital Forensic Research Lab's (DFRLab's) "discourse power" series, which outlines the strategy, capabilities, impacts, and responses to China's attempts to shape the global information environment. The series argues that China's leaders believe the country can gain the geopolitical power necessary to establish itself as a world leader, to spread its norms and values, and to decenter US power in the international system by gaining "discourse power" (话语权). In concept, discourse power is a narrative agenda-setting ability focused on reshaping global governance, values, and norms to legitimize and facilitate the expression of state power.¹

Whereas the first report introduced China's discourse power strategy, this second report examines its efforts to date. This report assesses this through a frame of "media convergence" (融媒体), a Chinese term that refers to the integration of internal and external Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda, the online and offline channels for its dissemination, and the mechanisms of oversight on which communications systems rely.²

More specifically, this report examines "media convergence" across three vectors: channel expansion, content innovation, and governance of technological infrastructure and digital connectivity.

The first vector, channel expansion, refers to creating or better leveraging delivery vehicles for China's messaging across different media platforms. The aim is to expose a growing international audience to Chinese narratives and norms in the hopes of eroding the global "discourse dominance" of the West.³ This report examines this trend through both traditional and social media. As for traditional media, China has spent over \$1.5 billion annually since 2008 on propaganda, with much of that going toward initiatives in the Global South. This is especially obvious in the strategies of China's flagship news organization, Xinhua, which describes itself as "light cavalry" in China's global public opinion war. Xinhua has described its media strategy as using a combination of "shipbuilding to go out to sea" and "borrowing a boat to go out to sea" (造船出海与借船出海相结合)—that is, building up China's own capacity to effectively disseminate its message internationally, while using foreign social media

platforms to disseminate propaganda.⁴ As part of these efforts, Xinhua has over the years greatly expanded its networks to now have the largest number of foreign correspondents of any news agency in the world.⁵ Other strategies include both coercing and incentivizing journalists abroad to engage in more favorable coverage of China.

Chinese state entities have greatly expanded their presence on social media as well. As of January 2021, Xinhua distributed on average seven thousand three hundred articles, photos, videos, and other media content in fifteen languages daily, garnering over 200 million overseas social media followers across various platforms (including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube).⁶ Indeed, China-based Twitter account creation skyrocketed by over 6,000 percent over a period of just three months in 2017, following reports on the situation in Xinjiang in the Western press. At the same time, however, there is a balancing act that the party-state faces when seeking to portray China as a confident leader to global audiences while also being subject to popular nationalism and domestic discontent in its actions.

As an example, tensions between different bureaucratic departments belie the official sanctioning of the assertive "wolf warrior" style of coercive diplomacy. In some instances, it appears that different elements responsible for external messaging within the Chinese government have initially contradicted each other, sometimes going as far as refuting each other's public statements, before consolidating around a single message. One such example occurred between the Central Propaganda Department and wolf warrior diplomat Zhao Lijian around the origins of the COVID-19 virus.

Self-censorship can be a nefarious side effect of the editorial pressures that Chinese state news agencies bring—not just in China's favor but also for authoritarian governments with which it is aligned. With regard to China's efforts in shaping public opinion, most studies have found that China's messaging at a general level is not especially resonant with local audiences; however, some initial studies have shown that Chinese propaganda can be effective at persuading audiences that the "China model" is superior to that of democratic political systems

1 Kenton Thibaut, *Chinese Discourse Power: Ambitions and Reality in the Digital Domain*, Atlantic Council, August 24, 2022, <https://dfriab.org/2022/08/24/chinese-discourse-power-ambitions-and-reality-in-the-digital-domain/>.

2 The main principles of "media convergence" are laid out in this document issued by the Cyberspace Administration of China. The commentary is a response to a document issued by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee on improving and modernizing national governance systems and capabilities: Cyberspace Administration of China, "融媒体矩阵如何发挥传播优势" ("How the Media Matrix Enable Communication Advantages"), April 10, 2020, https://web.archive.org/web/20230724155333/http://www.qstheory.cn/zhuantiqu/bkxj/2020-04/21/c_1125885183.htm

3 Xu Guoliang, "提升中国国际话语权的深刻意蕴与重要意义" ("The Profound Connotation and Significance of Improving China's International Discourse Power"), *Guangming Daily*, November 28, 2021, <https://archive.ph/Cf1cm#selection-439.100-439.198>; Li Jiangjing, "西方国家推行话语霸权的隐蔽性策略及其应对" ("The Concealed Tactics and Countermeasures of Western Countries in Promoting Discourse Hegemony"), *Qiushi*, February 9, 2017, <https://archive.is/D5NxJ>.

4 "优秀现实题材剧扬帆'出海'" ("Excellent Reality-Themed Drama Sails 'Going to Sea'"), Xinhua, May 20, 2022, <https://archive.is/D7f5b#selection-1791.2-1791.38>.

5 Joshua Kurlantzick, *Beijing's Global Media Offensive: China's Uneven Campaign to Influence Asia and the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

6 "新华通讯社2021年度部门决算" ("Xinhua News Agency's 2021 Departmental Final Accounts"), Xinhua News Agency, 2022, http://203.192.6.89/xhs/20220721/20220721_2021bmjts.html.

in delivering growth and stability. On social media platforms, Chinese officials have often engaged in coordinated influence and information campaigns, including those spreading disinformation on the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The second “prong” of China’s strategy of media convergence is content innovation, which includes tailoring content (and the narratives baked into it) in a way that best resonates with a particular audience, otherwise known as “precise communication” (精准传播). China sees access to public opinion data abroad as essential to enhancing its ability to tailor content. As the party secretary and president of the online arm of the CCP’s flagship *People’s Daily* stated in a 2022 address, the internet “houses a vast amount of...data and is able to accurately reflect social sentiments.... Using big data [analytics] and artificial intelligence (AI), the internet can be a tool for strengthening the Party’s leadership.”⁷ To this end, China recently launched four State Key Laboratories dedicated to using big data to better tailor content to specific audiences, as well as spread “positive energy” through digital and social media.

In addition to shaping content, another tactic is to obscure the fact that the content originates from Chinese state sources. This is a phenomenon known as “political native advertising,” in which Chinese state-run media organizations purchase space in news outlets abroad to publish state-sanctioned content “camouflaged” as neutral news articles. In a 2020 report, Freedom House highlighted that, especially in digital versions of local newspapers, “China Observer”—an English-language column produced by Chinese state media outlet China Daily—often goes unlabeled as being state sponsored.

Lastly, a related strategy involves China’s attempts to control local media environments via content-sharing agreements, which in some cases end up flooding local media environments with free or low-cost pro-CCP content. A huge part of this push is to countries within China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a majority of which are in the Global South.

The last frame for examining China’s digital discourse power strategy is governance. This includes ensuring China-sponsored standards, norms, and governance protocols in prioritized industries are widely adopted, especially in the Global South. China has, for instance, been active in shaping information and communications technologies standards in the International Telecommunication Union through a “flooding the zone” strategy in which all China-affiliated members, be they from academia, private industry, or government, vote as a bloc. This ensures that standards proposals from Chinese entities

end up receiving the number of votes needed to be adopted by the standards-setting body.⁸

These exchanges serve to spread Chinese cyber norms, such as “cyber sovereignty” (网络主权), which is China’s vision for internet governance that upholds a government’s sovereign right to control the internet within its borders. The party-state spreads this norm by advising governments on how to shape laws and policies to govern the technologies (often Chinese-provided, Chinese-standard-compliant) in their own societies. This process becomes a positive feedback loop, creating a degree of both technical and policy lock-in via China-provided technical infrastructure, the standards through which it operates, and know-how and data governance frameworks. At the same time, China leverages its media relationships to flood local environments with stories of the benefits of China’s investment in developing countries’ futures.

...[Diplomatic] relationships allow China to gain access to vast data resources related to international public opinion on news topics related to China...The Chinese state can then use this data to hone its censorship and propaganda apparatus...it can also aid the People’s Liberation Army engage in targeted information operations and psychological warfare campaigns against countries like Taiwan.

These relationships also allow China to gain access to vast data resources. One Chinese firm outlined in this report, Nebula, uses its big data and cloud computing technologies to obtain vast amounts of data related to international public opinion on news topics related to China. It uses a variety of analysis methods, including semantics and clustering, to understand public preferences and “evaluate the difference between this understanding and media expectations...helping Chinese media build top international discourse power and influence.”⁹ The Chinese state can then use this data to hone its messages further and enhance its censorship and propaganda apparatus. It can deploy these improved tools and technologies in banal ways, like helping the tourism bureau craft a compelling narrative of “Beautiful China.” However, it can also use Nebula’s sentiment data to help the People’s Liberation Army engage in more

7 Tuvia Gering, “Discourse Power | August 31, 2022,” Discourse Power, August 31, 2022, <https://tuviagering.substack.com/p/discourse-power-august-31-2022>; “「聚焦学理中国」以讲好中国故事为着力点全方位提升国际传播能力” ([Focus Theory China] Focusing on Telling Chinese Stories Well, Improving International Communication Capabilities in All Areas), China Social Sciences Network, June 10, 2022, <https://archive.ph/9yodK>.

8 Daniel R. Russel and Blake H. Berger, *Stacking the Deck: China’s Influence in International Technology Standards Setting*, Asia Society Policy Institute, November 30, 2021, https://asiasociety.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/ASPI_StacktheDeckreport_final.pdf.

9 Nebula, “星云纵横与CCTV+签约合作，开启外宣大数据时代” (“Nebula Signed a Contract with CCTV+ to Open a Big Data Era for External Publicity”), Sohu, October 20, 2016, https://web.archive.org/web/20220809202933/https://www.sohu.com/a/116710708_439559.

targeted information operations and psychological warfare campaigns against countries like Taiwan.

This report finds that, anecdotally, China's efforts gain larger ground in countries where civic freedoms are already limited and where winning the support of a small coalition of political elites matters over winning public support. In the rather extreme case of Zimbabwe, China is openly and actively antagonizing and targeting journalists and civil society activists. These findings cast doubt on assessments of Chinese influence that look solely at public opinion data. Such research may miss the fact that in some domestic contexts, China sees elite capture as much more important than winning hearts and minds.

In short, China's discourse power efforts are uneven. While the popularity of its state and traditional media lags behind that of Western countries, its efforts to shape the environments within media and information spaces are much more effective—and are in fact the focus of China's discourse power strategy. China is creating an alternative order in the Global South, and any effort to make meaningful progress on technological governance will need to stem from an understanding of the ecosystem that China has created, the push and pull factors facing the countries that engage with it, and on clearly messaging what the advantages of a democratic approach to such issues offers to the global majority.

INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has embarked on an ambitious strategy to put itself at the heart of an alternative international order that challenges the current Western-dominated one. Previous reports from the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) argue that a primary way China’s leaders believe they can achieve this is by gaining “discourse power” (话语权), a type of narrative agenda-setting ability focused on reshaping global governance, values, and norms to legitimize and facilitate the expression of state power.¹⁰ China’s leaders have clearly articulated that they believe the United States gained and maintained its global leadership in large part due to its discourse power dominance.¹¹ In short, the CCP believes that discourse power will assist China in gaining the geopolitical power necessary to establish itself as a world leader, to spread its norms and values, and to decenter US power in the international system.

The party-state has focused on two primary domains in its push for discourse power. First are the geographic regions of the Global South, where it has engaged in extensive coalition-building efforts via propaganda campaigns and through people-to-people exchanges. Second is the digital domain. Here, China has sought to shape international governance mechanisms in favor of its domestic technologies and the CCP’s political exigencies; it has also sought to influence local information ecosystems so that Chinese official narratives dominate.¹² Central to this latter goal is gaining political buy-in for China-defined norms such as “cyber sovereignty” (also sometimes translated as “network sovereignty”)—a norm of internet governance that privileges state sovereignty over civil liberties and subordinates human rights to national security.¹³

The party-state has clearly articulated its ambitions for gaining a discourse power advantage in these two domains through policy documents, state-funded academic studies, expert workshops, technical blueprints, and in official and social media spaces. However, there are gaps between the CCP’s stated goals and to what extent the party has achieved them on the ground. This report provides an initial overview of China’s efforts in this vein. This includes both where the party-state is focusing its human and financial resources, as well as the impacts of Chinese policies in local environments.

This report analyzes China’s discourse power efforts through a frame of “media convergence” (融媒体), a Chinese term that refers to the integration of internal and external CCP

propaganda, the online and offline channels for its dissemination, and the mechanisms of oversight on which communications systems rely.¹⁴ More specifically, this report examines “media convergence” across three vectors: channel expansion (i.e., expanding the delivery vehicles for China’s messaging via social media, digital media, etc.), content innovation (i.e., tailoring content to the audience, targeting audiences more effectively, and making content delivery more resonant and effective), and governance (i.e., ensuring Chinese standards and norms regarding technological infrastructure and digital connectivity are widely adopted).

China has been active in shaping information and communications technologies standards in international organizations. These standards are crafted to advantage the technical specifications of Chinese domestic technologies, including surveillance tools. Standards developed in international organizations are adopted at higher rates in countries in the Global South.

China’s capabilities in these areas have seen significant growth in recent years, and the effect on shaping digital ecosystems can be far-reaching. For example, China has been active in shaping information and communications technologies (ICT) standards in international organizations. These standards are crafted to advantage the technical specifications of Chinese domestic technologies, including surveillance tools. Standards developed in international organizations are adopted at higher rates in countries in the Global South. China also provides its domestic surveillance technologies at favorable price points to its partners in global majority countries through people-to-people exchanges.

These exchanges serve to spread Chinese cyber norms, such as “cyber sovereignty” (网络主权), which is China’s vision for internet governance that upholds a government’s sovereign right to control the internet within a given country’s borders. It reflects the CCP’s priorities for domestic internet governance that include controlling the flow of information and ideas,

¹⁰ Thibaut, *Chinese Discourse Power: Ambitions*.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Cyberspace Administration of China, (“How the Media Matrix Enable”).

increasing cybersecurity, and gaining self-sufficiency in technological development.¹⁵

The party-state spreads this norm by advising governments on how to shape laws and policies to govern the (often Chinese-provided, Chinese-standard-compliant) technologies in their own constituent societies. This process becomes a positive feedback loop, creating a degree of both technical and policy lock-in via China-provided technical infrastructure, the standards under which it operates, and know-how and data governance frameworks. At the same time, China leverages its media relationships to flood local environments with stories of the benefits of China's investment in developing countries' digital futures.

This process becomes a positive feedback loop, creating a degree of both technical and policy lock-in via China-provided technical infrastructure, the standards under which it operates, and know-how and data governance frameworks. At the same time, China leverages its media relationships to flood local environments with stories of the benefits of China's investment in developing countries' digital futures.

In the scenario outlined above, there is broad penetration and representation of Chinese interests across media, political, social, and economic sectors in host countries. This can have adverse affects in both democratic and nondemocratic civil society spaces. For example, China's presence can constrict the space for civil society actors to debate the merits of, and in more restrictive domains, freely report on, China's deepening involvement in their societies.

The above activities also have significant security implications. Through the above process of standards setting, tech marketing, and policy and governance shaping, China gains access to diverse data resources, which it can then use to enhance the effectiveness of the tools and technologies that are part of its extensive censorship and propaganda apparatus. It can then weaponize these improved tools to exert more restrictive forms

of social control over its own population, to craft more compelling external propaganda narratives that expound the benefits of Chinese involvement in local societies, or in psychological warfare campaigns against geopolitical adversaries.¹⁶

At the same time, China's successes are uneven. For the billions of dollars the state spends on "strategic communication" each year, multiple studies indicate that the resonance of its messaging across the globe is mixed at best.¹⁷ Efforts on global social media platforms have at times been clumsily executed by large numbers of inauthentic accounts, resulting in very little organic engagement.¹⁸ And in international fora, regional organizations, and in local media environments, civil society actors have proven adept at developing strategies to counter and mitigate nefarious impacts on their domestic digital spaces.¹⁹

This report provides granularity to areas of contestation and investigates the gap between China's stated intentions and where its strategy is bearing fruit; it aims to provide potential indicators of where priorities, successes, and obstacles lie in China's pursuit of its aims. As such, it is divided into three sections, assessing China's efforts in channel expansion, in content innovation, and, finally, in its discourse power efforts vis-à-vis digital governance.

As a final note, while other regions and countries apart from the Global South are featured throughout this report, many of the examples in this report feature countries located in sub-Saharan Africa. This is for three reasons: first, highlighting a particular region provides a more illustrative snapshot of both the variations and continuities within China's discourse power efforts. Second, China's activities across all three lines of effort—channel expansion, content innovation, and governance—are particularly salient in the region and help to establish a more direct connection between discourse power capabilities and effects. Third, the region has a special place in China's discourse power efforts. As China and Russia scholar Maria Repnikova writes, "a special focus of the Chinese media going-out push has been in Africa, which some see as a testing ground of its larger global initiatives."²⁰

15 Nadège Rolland, "Introduction" in *An Emerging China-Centric Order: China's Vision for a New World Order in Practice*, ed. Nadège Rolland, National Bureau of Asian Research, NBR Special Report 87, August 2020, https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr87_aug2020.pdf.

16 Josh Chin and Liza Lin, *Surveillance State: Inside China's Quest to Launch a New Era of Social Control* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2022).

17 David Bandurski, "Chinese Propaganda, In a Local Paper Near You," China Media Project, January 19, 2023, <https://chinamediaproject.org/2023/01/19/chinese-propaganda-coming-to-a-local-paper-near-you/>.

18 Shannon Vavra, "Research outs poorly constructed disinfo campaign aimed at Hong Kong protests," CyberScoop, September 26, 2019, <https://cyberscoop.com/hong-kong-disinfo-campaign-graphika/>.

19 *Framing China's Belt and Road Initiative: The Unexpected Power of Local Narratives*, Global Voices, December 5, 2022, https://globalvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/BRI-CMO-Report.V2-FINAL_sm.pdf.

20 Maria Repnikova, *Chinese Soft Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 22; Louisa Lim and Julia Bergin, "Inside China's audacious global propaganda campaign," *Guardian*, December 7, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/dec/07/china-plan-for-global-media-dominance-propaganda-xi-jinping>.

CHANNEL EXPANSION, THE FIRST PRONG OF ‘MEDIA CONVERGENCE’

The first prong in the “converged media” framework is channel expansion. In terms of China’s discourse power strategy, this refers to expanding lines of communication for disseminating “external propaganda” (外宣), also referred to as “international communication” (国际传播).

The aim is to grow the international audience that is exposed to Chinese narratives and norms, intending to erode the global “discourse dominance” of the West.²¹ As one state-funded research center report pointed out, “relying on the support of hard power, Western countries spread their cultural values to the world through various communication channels, and constantly strengthen their so-called superiority over cultural values, thus placing the entire international media landscape in the Western narrative.... [In doing so, it has] long occupied the dominant position of world public opinion and grasped the discourse power of world public opinion.”²²

An increasing proportion of the resources provided for international channel expansion are aimed at extending China’s reach in the Global South, especially in Africa and Latin America.²³ China sees these regions as more amenable to its vision for the global order, which emphasizes state-to-state relations and de-emphasizes Western “universal values” such as human rights and freedom of speech.²⁴ Criticism of the United States and other Western countries is a pervasive theme in Chinese external propaganda. Indeed, in service of its goal to win over Global South countries, China often positions itself as a defender of the rights and interests of developing countries, in contrast to the countries of the West.²⁵ These narratives often draw on the real grievances of local communities regarding the harmful legacies of Western colonialism and political interference.²⁶

The below assesses China’s efforts at channel expansion through the lenses of both traditional and social media. The sheer scale of China’s expansion across these domains illustrates that, at least in terms of exposure, China’s media presence on the world stage has vastly increased.

Traditional media

China has placed considerable emphasis on state media as a primary actor in its discourse power efforts.²⁷ As discourse power-related organs are tasked with “telling China’s stories well” (讲好中文故事), the party-state has granted these bodies increasing human and financial resources.²⁸

China has reportedly invested around \$1.5 billion annually since 2008 to expand its international media presence, though this figure is likely a conservative estimate.²⁹ In 2009, China announced it would invest around \$7.25 billion to support its state media outlets in “going global,” including the outlets Xinhua, *People’s Daily*, China Central Television (CCTV), China Radio International (CRI), and English-language paper China Daily.³⁰ Xinhua received almost a third of this budget, the bulk of which went to support expanding its international bureaus and to launching an English-language news channel, CNC World News.³¹ Also in 2009, China Daily launched its US edition, and the *People’s Daily’s* tabloid newspaper the Global Times launched its English-language edition.³²

State media outlets receive content directives from the Central Propaganda Department (CPD), one of the most central organizations in China’s discourse power strategy responsible for developing the overall “ideological orientation” of

21 Xu, (“The Profound Connotation”); Li, (“The Concealed Tactics”).

22 Hu Zhengrong and Wang Runjue, “中国传媒文化软实力的建构” (“The Construction of Chinese Media Cultural Soft Power”), *Research on Cultural Soft Power* 18, 22 (2016).

23 Clyde Yicheng Wang, “Changing Strategies and Mixed Agendas: Contradiction and Fragmentation within China’s External Propaganda,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 31 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2022.2109808>.

24 Kenton Thibaut, *China’s Discourse Power Operations in the Global South*, Atlantic Council, April 20, 2022, <https://dfrlab.org/2022/04/20/chinas-discourse-power-operations-in-the-global-south/>.

25 Thibaut, *Chinese Discourse Power: Ambitions*.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Wang, “Changing Strategies.”

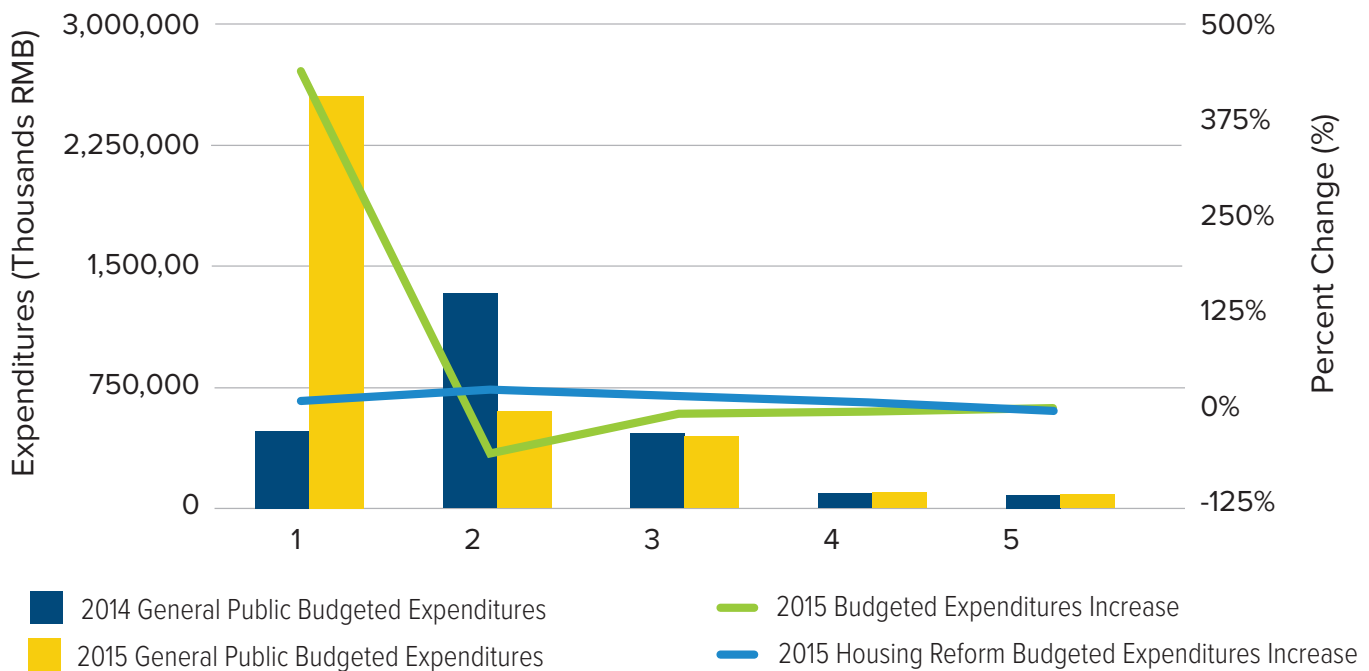
29 Paul Charon and Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer, *Chinese Influence Operations: A Machiavellian Moment*, Institute for Strategic Research, Ministry for the Armed Forces, Paris, October 2021, 172, <https://www.irsem.fr/report.html>.

30 David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 227; Shixin Ivy Zhang and Xiaoling Zhang, “Foreign Correspondents: A case study of China in the digital and globalization age,” *Journalism Studies* 19, 12 (2018): 1804-1824, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2017.1305913>. Note: Since 2018, China Central Television (CCTV) has been housed under the China Media Group, which sits under the Central Propaganda Department. CGTN, or China Global Television Network, is its international broadcasting arm.

31 Repnikova, *Chinese Soft Power*, 22.

32 Ibid.

Party Department Budget



The most recent publicly available and relatively complete budget data for Chinese Central Committee departments. The Central Propaganda Department's budget showed a 433 percent increase from 2014 to 2015.^A

external propaganda.³³ The CPD sits under the CCP's Central Committee, which has seen increasing control over nearly all aspects of the party-state's policy apparatus since Xi Jinping began his tenure as chair of the CCP and president of the state. While Central Committee financial data is rarely published publicly, one of the most recent, complete, and publicly available sources of budget data is from 2015. The data shows that the CPD received 2.5 billion RMB, or \$370 million, a 433 percent increase from the year prior.³⁴ While the jump in budget can be partly attributed to a change in how public expenditures were calculated from 2014 to 2015, it is still striking that the CPD's budget increased this substantially compared to either decreased or stable budgets for other Central Committee organizations and functions.³⁵

By 2015, Xinhua had almost doubled its number of overseas branches from 2009.³⁶ In the years following, Xinhua rapidly

built up its diplomatic capabilities, signing cooperation agreements with news agencies in over one hundred countries and regions and establishing ties with over twenty multilateral organizations.³⁷ In addition to these channels, the outlet also sought to scale up its online presence. In 2020, Xinhua platforms received 58 million views from 21 million users daily among WeChat, Weibo, and its home page.³⁸ As of January 2021, Xinhua distributed on average seven thousand three hundred articles, photos, videos, and other media content in fifteen languages daily, garnering over 200 million overseas social media followers across various platforms (including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube).³⁹

A large part of this expansion has to do with Xinhua's role in China's broader discourse power strategy. To this end, the organization outlined a global information operations strategy in a 2021 report. Defining itself as "light cavalry" in China's

33 Thibaut, *Chinese Discourse Power: Ambitions*.

34 Yang Zhijin, "学习党部预算：五部门公共预算支出37.68亿" ("Learning the Budget of the Party Department: The Public Budget Expenditure of the Five Departments Is 3.768 Billion"), *21st Century Business Herald*, March 18, 2015, <https://archive.ph/Oqqzm>.

35 Ibid.

36 Anne-Marie Brady, "Authoritarianism Goes Global (II): China's Foreign Propaganda Machine," *Journal of Democracy* 26, 4 (2015), <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/authoritarianism-goes-global-ii-chinas-foreign-propaganda-machine/>.

37 "新华通讯社2022年部门预算" ("Xinhua News Agency's 2022 Departmental Budget"), Xinhua News Agency, 2022, http://203.192.6.89/xhs/20220324/20220324_xhsbmjs_v1.html.

38 "新华通讯社2020年度部门决算" ("Xinhua News Agency's 2020 Departmental Final Accounts"), Xinhua News Agency, 2021, http://203.192.6.89/xhs/20210708/20210708_2020bmjs.html.

39 ("Xinhua News Agency's 2021 Departmental"), Xinhua News Agency.

global “public opinion war,”⁴⁰ one of Xinhua’s goals for 2022 included channel expansion so as to “strengthen international broadcasting capacity” and to become “[China’s] flagship of foreign propaganda.”

A core “channel” in Xinhua’s strategy includes expanding the number of its foreign correspondents, who work closely with Chinese embassies to coordinate messaging and propaganda priorities. Embassies relay messages and instructions on editorial content from the Propaganda Department’s External Information Bureau (对外新闻局) to state media outposts. Editors of overseas bureaus are responsible for ensuring that all external content adheres to government guidelines.⁴¹

Foreign correspondents are also tasked with gathering information on local politics and on prominent figures, working with the embassy and affiliated United Front Work Department (UFWD) bodies.⁴² As some of the primary organizations tasked with carrying out external propaganda related work, UFWD organizations abroad are also tasked with developing a network of “international influencers” who can serve as local advocates for Chinese interests and who provide information about local conditions of interest to the party-state.⁴³ The information gathered by foreign correspondents is often included in “internal reference” memos (内参), which are sent back to Beijing for internal distribution to CCP leadership.⁴⁴

Complementing this expansion of foreign correspondents, China has also engaged in a strategy of “localization” (本土化), which involves recruiting and hiring journalists and media professionals in target countries to work for Chinese state entities and report on local conditions with a pro-China angle. One of the more problematic aspects of “localization” is its potential impact on civil society, especially in countries with already limited civic freedoms. An example of this is the prevalence of state narratives that support authoritarian leaders friendly to China’s interests. For example, stories in Chinese state-owned CGTN Africa penned by African journalists working for the organization have sought to legitimize the government of Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, which has a long history of using state-led intimidation tactics to suppress dissidents and to manipulate local election outcomes in its favor.⁴⁵

Journalists working for Chinese media organizations abroad also have reported facing strict editorial guidelines and bureaucratic intimidation. In a 2020 survey of African journalists

working for Chinese state media bureaus, respondents stated that there was a “zero tolerance” editorial policy for news items that promoted Western-style democracy; the survey also found that African journalists who cross “official [propaganda] redlines are likely to face sanctions.”⁴⁶

In a 2020 survey of African journalists working for Chinese state media bureaus, respondents stated that there was a “zero tolerance” editorial policy for news items that promoted Western-style democracy; the survey also found that African journalists who cross “official [propaganda] redlines are likely to face sanctions.”

At the same time, however, there can be powerful incentives for journalists to self-censor and adhere to Chinese editorial guidelines. In a survey of journalists working for Chinese state media bureaus in Zimbabwe, respondents reported that, compared to independent journalists, they gain increased access to their own government officials and often get first access to government developments and announcements, among other things. One reporter stated that “it was far easier for [local employees of CCTV] than for local Zimbabwean journalists to hold interviews with Zimbabwean politicians” because the CCTV journalists “knew not to cross the line.”⁴⁷

In addition to increasing the presence of foreign and local correspondents, traditional state media outlets have also sought to gain exposure for their content by expanding the platforms on which it is disseminated. Organizations are increasingly using mobile, web-based, and digital television platforms. Recent studies suggest that China’s recent investment in such channel expansion has, at minimum, increased the exposure of international audiences to Chinese sources. For example, a recent survey conducted by a Chinese communications university outlined the inroads of China’s channel expansion in sub-Saharan Africa, finding that, in a survey of 266 participants across thirty-seven African countries, over 60 percent of those surveyed first came into contact with Chinese media either “over the past year” (i.e., 2019 to 2020) or “over the past five years” (i.e., 2015 to 2020). The same survey found that 74 percent accessed

40 “新华网：新华网股份有限公司2021年年度报告” (“Xinhuanet: Xinhuanet Co., Ltd. 2021 Annual Report”), Sina Finance, April 26, 2022, <https://archive.ph/qCviw#selection-481.0-481.22>.

41 Zhang and Zhang, “Foreign Correspondents.”

42 Ibid.

43 Thibaut, *Chinese Discourse Power: Ambitions*.

44 Zhang and Zhang, “Foreign Correspondents.”

45 “Uganda’s Presidential Election: Voting for an Autocrat,” Australian Institute of International Affairs, February 19, 2022, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/ugandas-presidential-election-voting-for-an-autocrat/>.

46 Emeke Umejei, *Chinese Media in Africa: Perception, Performance, and Paradox* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020).

47 Winston Mano, “Geopolitics of China’s Rising Media and Soft Power in Africa: Eating and Being Eaten,” *Communicatio* 47, 3 (2021): 1-25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02500167.2021.2001554>.

Chinese media through their mobile phones, 45 percent through the web, 41 percent through television, and 16 percent through traditional newspapers.⁴⁸

The statistics for mobile phones are notable, as Chinese firms already hold the majority of market share in Africa's smartphone market and thus provide an important channel for engaging consumers. For example, as of 2019, the Chinese firm Transsion held almost two-thirds of the feature phone market and over 40 percent of the smartphone market in the continent.⁴⁹ The company came under fire in 2020 after pre-installed malware was discovered on thousands of African users' phones.⁵⁰

At the same time that exposure has increased, assessments are mixed regarding the dividends of this investment in improving public perceptions of China. One assessment comparing China's French-language propaganda in African countries found that Russian news content was reproduced seven times more frequently in local outlets.⁵¹ The authors found that Chinese propaganda lacked resonance in the sampled French-speaking countries because its narratives focused more on promoting China rather than reporting stories on African issues. The authors also found that outlets reproducing Chinese content did so largely because it was "freely available."⁵²

A 2016 study of China's English-language engagement in Kenya found similar results. The authors found that despite "tremendous efforts" to increase soft power by expanding media presence, "public awareness and influence of the Chinese media in Kenya [is] limited compared to the dominance of Western media." A 2016 study of the relatively independent South African media environment also found that "the 'China story' only enters local news agendas if it satisfies news values as they are conceived in local practices and routines," and that "Chinese media do not yet seem able to present their content such that it is either credible or appealing to local journalists."⁵³

An August 2022 study released by researchers from Yale University showed that, across nineteen countries, Chinese propaganda was effective at persuading audiences that the "China model" is superior to that of democratic political systems in delivering growth and stability.

A Chinese state-funded assessment from 2019 reported similar findings among Latin American countries. The report found that Latin American audiences primarily turn to domestic media for their understanding of relations with China, followed by—in descending order—media from other Latin American countries, Western media (including the BBC and CNN), and, finally, Chinese media.⁵⁴ The assessment found that "among the five Latin American countries [surveyed], only the Brazilian respondents chose Chinese media over Western media [for reporting on China-related issues]."⁵⁵ The study urged the government to "better tailor propaganda messages to local public opinion so as to garner more views of Chinese state sponsored content."

While findings regarding the impacts of China's overall messaging are mixed, more recent assessments indicate that its narratives may be gaining resonance among global audiences on specific issues.

An August 2022 study released by researchers from Yale University showed that, across nineteen countries,⁵⁶ Chinese propaganda was effective at persuading audiences that the "China model" is superior to that of democratic political systems in delivering growth and stability. The authors noted that "exposure to a representative set of Chinese [propaganda narratives] strengthens perceptions that the CCP delivers growth, stability, and competent leadership. It also triples the proportion

48 Li Huailiang and Gong Yuhua, "中国媒体'走出去'非洲受众调查及思考" ("Survey and Reflections on Chinese Media's 'Going Out' in Africa"), *International Communications* 5 (2021).

49 For more on Transsion, see: "Transsion: a Chinese Prodigy in Africa?" *Net Politics*, Council on Foreign Relations, October 21, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/transsion-chinese-prodigy-africa>; Andrew Deck, "Africa's phone phenom: Your guide to Transsion," *Rest of World*, June 23, 2020, <https://restofworld.org/2020/transsion-from-china-to-africa/>; "传音控股下一站：扩展一带一路沿线国家新市场" ("Transsion's Next Stop: Expanding New Markets in Countries Along the Belt and Road"), Sohu, May 19, 2020, <https://archive.md/bYDMe>; "Africa's Top Handset Vendor Transsion Hit by Pre-installed Malware Incident - Security Vendor Also Spotted Two Other Similar Incidents with Other Handset Vendors," AllAfrica, August 28, 2020, <https://allafrica.com/stories/202009010216.html>.

50 "Africa's Top Handset Vendor Transsion," AllAfrica.

51 Frédéric Douzet et al., "Mapping the spread of Russian and Chinese contents on the French-speaking African web," *Journal of Cyber Policy* 6, 1 (2021): 50-67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23738871.2021.1943477>.

52 Ibid.

53 Herman Wasserman, "China's 'soft power' and its influence on editorial agendas in South Africa," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 9, 1 (2016): 8-20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2015.1049953>.

54 In SRF translations: Zhai Huixia, "2019年度中国企业海外形象调查分析报告—以拉美五国为调查对象" ("2019 Survey and Analysis Report on Chinese Enterprises' Overseas Image—the Case of Five Latin American Countries"), *International Communications* 1 (2020).

55 Ibid.

56 Daniel Mattingly et al., "Chinese Propaganda Persuades a Global Audience That the 'China Model' is Superior: Evidence From A 19-Country Experiment," OSF Preprints (January 18, 2023), <https://osf.io/5cafd/>. The authors note that "we survey citizens of 19 countries that represent a diverse range of contexts, from low-income countries like Kenya to high-income countries like Singapore, from democracies like Canada to authoritarian regimes like Saudi Arabia, and from countries where China's leadership is popular, like Nigeria, to places where China's leadership is unpopular, like Australia."

of respondents who think the Chinese system is superior to the American system, from 16 to 54 percent.”⁵⁷

The authors found that exposure to real Chinese propaganda “doubles support for China’s political and economic models [from baseline levels],” noting that in “head-to-head match-ups with American state messages, global audiences move toward China.”⁵⁸ The findings showed that improvement in favorability of China’s governance model makes “especially striking gains” in regions of the Global South, in particular among countries in Latin America and Africa.

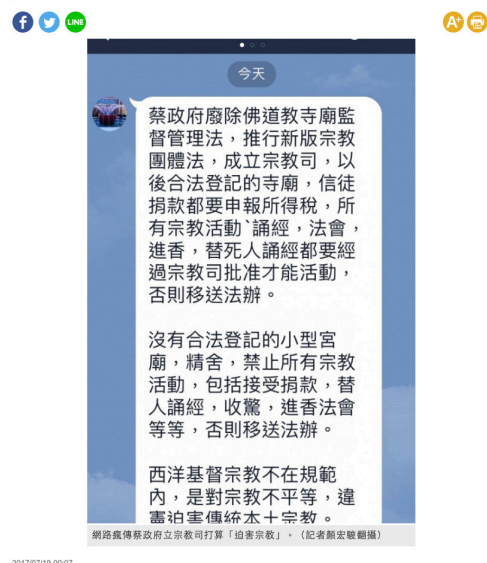
With regard to channel expansion via traditional media, China has spent billions annually, with much of that resourcing going toward initiatives in the Global South. This is especially obvious in the strategies of China’s flagship news organization, Xinhua, which over the years has greatly expanded its network of foreign correspondents; other strategies include both coercing and incentivizing journalists abroad to engage in more favorable coverage of China. At the same time, traditional media organizations have expanded the platforms on which state narratives appear, most notably via optimizing content for mobile devices, in which Chinese companies dominate the market. Most studies have found that China’s messaging at a general level is not especially resonant with local audiences; however, some studies have shown that Chinese narratives, specifically regarding the superiority of the “China model” of governance, consistently outperformed US narratives.

Social Media

As part of its discourse power push, China has also sought to expand channels of international communication via social media, especially in the expanded presence of Chinese state media, officials, and even state-owned companies on overseas social media platforms.

Some of the first reported social media information operations attributable to Beijing can be traced to 2014, when journalists discovered a network of fake Twitter accounts amplifying Chinese narratives attacking the Tibetan independence movement.⁵⁹ A series of external reports from 2015 to 2017 revealed an uptick in suspected Chinese state-sponsored

網路瘋傳「蔡政府迫害宗教」 內政部澄清



Screen cap of a text message from a suspected China-linked disinformation campaign directed at Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen. In 2017, residents in southern Taiwan received text messages warning that the Tsai administration would force temples to adhere to strict new registration requirements as well as new tax and operational regulations.⁶⁰

activity on Western social media platforms. These include reports that state media accounts were purchasing large numbers of Twitter followers,⁶⁰ that Chinese operatives were using LinkedIn to conduct espionage operations,⁶¹ and that China-linked actors had conducted disinformation campaigns against the then-newly elected Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen.⁶²

More recent examples include a December 2021 investigation by threat analysis firm Miburo that detected a massive campaign of more than two thousand accounts across Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube spreading CCP-aligned disinformation.⁶³ Similarly, a recent investigation by the intelligence firm Mandiant showed that, in June 2022, thousands of inauthentic pro-CCP social media accounts promoted negative stories about Australian, Canadian, and US rare earths companies as

57 Mattingly et al., “Chinese Propaganda Persuades.”

58 Ibid.

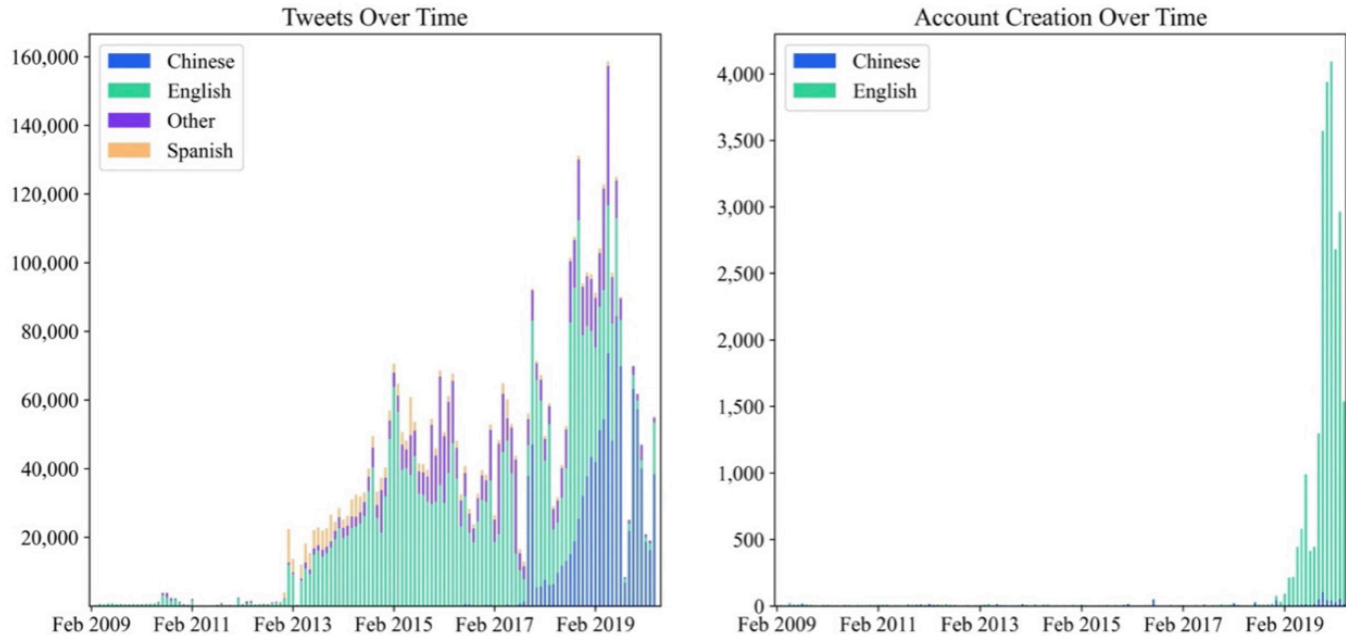
59 Jonathan Kaiman, “Free Tibet exposes fake Twitter accounts by China propagandists,” *Guardian*, July 22, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/22/free-tibet-fake-twitter-accounts-china-propagandists>.

60 Nicholas Confessore et al., “The Follower Factory,” *New York Times*, January 27, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/01/27/technology/social-media-bots.html>; Tom Grundy, “Did China’s state-run news agency purchase Twitter followers?” *Hong Kong Free Press*, April 14, 2015, <https://hongkongfp.com/2015/04/14/did-chinas-state-run-news-agency-purchase-twitter-followers/>; Alexa Olesen, “Where Did Chinese State Media Get All Those Facebook Followers?” *Foreign Policy*, July 7, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/07/china-facebook-peoples-daily-media-soft-power/>.

61 “German spy agency warns of Chinese LinkedIn espionage,” *BBC*, December 10, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-42304297>.

62 J. Michael Cole, “Fake News at Work: President Tsai ‘Persecutes Religion’ in Taiwan,” *Taiwan Sentinel*, July 20, 2017, <https://sentinel.tw/fake-news-tsai-persecutes-religion/>.

63 Nick Monaco, “Spamouflage Survives: CCP-aligned Disinformation Campaign Spreads on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube,” *Miburo*, December 22, 2021, <https://miburo.substack.com/p/spamouflage-survives>.



Graph generated from dataset downloaded from the China country page of the Project on Understanding Global Disinformation and Information Operations of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute's International Cyber Policy Centre.^C

a strategy to help protect China's market dominance in the sector.⁶⁴

China scaled up and extended its information operations abroad in response to a number of major foreign policy events. These included a July 2016 decision by a tribunal in the Permanent Court of Arbitration of The Hague, which ruled that China's ongoing claims in the South China Sea were illegal.⁶⁵ China's English-language versions of its state media reacted strongly to the news, spreading narratives aimed at nullifying the legal authority of the tribunal by demoting its role as simply a "political tool."⁶⁶ According to a 2019 dataset released by Twitter that tracked almost twenty-three thousand accounts originating in China, a major spike in English-language account creation occurred after the ruling (with forty-nine accounts created in a single month, whereas the year prior had averaged one to four per month).⁶⁷

Similarly, China engaged in widespread media and social media activity in 2017 following Western media reports about detentions of Uyghur Muslims in China's western province

of Xinjiang.⁶⁸ In August 2017, for example, just 761 Chinese-language tweets were sent from the China-based accounts identified in the Twitter dataset; this number skyrocketed to 37,935 in October and 47,041 in November of that year, following increasing international attention on Xinjiang.⁶⁹ The two main languages used by these accounts from 2017 onward were English and simplified Chinese, suggesting the target audience was mainly diaspora Chinese and international users.

The Chinese party-state has in recent years invested significantly in human resources allocated to operating foreign social media accounts, both to spread positive China news and to engage in what it terms "foreign public opinion monitoring."

Such activities include government-funded software that collects data from Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms that deal with China-related topics. For example, a 2021 Washington Post article detailed several projects outlined in government bidding documents related to foreign public opinion monitoring, including a \$320,000 software program that mines Twitter and Facebook data to develop a database of foreign journalists, and a \$216,000 program from the Beijing

64 "Pro-PRC DRAGONBRIDGE Influence Campaign Targets Rare Earths Mining Companies in Attempt to Thwart Rivalry to PRC Market Dominance," Mandiant, June 28, 2022, <https://www.mandiant.com/resources/blog/dragonbridge-targets-rare-earths-mining-companies>.

65 Jane Perlez, "Tribunal Rejects Beijing's Claims in South China Sea," *New York Times*, July 12, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/13/world/asia/south-china-sea-hague-ruling-philippines.html>.

66 China Xinhua News (@XHNews), "#BREAKING: Law-abusing tribunal issues ill-founded award on #SouthChinaSea arbitration: Source," Twitter, July 12, 2016, 4:45 a.m., <https://archive.ph/4F3mq>; "People's Daily slams South China Sea arbitration tribunal for being political tool," *People's Daily*, July 14, 2016, <https://archive.ph/zmryw>; Chen Yue, "China refuses South China Sea arbitration award," CCTV, July 12, 2016, <https://archive.ph/wN9b3>.

67 "China," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, September 19, 2019, <https://infoops.aspi.org.au/country/china/>.

68 "China: Free Xinjiang 'Political Education' Detainees," Human Rights Watch, September 10, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/10/china-free-xinjiang-political-education-detainees>.

69 "China," Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

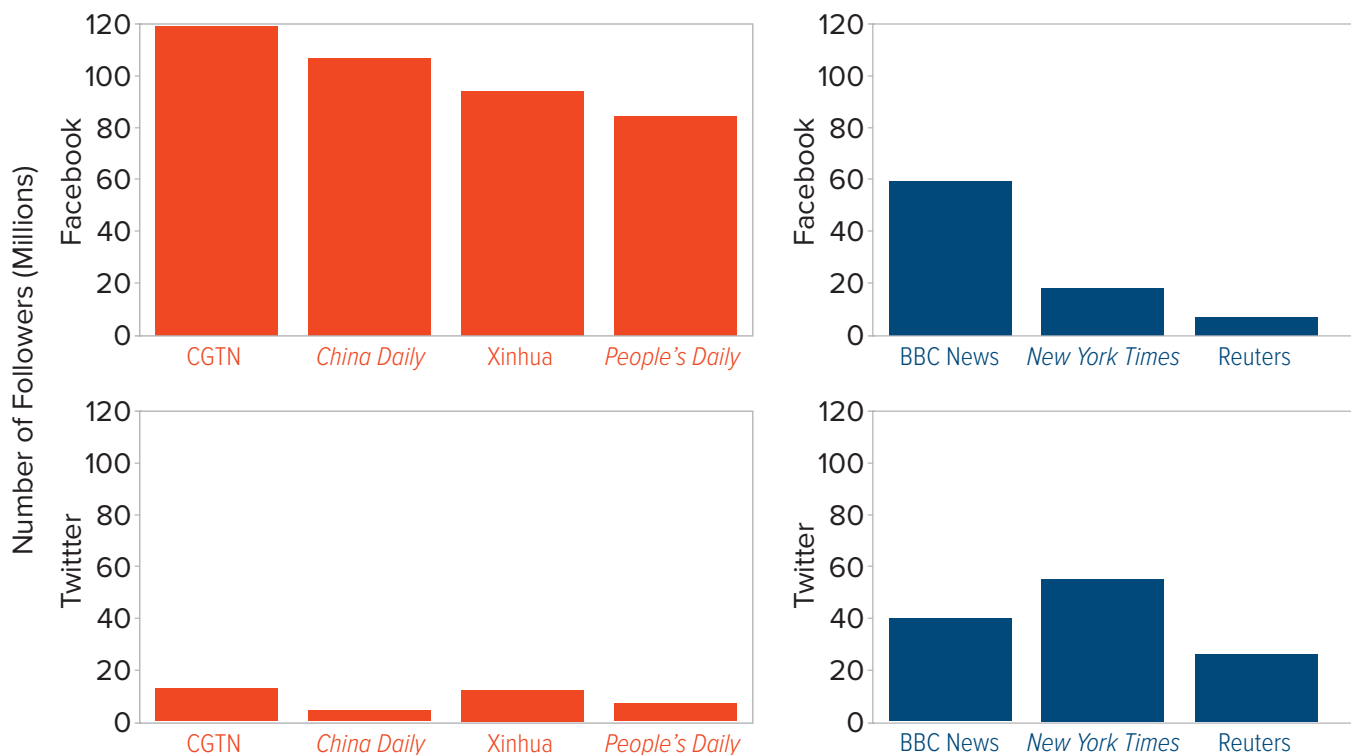
municipal police that examines narratives on Hong Kong and Xinjiang on Western platforms.⁷⁰ Operators are tasked with gathering comments and reactions from foreign citizens on news related to China.⁷¹ The findings are then written into reports that are sent to CPD leadership.

Xinhua has described its media strategy as using a combination of “shipbuilding to go out to sea” and “borrowing a boat to go out to sea” (造船出海与“借船出海”相结合)—that is, building up China’s own capacity to effectively disseminate its message internationally while using foreign social media platforms to disseminate propaganda.⁷² As of March 2023, the Xinhua News page had over 94 million followers on Facebook, CGTN had over 119 million, China Daily had 107 million, and *People’s Daily* had over 84 million. To compare, Reuters had about 6.7 million followers, BBC News had 59 million, and the New York Times had around 18 million followers on their respective Facebook pages.⁷³ On Twitter, Xinhua News Agency had 12

million followers, CGTN had 13.1 million, China Daily had 4.1 million, and *People’s Daily* had 6.7 million. In comparison, Reuters had 25.7 million, BBC News (World) had 39.5 million, and the New York Times had 54.9 million followers on Twitter.⁷⁴ As Chinese citizens do not have access to Western social media without the use of a virtual private network (more commonly known as a VPN), these numbers very likely comprise a vast majority non-China-based followers.

Cumulatively, using the numbers above, China’s state media outlets have a potential reach of over 400 million accounts on Facebook and about 36 million on Twitter. However, reach does not necessarily correlate with resonance among audiences, a fact that is further obfuscated by the possibility that many of the follower accounts could be inauthentic (i.e., bots) or duplicated across platforms. Similarly, while Chinese messaging on social media garners more engagement, engagement

Chinese and Western News’ Follower Counts on Social Media



Bar charts showing the number of followers on Facebook and Twitter for the pages or accounts of Chinese and Western news organizations.^D

70 Cate Cadell, “China harvests masses of data on Western targets, documents show,” *Washington Post*, December 31, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/china-harvests-masses-of-data-on-western-targets-documents-show/2021/12/31/3981ce9c-538e-11ec-8927-c396fa861a71_story.html.

71 Wang, “Changing Strategies.”

72 “Excellent Reality-Themed Drama,” Xinhua.

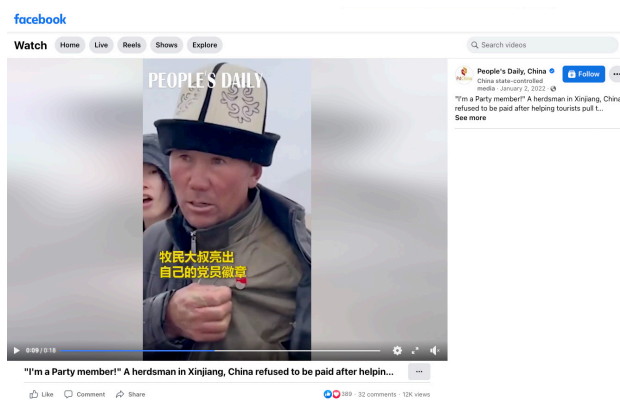
73 Author’s count.

74 Author’s count.

alone is not a perfect proxy for success given the ease at which it can be fabricated or manipulated.⁷⁵

An analysis of eight hundred posts from Chinese state media sources across platforms on both Twitter and Facebook reveals an average “like” count of 1,026, seventy-one shares, and twenty-one comments.⁷⁶ The ratio of followers to likes, shares, and comments on posts from state media accounts indicates, on average, a very a low level of engagement from user accounts. Of the Chinese news organizations, the *People’s Daily* had the highest level of engagement, with its posts being 138 percent more likely to be shared than other state media platforms, and 83 percent more likely to generate comments. The *People’s Daily* content makes heavy use of short videos, and its headlines tend to use dramatic language to capture users’ attention.⁷⁷

Though the above may provide insight into which posting tactics may yield greater resonance among audience members,



Screencap of the *People’s Daily* Facebook page featuring dramatic headlines and short videos.^E

such analyses yield imperfect results.

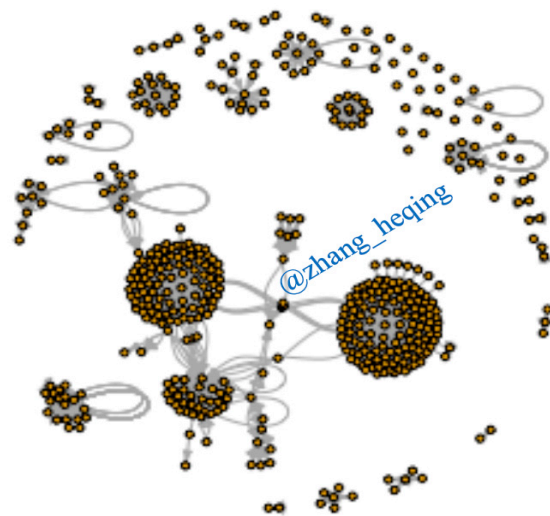
Network analysis may be used to shed light on understanding how state media information travels within platforms, which may provide clearer insights into its potential reach. For example, a DFRLab network analysis shed light on how official Chinese government accounts can serve as loci for disinformation narratives on Twitter.

As context, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) officials have rapidly expanded their presence on Twitter since the outbreak of COVID-19. In October 2018, the MFA operated

only thirteen Twitter accounts; this number grew to eighty by January 2020, at the start of the pandemic.⁷⁸

The DFRLab examined the spread of a China-sponsored COVID-19 conspiracy theory on Twitter from May 1, 2020, through November 20, 2021, in which Chinese officials claimed that a US biolab at Fort Detrick was the actual site of the pandemic outbreak, rather than Wuhan, China. Findings showed that the official account of Zhang Heqing, the cultural counselor at the Chinese Embassy in Pakistan (@zhang_heqing), served as a top disseminator of hashtags related to the disinformation campaign across the entire Twitter platform. Specifically, his account served as a “cut point”—an account which, if removed, would most severely affect the spread of the narratives associated with the hashtags on Twitter.

In addition to spreading China-linked conspiracy theories, embassy accounts on Twitter have also shown increasing sophistication in targeting their messaging at local audiences and increasingly appear to synchronize their messages. For example, between August 18 and 25, 2021, Chinese diplomatic Twitter and Facebook accounts in Africa posted similar



Network map of #Detrick-related hashtags on Twitter from May 1, 2020, through November 20, 2021. Each dot represents an account that used the hashtag during the query period. Lines indicate retweets, mentions, or quote tweets between accounts. The labeled @zhang_heqing account is a primary “cut point” in the network.^F

narratives in English, French, Arabic, and Portuguese promoting China-Africa partnerships, with five of the ten most popular

75 Julia Carrie Wong, “How Facebook let fake engagement distort global politics: a whistleblower’s account,” *Guardian*, April 12, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/apr/12/facebook-fake-engagement-whistleblower-sophie-zhang>.

76 Qingjiang Yao, “The News as International Soft Power: An Analysis of the Posting Techniques of China’s News Media on Facebook and Twitter” in *Engaging Social Media in China: Platforms, Publics, and Production*, eds. Guobin Yang and Wei Wang (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.14321/j.ctv1h9dg1n>.

77 Ibid

78 Zhao Alexandre Huang and Rui Wang, “‘Panda engagement’ in China’s digital public diplomacy,” *Asian Journal of Communication* 30, 2 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/101292986.2020.1725075>.

posts by engagement (likes, comments, and reposts) promoting technological development.⁷⁹

Around this same timeframe, between August 11 and 28, 2021, official diplomatic accounts targeting the Middle East in North Africa posted in Arabic, Turkish, and Urdu mocking the United States and its Afghanistan policies, using political cartoons, and attempting to tarnish the international reputation of the United States. Three out of the ten most popular posts (by likes, comments, and retweets) featured criticisms of US policies in Afghanistan, while three of the top five most popular posts were political cartoons criticizing US involvement in Afghanistan.⁸⁰

Similarly, in June 2022, China launched a global campaign both in advance and shortly after the Group of Seven (G7) meeting highlighting this messaging criticizing the United States for its “hypocrisy.” In the lead-up to the event, Chinese state-affiliated accounts posted almost one thousand seven hundred posts on China’s Weibo and eight hundred eighty posts on Twitter that highlighted the inclusiveness of the BRICS forum (which brings together the developing economies of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) and China’s role in establishing a more equitable international environment.⁸¹

Following the G7, the same accounts posted almost four hundred posts on Weibo and over two hundred on Twitter with



A former Chinese diplomat to Iraq and Lebanon posted the above anti-US cartoon on social media. This post had the most engagements from the period of August 11-28, 2021, at 1,140.⁶

messaging that G7 initiatives only serve the interests of the wealthy West, while China-led initiatives like BRICS served the entire globe.⁸² Across global social media platforms, Chinese government organizations, officials, and state media outlets located in at least sixty-two countries promoted BRICS-related propaganda.

Similarly, in December 2021, after Nicaragua switched diplomatic recognition away from Taiwan, Chinese diplomatic accounts and state media engaged in a series of coordinated Spanish-language campaigns in over thirty countries, including in more than sixty Spanish- or Portuguese-language posts on Twitter. The campaign was designed to illustrate growing global support for China’s position on Taiwan. The campaign also took place on the second day of the Biden administration’s “Summit for Democracy,” to which Taiwan was an invited participant.⁸³

Despite the appearance of a united front with regard to China’s assertive messaging, however, reactions to such tactics—commonly referred to as “wolf warriorism”—within China itself is mixed. China’s censors have previously removed discussions on Weibo criticizing “wolf warrior” tactics.⁸⁴

On March 31, 2021, for example, users on Weibo engaged in heavy criticism of a Twitter post by Li Yang, the Chinese consul general to Brazil, that accused Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of turning Canada into a “running dog” of the



Screenshots of Chinese state media accounts on Twitter posting similar narratives about the G7.^H

79 Analysis of data provided by Two Six Technologies.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

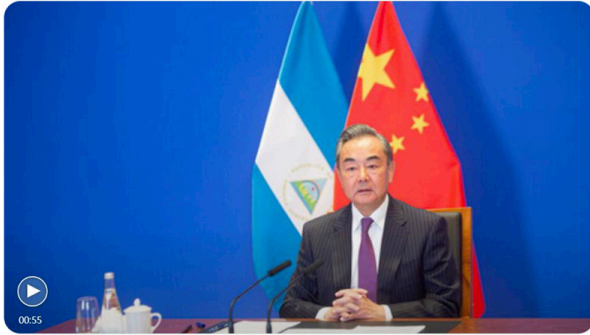
83 Ibid.

84 Ibid.



O ministro das Relações Exteriores da China, Wang Yi, saudou a decisão da #Nicarágua de cortar os laços com a região de #Taiwan e retomar os laços diplomáticos com a República Popular da China na sexta-feira.

[Translate Tweet](#)



3:04 AM · Dec 10, 2021 · Hootsuite Inc.

Screencap of a Twitter post celebrating Nicaragua's removal of diplomatic recognition of Taiwan by the Portuguese-language version of the *People's Daily*.¹

United States.⁸⁵ Most criticisms revolved around the potential blowback on China of such a “vulgar” (难听) approach. Chinese censors removed 46 percent of posts mentioning Li, with the removed posts having garnered over forty thousand interactions.⁸⁶

Tensions between different bureaucratic departments also belie the official sanctioning of the “wolf warrior” approach. In March 2020, MFA spokesperson and “wolf warrior” diplomat Zhao Lijian initiated the first Twitter post claiming that COVID-19 originated in the biological laboratory at US Army base Fort Detrick in Maryland.⁸⁷ Reportedly, the CPD had not been informed in advance of the tweets, and initially, state media outlets were directed to avoid addressing Zhao's posts—with the *People's Daily* actually issuing a tweet refuting his comments.⁸⁸ The *People's Daily* Twitter account in March 2020 also promoted an Axios interview with China's ambassador to the United States, Cui Tiankai, in which he states that it is “crazy” to

spread rumors about the coronavirus originating in the United States.⁸⁹

However, as Zhao's message gained popularity among China's domestic population, the CPD changed tack, with state media throwing its full support behind the conspiracy theory by May 2020.⁹⁰ Such dynamics illustrate the balancing act that the party-state faces when seeking to portray China as a confident leader to global audiences, while also being subject to popular nationalism and domestic discontent in its actions.

Indeed, such sensitivities can also limit the effectiveness of Chinese social media activities abroad. A Chinese government-funded assessment of propaganda activities on global social media platforms outlined the constraints social media posed for expanding China's discourse power. First, core platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube are all operated by Western internet companies, and accounts are “subject to the regulations of the platform,” such that “the state will take stricter or even extreme measures to control Chinese media accounts.”⁹¹ Additionally, the study stated that many of the “internet celebrities and talents” who are active on overseas media platforms are labeled as “Chinese official media” by Twitter and Facebook, and “the visibility of social media influencers from China in the international communication field is still low.”⁹²

However, at the same time, China has identified certain regions as being potentially more amenable to social media penetration. Chinese scholars have written on the popularity of TikTok [the international version of China's Douyin (抖音)], which as of September 2021 reported over 1 billion global monthly active users (MAUs)—a 45 percent increase from July 2020.⁹³ A 2020 assessment by the Guangxi Social Science Think Tank highlighted the potential for China's growth in the Southeast Asian market in particular and emphasized the potential popularity of not just TikTok, but also of Chinese social media platforms WeChat and Weibo, due to linguistic similarities and the “relative underdevelopment of the domestic platform environment.” The same article outlined how expansion into the market would allow China to “localize content production and dissemination adapted to local conditions” to improve its discourse power

85 Li Yang (@Li_Yang_China), “Boy, your greatest achievement is to have ruined the friendly relations between China and Canada, and have turned Canada into a running dog of the US...,” Twitter, March 28, 2021, 11:51 p.m., <https://archive.ph/dUlwM>.

86 Analysis from data provided by Two Six Technologies.

87 “Wuhan lab leak theory: How Fort Detrick became a centre for Chinese conspiracies,” BBC, August 23, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-58273322>.

88 Wang, “Changing Strategies.”

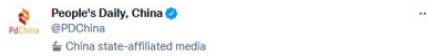
89 *People's Daily*, China (@PDChina), “Chinese Ambassador to the United States Cui Tiankai answered questions regarding FM spokesperson Zhao Lijian's opinion on tweets in an interview with Axios on...,” Twitter, March 23, 2020, 3:30 p.m., <https://archive.ph/bCOLz>; Jonathan Swan and Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, “Top Chinese Official Disowns U.S. Military Lab Coronavirus Conspiracy,” Axios, March 22, 2020, <https://www.axios.com/2020/03/22/china-coronavirus-ambassador-cui-tiankai>.

90 Wang, “Changing Strategies.”

91 Shi Anbin and Tong Tong, “‘乌卡时代’战略传播的转型与升维” (“VUCA Times' Transformation and Upgrading of Strategic Communication”), *International Communications* 6 (2022).

92 Ibid.

93 L. Ceci, “Number of monthly active users (MAU) of TikTok worldwide from January 2018 to September 2021,” Statista, July 29, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1267892/tiktok-global-mau/>.



Chinese Ambassador to the United States Cui Tiankai answered questions regarding FM spokesperson Zhao Lijian's opinion on tweets in an interview with Axios on HBO on Mar 17. Here are details and more: bit.ly/2UHdIKL

AXIOS

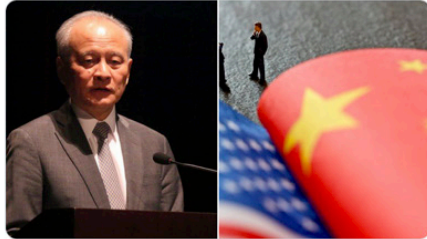
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Mar 22, 2020 - Health

Top Chinese official disowns U.S. military lab coronavirus conspiracy

Jonathan Swan, Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian

11:30 PM · Mar 22, 2020 · TweetDeck

24 Retweets · 8 Quote Tweets · 71 Likes

Screen cap of a tweet from the *People's Daily* promoting an Axios interview with Cui Tiankai, China's ambassador to the United States, alongside a screen cap of the headline on Axios. In that tweet, Cui states that it is "crazy" to spread rumors about the coronavirus originating in the United States.⁹⁴

among the countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).⁹⁴

Similarly, a Chinese-funded survey of social media users in sub-Saharan Africa found that Facebook and YouTube are the most commonly used social media platforms at 68 percent of audiences (combined, both platforms), followed by WeChat at 50 percent, and Twitter at 35 percent. The study concluded that "the three platforms of Facebook, YouTube, and WeChat are the main battlefields for Chinese media to 'go global' in the region."⁹⁵ Expanding the use of WeChat among African audiences could be an appealing proposition for the Chinese party-state, as it exerts control over the content and data on the platform.

Such studies illustrate the synergies between the commercial incentives of Chinese technology companies and the political goals of the CCP. As an illustration, Xinhua's All-Media Service, established in 2014, monitors public sentiment on domestic and global social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter using big-data-driven social-listening tools, using this information to shape editorial guidance.⁹⁶

With regard to channel expansion vis-à-vis social media, the past several years have seen a dramatic increase in the visibility and presence of state media on global social media platforms. This was driven in large part by the need to respond to foreign policy events and perceived strategic communication crises, such as accusations against China regarding forced labor in Xinjiang. China-based Twitter account creation skyrocketed by over 6,000 percent over a period of just three months in 2017 following reports on Xinjiang in the Western press. On social

media platforms, Chinese officials have often engaged in coordinated influence and information campaigns, including those spreading disinformation on the origin of COVID-19.

Alongside an increased social media presence, China has also been investing resources in public opinion monitoring and developing new ways to deliver more resonant content, including through short videos. In doing so, companies have come to understand that the data gathered from these platforms is also valuable for developing more tailored messaging. Such dynamics illustrate the overlap of commercial and political incentives with discourse power priorities, as discussed below in the section on weaponizing data.

94 Ding Yusen, "‘四全媒体’视域下中国对东盟传播的思考" ("China's Reflections on ASEAN Communication from the Perspective of 'Four Media'"), *International Communications* 10 (2020).

95 Li and Gong, ("Survey and Reflections on Chinese").

96 Gerry Shih and Aritz Parra, "Chinese propaganda machine places hopes in cartoon rappers," AP, March 4, 2016, <https://apnews.com/article/5b56df1c8b5e4a908b803fed796d714>.

CONTENT INNOVATION, THE SECOND PRONG OF ‘MEDIA CONVERGENCE’

While China has made headway in its goals for channel expansion, it has also engaged in a strategy of content innovation to enhance the resonance of its external propaganda to foreign audiences.

Three tactics guide China’s actions under this strategy. The first is “precise communication” (精准传播), which, when applied to external propaganda, involves tailoring content in a way that resonates with target audiences—such as elites or the public en masse—in third countries.⁹⁷

Second, in addition to shaping content itself, another tactic is to obscure the fact that the content originates from Chinese state sources. This is a phenomenon known as “political native advertising,” a non-China specific term adapted from marketing studies. “Political native advertising” involves foreign governments purchasing space in news outlets abroad to publish content “camouflaged” as neutral news items.

Lastly, a related tactic involves China’s attempts to control local media environments via content-sharing agreements, which can flood local media environments with free or low-cost pro-CCP content. China often promotes media agreements under the auspices of other cooperation frameworks, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and through regional organizations, with content-sharing agreements included as part of these larger frameworks.⁹⁸ As part of these efforts, state media outlets also engage in economic coercion to control editorial agendas, further warping the information space.

Precise communication

China’s embrace of “precise communication” resulted from a growing understanding that existing external propaganda strategies were failing to resonate with audiences abroad. A range of government-funded internal assessments and academic papers in recent years found that Chinese narratives had low salience among target populations; for example, one 2021 report outlined that, despite China’s attempts to spread

its narrative of a “community of common destiny” in Arab countries, the common impression among most of them were still that of China as an exporter of cheap, low-quality goods.⁹⁹ These assessments found that stilted, propagandistic language used by Chinese state-funded media was a primary barrier to the resonance of pro-China stories.¹⁰⁰

Censorship of domestic Chinese social media reveals the sensitivity of the CCP to these critiques. For example, on December 1, 2021, China engaged in extensive censorship on Weibo, removing 99 percent of the posts that discussed how a British columnist had claimed that he had been banned from publishing with CGTN after he penned a piece for RT describing how China’s propaganda was ineffective.¹⁰¹

China has begun to embrace new media and marketing techniques to increase its appeal...Xinhua President He Ping referred to this kind of content innovation in a 2021 editorial, writing that the news organization would “expand from broad-spectrum propaganda to individual expression,” reflecting this focus on precise communication.

Despite—or perhaps because of—criticism of its propaganda as stale, China has begun to embrace new media and marketing techniques to increase its appeal. Think tanks, experts, policymakers, and media staff are all actively innovating the propaganda apparatus to appeal to a younger, more digitally literate and global audience. Xinhua President He Ping referred to this kind of content innovation in a 2021 editorial, writing that the news organization would “expand from broad-spectrum

97 Hu Bangsheng, “我国对外宣传如何实现精准传播” (“External Propaganda Realizes Precise Communication”), *Chinese Cadres Tribune* 7 (2017); Insikt Group, *1 Key for 1 Lock: The Chinese Communist Party’s Strategy for Targeted Propaganda, Recorded Future*, September 28, 2022, <https://www.recordedfuture.com/1-key-for-1-lock-chinese-communist-party-strategy-targeted-propaganda>.

98 Repnikova, *Chinese Soft Power*, 22.

99 Huo Na, “人类命运共同体理念的对外传播及相关策略——以中阿命运共同体为例” (“External Communication Strategies of the Concept of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind – the Case of China and the Arabic World”), Central Party History and Literature Research Institute, February 19, 2021, https://web.archive.org/web/20220809194603/https://theory.gmw.cn/2021-02/19/content_34627341.htm.

100 Zhang Hongying, “1949-2019 : 新中国对外传播的变迁与发展” (“1949-2019: Changes and Development of China’s International Communication”), *International Communications* 1, 2020; Wang Jingxuan, Liu Qi, and Pan Yue, “‘一带一路’对外传播话语体系建构初探” (“A Preliminary Study on the External Communication Discourse System of ‘the Belt and Road Initiative’”), *International Communications* 5, 2020; Wang Jingxuan, Pan Yue, and Liu Qi, “‘一带一路’主题图书海内外出版现状对比及海外出版启示——基于当当网中国站点与亚马逊美国站点的实证分析” (“Comparisons and Inspirations from the Foreign and Domestic Publication of ‘the Belt and Road Initiative’ Books – Based on Analysis of China’s Dangdang and America’s Amazon”), State Information Center of China, September 11, 2020, <https://archive.ph/9E5ur>.

101 Analysis of Weibo from data provided by Two Six Technologies tracking amplification and censorship of Weibo social media posts.

propaganda to individual expression,” reflecting this focus on precise communication.¹⁰²

China sees access to public opinion data abroad as essential to enhancing its ability tailor content. To this end, China recently launched four State Key Laboratories dedicated to “media convergence and communication,” housed in the Ministry of Education, the *People’s Daily*, Xinhua News Agency, and CCTV, respectively. The Xinhua-run State Key Laboratory of Media Convergence Production Technologies and Systems launched under the CPD’s guidance, which tasked the lab with focusing on “the applications of artificial intelligence to news production and dissemination.”¹⁰³

Xu Zhengzhong, chairman of the Academic Committee of the State Key Laboratory of Communication Content Cognition under the *People’s Daily*, described the lab’s role as using big data to better tailor content to specific audiences, as well as spread “positive energy” through digital and social media. The lab’s guidance includes “building a mainstream public opinion pattern that integrates online and offline, internal and external propaganda” using big data as the support.¹⁰⁴

At the 2022 Internet Civilization Conference, Ye Zhenzhen, the *People’s Daily* online president and party secretary, underscored the utility of big data access to shaping more tailored communications, thus furthering China’s discourse power goals. He stated, “the internet houses a vast amount of economic and social data and is able to accurately reflect social sentiments and public opinion. With the scientific and technological support of big data [analytics] and artificial intelligence (AI), the internet can be a tool for strengthening the Party’s leadership.”¹⁰⁵

“The internet houses a vast amount of economic and social data and is able to accurately reflect social sentiments and public opinion. With the scientific and technological support of big data [analytics] and artificial intelligence (AI), the internet can be a tool for strengthening the Party’s leadership.” - Ye Zhenzhen

102 He Ping, “坚持守正创新 担当使命任务” (“Adhere to Integrity and Innovation, Take on Missions and Tasks”), *Guangming Daily*, January 15, 2021, <https://archive.ph/PKWwB>.

103 “媒体融合生产技术与系统国家重点实验室开放课题管理办法（试行）” [“Management Measures for Open Projects of the State Key Laboratory of Media Integration Production Technology and Systems (Trial)”], Xinhua, August 3, 2021, <https://archive.ph/eUwCH>; “新华社媒体融合国家重点实验室揭牌运行” (“Xinhua News Agency’s State Key Laboratory of Media Integration Was Inaugurated and Put into Operation”), Xinhua, December 11, 2019, <https://archive.ph/2czKy>.

104 “这为人民日报社推进媒体深度融合以及推进国家重点实验室建设指明了方向” (“This Has Pointed Out the Direction for *People’s Daily* to Promote the Deep Integration of Media and Promote the Construction of National Key Laboratories”), *China Environmental News*, December 9, 2019, <https://archive.ph/e7XhL>.

105 Gering, “Discourse Power”; [(Focus Theory China) Focusing on Telling Chinese Stories], China Social Sciences Network.

106 Author’s CNKI counts; “习近平:坚持正确方向创新方法手段 提高新闻舆论传播力引导力” (“Xi Jinping: Adhere to the Correct Direction, Innovate Methods and Means, and Improve the Guiding Force of News and Public Opinion Dissemination”), Xinhua, February 19, 2016, <https://archive.md/eNTVI>.

107 Author’s counts.

108 Author’s counts.



Why China is losing the war of words with the West



Tom Fowdy is a British writer and analyst of politics and international relations with a primary focus on East Asia.



Screenshot of RT article written by Tom Fowdy, who later claimed that he had been banned from CGTN after writing the post. His posts on Weibo were deleted, and discussions of the topic were heavily censored.^K

China has also provided increased funding for academic work on these topics. In 2016, there was a major uptick in publications exploring the topics of “new media,” “converged media,” and “media innovation” among Chinese think tanks, experts, and scholars after Xi, the Chinese president, called for more innovation in the media environment.¹⁰⁶ An analysis of Chinese-language academic research database CNKI showed that published academic research on applications of artificial intelligence (AI) on news and media dissemination and content production almost quadrupled from 2016 to 2017 (from fifty-eight to 206), then more than doubled from 2017 to 2018 (from 206 to 447).¹⁰⁷ Of the 2,285 articles tracked in the database covering the topics of AI + News Media, 156 received funding from China’s National Social Science Fund, which funded thirty-six studies on the topic in 2021, up from six in 2017.¹⁰⁸

In one study, titled “Chinese Enterprises Going Out to Europe, America, and Chinese Media Communication Strategy and Tactics,” researchers outlined the utility of access to public sentiment data for shaping “precise communication” as follows:

“With regards to external propaganda, after the optimized content reaches the target audience

through expanded communication channels, if intelligent human-machine dialogue can be continuously realized or supplemented by customized interaction in different languages and cultures, the communication effect will be greatly improved.... However, the effectiveness of relational connection needs to rely on further dialogue and interaction. The traditional AI model will inevitably encounter physical and resource bottlenecks in the face of the blowout of big data. We must continue to upgrade our AI capabilities to meet the opportunities [for external propaganda] in the era of big data.”¹⁰⁹

Political native advertising

In addition to “precise communication,” another way that China has sought to increase the resonance of its messaging is to obscure the fact that government narratives are originating from government sources. This is referred to as “political native advertising,” of which a core strategy involves foreign governments purchasing advertising space in news outlets abroad and disguising the origin of the content as being provided by the state.¹¹⁰ In a study on the effects of such advertising, media scholars Yaoyao Dai and Luwei Luqiu explain that “those who engage in this form of propaganda hope to exploit the higher credibility of the hosting media site to enhance the persuasiveness of their message.”¹¹¹

In their study, Dai and Luqiu came to several troubling conclusions: first, that “respondents struggle to distinguish political advertisements from standard news stories regardless of their level of education and media literacy;” second, that “political advertisements are more convincing if they appear on and are perceived as news from an independent hosting media site than in a government-controlled news outlet;” and third, that “trust in the hosting media site declines if the political advertisement is detected.”¹¹²

China has embraced political native advertising as a core feature of its external propaganda strategy. One example is the “China Observer” (also translated as “China Watch”) column that the English-language state media outlet China Daily produces. The column highlights achievements of China’s

development model and tells “positive China stories” to the world. Currently, over forty news outlets in twenty countries publish the monthly “China Observer” column; China Daily claims that the column has a circulation of “around 4 million” readers.¹¹³ The column appears in papers in the Global South but also in Western newspapers, including the Washington Post (the United States), the Telegraph (the United Kingdom), Handelsblatt (Germany), Süddeutsche Zeitung (Germany, though it stopped running the column in 2018), Le Figaro (France), Le Soir (Belgium), De Standaard (Belgium), and El País (Spain). In a 2020 report, Freedom House highlighted that, in digital versions of newspapers especially, the “China Observer” column often goes unlabeled as being state sponsored.¹¹⁴

Content sharing and applying editorial pressure

In addition to its own media coverage, China has expanded partnerships and content-sharing agreements with local media companies to better disseminate propaganda. For example, in addition to the “China Observer” column, the China Daily also founded the Asia News Network, which covers twenty-one news organizations in nineteen Asian countries and provides free content and journalist exchanges in exchange for pro-China coverage.¹¹⁵

A huge part of this push is to countries within the BRI, a majority of which are in the Global South. For example, China funds the Forum of Africa-China Cooperation (FOCAC), which it routinely uses as a venue for its state media outlets to sign agreements with national press agencies of African participants; the agreements themselves encourage local press agencies to distribute China-provided media content,¹¹⁶ which is provided for free to both public and private local media organizations.¹¹⁷ Illustrating the scope of some of these content agreements, in June 2022 alone, over 80 percent of China-related articles published by the state-owned Kenya Broadcasting Corporation were sourced directly from Chinese state media.¹¹⁸

Another example of how China bakes in content sharing in its media cooperation activities can be seen in China Media Group’s November 2019 content-sharing and joint production agreement with Brazil’s Band network, the country’s

109 Ma Ning, “人工智能、大数据与对外传播的创新发展” (“Innovative Development of Artificial Intelligence, Big Data and External Communication”), *People’s Daily*, April 18, 2019, <https://archive.md/Gv9b2>. Study: 中国传媒大学, “中国企业走出去欧美华文媒体传播战略与策略,” 课题的阶段性成果·项目编号HW17133, 2019 (China Communications University, “Chinese Enterprises Going Out to Europe, America, and Chinese Media Communication Strategy and Tactics,” Project No. HW17133, 2019).

110 Yaoyao Dai and Luwei Luqiu, “Camouflaged Propaganda: A Survey Experiment on Political Native Advertising,” *Research & Politics* 7, 3 (2020).

111 Ibid.

112 Ibid.

113 “China Daily’s global development,” *China Daily*, <https://archive.ph/aYJae>.

114 Sarah Cook, *Beijing’s Global Megaphone*, Freedom House, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2020/beijings-global-megaphone>.

115 “About Us,” *China Daily*, accessed March 9, 2023, <https://archive.ph/wRY03>.

116 Selma Mihoubi, “La Stratégie d’implantation de Radio Chine Internationale (Rci) en Afrique Sahélienne” [“The Implementation Strategy of Radio China International (RCI) in Sahelian Africa”], *Noroi* 252, 2019.

117 Douzet et al., “Mapping the spread.”

118 Arthur Kaufman, “China Plays Mediator in the Horn of Africa, Leverages Local Media to Reinforce Narrative of Benevolence,” *China Digital Times*, June 28, 2022, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2022/06/china-plays-mediator-in-the-horn-of-africa-leverages-local-media-to-reinforce-narrative-of-benevolence/>.

third largest media organization by viewership. One program included in the agreement was Mundo China, which has replicated Chinese narratives refuting accusations of forced labor and genocide in Xinjiang.¹¹⁹ Similarly, the DFRLab previously outlined how Xinhua's content-sharing agreements with news organizations in South Africa have led to a preponderance of Chinese narratives in the local information space, including those spreading disinformation about the origins of COVID-19.¹²⁰ One major concern with this is, as a German Marshall Fund study found, "through content-sharing agreements, these stories are seen by many citizens on local news websites with few clear indications they come from Chinese media."¹²¹ Such examples illustrate how China's communications strategies, such as political native advertising and content sharing, can be mutually reinforcing.

The availability of free content is also represented in China's digital TV footprint. The China-funded digital TV company StarTimes, which provides content to millions of households across both urban and rural Africa, publishes articles giving favorable coverage to the Chinese government, with CGTN channels offered as a part of its cheapest service package while placing international news channels, such as BBC World News, in more expensive packages.¹²²

Chinese embassies also pay local newspapers to run state-sponsored columns and news items.¹²³ A July 2022 study by the China Global South Project found that nearly every major newspaper in Kenya ran the same column penned by Chinese Ambassador to Kenya Zhou Pingjian refuting the narrative that China engages in "debt trap" diplomacy in Africa. The ambassador also took the opportunity to highlight the advantages of Chinese versus Western funding, stating that "the fact is, financing from Western countries mainly focuses on non-manufacturing sectors, and often comes with political strings attached, such as reforms in human rights."¹²⁴

In several African countries, reporters working with state-owned news organizations that hold cooperation agreements with China face pressure to publish pro-China stories or to otherwise censor themselves from writing content that would contravene China's state media's editorial guidelines.

China also uses its economic leverage to actively shape editorial agendas. Recent scholarship has noted how, in several African countries, reporters working with state-owned news organizations that hold cooperation agreements with China face pressure to publish pro-China stories or to otherwise censor themselves from writing content that would contravene China's state media's editorial guidelines.

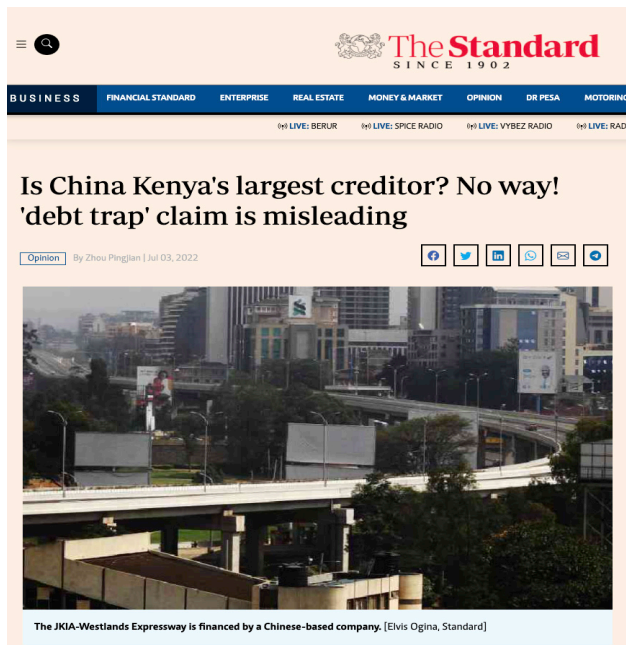
Recent scholarship has also pointed out the existence of a positive relationship between Chinese training and support for local media organizations and the presence of pro-China propaganda in domestic state-affiliated news organizations.¹²⁵ One study on China's media influence in Mauritius found that:

"The state broadcaster covers government-to-government news items at great length, often emphasizes China as a friendly country, and devotes extended coverage to the key development projects China finances. Notably, several journalists working at the Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation have trained at Chinese universities. In addition, the broadcaster's building was constructed using an interest-free loan from China. On the other hand, private media is more cautious in balancing coverage between China and other foreign entities. Journalists from private media have been more willing to write

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- 119 Nicola Casarini et al., *Coercion, Capture, and Censorship: Case Studies on the CCP's Quest for Global Influence*, eds. Caitlin Dearing Scott and Matt Schrader, *International Republican Institute*, September 28, 2022, <https://www.iri.org/resources/coercion-capture-and-censorship-case-studies-on-the-ccps-quest-for-global-influence/>; Nelson de Sá, "Band fecha acordo com TV estatal chinesa" ("Band closes deal with Chinese state TV"), *Folha de S.Paulo*, November 6, 2019, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/mercado/2019/11/band-fecha-acordo-com-tv-estatal-chinesa.shtml>; Mundo China (@mundo_china), "Opinião popular em #Xinjiang. @LiuXininBeijing tem conversado com as pessoas lá e isso é o que elas falam sobre sua vida naquela bela terra com as alegações..." ("Popular opinion in #Xinjiang. @LiuXininBeijing has been talking to people there and this is what they say about their life in that beautiful land with allegations of 'genocide' and 'forced labor'"), Twitter, April 8, 2021, 9:51 a.m., <https://archive.ph/DW71S>.
- 120 Kenton Thibaut, "China's COVID-19 messaging makes its way to South Africa," DFRLab (@DFRLab), December 22, 2021, <https://dfrlab.org/2021/12/22/chinas-covid-19-messaging-makes-its-way-to-south-africa/>.
- 121 Bryce Barros, Nathan Kohlenberg, and Etienne Soula, *China and the Digital Information Stack in the Global South*, ed. Kristine Berzina, *Alliance for Securing Democracy, German Marshall Fund of the United States*, June 15, 2022, <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/China-Digital-Stack.pdf>.
- 122 "China is broadening its efforts to win over African audiences," *Economist*, October 20, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/10/20/china-is-broadening-its-efforts-to-win-over-african-audiences>; "China has conquered Kenya': Inside Beijing's new strategy to win African hearts and minds," *Los Angeles Times*, August 7, 2017, <https://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-china-africa-kenya-20170807-htlmlstory.html>.
- 123 Eric Olander, "Almost Every Major Kenyan Newspaper Published Column by Chinese Ambassador That Refutes Debt Trap Accusation," China Global South Project, July 5, 2022, <https://chinaglobalsouth.com/2022/07/05/almost-every-major-kenyan-newspaper-published-column-by-chinese-ambassador-that-refutes-debt-trap-accusation/>.
- 124 Zhou Pingjian, "Is China Kenya's largest creditor? No way! 'debt trap' claim is misleading," *Standard*, July 2, 2022, <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/business/opinion/article/2001449406/is-china-kenyas-largest-creditor-no-way-debt-trap-claim-is-misleading>.
- 125 "Expanding Engagement: Perspectives on the Africa-China Relationship," *Asia Policy* 17, 3 (2022), <https://www.nbr.org/publication/expanding-engagement-perspectives-on-the-africa-china-relationship/>.

critical pieces pertaining to China's real estate development, infrastructure campaigns, and Safe City project, among other activities."¹²⁶

Other research reveals similar trends. A China Digital Times analysis of the state-owned Somali National News Agency (SONNA) found that, in August 2022 alone, the site published an article praising China's policies in Xinjiang, ran articles by Chinese Ambassador to Somalia Fei Shengchao promoting China's Global Security Initiative, and published two articles defending China's claims over Taiwan. Lastly, SONNA



Screen cap of Chinese Ambassador to Kenya Zhou Pengjian's article in Kenyan newspaper the Standard, refuting the "debt trap diplomacy" narrative surrounding China's engagements in Africa.¹²⁷

published an editorialized version of the Chinese ambassador's original article defending the One China policy without indicating that the origin of the article was a Chinese state source.¹²⁷ The Xinjiang article was written by a journalist who at the time was attending China's Forum of China-Africa Media Cooperation in Beijing.

The state-owned Ethiopian News Agency (ENA) also publishes a large number of pro-China pieces. An August 2022 article, written by an Ethiopian journalist who at the time was participating in a media training program in Beijing, featured effusive praise of China's model of "South-South cooperation," describing its engagement through the BRI as "surely...a more solid foundation for building a strong thrust for the rise of developing countries as a whole."¹²⁸

An interview in ENA with Ethiopian Ambassador to China Teshome Toga highlighted the "distorted and too often misleading narratives peddled by outside interest groups regarding Africa-China Cooperation;" in verbatim repetition of Chinese phrasing, the ambassador noted that "China and African countries are a community with a shared future" and that media outlets "should strive to enhance mutual trust and cooperation."¹²⁹ According to a count by China Digital Times, "all eight of the articles about China in ENA [in August 2022] praise China-Ethiopia cooperation: affirming China's Taiwan policy, praising Chinese projects in Ethiopia and Africa, and parroting Chinese embassy press releases."¹³⁰

A recent ASPI blogpost identified similar trends in the Solomon Islands where articles pushed by the CCP in domestic media outlets were able to penetrate and resonate with local audiences more effectively.¹³¹ The analysis showed that negative China sentiment declined in correlation to real-world efforts by CCP officials to influence public sentiment, largely through these domestic media channels.¹³²

At the same time as it actively promotes pro-China stories in local outlets, Beijing has also used its political and economic leverage to censor negative coverage. An Economist investigation found that, in response to a political cartoon drawn by a local journalist criticizing its mining activities in the country for the environmental issues it has caused, the Chinese Embassy in Ghana had urged a Ghanaian government minister to help bilateral ties between the two countries by "guiding the media to report more objectively" on its gold-mining activities.¹³³

In one well-publicized account from Zimbabwe, the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU–PF) party leveraged its control over domestic media to launch a national campaign against several journalists and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) critical of Chinese mining activities. The state-controlled Zimpapers operates one of the

¹²⁶ "Expanding Engagement"; Roukaya Kasenally, "China in Mauritius: The Telling of the Chinese Story," *Asia Policy* 29, 3 (2022), <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/861925>.

¹²⁷ See *China Digital Times* write-up and broader analysis of China-Africa media cooperation here: Arthur Kaufman, "Media Forums Promote Journalist Collaboration and Position Chinese Narratives in African News Agencies," *China Digital Times*, August 30, 2022, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2022/08/media-forums-promote-journalist-collaboration-and-position-chinese-narratives-in-african-news-agencies/>.

¹²⁸ Bereket Sisay, "Ethio-China Cooperation Gaining Momentum," ENA, <https://www.ena.et/en/?p=37893>.

¹²⁹ "Africa, China Media Synergy Crucial to Foil Disinformation, Says Ethiopian Amb. Teshome," ENA, <https://www.ena.et/en/?p=38050>.

¹³⁰ Kaufman, "Media Forums."

¹³¹ Blake Johnson, "How the Chinese Communist Party is spreading lies in Solomon Islands," *Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, October 5, 2022, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/how-the-chinese-communist-party-is-spreading-lies-in-solomon-islands/>.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ "The price of friendship," *Economist*, May 20, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2022/05/20/the-price-of-friendship>; Kwasi Gyamfi Asiedu, "How a lone Ghanaian cartoonist stood up to China," *Quartz*, November 25, 2017, <https://qz.com/africa/1137709/how-a-lone-ghanaian-cartoonist-stood-up-to-china/>.

country's leading newspapers by circulation numbers, the Zimbabwe Herald. Using the Herald as a mouthpiece, ZANU-PF accused these actors, as well as independent newspaper the Standard, of being part of a US government-funded operation to weaken China-Zimbabwe ties by sowing domestic division over China's mining presence in the country.¹³⁴

The Twitter account for the Chinese Embassy in Zimbabwe amplified these narratives. The account launched a campaign using the hashtag #Mr1k (referring to the unsubstantiated claims that the United States pays \$1,000 per pitch for negative China stories) to attack Zimbabwe-based NGOs and journalists, claiming they are paid agents of the United States. The #Mr1k hashtag reached a peak on Twitter on May 6, 2022, the same day that the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, a conglomeration of around seventy-five civil society organizations focused on promoting democracy in the country, issued a letter criticizing what it described as China's exploitative business practices in the country.¹³⁵ Between August 2021 and August 2022, the hashtag garnered 5.91 million impressions and a reach of 2.62 million.¹³⁶ The majority of hashtag uses were retweets, an

indication of potential inauthentic manipulation, as a disproportionately high volume of retweets can be a sign of potential inauthentic amplification by inorganic accounts, a tactic previously used by China on the Twitter platform.¹³⁷

A May 6, 2022, tweet from the Chinese Embassy in Zimbabwe's official Twitter handle containing the #Mr1k hashtag received the highest number of engagements (one thousand one hundred). The tweet directly targeted two prominent Zimbabwean opposition figures, both of whom had been previously arrested by police for "spreading falsehoods" after reporting on government corruption by ZANU-PF members and for organizing protests against the previous administration.¹³⁸ By lending credence to the narrative that civil society actors in Zimbabwe are US-government funded, the Chinese Embassy continues to provide a veneer of political legitimacy to ZANU-PF's long-standing practice of targeting and cracking down on critics of the ruling regime.¹³⁹

Chinese involvement in local media can also constrict the space for members of local communities to debate the merits of and—in more restrictive domains—freely report on China's deepening involvement in their societies. Specifically, Chinese ownership in local media companies has been found to have a positive and significant relationship to pro-China media coverage.

In addition to providing political cover for crackdowns on civil society, Chinese involvement in local media can also constrict the space for members of local communities to debate the merits of and—in more restrictive domains—freely report on China's deepening involvement in their societies. Specifically, Chinese ownership in local media companies has been found to have a positive and significant relationship to pro-China media coverage.¹⁴⁰

For example, South Africa's Independent Media is a private media company of which 20 percent is owned by Chinese state entities. Previous DFRLab research found that its affiliated



Isma badali doono Shiinaha oo mid ah iyo dib ugu soo noqoshada Taiwan ee Dhulka hooyo

August 7, 2022



Screencap of an article in SONNA by Chinese Ambassador to Somalia Fei Shengchao defending China's claims over Taiwan. The title reads, "We will not change the One China policy and will return Taiwan to the Motherland." Machine translated by Google.^M

134 "Chinese Embassy dismisses newspaper report," *Herald*, July 11, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220712153857/https://www.herald.co.zw/chinese-embassy-dismisses-newspaper-report/>.

135 "Zanu PF mortgaging country to China," *NewsDay*, May 6, 2022, <https://www.newsday.co.zw/2022/05/zanu-pf-mortgaging-country-to-china/>.

136 As calculated using Meltwater Explore. Impressions refer to the total number of times a tweet has appeared in users' feeds. Reach is an estimation of the de-duplicated follower count for all unique Twitter handles. It is an estimate of the potential total audience of the tweets.

137 Monaco, "Spamouflage Survives."

138 "Zimbabwe journalist Hopewell Chin'ono arrested for third time in six months," *Guardian*, January 8, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/08/zimbabwe-journalist-hopewell-chinono-arrested-for-third-time-in-six-months>.

139 Kenton Thibaut, "China spearheads social media campaign to attack civil society in Zimbabwe," DFRLab (@DFRLab), November 9, 2022, <https://dfrlab.org/2022/11/09/china-spearheads-social-media-campaign-to-attack-civil-society-in-zimbabwe/>.

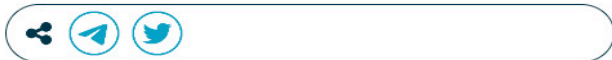
140 James Sundquist, "Telling Chinese Stories Well: Two New Mechanisms of Chinese Influence on Foreign Media," GCI Working Paper 022, Global China Initiative, Global Development Policy Center, Boston University, August 2022, https://www.bu.edu/gdp/files/2022/08/GCI_WP_022_FIN.pdf.

news media site Independent Online (IOL) had published pro-China conspiracy theories on COVID-19's origins and that its editorial team has a close relationship with Chinese state entities.¹⁴¹ A recent content analysis of China-related articles run in Cape Times, one of the newspapers owned by IOL, showed that coverage of China became “dramatically more favorable” following its 2013 investment in IOL. Coverage of human rights issues in China had fallen by around 85 percent between 2013 and 2020 when compared to articles published between 2004 and 2013, before China's investment in Cape Times.¹⁴²

Aside from China's direct efforts to influence editorial agendas, there are also significant economic incentives that encourage pro-China coverage. A 2021 survey conducted with the

Africa, China Media Synergy Crucial to Foil Disinformation, Says Ethiopian Amb. Teshome

792



Screencap of an article in ENA. The first line of the article reads, “China's media synergy is crucial to foil disinformation peddled by outside interest groups concerning Sino-Africa cooperation, Ethiopia's Ambassador to China, Teshome Toga, said.”¹⁴³

Zimbabwe Union of Journalists (ZUJ) indicated that the country's journalists often increase positive coverage of China in order to better position themselves to participate in bilateral exchange programs.¹⁴³ ZUJ nominates journalists to the Ministry of Information in Zimbabwe, with the Chinese Embassy in Harare having the final say on which journalists attend.

A similar study on China's influence on Ghana's media environment found that underfunded and under-resourced journalists find China's offers of free training and equipment highly appealing. However, these offers rarely come with no strings attached. In fact, the study found that “not only [are] local journalists compelled to promote a positive image of China and its policies, some stations and media outlets are also compelled to promote Chinese content ahead of local or Ghanaian news items, adversely affecting the general media environment in Ghana.”¹⁴⁴

These calls for Africa to “tell China's stories well” are evidenced at the highest levels of Chinese leadership. At the August 25, 2022, Forum on China-Africa Media Cooperation in Beijing, CPD head Huang Kunming, on behalf of Xi, urged representatives from forty-two African countries to ensure that their journalists would be “advocates for development, to tell the stories of the new era in China-Africa cooperation well, and promote the common values of all humankind.”¹⁴⁵ Sessions at the forum included those focusing on “media development policy, content cooperation, new technology applications, and digital convergence.”¹⁴⁶ During the event, African Union of Broadcasting CEO Gregoire Ndjaka highlighted that media training was a particular strong point in the China-Africa relationship.¹⁴⁷ Indeed, according to a China Daily report, as of August 2022, China had provided media training for over three thousand African journalists.¹⁴⁸

Huang gave similar remarks at the August 2022 Media Cooperation Forum on the Belt and Road, which included more than one hundred twenty media representatives from forty countries and international organizations in the BRI. In a speech at this forum, the CPD head emphasized the media's “indispensable role in disseminating information, fostering mutual trust, and building consensus,” urging their “participation, actions, communication and cooperation in the joint building of the Belt and Road.”¹⁴⁹

141 Thibaut, “China's COVID-19 messaging.”

142 Sundquist, “Telling.”

143 Mano, “Geopolitics.”

144 Arthur Kaufman, “Ghana Study Highlights Chinese Drive for Global Media Influence,” *China Digital Times*, June 8, 2022, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2022/06/ghana-study-highlights-chinese-drive-for-global-media-influence/>; Emmanuel K. Dogbevi, “China in Africa's Media: A Case Study of Ghana” in *Political Front Lines: China's Pursuit of Influence in Africa*, Nadège Rolland, ed., NBR Special Report no. 100 (2022).

145 “第五届中非媒体合作论坛举行 黄坤明宣读习近平主席贺信并发表主旨演讲” (“Holding the 5th China-Africa Media Cooperation Forum Huang Kunming Read Out the Congratulatory Letter from President Xi Jinping and Delivered a Keynote Speech”), Xinhua, August 26, 2022, <https://archive.ph/kFct5>.

146 Kaufman, “Media Forums.”

147 “5th Forum on China-Africa Media Cooperation: 2012 – 2022,” African Union of Broadcasting, <https://www.uar-aub.org/single-post/5th-forum-on-china-africa-media-cooperation-2012-2022>.

148 Mo Jingxi, “Xi: Teamwork of China, Africa media crucial,” *China Daily*, August 26, 2022, <https://archive.ph/di2s2>.

149 “Senior CPC official stresses enhanced media contribution to Belt and Road construction,” *People's Daily*, August 10, 2022, <https://archive.ph/aUZni>.

Key Metrics For Twitter (i)

1.39k

Users (i)

3.02k

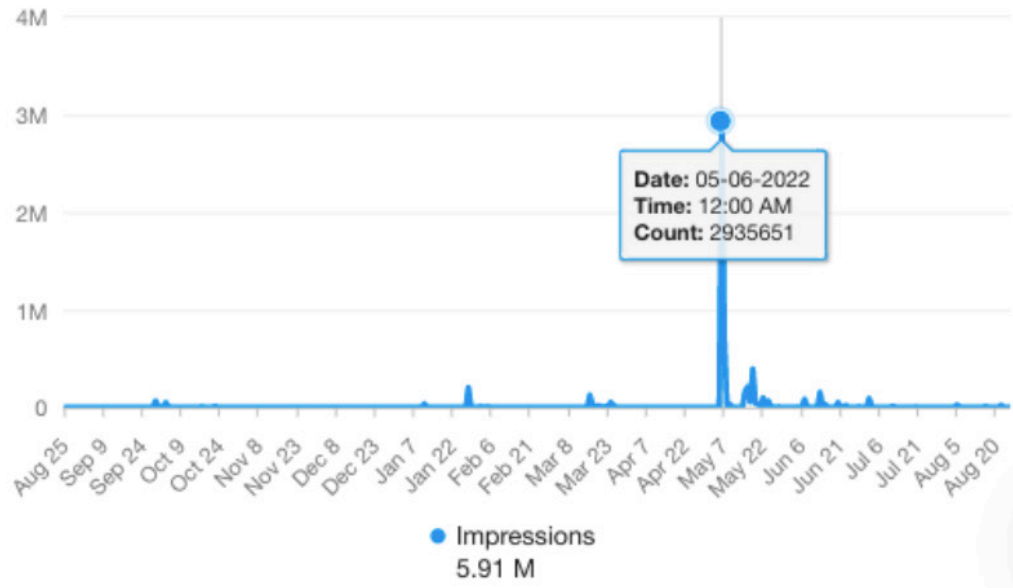
Mentions (i)

5.91M

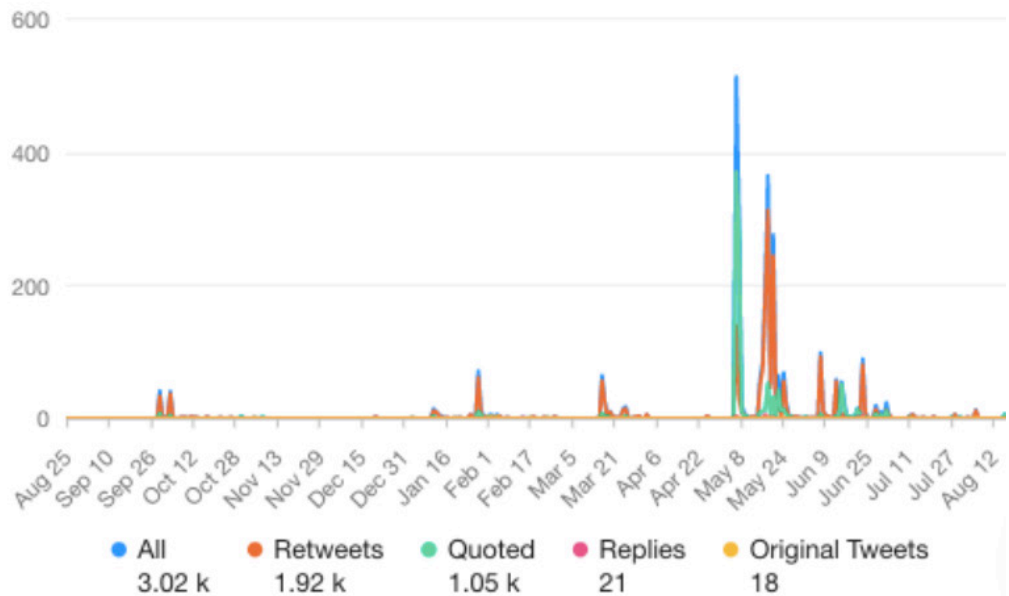
Impressions (i)

2.62M

Reach (i)



Tweet Type Breakdown (i)



Metrics for the #Mr1k hashtag between August 2021 and August 2022 using Meltwater Explore. The hashtag reached a peak on May 6, the day that an NGO coalition issued a public letter criticizing Chinese business practices. The line graph on the top shows the frequency of the hashtag use over time, while the line graph on the bottom shows the percentage of hashtag responses that were original tweets, retweets, and quote tweets. The high number of retweets indicates potential inauthentic amplification, as used by China on Twitter in previous campaigns.⁹

GOVERNANCE, THE THIRD PRONG OF ‘MEDIA CONVERGENCE’

The third and final prong of China’s approach to “media convergence” is governance. In this aspect, China has embarked on a concerted push to expand its capabilities and influence over governance of technological infrastructure and connectivity.

Of the areas surveyed, China’s efforts at standards shaping and digital governance have the potential to be the most far reaching, for example, in the areas of facial recognition and surveillance technologies. While China still lags behind the United States in terms of its overall technological prowess, its inroads are especially visible in the Global South.¹⁵⁰

Underscoring this point, in February 2022, Chinese scholar Wang Jisi assessed that China’s breakthroughs in 5G communication and ICT standards were more successful relative to other sectors, including technology and product standards in sub-sectors such as memory and auto chips.¹⁵¹ The assessment also outlined that, globally, China was relatively behind the United States in terms of “soft standards, like core technological advantages, market penetration, and user acceptance.”¹⁵² However, while on the global stage China may still be behind the United States, its standards have seen asymmetrically rapid uptake in the Global South.

Standards

The United Nations is at the center of China’s discourse power strategy and plays a core role in its vision for the global order. The CCP sees the UN as one of the primary vehicles for reshaping the international order by institutionalizing Chinese policies and norms at the global level.¹⁵³ One of the areas of the UN in which China has been increasingly active in recent years is in promoting its technical and digital standards, including norms of governance. These standards ensure interoperability across products, network systems, and technologies adopted across markets. They also can grant incredible market power to first movers and early adopters.

The UN tends to occupy a place of elevated importance to global majority countries for several reasons, the most powerful

of which is the principle of sovereign equality of all countries under the UN system. More specifically, the organization’s principle of “one country, one vote” allows for less powerful countries to speak to the concerns of developing nations on a more equal footing; at the same time, UN mechanisms allow smaller countries to air grievances and advocate policy positions to more powerful countries in coalitions or as a group, in a way that their individual status would not otherwise allow.¹⁵⁴ As such, the UN’s endorsement is particularly valuable for China in securing acceptance of its norms in the Global South.¹⁵⁵

When applied to standards setting, national or regional standards-setting bodies in the Global South are either nascent, do not exist, and/or are underfunded. As such, adopting pre-vetted UN standards helps to streamline the process. However, Chinese-sponsored international standards often mirror those developed by China’s domestic companies—thus, UN standards adopted across the globe are often those that are tailored to the end use goals of these firms and, by extension, the CCP.

China’s engagement in multilateral standards-setting bodies serves two complementary goals: (1) promote the uptake of Chinese domestic technical standards in international standards-setting organizations, and (2) encourage their adoption in third markets via cooperation agreements, largely with countries in the Global South.

China has been active in multilateral standards-setting bodies and has strong representation among its domestic industry representatives in the leadership of these organizations.¹⁵⁶ China’s engagement in this space serves two complementary goals: (1) promote the uptake of Chinese domestic technical

150 Paul Triolo, “Why did a Peking University paper on China’s tech deficiencies get deleted?” China Project, February 25, 2022, <https://thechinaproject.com/2022/02/25/why-did-a-peking-university-paper-on-chinas-tech-deficiencies-get-deleted/>.

151 Peking University International Strategy Research Group, “技术领域的中美战略竞争：分析与展望” (“Sino-US Strategic Competition in Technology: Analysis and Prospects”), *US-China Perception Monitor*, January 30, 2022, <https://archive.ph/Xz6VD>.

152 Ibid.

153 Thibaut, *Chinese Discourse Power: Ambitions*.

154 Yong Deng, “How China Builds the Credibility of the Belt and Road Initiative,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 30, 131 (2021): 734-750, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2021.1884958>.

155 Ibid.

156 Thibaut, *Chinese Discourse Power: Ambitions*.



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#5G# 【我国提交的5G技术方案顺利成为国际电信联盟认可的5G国际标准】北京时间2020年7月9日晚间，ITU-R WP5D#35会议宣布了IMT-2020（5G）技术方案的诞生。我国基于3GPP技术的无线空口技术方案顺利成为ITU认可的5G方案。

Screencap of a 2020 post on Weibo by the China Academy of Information and Communications Technology (CAICT), a think tank affiliated with China's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT). The MIIT plays a major role in developing China's technical standards for areas like 5G and telecommunications more broadly. The post reads, "#5G# [The 5G technical solution submitted by China has successfully become the 5G international standard recognized by the International Telecommunication Union] On the evening of July 9, 2020, Beijing time, the ITU-R WP5D#35 meeting announced the IMT-2020 (5G) technical solution. China's wireless air interface technology solution based on 3GPP technology has successfully become a 5G solution approved by ITU. China's 5G wireless air interface technology solution is based on 3GPP new air interface (NR) and narrowband Internet of Things."¹⁵⁷

standards in international standards-setting organizations, and (2) encourage their adoption in third markets via cooperation agreements, largely with countries in the Global South.

First, China highly encourages its domestic companies to support the state's goal of having domestic standards adopted in global governance bodies. Joint awards from the Central Cyberspace Administration of China, the relevant departments of the State Council, the Equipment Development Department of the Central Military Commission, industry associations, the State Administration for Market Regulation, and the National Professional Standardization Technical Committee are also provided to organizations and individuals who help develop standards for the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC), and International Telecommunication Union (ITU). The 2017 Standardization Law specifically outlines incentives for universities and research centers that contribute to this work, including a \$155,000 yearly award for firms that work to promote domestic standards in UN bodies, and bonuses for executives who earn leadership positions in these organizations.¹⁵⁷

Such a strategy is clearly outlined in the national standards-setting plan, the "National Standardization Development Framework" (国家标准化发展纲要), released by the CCP's Central Commission in 2021. In the plan, the Central Commission and the State Council outlined the goal that, by 2025, China's standardization work would move from strictly domestically driven to "mutual development and promotion of domestic and international standards."¹⁵⁸ A review of China's 2020 standards work boasted that, in that year alone, Chinese experts had assumed leadership positions in twelve ISO and IEC technical institutions, covering areas ranging from lab

design to robotics. It said that China had "transformed 880 international standards and put forward 278 international standard proposals in the fields of artificial intelligence...biotechnology, aerospace, Internet of Things, and semiconductor devices."¹⁵⁹

As implicated above, China's interests in organizations like the ITU span numerous issue areas and recruit involvement from all sectors of society; these groups are then rallied behind a unified goal of advancing Chinese-led standards. As China scholar Rogier Creemers writes:

"China's internet ecology consists of numerous industry associations and professional bodies that fall under the formal authority of state ministries, or whose senior officials are appointed by the CCP. Business leaders, too, are often party members. While that does not mean monolithic acceptance of central state policy—often quite the opposite—this model combines a semblance of institutional pluralism while maintaining a considerable degree of political control."¹⁶⁰

However, the impact of China's efforts differs from organization to organization. A prioritized forum for engagement is the ITU. As an example of China's multi-sectoral collaboration on promoting standards, on August 4, 2021, the ITU announced it had published a China-led standard for encryption-based privacy solutions in computing, dubbed the Technical Framework for Shared Machine Learning Systems. According to Chinese media reporting, this standard is aimed at guiding the design and development of privacy-preserving machine-learning systems, with the ultimate goal of promoting more expansive

157 Seconded European Standardization Expert in China, trans., "Standardization Law of the People's Republic of China (Revised Draft)," https://share.ansi.org/Shared%20Documents/News%20and%20Publications/Links%20Within%20Stories/China%20Standardization%20Law_English%20translation_SESEC_5.17.2017.pdf; Russel and Berger, *Stacking the Deck*.

158 "中共中央 国务院印发《国家标准化发展纲要》" ("The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued the 'National Standardization Development Outline'"), Central Government of the People's Republic of China, October 10, 2021, <https://archive.ph/f1ysci>.

159 "2021年我国标准化工作回眸" ("Review of China's 2021 Standardization Work"), *Xiaoxiang Morning Herald*, January 14, 2022, <https://archive.ph/fwuKc>.

160 Rogier Creemers, "China's Conception of Cyber Sovereignty: Rhetoric and Realization" in *Governing Cyberspace: Behavior, Power, and Diplomacy*, eds. Dennis Broeders and Bibi van den Berg (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), https://rowman.com/WebDocs/Open_Access_Governing_Cyberspace_Broeders_and_van_den_Berg.pdf.

data collaboration and data-sharing efforts.¹⁶¹ China Telecom, a state-owned ICT company, and Zhejiang Laboratory, a university-affiliated think tank, jointly developed the standard using government funding; the standard itself is based on machine-learning technology provided by Chinese technology company Ant Group.¹⁶²

As mentioned above, one element of China's standards strategy involves embedding representatives in leadership positions in standards-setting bodies. For example, Zhao Houlin, who was secretary general of the ITU until early 2023, signed an agreement on behalf of the organization with China in 2017 to collaborate on ICT projects under the BRI.¹⁶³

As of September 2022, Zhao also served as an adviser to Xi and then Chinese premier Li Keqiang on how to best position Chinese telecom companies with regional telecommunication cooperation along the BRI.¹⁶⁴ Prior to serving as secretary general of the ITU, Zhao served two terms as the director of the ITU's Telecommunication Standardization Bureau, which develops technical standards on ICT interoperability.¹⁶⁵ In a 2019 interview, Zhao stated that, upon first joining the ITU, his "heart was full of sorrow about implementing other [countries'] visions, but he always hoped to fight for the discourse power of the motherland."¹⁶⁶

In addition to seeking out leadership positions in standards organizations, China also leverages its broad presence within certain standards organizations to engage in bloc voting on proposals—meaning that all China-affiliated members, including those from academia, private industry, or government, coordinate their votes and essentially vote as a unit. This ensures that standards proposals from Chinese entities receive the number of votes needed to be adopted by the entire standards-setting body, a tactic the Asia Society Policy Institute describes as "flooding the zone."¹⁶⁷ This tactic is unique to China, as "the experts and engineers from other countries...

vote according to their own or their company's best judgment."¹⁶⁸ For example, in 2020, Huawei was the top submitter for standards for Narrowband Internet of Things technology; its standards took about four years from the proposal stage until they were adopted by the ITU in July 2020. In this area specifically, Huawei submitted over one thousand proposals, accounting for over 40 percent of all the proposals received, of which almost two hundred were approved.¹⁶⁹

These initiatives are often explicitly aimed at promoting standards that seek to institutionalize Chinese norms of internet governance, one of which is China's "cyber sovereignty" principle. As mentioned above, cyber sovereignty is China's vision for internet governance that privileges the state's authority to control all aspects of internet activity within its borders. A successful example of Beijing's efforts in this regard is its promotion of the adoption of global 5G standards through the ITU sub-group 3GPP, or the Third Generation Partnership Project, the leading global mobile network standardization organization.¹⁷⁰

Here, China employed its "flooding the zone" strategy, financing its top telecommunications firm Huawei to "submit over 19,000 technical contributions and dispatch over 3,000 engineers to participate in the 5G standard-setting process."¹⁷¹ This is compared to US firm Qualcomm, which had the largest presence of US companies in the sub-group and made around six thousand contributions and provided almost one thousand three hundred engineers to attend 3GPP sub-group meetings.¹⁷² According to one analysis, here China supplied 31.5 percent of 5G technical standards contributions, followed by Sweden (18.85 percent), Finland (13.4), the United States (10.95), and South Korea (8.4).¹⁷³

In July 2020, after the ITU adopted the 5G standards proposed by Huawei, Chinese media broadly celebrated the event as a triumph for China's discourse power.¹⁷⁴

161 Chloe Ma, "国际电信联盟首次发布隐私计算标准 中国机构参与制定" ("The International Telecommunication Union Released the Privacy Computing Standard for the First Time Chinese Institutions Participated in the Formulation"), Qianzhan, August 5, 2021, <https://archive.ph/IZYES>.

162 Ibid.

163 Du Mingming, "ITU secretary-general: ICT a foundation for development under Belt and Road Initiative," *People's Daily Online*, May 23, 2017, <https://archive.ph/HQP8x>.

164 "国际电联'掌门人'赵厚麟：南邮骄子，国之骄子" ("Zhao Houlin, 'Head of ITU': The Proud Son of NUPT, the Proud Son of the Country"), Nanjing University of Posts and Telecommunications Propaganda Department, September 24, 2019, <https://archive.ph/IVgCk>.

165 "赵厚麟简历" ("Houlin Zhao Resume"), *Ifeng News*, September 10, 2015, <https://archive.ph/fUpuS>.

166 ("Zhao Houlin, 'Head of ITU'"), Nanjing University of Posts and Telecommunications Propaganda Department; the US government's success in promoting Doreen Bogdan-Martin to win the September 2022 ITU secretary general election, over her Russian opponent, exemplifies the benefits of direct response. Emma Farge, "U.S. candidate beats Russian to head U.N. tech agency," Reuters, September 29, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/us-candidate-beats-russia-head-un-telecoms-agency-2022-09-29/>.

167 Russel and Berger, *Stacking the Deck*.

168 Ibid.

169 "中国5G标准获国际电信联盟认可，华为参与，美国也没办法阻止" ("China's 5G Standard Is Recognized by the International Telecommunication Union, Huawei Participates, and the United States Has No Way to Stop It"), *Gufeng Huiyun*, July 16, 2020, <https://archive.ph/EowLC>.

170 *A 'China Model?' Beijing's Promotion of Alternative Global Norms and Standards*, US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 116th Cong. (2020), https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2020-10/March_13_Hearing_and_April_27_Roundtable_Transcript_0.pdf.

171 Ibid.

172 Ibid.; see also: "Who is leading the 5G patent race? – June 2022," Iplytics, June 2022, <https://www.iplytics.com/report/5g-patent-race-june-2022/>.

173 Tim Rühlig, "Chinese Influence through Technical Standardization," *Journal of Contemporary China* 32, 139 (2023): 54-72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2022.2052439>; data: Valentina Pop, Sha Hua, and Daniel Michaels, "From Lightbulbs to 5G, China Battles West for Control of Vital Technology Standards," *Wall Street Journal*, February 8, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/from-lightbulbs-to-5g-china-battles-west-for-control-of-vital-technology-standards-11612722698>.

174 ("China's 5G Standard Is Recognized"), *Gufeng Huiyun*.

China also has had major success in establishing patents related to 5G technologies. As of September 2022, Chinese companies accounted for a third of all patent groupings that are declared as “standards essential,” which are crucial to the functioning of highly technical economic sectors. China has supplied a third of these “standard-essential” 5G patents, while European and US companies supplied 17 and 14.1 percent, respectively.¹⁷⁵

China-sponsored standards have been widely adopted in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, where China had signed ninety Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) on technical standards recognition with fifty-two countries by 2019. As of April 2022, China’s National Standards Committee had directly signed forty-four cooperation agreements with thirty-six countries along the BRI.

In addition to promoting the uptake of Chinese domestic standards internationally, Beijing also works to ensure uptake in third countries via cooperation agreements, especially along the BRI. Often, Beijing will initiate agreements under the auspices of the BRI that bind financing for major infrastructure projects, like railways, to the adoption of China’s technical standards. As China scholar Tim Rühlig writes, “this incentivizes developing countries in particular, as they have a strong demand for Chinese funding. Chinese technical standards result in...lock-in effects...as a political dimension of technical standardization power.”¹⁷⁶

Indeed, China-sponsored standards have been widely adopted in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, where China had signed ninety Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) on technical standards recognition with fifty-two countries by 2019.¹⁷⁷ As of April 2022, China’s National Standards Committee had directly signed forty-four cooperation agreements with thirty-six countries along the BRI, including Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Singapore, Tajikistan, and Armenia.¹⁷⁸ At the 2019 Belt and Road Forum,

in partnership with UN standards-setting organizations including the ITU, the ISO, and the IEC, China announced the launch of its Standardization Chinese-English Bilingual Intelligent Translation Cloud Platform. The platform aims to help update and translate China-led standards to facilitate their adoption by BRI countries.¹⁷⁹

Similarly, in its “2021 Key Points for National Standardization Work” (2021年全国标准化工作要点), China’s National Standardization Committee outlined plans to promote international cooperation on the issue with Pakistan, Costa Rica, European and Gulf Arab countries, the African Standards Organization, the Pacific Regional Standards Conference, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation’s Subcommittee on Standards and Conformity Assessment, the Pan American Standards Committee, and through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, specifically.¹⁸⁰

Once standards developed through UN standards-setting bodies are adopted, they can come to have significant market-shaping power and can influence the future trajectory of technology development.¹⁸¹ However, the impact of international adoption of Chinese domestic standards is not limited to just the technical or economic spheres; there are significant policy implications as well.

As with standards proposed by other countries, including the United States,¹⁸² Chinese standards proposals also often contain policy recommendations in the form of recommended use cases. For example, Chinese telecommunications company ZTE, along with China Telecom, proposed facial recognition standards with recommended use cases such as police monitoring of public spaces for criminal activity.¹⁸³ An ITU proposal that was adopted in June 2019 from ZTE and China Mobile laid out standards and requirements related to “smart street light services”; these particular standards are tailored in both back-end architecture and functionality to the design of ZTE’s Smart Street 2.0 street light.¹⁸⁴ One of the use cases promoted in this proposal outlined potential public safety applications of the street lights’ surveillance capabilities.

175 Rühlig, “Chinese Influence.”

176 Ibid.

177 Russel and Berger, *Stacking the Deck*.

178 “我国国际标准化协议大盘点” (“Compiling China’s International Standardization Agreements”), China Standard Bureau, April 25, 2022, <https://archive.ph/af3L2>.

179 Russel and Berger, *Stacking the Deck*.

180 “2021年全国标准化工作要点” (“Key Points for National Standardization Work”), Standardization Administration of China, April 9, 2021, <https://archive.ph/Ahhcf>.

181 Russel and Berger, *Stacking the Deck*.

182 Rick Rojas and Jesus Jiménez, “As Officers Beat Tyre Nichols, a Crime-Fighting Camera Watched Over Them,” *New York Times*, February 1, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/01/us/skycop-camera-tyre-nichols-memphis.html>.

183 Anna Gross, Madhumita Murgia, and Yuan Yang, “Chinese tech groups shaping UN facial recognition standards,” *Financial Times*, December 1, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/c3555a3c-0d3e-11ea-b2d6-9bf4d1957a67>.

184 Ibid.

Positive Feedback Loop of Diplomacy, Technical Standards, and Chinese Governance Norms

China's efforts to strengthen its influence in the digital domain do not only happen in international forums. China's discourse power strategy in the digital domain also includes diplomatic and media efforts in local settings. In addition to shaping international standards that conform to domestic technologies that are then widely adopted in Global South countries, China also engages in people-to-people exchanges that promote "cyber sovereignty" norms in governance policies. In parallel to these diplomatic efforts, China often leverages its deep media penetration to flood local media environments with stories of the benefits of China's investment in developing countries' digital futures. In other words, people-to-people exchanges serve as connective tissue between the CCP's goals for technological development, and its aims to center China at the heart of the global digital economy.

China's efforts to gain discourse power in large part center around external propaganda and diplomatic engagement efforts, particularly in the Global South.¹⁸⁵ China has greatly ramped up its high-level diplomatic visits and people-to-people exchanges in these regions. According to a database tracked by the Central European Institute of Asian Studies, Xi himself traveled on 103 international trips, mostly to the Global South, from 2013 to 2020, before the onset of the pandemic.¹⁸⁶

China's efforts here also include hosting thousands of training workshops for elites and technical staff from countries along the BRI. Through these trainings, China is able to establish relationships with high-ranking elites who likely have decision-making power in their home countries.¹⁸⁷ Seminars can range from "government-media relations, internet censorship and opposition monitoring on social media platforms" to introductory seminars on the CCP's version of China's relationships with Taiwan and Hong Kong, among other topics.¹⁸⁸

China actively encourages its partners to attend these trainings. For example, in 2019, South Africa's ruling African National Congress party, which traditionally has close ties to Beijing, sent three hundred of its members to receive training in China on communication platforms and propaganda diffusion.¹⁸⁹ The CCP has also held trainings for Vietnamese party members on "guiding online public opinion"¹⁹⁰ and for Zimbabwe's ruling ZANU-PF party on cyber controls and surveillance techniques.¹⁹¹ In September 2021, Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister Sar Kheng and then Chinese public security minister Zhao Kezhi signed a work plan in which Chinese police would provide "crime detection equipment" to Cambodia's Ministry of Interior and also provide technical training to the country's national police.¹⁹² From 2017 to 2018 alone, Freedom House counted thirty-eight cases of foreign media representatives or elites participating in China-sponsored trainings on media management and controls, with a heavy emphasis on BRI countries located in the Global South.¹⁹³

These trainings offer Beijing the opportunity to market its surveillance and public opinion monitoring tools and technologies. For example, a 2018 Foreign Affairs article described how now-incarcerated South Sudanese military official Anthony Kpandu reportedly placed orders for surveillance drones that he first saw in China while leading a delegation.¹⁹⁴ Similarly, a 2018 article in Chinese state media outlet Global Times outlined how, during a business conference in Harare, the chairman of Chinese technology company Dahua pledged to train local scientists from Zimbabwe on how to manage and operate China's "safe city" technologies.¹⁹⁵

Huawei is perhaps the Chinese firm most well known for the benefits it has reaped in terms of its involvement in Africa's ICT sector. With heavy government assistance, Huawei has been successful in expanding its capabilities abroad, especially in the Global South. In 2016, Huawei joined the Smart Africa Alliance, becoming the organization's main ICT consultant and occupying a leadership position on its board of directors. Huawei has used its position to promote its "Safe City Solutions" in the

185 Thibaut, *China's Discourse Power Operations*; Thibaut, *Chinese Discourse Power: Ambitions*.

186 "Who, Where, When - International Travel of the PRC Leaders (1949-2020)," *Central European Institute of Asian Studies* (2020), <https://who-where-when.ceias.eu/#h.wpukvj4ca2r>.

187 Lina Benabdallah, "Power or Influence? Making Sense of China's Evolving Party-To-Party Diplomacy in Africa," *African Studies Quarterly* 19, 3-4 (2020), <https://asq.africa.ufl.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/168/V19i3-4a6.pdf>.

188 Ibid.

189 Ibid.

190 "Vietnam, China cooperate in holding cyber security training course," *Vietnam+*, March 3, 2022, <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/vietnam-china-cooperate-in-holding-cyber-security-training-course/222914.vnp>.

191 Nadège Rolland, ed., *(In)Roads and Outposts: Critical Infrastructure in China's Africa Strategy*, NBR Special Report 98, May 3, 2022, https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr98_inroadsandoutposts_may2022.pdf.

192 "នគរបាលចិន ចែកព័ត៌មានសម្រាប់និងជួយលំបាកចូរកែទម្រង់យានយន្តជាមួយកម្ពុជា ហើយជួយសង់ទីបញ្ជាការកណ្តាលនគរបាលជាតិ" ("Chinese Police Share Intelligence and Provide Surveillance Technology with Cambodia and Help Build National Police Headquarters"), *Voice of America Cambodia*, September 29, 2021, <https://khmer.voanews.com/a/new-deal-sees-china-build-cambodia-s-police-hq-share-police-intels-supply-surveillance-techs/6250478.html>.

193 *Freedom on the Net 2018*, Freedom House, October 2018, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FOTN_2018_Final.pdf.

194 Yuen Yuen Ang, "The Real China Model: It's Not What You Think It Is," *Foreign Affairs*, June 29, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2018-06-29/real-china-model>.

195 Zhang Hongpei, "Chinese facial ID tech to land in Africa," *Global Times*, May 17, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210120110945/https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1102797.shtml>.

region, which purport to help governments enhance public security through big data and AI-enabled surveillance and monitoring.¹⁹⁶ As of 2015, Huawei had twenty-four representative offices in Africa, covering all fifty-four countries in the continent, and about seven thousand one hundred employees.¹⁹⁷

In a write-up on Huawei's website regarding its "Safe City Solutions"—ominously titled "Nowhere to hide"—the company described how the system works, stating:

"When constructing safe cities, different municipal departments and telcos will be able to pool resources and build integrated systems that combine street lamps, mini base stations, and surveillance cameras, so that all areas with street lighting can be placed under surveillance.... Control and dispatch centers will use this information to help carry out unified surveillance, safety management, and dispatch of public safety resources.... By analyzing people's behavior in video footage, and drawing on other government data such as identity, economic status, and circle of acquaintances, AI could quickly detect indications of crimes and predict potential criminal activity."¹⁹⁸

With the support of the state, Huawei pours considerable resources into research and development (R&D). In 2021, Huawei spent RMB 142.7 billion (approximately \$20 billion) on R&D, accounting for almost a quarter of its annual revenue. By comparison, US firm Qualcomm spent about a fifth of its annual revenue on R&D for the same year, or around \$6.7 billion.¹⁹⁹ From 2011 to 2021, Huawei invested more than RMB 845 billion (approximately \$118 billion) in R&D.²⁰⁰ In addition to funding, the company also pours considerable resources into its public relations in the regions where it operates.

China places high importance on ICT investment abroad, even relative to other core economic sectors. For example, for the years 2015 and 2017, Chinese investment in ICT infrastructure in Africa was greater than that from the G7, multilateral lending organizations, and African governments combined.²⁰¹ According

to the Boston University Global Development Policy Center, which tracks Chinese lending to Africa, lending fell almost 80 percent in 2020, from thirty-three loan agreements worth \$8.3 billion in 2019 to just eleven worth almost \$2 billion in 2020.²⁰² This trend held true for all but the ICT sector, in which Chinese lending actually increased. ICT lending alone accounted for almost \$570 million, or a third of total lending in 2020.²⁰³

China's lending abroad is enabled by the major demand in Global South countries for digital infrastructure and better methods to deliver public goods, including public safety. As China-Africa scholar Bulelani Jili writes, the decision by African governments to procure "Smart City solutions" is due in large part to the cost effectiveness of the platforms, and that "local procurement is critically driven by public security ambitions and justified as a means towards development in African countries."²⁰⁴ At the same time, however, China also imparts policy guidance and operational know-how for how to govern these technologies, which can lead to human rights concerns in environments with limited governance capacity and where regulatory frameworks over issues related to cybersecurity and data privacy are lacking.²⁰⁵

The laws include vague references to activities and communications that may be subject to government intervention, should they offer the "potential to impact national security." Such an expansive and unclear definition is purposeful, as it provides the government broad discretion in deciding to intervene in the operations of the country's ICT sector.

Particularly, China's Cyber Security Law (2016), Intelligence Law (2017), and Data Security Law (2021), among other legal

196 "华为举办平安城市非洲峰会：新ICT让城市更安全" ("Huawei Holds Safe City Africa Summit: New ICT Makes Cities Safer"), Huawei, October 17, 2016, <https://archive.ph/ljtXH>.

197 "非盟主席祖马参观华为北研所" ("African Union Commission Chairperson Dlamini-Zuma visits Huawei North Research Institute"), Huawei, November 2, 2015, <https://archive.ph/7D5iH>.

198 Cao Zhihui, "Nowhere to hide: Building safe cities with technology enablers and AI," Huawei, July, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230201070930/https://www.huawei.com/us/huaweitech/publication/winwin/ai/nowhere-to-hide>.

199 Thomas Alsop, "Qualcomm research and development costs as a share of revenue worldwide from FY 2016 to FY 2022," Statista, December 16, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/980321/research-and-development-intensity-of-qualcomm/>; Thomas Alsop, "Qualcomm revenue worldwide from FY 2012 to FY 2022," Statista, December 16, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/737780/revenue-of-qualcomm/>; *Huawei Investment & Holding Co., Ltd.: 2021 Annual Report*, Huawei, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230128232346/https://www.huawei.com/en/annual-report/2021>.

200 *Huawei Investment*, Huawei.

201 Rebecca Arcesati, "The Digital Silk Road is a development issue," *Merics*, April 28, 2020, https://merics.org/en/short-analysis/digital-silk-road-development-issue; Infrastructure Financing Trends in Africa – 2017, Infrastructure Consortium for Africa, 2018, https://www.icafrica.org/fileadmin/documents/Annual_Reports/IFT2017.pdf.

202 Jevans Nyabiagi, "China slashes African infrastructure loans but ICT funding holds firm," *South China Morning Post*, April 27, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3175558/china-slashes-african-infrastructure-loans-ict-funding-holds>.

203 *Ibid.*

204 Bulelani Jili, "A Technological Fix: The Adoption of Chinese Public Security Systems," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, January 20, 2023, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2023/01/20/a-technological-fix-the-adoption-of-chinese-public-security-systems/>.

205 *Ibid.*

Nowhere to hide: Building safe cities with technology enablers and AI

Governments are ramping up camera coverage in cities to stop "shadow maps" of crime hotspots from emerging and are using big-data driven AI like computer vision to cut crime.

By Cao Zhihui, Huawei
2016.07



Screencap of promotional article on Huawei's website outlining the benefits of its Smart City Solutions for tackling crime.⁹

frameworks, have reportedly served as inspiration for countries in the Global South. These laws embody China's "cyber sovereignty" principle, which holds that each country has the right to exert control over their own online media and communications and which puts state security at the forefront of digital governance considerations. The laws include vague references to activities and communications that may be subject to government intervention, should they offer the "potential to impact national security." Such an expansive and unclear definition is purposeful, as it provides the government broad discretion in deciding to intervene in the operations of the country's ICT sector.

As a concrete example of how the standards, technology, ICT investment, and diplomacy cycle works to China's benefit, Zimbabwe's 2019 Cyber Crime, Cyber Security and Data Protection Bill—as reported by analysts, activists, and researchers—was inspired by the Chinese principle of cyber sovereignty.²⁰⁶ It grants the government broad authority to crack down on social media use and detain those it deems to have spread "harmful" information online.²⁰⁷ Some democracy activists in Zimbabwe have said they believe the government "will lean on China for technology and expertise to monitor and regulate social media data under the new cyber-crime law."²⁰⁸

Supporting this view, a senior ICT official in Zimbabwe confirmed in 2018 that China was assisting to set up the country's version of a National Security Agency, equipped with "world class [surveillance] technology for us to be geared against threats foreign and domestic."²⁰⁹ Zimbabwe made its first journalist arrests under the cybersecurity law in August 2022, ahead of the 2023 election in which the ZANU-PF is aiming to keep its hold on power. The journalists were charged with "spreading false data messages" on social media platforms, in line with the provisions of the law.²¹⁰

Similar cases can be seen in other countries. For example, at an August 2017 roundtable jointly hosted by the government of Tanzania and the Cyberspace Administration of China, the Tanzanian deputy minister for transport and communications endorsed China's web censorship and set it as a model to strive for: "Our Chinese friends have managed to block [social] media [platforms] in their country and replaced them with their homegrown sites that are safe, constructive and popular. We aren't there yet, but while we are still using these platforms we should guard against their misuse."²¹¹ In 2020, Tanzania developed its Electronic and Postal Communications (Online Content) Regulations, which included prohibitions on "content that causes annoyance."²¹² The government amended the regulations

206 Tawanda Karombo, "Zimbabwe is clamping down on social media use with a cyber crime bill set to become law," *Quartz*, October 9, 2019, <https://qz.com/africa/1724542/zimbabwe-bill-clamps-down-on-social-media-porn-with-china-tech/>; Eric Olander, "Zimbabwe Expected to Lean on Chinese Expertise and Technology to Enforce New Cyber Crime Law," *China Global South Project*, October 10, 2019, <https://chinaglobalsouth.com/2019/10/10/zimbabwe-expected-to-lean-on-chinese-expertise-and-technology-to-enforce-new-cyber-crime-law/>.

207 Ibid.

208 Ibid.

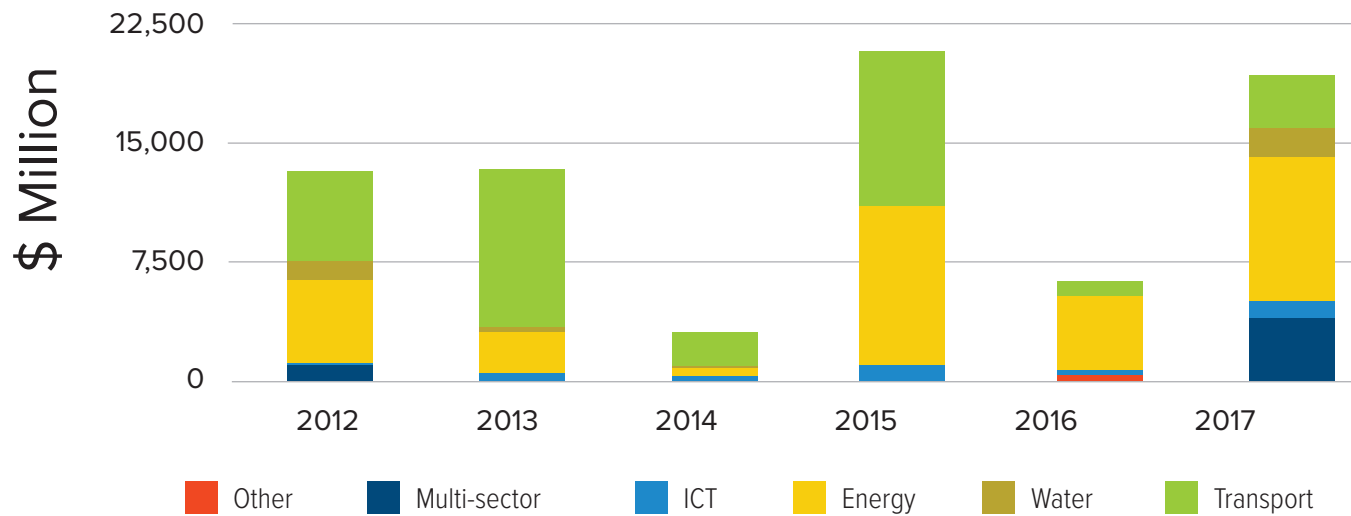
209 Itai Mushekwe, "China, Russia and Iran helping Zimbabwe to set-up own NSA," *Bulawayo*, March 23, 2018, <https://bulawayo24.com/index-id-technology-sc-internet-byo-131135.html>.

210 Ignatius Banda, "Zimbabwe Makes First Journalist Arrests Under Cybersecurity Law," *Global Issues*, August 10, 2022, <https://www.globalissues.org/news/2022/08/10/31588>; Ignatius Banda, "Zimbabwe Makes First Journalist Arrests Under Cybersecurity Law," *AllAfrica*, August 10, 2022, <https://allafrica.com/stories/202208100404.html>.

211 Asterius Banzi, "Tanzania seeks Chinese help in social media," *EastAfrican*, August 1, 2017, <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/news/Tanzania-seeks-Chinese-help-in-social-media/2558-4041306-d66m76z/index.html>.

212 Nick Bailey, "East African States Adopt China's Playbook on Internet Censorship," *Freedom House*, October 24, 2017, <https://freedomhouse.org/article/east-african-states-adopt-chinas-playbook-internet-censorship>; "The Electronic and Postal Communications," *Gazette of the United Republic of Tanzania* 29, 101, July 17, 2020, [https://www.tcra.go.tz/uploads/documents/sw-1619088125-The%20Electronic%20and%20Postal%20Communications%20\(Online%20Content\)%20Regulations,%202020.pdf](https://www.tcra.go.tz/uploads/documents/sw-1619088125-The%20Electronic%20and%20Postal%20Communications%20(Online%20Content)%20Regulations,%202020.pdf).

Chinese Commitments by Sector



Graphic reworking data from the Infrastructure Consortium of Africa's 2017 annual report depicting Chinese commitments in Africa by sector between 2012 and 2017.^R

in 2022 but made no meaningful changes to roll back the censorship.²¹³

In July 2017, the state-owned China National Electronics Import & Export Corp. (CEIEC) signed a preliminary agreement with the Ugandan government to provide a “comprehensive cyber-security solution, including technical capacity to monitor and prevent social media abuse.”²¹⁴ CEIEC helped build the surveillance capacity of the Uganda Communications Commission, Ugandan Police Force, and Ministry of Internal Affairs. The state-owned enterprise was later sanctioned by the United States in November 2020 for its support of the Maduro regime in Venezuela, claiming that it

“restrict[ed] internet service and conduct[ed] digital surveillance against political opponents of the regime. CEIEC has provided software, training, and technical expertise to the [Maduro] regime’s entities. It provides cyber support and technical experts to state-run telecommunications provider Venezuelan National Telephone Company (CANTV) which controls 70 percent of internet service in Venezuela and frequently

blocks online independent newspapers and speeches by opposition members.”²¹⁵

According to Ugandan civil society organization Unwanted Witness, which advocates for “open, secure and accessible internet,” the China-Uganda social media monitoring agreement came during a time when internet users were engaging on social media platforms to discuss a parliamentary debate on raising the presidential age limit. Doing so allowed the incumbent Yoweri Museveni to successfully seek another term in 2021.²¹⁶ The Uganda Communications Commission—the same entity that had received assistance from CEIEC—shut down the internet the day before the election and restricted access to social media platforms.²¹⁷

In February 2019, Thailand’s parliament passed an internet security law that shares strong similarities with China’s cyber-security law, including provisions requiring that a governmental body, the Cybersecurity Regulating Committee—similar to China’s Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission (CAC)—would have broad access to computer data and information.²¹⁸ In July 2022, the Thai government signed an MOU with China’s CAC to

213 “Amendment (sic) of Electronic and Postal Communications Regulations, 2022,” Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority, 2022, <https://www.tcra.go.tz/uploads/newsdocs/sw-1651236980-Public%20Notice%20-%20Amendment%20of%20Electronic%20and%20Postal%20Communications%20Regulations,2022.pdf>.

214 “China to help Uganda fight Internet abuse,” *Monitor*, January 15, 2021, <https://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/China-Uganda-Internet-Evelyn-Anite-Africa-Internet-Users/688334-4032626-u1161r/index.html>.

215 U.S. Embassy Caracas, U.S. sanctions CEIEC for supporting the illegitimate Maduro regime’s efforts to undermine Venezuelan democracy, press statement, November 30, 2020, <https://ve.usembassy.gov/u-s-sanctions-ceiec-for-supporting-the-illegitimate-maduro-regimes-efforts-to-undermine-venezuelan-democracy/>.

216 Bailey, “East African States.”

217 “Uganda: Elections Marred by Violence,” Human Rights Watch, January 21, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/21/uganda-elections-marred-violence>.

218 Patpicha Tanakasempipat, “Thailand passes internet security law decried as ‘cyber martial law,’” *Reuters*, February 28, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-cyber/thailand-passes-internet-security-law-decried-as-cyber-martial-law-idUSKCN1QH10B>.

cooperate on “cybersecurity and cyberspace stability.”²¹⁹ A June 2022 report by the Alliance for Securing Democracy outlines further examples of China-inspired policies and governance frameworks in Myanmar, which passed a similar cybersecurity bill “with provisions that directly echo those found in...China.”²²⁰ The report also documented similar instances of China-inspired internet governance and cybersecurity-related policies in Nigeria, Senegal, and Jamaica.²²¹ Freedom House outlined how Vietnam’s 2017 cybersecurity law contained similar language to that of China’s law and linked its development to Beijing’s cyber-related trainings with high-ranking Vietnamese officials in 2016 and 2017.²²² Other reports have outlined the adoption of similar China-inspired laws, policies, and approaches in Egypt, Uganda, and Tanzania, among others.²²³

Weaponizing Data

While having a market for its products and seeding the spread of “cyber sovereignty” could be an end in itself in China’s discourse power push, expanded access to more diverse pools of data is a powerful motivator as well. China’s deep and broad involvement in digital connectivity in the Global South is part of its broader plan to gain access to data to better refine its messaging and public opinion management capabilities, both at home and abroad.

A recent example helps to illustrate this point. In 2018, under the auspices of the BRI, China’s CloudWalk Technology signed a cooperation agreement with the government of Zimbabwe on a mass facial recognition project.²²⁴ The agreement is for CloudWalk to set up a national facial recognition database. In the project agreement, the system is billed as being able to help Zimbabwe’s law enforcement with public safety and security.²²⁵ In turn, CloudWalk gains access to biometric data of thousands of African faces, which it will use to enhance the precision of its technology.²²⁶ As of June 2022, CloudWalk has reportedly been implementing the agreement in stages and will soon roll out its camera and network infrastructure in Zimbabwe.²²⁷

Researchers have pointed out the utility of such data in China’s ongoing repression and persecution of its Uyghur Muslim population.²²⁸ Gaining access to expanded data sources gives Chinese companies the opportunity to test and develop standards for detecting physical attributes specific to certain ethnic populations for targeting purposes. In turn, such technologies supplied to the government in Harare, civil society actors worry, will allow for the government to more precisely surveil, identify, and track down political dissidents.²²⁹

The CCP’s ability to gather data has increased in recent years and has been used to enhance the capabilities of the external propaganda system...[data-gathering firms] use a variety of analysis methods, including semantics and clustering, to understand public preferences and “evaluate the difference between this understanding and media expectations...helping Chinese media build top international discourse power and influence.

China is also co-opting its domestic firms active along the BRI for data-gathering purposes. A September 2020 report detailed a massive database gathered by a company in Shenzhen for the purposes of informing intelligence and influence operations. Shenzhen Zhenhua Data Information Technology Co. compiled the Overseas Key Information Database, which contained information on 2.4 million individuals and more than six hundred fifty thousand organizations. The company has close ties with the Ministry of State Security, China’s main spy organization, and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA).²³⁰

219 “International: China and Thailand Sign MoU on Cybersecurity,” DataGuidance, July 7, 2022, <https://www.dataguidance.com/news/international-china-and-thailand-sign-mou-cybersecurity>.

220 Bryce Barros, Nathan Kohlenberg, and Etienne Soula, *China and the Digital Information Stack in the Global South*, Alliance for Securing Democracy, German Marshall Fund of the United States, June 15, 2022, <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/china-digital-stack/>.

221 Ibid.

222 *Freedom*, Freedom House.

223 Russel and Berger, *Stacking the Deck*.

224 Chris Burt, “Zimbabwe govt selects CloudWalk for mass facial recognition project,” Biometric Update, April 13, 2018, <https://www.biometricupdate.com/201804/zimbabwe-govt-selects-cloudwalk-for-mass-facial-recognition-project>.

225 Chris Burt, “Implementation of CloudWalk facial recognition technology in Zimbabwe progressing in stages,” Biometric Update, May 18, 2018, <https://www.biometricupdate.com/201805/implementation-of-cloudwalk-facial-recognition-technology-in-zimbabwe-progressing-in-stages>.

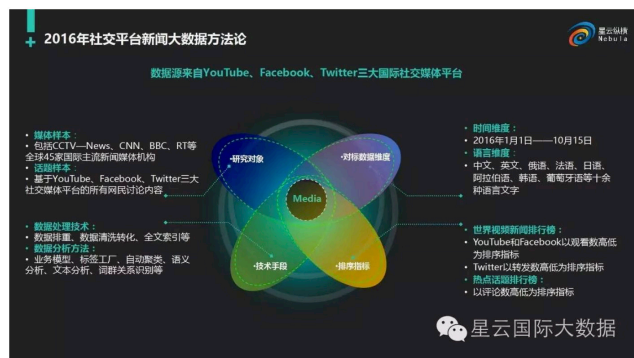
226 “China exports facial ID technology to Zimbabwe,” *New Zimbabwe*, April 13, 2018, <https://www.newzimbabwe.com/china-exports-facial-id-technology-to-zimbabwe/>; Zhang, “Chinese facial ID tech.”

227 Kudzai Chimhangwa, “How Artificial Intelligence could influence Zimbabwe’s 2023 elections,” Global Voices, June 13, 2022, <https://globalvoices.org/2022/06/13/how-artificial-intelligence-could-influence-zimbabwes-2023-elections/>.

228 Dahlia Peterson and Samantha Hoffman, *Geopolitical Implications of AI and Digital Surveillance Adoption*, Brookings Institution, June 2022, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/FP_20220621_surveillance_exports_peterson_hoffman_v2.pdf.

229 Dumisani Ndiela, “Privacy violations fears grow as govt sets surveillance cameras in cities,” *Standard*, June 21, 2020, <https://www.thestandard.co.zw/2020/06/21/privacy-violations-fears-grow-govt-sets-surveillance-cameras-cities/>.

230 Christopher Balding, “Chinese Open Source Data Collection, Big Data, And Private Enterprise Work For State Intelligence and Security: The Case of Shenzhen Zhenhua,” SSRN, (2020), <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3691999>.



Chinese media build top international discourse power and influence.”²³⁴

Slides from a 2016 presentation given by Nebula, detailing its capabilities in analyzing social media through big data (top) and describing how its mission statement overlaps with China’s foreign propaganda goals as outlined by Chinese President Xi Jinping (bottom).



Nebula also specifically outlines its in-country capabilities in countries along the BRI, claiming it gives Chinese state media the ability to “accurately judge the cognition, emotion and attitude feedback of local social masses, enterprises and government departments” so that they can engage in “timely adjustment of propaganda strategies to help the smooth implementation of national strategy.”²³⁵

Nebula feeds the data it gathers into a single consolidated platform, which is then provided to China’s external propaganda bureaus.²³⁶ Nebula’s clients also include the Chinese International Education Foundation, which oversees China’s Confucius Institutes across the globe, several tourism bureaus and government agencies, enterprises and institutions, and the PLA.²³⁷ During the signing ceremony for the event, the cooperation agreement was touted in state media as “marking the arrival of the big data era of Chinese media’s foreign propaganda.”²³⁸

Slides from a 2016 presentation given by Nebula, detailing its capabilities in analyzing social media through big data (top) and describing how its mission statement overlaps with China’s foreign propaganda goals as outlined by Chinese President Xi Jinping (bottom).⁵

The CCP’s ability to gather data has increased in recent years and has been used to enhance the capabilities of the external propaganda system. In 2016, for example, Nebula (Beijing) Big Data Information Technology Co., Ltd. signed a contract with China’s state-run CCTV International to provide its big data cloud platform service.²³¹ Nebula engages in mass collection of personal data across digital media (both its own and overseas media outlets), social media, and other platforms, in dozens of countries and multiple languages.²³² On social media platforms specifically, Nebula uses its big data and cloud computing technologies to obtain vast amounts of data related to international public opinion on news topics related to China.²³³ It uses a variety of analysis methods, including semantics and clustering, to understand public preferences and “evaluate the difference between this understanding and media expectations...helping

While Nebula is just one company, other reports show similar dynamics. A 2019 ASPI report traced how a translation company under China’s CPD gathers massive amounts of data from its subsidiaries, including along the BRI, through the language services it provides; this data is in turn used to aid government decision-making through the generation of sentiment analysis.²³⁹

231 Nebula, “Nebula Signed a Contract.”

232 Ibid.

233 “中国电视台YouTube平台海外中文传播力报告” (“Report of CCTV’s Foreign Broadcasting Metrics on YouTube”), Afenxi, June 2, 2016, <https://archive.is/PRUay>; “星云纵横申报《关于推动北京文化‘走出去’相关课题成功中标》” (“Nebula Won the Bid for the ‘Promoting Beijing Culture ‘Going Global’ Project””), Nebula, March 28, 2017, <https://archive.md/5AmPU>.

234 Ibid.

235 Nebula, “Nebula Signed a Contract”; “【聚焦京交会】星云纵横国际大数据将在‘京交会’上点亮‘启明星’” (“[Beijing International Trade Fair] Nebula International Big Data Will Light up the ‘Venus’ at the ‘Beijing International Trade Fair’”), Shanghai International Service Trade Industry Association, May 23, 2016, <https://archive.md/7FGRI>.

236 Nebula, “Nebula Signed a Contract.”

237 Ibid.; “星云纵横发布‘国际互联网新媒体传播指数’” (“Nebula Released the ‘Internet New Media Communication Index’”), Sohu, August 31, 2016, https://web.archive.org/web/20220810140841/https://www.sohu.com/a/113001282_439559.

238 Nebula, “Nebula Signed a Contract.”

239 Samantha Hoffman, *Engineering global consent: The Chinese Communist Party’s data-driven power expansion*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, October 14, 2019, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/engineering-global-consent-chinese-communist-partys-data-driven-power-expansion>.

CONCLUSION

This report used the frame of “converged media” to illustrate the capabilities and impacts of China’s discourse power efforts in the digital domain. While the effects of China’s efforts at a global scale are mixed, the most significant consequences can be seen in how the spaces for digital rights and freedoms in civil societies shrink in countries with less robust government protections.

This study found that, anecdotally, China’s efforts can be highly effective in countries where civic freedoms are already limited and where winning the support of a small coalition of political elites matters over winning public support. In the rather extreme case of Zimbabwe, China is openly and actively antagonizing and targeting journalists and civil society activists. These findings cast doubt on assessments of Chinese influence that look solely at public opinion data. Such research may miss the fact that in some domestic contexts, China sees elite capture as much more important than winning hearts and minds.

This report also sought to clearly illustrate the connection between China’s efforts at media and information operations, its efforts to implement technical standards and norms at the international level, and changes on the ground in countries in the Global South, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Through people-to-people exchanges, China cultivates elite networks through media and technical trainings; these elites then return to their home countries and purchase Chinese technologies, implement Chinese know-how, and pass Chinese-style laws enshrining “cyber sovereignty.”

These relationships also allow China to gain access to vast data resources, which it can then use to further hone its messages and enhance its censorship and propaganda apparatus. It can leverage these improved tools and technologies in banal ways, like helping the tourism bureau craft a compelling narrative of “Beautiful China.” However, it can also use Nebula’s sentiment data to help the PLA engage in more targeted information operations and psychological warfare campaigns against countries like Taiwan.

This process becomes a positive feedback loop, in which influence begets influence and deepens lock-in at multiple levels: through the provided technical infrastructure, the standards through which it operates, and the penetration of Chinese interests at the political and policy level, from the UN to Harare.

In short, the impacts of China’s efforts are asymmetric. While the popularity of its state and traditional media lags behind that of the West, its efforts to shape the environments within media and information operations are much more effective and, in actuality, constitute the focus of China’s discourse power strategy.

In terms of impact, China has gained considerable shaping power through its discourse power efforts in the digital domain.

China is creating an alternative order in the Global South, one centered on connectivity. Responding to these developments requires understanding the ecosystem that China has created, as well as the push and pull factors facing those engaged within it. It will also require effectively communicating—and delivering on—the advantages that a democratic approach to technological governance offers to the global majority.

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