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## **Black and White and Red All Over: China's Improving Foreign-Directed Media**

Elizabeth Bachman

With contributions by James Bellacqua

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## Abstract

Over the last 15 years, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has conducted an ambitious campaign to increase the efficacy of its external propaganda. Drawing from primary Chinese language sources, this study identifies and traces the origins of the overarching objectives of these efforts. In addition, it outlines the concrete steps that Beijing has taken to date to strengthen Chinese foreign-directed media. Using translated professional journals, the study also analyzes how Chinese subject matter experts in their own words assess Beijing's successes and shortcomings in improving the reach and resonance of China's external propaganda. This research was conducted on behalf of the US Indo-Pacific Command's China – Strategic Focus Group in support of USINDOPACOM requirements.


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Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise, Director  
China Studies Program  
CNA China & Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Division

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# Executive Summary

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***Beijing views its foreign-directed media as an important tool to defend and promote China's national security interests internationally.*** The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) efforts to strengthen Chinese external propaganda have several implications:

- The international information environment is a key front line in the global competition for ideas and influence between Beijing and Washington.
- Formulating effective countermeasures against Chinese external propaganda requires an up-to-date understanding of Chinese goals and shortcomings in foreign-directed media.
- More research is required to evaluate fully how effectively Chinese external propaganda resonates among foreign audiences.

***Over the last two decades, the CCP has embarked on an ambitious global effort to improve the reach and resonance of its principal media outlets aimed at foreign audiences. This effort has multiple drivers, including:***

- A Chinese perception that Beijing needs a greater international voice commensurate with the country's growing international status.
- The CCP's recognition that its external propaganda efforts to date have proven largely ineffective and that further improvements are necessary to win over foreign audiences.
- A desire to counter what Beijing views as a widespread anti-China bias in Western journalism.

***The CCP's efforts to improve its China's foreign-directed media have three broad objectives, including:***

- Increasing the international influence of China's principal foreign-directed media outlets to be on par with the country's rising global status.
- Propagating Beijing's worldview and spreading positive images of China to foreign audiences to counter perceptions that China's rise poses a threat to others.
- Improving the integration of internet-based media to maximize the number of overseas users exposed to Chinese news reports.

***The CCP's current efforts to enhance the efficacy of China's foreign-directed media predate Xi Jinping and have their origins in the early years of the Hu Jintao administration.***

Three major inflection points that shaped the trajectory of China's efforts to improve its foreign-directed media are as follows:

- **2004:** The CCP unveiled a three-step plan aimed at improving Beijing's foreign-directed media and creating an international public opinion environment favorable to China. The Party also established a central leading small group focused on external propaganda to oversee these efforts and released a policy that called for external propaganda to focus explicitly on safeguarding national security and stability.
- **2008:** Following a series of public relations failures leading up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the CCP earmarked \$6 billion to improve the external messaging efforts of six of China's principal authoritative media outlets.
- **2013:** Xi Jinping launched his signature external propaganda initiative as part of his push for Chinese media outlets to do a better job of "telling China's story well."

***Beijing is attempting to improve its foreign-directed media by broadening the number of channels by which Chinese media reaches foreign audiences and tailoring its external propaganda messaging to improve its resonance.*** Examples include:

- Using foreign (non-Chinese) media outlets to spread Chinese-produced content to overseas audiences, a practice the Chinese describe as "borrowing a boat to go out to sea."
- Increasing the presence of Chinese media, scholars, and officials on foreign social media platforms.
- Leveraging foreign voices to convey Beijing's talking points in Chinese media outlets aimed at overseas audiences.
- Creating new content distribution methods geared for specific target audiences.
- Increasing the number and geographic breadth of Chinese media outlets' overseas bureaus and production centers.
- Enhancing content tailoring by increasing the sophistication and relevance of People's Republic of China (PRC) media reporting to specific target audiences.
- Diversifying beyond Chinese and English the languages in which PRC media content is published or broadcast.

***Despite the expanding footprint of these foreign-directed media outlets, many are facing challenges operating in Western countries,*** where governments increasingly view them as state-sponsored propaganda tools.

- In the US, many of these outlets are required to register as foreign missions.
- In the UK, China's state television broadcaster is in danger of having its broadcasting license revoked after it breached British broadcasting standards.
- Western social media companies are beginning to label these outlets "state-controlled media."

***Journal articles authored by PRC propaganda officials and communications professionals suggest that China's efforts to improve the reach and resonance of its foreign-directed media remain a work in progress.*** Chinese scholars and officials identified weaknesses that must be addressed to achieve China's external propaganda goals, including:

- The inability of China's media outlets to achieve a level of influence on par with Beijing's growing international clout.
- Insufficient content tailoring that prevents Chinese media coverage from resonating effectively with foreign audiences.
- Media outlets' failure to adapt effectively or capitalize on new media platforms, especially on the internet.

***As demonstrated during the coronavirus pandemic, Chinese external propaganda is growing increasingly strident in both its defense of Beijing and its critiques of other countries. Whether foreign-directed media will maintain this more forceful tone for the long-term remains to be seen.***

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# Chapter One: Introduction

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Since the mid-2000s, successive leaders of the People's Republic of China (PRC) have called explicitly for Beijing to improve its external propaganda capabilities and international influence.<sup>1</sup> Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) first elevated these efforts in 2004, and they gained renewed urgency after the 2008 Beijing Olympics; international protests over China's human rights record largely overshadowed the lead-up to the games. The following year, the Chinese government started investing billions into efforts to improve Chinese foreign-directed media and combat a perceived anti-China bias in Western reporting.<sup>2</sup> These funds paid for Chinese state media and broadcasters to produce content in a broader range of foreign languages, establish overseas bureaus, and develop increasingly sophisticated content aimed at foreign audiences.<sup>3</sup>

Although these efforts began in the previous decade, they have grown in scale and sophistication since Xi Jinping (习近平) became general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012. Under his leadership, the Party has made a concerted effort to tighten its control over China's internal and external propaganda apparatuses. He has overseen the formal consolidation of Party control over China's print media, with recent administrative reorganizations moving direct control of the media out of state structures and into the hands of the Party.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> At the 17th National Party Congress in 2007, then-President Hu Jintao exhorted "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation will definitely be accompanied by the thriving of the Chinese culture... as part of the soft power of our country....We will further publicize the fine traditions of Chinese culture and strengthen international cultural exchanges to enhance the influence of Chinese culture worldwide." Hu Jintao (胡锦涛), "Report to the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China," *People's Daily in English (Renmin Ribao; 人民日报)*, Oct. 15, 2007, <http://en.people.cn/90001/90776/90785/6290144.html>.

<sup>2</sup> "Beijing in 45b Yuan Global Media Drive," *South China Morning Post*, Jan. 13, 2009, accessed Nov. 2, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/article/666847/beijing-45b-yuan-global-media-drive>.

<sup>3</sup> Anne-Marie Brady, "China's Foreign Propaganda Machine," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 4 (2015): 54, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/authoritarianism-goes-global-ii-chinas-foreign-propaganda-machine/>.

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of the March 2018 reorganization caused by the adoption of the *Plan for Deepening Reform of Party and Government Organs*, see: David Bandurski, "When Reform Means Tighter Controls," China Media Project, Mar. 22, 2018, accessed Nov. 2, 2019, <https://chinamediaproject.org/2018/03/22/when-reform-means-tighter-controls/>.

The CCP's more direct role in external propaganda ensures that the media serve the Party's interests. Expanding and developing China's foreign-directed media is key to helping Beijing achieve its economic and security interests overseas. In the media and propaganda realm, these interests are primarily to promote a positive image of China (what Xi Jinping has described as "telling China's story well"), drown out competing (especially critical) voices, and counter what Beijing views as an anti-China bias.<sup>5</sup>

## Approach and scope

Given Beijing's growing and increasingly sophisticated foreign-directed media efforts, it is important to understand the steps China has taken to enhance its foreign-directed media and their potential implications. This study aims to develop a more comprehensive understanding of Beijing's efforts to improve its external messaging, why it is pursuing these efforts, and what strategies it may use to boost further the efficacy of Chinese foreign-directed media.

The scope of this study is limited to traditional news media and their social media use, including radio and television broadcasters, newspapers, and social media platforms inside and outside of China. It does not cover film, United Front Work Department activities, Confucius Institutes, or other methods that the PRC government uses to conduct foreign influence operations.

To provide a comprehensive and up-to-date picture of China's evolving foreign-directed media environment, this study draws from primary Chinese language sources, such as authoritative leadership statements, laws and regulations, academic journals, and news articles. However, because of the opacity of the CCP governance system, this study also uses secondary Western reporting to fill in information gaps.

Chapter One introduces the study. Chapter Two focuses on the structures (Party, government, and military) that make up China's propaganda and news systems. Chapter Three examines the goals Beijing hopes to achieve by improving its foreign-directed media and how Chinese external propaganda policies have evolved over the last 20 years. Chapter Four looks at the steps Chinese foreign-directed media have taken to increase the reach and resonance of their coverage. Chapter Five examines how the Chinese, in their own words, assess their progress to date and highlights the areas they identify as necessary for improvement and what potential strategies have been proposed for doing so. The study concludes by examining the implications of China's continued efforts to strengthen its foreign-directed media.

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<sup>5</sup> Brady, "China's Foreign Propaganda Machine," 53.

## Chapter Two: External Propaganda Organizations, Roles, and Missions

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China's foreign-directed news media fall under the broader umbrella of its external propaganda system. The structures and policies of that system are the product of decades of accumulated ideas and changes. In recent years, Chinese leaders have increasingly prioritized improving and developing Beijing's external propaganda work. To grasp fully how the external propaganda system functions, it is important to understand the organizations, roles, and missions of the Party and government structures that manage it. Foreign-directed media outlets report to, are administered by, and operate within the limitations imposed by these structures.

### Chinese External Propaganda and the CCP

Although this study focuses mainly on Chinese foreign-directed media under Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping, external propaganda has been part of the Party's DNA since before the founding of the PRC in 1949. Even from the caves of Yan'an, where Mao Zedong (毛泽东) and his colleagues sequestered themselves from both the Japanese Imperial Army and the Chinese Nationalists, the CCP worked to establish organizations and mechanisms to shape foreign perceptions. Despite the austere conditions, the Party cultivated foreign journalists, printed its own newspapers, and broadcast its messages via its own radio station.

Historically, the Chinese Party-state did not have a separate external propaganda system. Instead, external propaganda work was carried out through pre-established structures originally designed for domestic propaganda work in coordination with the Party-state's foreign affairs departments. As different post-Mao leaders have pursued political reform and economic opening, they have afforded varying status levels to external propaganda work. In practice, external propaganda work today is enmeshed in the PRC's overall propaganda activities and is the foreign-directed component of broader efforts by the Central Propaganda Department (CPD) to "coordinate the domestic and the international."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Mareike Ohlberg, "Creating a Favorable International Public Opinion Environment: External Propaganda (*Duiwai Xuanchuan*) as a Global Concept with Chinese Characteristics," (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Heidelberg, 2013), 483-484, accessed Nov. 13, 2019, <http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/archiv/17289>. For example, since 2005, the head of the State Council Information Office has simultaneously served as deputy director of the CPD, indicating close coordination between the CPD and Party-state structures involved in external propaganda work.

### A Note on Terminology

For this study, “foreign-directed media” refers to news media created by Chinese Party-state affiliated outlets for non-domestic audiences, including both foreigners and Chinese living overseas. Foreign-directed media is a subsection of China’s broader “external propaganda” (*waixuan*; 外宣) work, a larger umbrella term used by the CCP to encompass all types of propaganda efforts, including entertainment media such as films and television shows.

Realizing that “propaganda” has a negative connotation to foreign audiences, the CCP Central Committee’s Propaganda Department changed its official English name in 1998 to the “Central Publicity Department.” The Chinese name for the organization, *Zhongyang Xuanchuanbu* (中央宣传部), remains the same. Because this study translates other uses of *xuanchuan* (宣传) as “propaganda,” for consistency, this department is referred to as the Central Propaganda Department (CPD) throughout the study.

## Party and state organizations

Many different Party-state actors guide and execute Chinese external propaganda work. The most important are the following:

- Key personalities, such as the Party’s general secretary and the Politburo members who oversee propaganda work
- Leading small groups for propaganda and ideology and external propaganda
- The Central Propaganda Department
- The State Council Information Office (SCIO)/Office of External Propaganda

## Key personalities

### Party general secretary

At the top of the propaganda system (and all Party-state systems in China) is the CCP general secretary, currently Xi Jinping. The general secretary is in charge of agenda-setting and defining parameters for acceptable levels of openness in propaganda and ideological work more broadly.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Anne-Marie Brady, “Plus ça Change?: Media Control Under Xi Jinping,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 64, no. 3-4 (2017): 130, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2016.1197779>.

## Politburo members

Below the general secretary are Politburo members whose portfolios pertain to propaganda and ideological work. At present, they are:

- **Wang Huning** (王沪宁), the Politburo Standing Committee member who serves as chairman of the Central Guidance Commission on Building Spiritual Civilization. He is also presumed to oversee propaganda work as head of the Central Leading Small Group for Propaganda and Ideology (*Zhongyang Xuanchuan Sixiang Gongzuo Lingdao Xiaozu*; 中央宣传思想工作领导小组).<sup>8</sup>
- **Huang Kunming** (黄坤明), the Politburo member who currently heads the CPD.

## Leading small groups

These Politburo members are thought to chair and participate in central-level policy deliberation and coordination bodies known as leading small groups. Two central leading small groups are relevant to Chinese foreign-directed media: the Central Leading Small Group for Propaganda and Ideology and the Central Leading Small Group for External Propaganda Work.

The **Central Leading Small Group for Propaganda and Ideology** is the highest coordinating body in the propaganda system.<sup>9</sup> Although its composition is unknown, it is thought to include representation from the state administrations that administer broadcast media, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Political Work Department, the presidents of prominent Party-state media organizations such as *People's Daily* and Xinhua, the director of the SCIO, and the vice premier responsible for cultural affairs.<sup>10</sup>

The **Central Leading Small Group for External Propaganda Work** (*Zhongyang Duiwai Xuanchuan Lingdao Xiaozu*; 中央对外宣传领导小组) is the highest coordinating body specific to external propaganda work. Its current membership composition is unknown. The changing

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<sup>8</sup> Although Chinese media have not publically referred to Wang Huning (王沪宁), the current Politburo Standing Committee member with this portfolio, as head of this small group, his two most recent predecessors (Liu Yunshan [刘云山] and Li Changchun [李长春]) are known to have held this position. See, for example: “First Speech at the Central Leading Small Group for Propaganda and Ideology Work Meeting,” (*Zai Zhongyang Xuanchuan Sixiang Gongzuo Lingdao Xiaozu Huiyi de Shangjianghua*; 在中央宣传思想工作领导小组会议的上讲话), *People's Daily*, (*Renmin Ribao*; 人民日报), Oct. 24, 2012, accessed Dec. 4, 2019, <http://www.71.cn/2012/1024/691572.shtml>.

<sup>9</sup> For more on the use of Leading Small Groups under Xi Jinping, see: Alice L. Miller, “More Already on the Central Committee's Leading Small Groups,” *China Leadership Monitor* 44 (2014), <https://www.hoover.org/research/more-already-central-committees-leading-small-groups>.

<sup>10</sup> The current membership is unconfirmed. These individuals were cited as being members of the leading small group in 2008. Ibid.

fortune of this small group reflects the varying degrees of importance that CCP leaders have placed on external propaganda. In 1980, for example, Deng Xiaoping (邓小平) established a small group for external propaganda work within the CPD. This small group was disbanded in 1988, revived in 1990, and then merged with part of the State Council in 1991 to create the SCIO, which is dual-hatted as the CCP's Office of External Propaganda.<sup>11</sup> A standalone version of the leading small group was reconstituted in 2004 as part of the Party's drive to improve China's image abroad at the time but is rarely mentioned in PRC media or official documents.<sup>12</sup>

## Central Propaganda Department

The CPD is the leading bureaucratic organization in the propaganda system more broadly. It oversees all propaganda work in China, meaning that, among other responsibilities, it issues guidance explicitly directing how to frame news media coverage and what topics should be censored.<sup>13</sup> Provinces, cities, and other administrative areas have their own propaganda departments that report to the propaganda department at the level above them hierarchically, enabling the CPD to ensure compliance.<sup>14</sup> The CPD works to maintain coordination and uniformity across media and propaganda reports.

## State Council Information Office/Office of External Propaganda

The most prominent Party-state organ charged with executing external propaganda work is the SCIO (*Guowuyuan Xinwen Bangongshi*; 国务院新闻办公室), which is responsible for managing foreign press agencies operating in China, analyzing international public opinion for the Chinese government, dispensing press releases and government white papers, and overseeing external reporting on major events.<sup>15</sup> It is composed of nine functional bureaus and

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<sup>11</sup> For a thorough discussion of the evolution of China's external propaganda system, see: Ohlberg, "Creating a Favorable International Public Opinion Environment: External Propaganda (*Duiwai Xuanchuan*) as a Global Concept with Chinese Characteristics."

<sup>12</sup> A Chinese scholarly article from 2018 confirmed that a Central External Propaganda Work Leading Small Group was re-established in 2004, "indicating that the central government was increasingly valuing strengthening external propaganda." Zhang Peng (张鹏), "Case Study of External Propaganda Systems in Cities with Separately Designated Planning," (*Dui Jihua Danlieshi Waixuan Tizhi de Anli Kaocha*; 对计划单列市外宣体制的案例考察), *International Public Relations Magazine* (*Guoji Gongguan Zazhi*, 国际公关杂志) (2018), accessed Jan. 7, 2020, <http://www.chinapr.com.cn/p/1212.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Brady, "Plus ça Change?: Media Control Under Xi Jinping," 130.

<sup>14</sup> David Shambaugh, "China's Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy," *The China Journal*, no. 57 (2007): 138, <https://myweb.rollins.edu/tlairson/china/chipropaganda.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> "Screenshot of 'Organizational Structure,'" (*Jigou Shezhi*; 机构设置) Baike Baidu (百度百科), Apr. 12, 2019, accessed Jan. 9, 2020, <https://baike.baidu.com/reference/15435334/013aNm26t3EbUTBnBmY->

is the most important Party-state organization that executes Beijing’s external propaganda policy (see Appendix A for descriptions of each bureau). The SCIO also has a variety of subordinate units engaged in external propaganda work, ranging from publishing houses to professional associations.

The SCIO is not a purely state institution. It is double-hatted and referred to internally as the CCP’s Office of External Propaganda (*Duiwai Xuanchuan Bangongshi*; 对外宣传办公室).<sup>16</sup> The CPD plays a guiding role over the SCIO, with the SCIO head serving as a deputy CPD director.<sup>17</sup>

### “One Structure, Two Nameplates”

As evidenced by the SCIO/Office of External Propaganda’s dual names, Beijing frequently and purposely obscures the degree to which the Party is involved in government functions. One of the main strategies for doing so is a tactic known as “one structure, two nameplates” (*yige jigou, liangge paizi*; 一个机构, 两个牌子). To unwitting overseas audiences, only a state-affiliated name is presented, when, in reality, many are also Party structures. Following organizational reforms in 2018, the National News and Publishing Administration and the National Film Bureau are two other dual-hatted institutions that are referred to as part of the CPD domestically but use a different, state-affiliated name externally.

Source: Yang Xiaojun (杨小军) and Shen Jing (申静), “Experts Explain Special Nameplates of Party Central Committee and Government Institutions,” (*Zhuanjia Jiedu Dangzhongyang yu Zhengfu Xuangua Jigou Mingpai Tedian*; 专家解读党中央与政府悬挂机构名牌特点), *People’s Daily Online*, (*Renminwang*; 人民网), Jun. 20, 2013. <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/0620/c49150-21904313.html>.

Figure 1 shows a rough organizational chart illustrating the relationships between the most important institutional actors in Chinese media and external propaganda work.

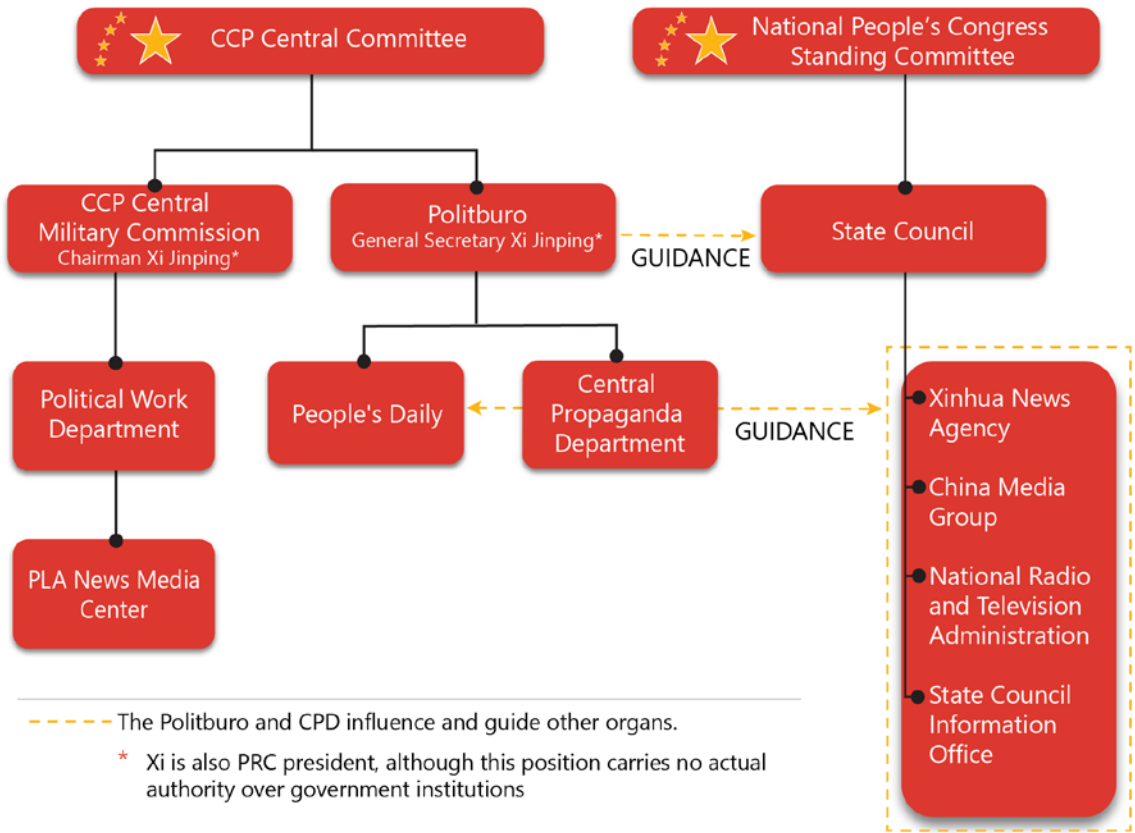
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WRqxNYRuveIL97NG6i5Tzr1NHmU95jPASZlq0JVi80nUb81qiYJwU0rk36a5LmC5DPc8y3esuZCH3AqNIQyprE5IQ.  
See Appendix A for a full translation of all bureau descriptors.

<sup>16</sup> Brady, “China’s Foreign Propaganda Machine.”

<sup>17</sup> The CPD director is a Politburo member, while the head of the SCIO has simultaneously served as a deputy director of the CPD since 2005 but has never been a Politburo member, indicating that the CPD is a higher-ranking institution. To date, the SCIO has been directed by: Xu Lin (徐麟) (2018-Present), Jiang Jianguo (蒋建国) (2015-2018), Cai Mingzhao (蔡名照) (2013-2014), Wang Chen (王晨) (2008-2013), Cai Wu (蔡武) (2005-2008), Zhao Qizheng (赵启正) (1998-2005), and Zeng Jianhui (曾建徽) (1992-1998). None have ever been members of the CCP Politburo.

Figure 1. Notional overview of China’s propaganda and news system



Source: CNA, based on PRC government and CCP website descriptions. The author would like to thank Alice L. Miller for her assistance in conceptualizing this chart.

## Regulatory bodies

Other state structures historically functioned as administrators and regulators charged with enforcing policies outlined by the CPD. The organization and lines of control of these bodies have been adjusted frequently over the past two decades. The most salient regulatory bodies for foreign-directed media have included:

- State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) (pre-2018) (*Guojia Xinwen Chuban Guangdian Zongju*; 国家新闻出版广电总局)
  - National News and Publishing Administration (post-2018) (*Guojia Xinwen Chubanshu*; 国家新闻出版署)



- National Radio and Television Administration (post-2018) (*Guojia Guangbo Dianshi Zongju*; 国家广播电视总局)
- National Film Bureau (post-2018) (*Guojia Dianyingju*; 国家电影局)
- Cyberspace Administration of China (*Guojia Hulianwang Xinxi Bangongshi*; 国家互联网信息办公室)

## Organizational descendants of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television

Until 2018, SAPPRFT was an important administrative structure involved in foreign-directed media work. It oversaw state-owned broadcast media such as China Central Television (CCTV) and China Radio International (CRI) and regulated newspaper groups and joint ventures with foreign news organizations. SAPPRFT handled cases in which media failed to follow CPD censorship instructions and also licensed and registered Chinese journalists (registration was mandatory).<sup>18</sup> SAPPRFT was abolished as part of a Party-state reorganization in March 2018 that was intended to strengthen and consolidate CCP control over media. Figure 2 illustrates how the March 2018 reforms broke up SAPPRFT’s regulatory responsibilities.

### March 2018 Reforms

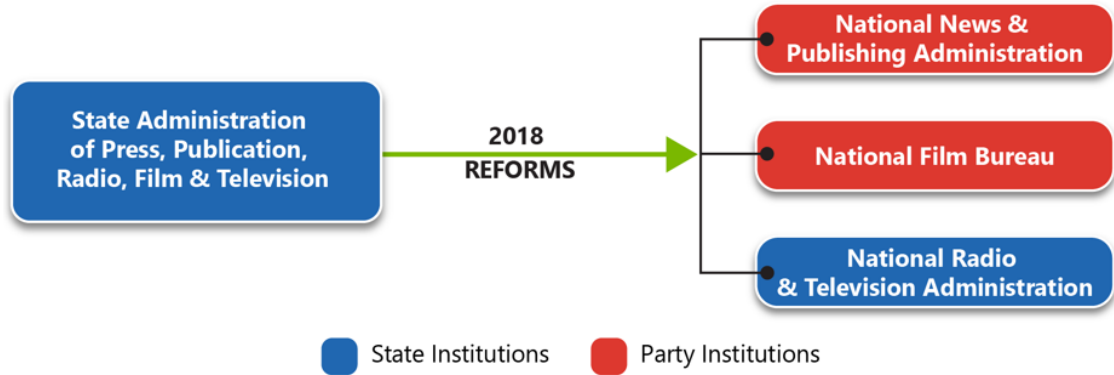
The March 2018 reforms, called the “Program for Deepening Reform of Party and Government Organs,” included multiple provisions related to foreign-directed media. The most important were:

- Abolishing SAPPRFT and transferring to the CPD its responsibilities over print media and film regulation.
- Creating a National Radio and Television Administration to regulate broadcast media.
- Integrating China’s official radio and television stations into a new organization (see the box in the “Key PRC Media Outlets” section and Figure 5 for more on the new outlet, “China Media Group”).

*Source: CCP Central Committee (Dangzhongyaoang Weiyuanhui; 党中央委员会), “Program for the Deepening Reform of Party and Government Organs,” (Shenhua Dang he Guojia Jigou Gaige Fang’an; 深化党和国家机构改革方案), Xinhua, (新华), Mar. 21, 2018, Sections 11, 35, 36, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-03/21/c\\_1122570517.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-03/21/c_1122570517.htm).*

<sup>18</sup> Brady, “Plus ça Change?: Media Control Under Xi Jinping,” 130.

Figure 2. Effects of 2018 reforms on Chinese media regulators



Source: CNA, based on CCP Central Committee (*Dangzhongyao Weiyuanhui*; 党中央委员会), “Program for the Deepening Reform of Party and Government Organs,” (*Shenhua Dang he Guojia Jigou Gaige Fang’an*; 深化党和国家机构改革方案), Xinhua, (新华), Mar. 21, 2018, Sections 11, 12, 35, and 36, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-03/21/c\\_1122570517.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-03/21/c_1122570517.htm).

### National News and Publishing Administration

Through the 2018 reorganization, the Party separated regulation of print media from regulation of broadcast media. Responsibilities over print media were moved directly into the CPD in the form of the “National News and Publishing Administration (National Copyright Office).”<sup>19</sup> This administration is responsible for carrying out the CCP’s propaganda policies, governing the news and publishing industries, and coordinating print news activities.

### National Film Bureau

Similarly, the 2018 reforms moved control of the film industry directly into the CPD in the form of the “National Film Bureau.” This bureau is responsible for censoring film content; guiding film production, distribution, and screening; managing co-productions with overseas studios; and regulating the import and export of movies.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> In other words, this administration is dual-hatted as one of the CPD’s state faces. CCP Central Committee (*Dangzhongyao Weiyuanhui*; 党中央委员会), “Program for the Deepening Reform of Party and Government Organs,” (*Shenhua Dang he Guojia Jigou Gaige Fang’an*; 深化党和国家机构改革方案), Xinhua, (新华), Mar. 21, 2018, Section 11, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-03/21/c\\_1122570517.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-03/21/c_1122570517.htm).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, Section 12.

## National Radio and Television Administration

Unlike print and film media, responsibility for regulating radio and television broadcasting was not transferred to the CPD when SAPPRFT was abolished in 2018. Instead, a new National Radio and Television Administration was created and charged with implementing the Party's propaganda guidelines and policies; governing the radio and TV industries; and managing and censoring radio, TV, and online audiovisual programming.<sup>21</sup>

## Cyberspace Administration of China

The Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) enforces online censorship standards and regulates the internet in China. PRC news outlets are required to obtain licenses from CAC before they can post content online, meaning that CAC regulates online news reporting.<sup>22</sup> CAC has the power to levy fines and even take down entire websites if they violate Chinese standards or censorship regulations. Additionally, contract bids reveal that CAC hires Chinese foreign-directed media outlets such as *People's Daily* and pays them to spread pro-China content on overseas social media platforms such as Facebook, even though CAC blocks these platforms within China.<sup>23</sup>

## Military media structure

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has its own propaganda organs, some of which produce content aimed at foreign audiences. The most important Chinese military media structure is the PLA News Media Center (*Jiefangjun Xinwen Chuanbo Zhongxin*; 解放军新闻传播中心), which was established in April 2018 amid massive reforms throughout the PLA.<sup>24</sup>

## PLA News Media Center

The PLA News Media Center is responsible for integrating PLA-controlled media outlets. It was created as part of a larger effort articulated by President Xi Jinping since the 18th Party

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., Section 35.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Rudolph, "New Regulations Consolidate Control over Online News," *China Digital Times*, May 3, 2017, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2017/05/updated-regulations-consolidate-control-online-news/>.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example: "China's Propaganda Machine is Spending over \$1 Million to Buy Influence on Foreign Social Media," *Quartz*, Aug. 21, 2019, <https://qz.com/1691785/chinas-paying-to-build-its-influence-on-foreign-social-media/>.

<sup>24</sup> *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, edited by Philip C. Saunders, et al. (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2019).

Congress in 2012 to achieve “the integration and development of traditional and new media.”<sup>25</sup> Dual- and triple-hatted positions within the Media Center help ensure integration. For example, Ding Haiming (丁海明) is currently triple-hatted as the head of the PLA News Media Center’s Internet Department (*Wangluobu*; 网络部) and as editor-in-chief of both the Ministry of National Defense (MND) (*Guofangbu*; 国防部) website and China Military Online (*Zhongguo Junwang*; 中国军网). China Military Online is the most authoritative website for PLA news and a portal to access other authoritative publications, such as the Chinese military’s official newspaper, *PLA Daily* (*Jiefangjun Bao*; 解放军报).<sup>26</sup> This triple-hatted position demonstrates a move toward consolidation and coordination of oversight across the most authoritative military information platforms under the PLA News Media Center. The PLA’s two primary outlets for foreign-directed media, China Military Online and the MND English-language website, both fall under the purview of this new center. Descriptions from China Military Online indicate that the PLA News Media Center manages content on both domestic and external websites.<sup>27</sup> See Figure 3 for a complete list of the news outlets under the PLA News Media Center’s guidance.

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<sup>25</sup> “To Be Honest and Innovative Is To Be Integrated,” (*Shouzheng Chuan Xin You “Rong” Reng Qiang*; 守正穿心有“融”仍强), *People’s Daily*, (*Renmin Ribao*; 人民日报), Jan. 27, 2019, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0127/c1001-30591719.html>, and “PLA News Media Center: Exploring the Path to Integration and Growing the Voice of Military Media,” (*Jiefangjun Xinwen Chuanbo Zhongxin: Tansuo Ronghe Zhi Lu Zhuangda Junmei Zhi Sheng*; 解放军新闻传播中心：探索融合之路 壮大军媒之声), China Military Online, (*Zhongguo Junwang*; 中国军网), Oct. 29, 2019, [http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2019-10/29/content\\_9663098.htmw](http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2019-10/29/content_9663098.htmw).

<sup>26</sup> “China Military Online’s Ding Haiming: Watcher, Bearer, and Victor of Making a Military Affairs Network Frontline,” (*Zhongguo Junwang Ding Haiming: Zuo Junshiwang Xuan Zhendi de Liaowangzhe, Dandangzhe, Shengzhanzhe*; 中国军网丁海明：做军事网宣阵地的瞭望者、担当者、胜战者), Ministry of National Defense, (*Guofangbu*; 国防部), Sept. 12, 2018, [http://www.mod.gov.cn/2018lbbz/2018-09/12/content\\_4825154.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/2018lbbz/2018-09/12/content_4825154.htm).

<sup>27</sup> “In Reform and Remodeling, Polish the Golden Sign,” (*Zai Gaige Chongsu Zhong Caliang Jinzi Zhaopai*; 在改革重塑中擦亮金字招牌), China Military Online, (*Zhongguo Junwang*; 中国军网), Dec. 25, 2018, [http://www.chinamil.com.cn/jmywyl/2018-12/25/content\\_9387616.htm](http://www.chinamil.com.cn/jmywyl/2018-12/25/content_9387616.htm).

Figure 3. PLA News Media Center constituent organizations

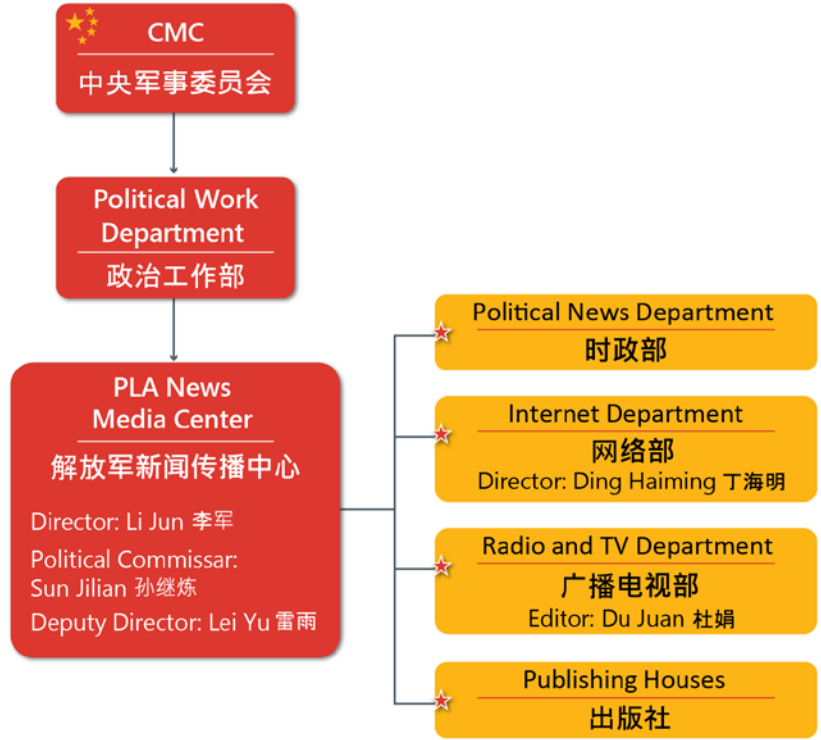


Source: Translated from "PLA News Media Center: Exploring the Path to Integration, Strengthening the Voice of Military Media," (*Jiefangjun Xinwen Chuanbo Zhongxin: Tansuo Ronghe Zhi Lu, Zhuangda Junmei zhi Sheng*; 解放军新闻传播中心：探索融合之路壮大军媒之声), China Military Online, (*Zhongguo Junwang*; 中国军网), Oct. 29, 2019, [http://photo.81.cn/pla/2019-10/29/content\\_9664108.htm](http://photo.81.cn/pla/2019-10/29/content_9664108.htm).

The PLA News Media Center likely sits directly under the Central Military Commission's Political Work Department (*Zhongyang Junwei Zhengzhi Gongzuobu*; 中央军委政治工作部). Chinese media have reported that the PLA News Media Center contains several departments, such as a Radio and Television Department (*Guangbo Dianshibu*; 广播电视部), Internet Department (*Wangluobu*; 网络部), and Publication Department (*Chubanshe*; 出版社), among others (see Figure 4 below).<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> "The PLA News Media Center, Born in the Midst of Military Reform, Has Made its Debut, Under It are the Radio and TV Department, Internet Department, etc.," (*Jun Gai Zhong Dansheng de Jiefangjun Xinwen Chuanbo Zhongxin Liangxiang, Xia She Guangdianbu, Wangluobu, Deng*; 军改中诞生的解放军新闻传播中心亮相, 下设广电部, 网络部等), *The Paper*, (*Pengpai*; 澎湃), Jun. 25, 2019, [http://www.chinamil.com.cn/jmywyl/2018-12/25/content\\_9387616.htm](http://www.chinamil.com.cn/jmywyl/2018-12/25/content_9387616.htm).

Figure 4. Likely organization of PLA news structure



Source: CNA, based on available information compiled from China Military Online.

## Key PRC media outlets engaged in external propaganda work

Numerous Chinese publications contribute to Beijing’s external propaganda efforts. The most important are those most closely tied to the central government and Party. In fact, some of these outlets are considered ministry-level institutions in the Chinese bureaucratic hierarchy, making them the same rank as regulatory agencies such as the National Radio and Television Administration. Aside from their ties to the Party-state center, these publications are notable for their foreign-language offerings. Seven of the most prominent authoritative Chinese news outlets that produce foreign-directed media are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of key PRC foreign-directed media outlets

Outlet	Description
<b>People's Daily (Renmin Ribao; 人民日报)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Official newspaper of the CCP Central Committee</li> <li>• Carries most authoritative commentary of all Chinese media outlets<sup>29</sup></li> <li>• Ministerial-level institution</li> <li>• Produces an <i>Overseas Edition (Haiwaiban; 海外版)</i> aimed at overseas Chinese audiences</li> </ul>
<b>China Central Television (CCTV; Zhongguo Zhongyang Dianshitai; 中国中央电视台) /China Global Television Network (CGTN; Zhongguo Guoji Dianshitai; 中国国际电视台)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• China's official television broadcaster</li> <li>• Operates dozens of channels, including CGTN, its international foreign-language news division</li> <li>• Part of China Media Group/Voice of China, a ministerial-level media outlet under the State Council that is led by the CPD<sup>30</sup></li> </ul>
<b>China Radio International (CRI; Zhongguo Guoji Guangbo Diantai; 中国国际广播电台)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• China's official international radio broadcaster</li> <li>• Broadcasts in at least 44 languages and maintains 70 overseas radio stations<sup>31</sup></li> <li>• Part of China Media Group/Voice of China</li> </ul>
<b>Xinhua (Xinhua She; 新华社)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• China's official news agency</li> <li>• Ministerial-level institution under the State Council</li> <li>• The "eyes, ears, and mouthpiece of the Party and People"<sup>32</sup></li> </ul>

<sup>29</sup> "Brief Introduction to *People's Daily*," (*Baoshe Jianjie*; 报社简介), *People's Daily*, (*Renmin Ribao*; 人民日报), Mar. 30, 2020, [people.com/cn/GB/50142/104580/index.html](http://people.com/cn/GB/50142/104580/index.html).

<sup>30</sup> CCP Central Committee, "Program for the Deepening Reform of Party and Government Organs," Section 36.

<sup>31</sup> "Who We Are," China Plus - CRI, Feb. 16, 2017, <http://chinaplus.cri.cn/aboutus/aboutcri/62/20170216/393.html>.

<sup>32</sup> "Brief Introduction to Xinhua News Service," (*Xinhua Tongxunshe Jianjie*; 新华通讯社简介), Xinhua, (新华), 2013, [xinhuanet.com/xhsjj/xhsjj.htm](http://xinhuanet.com/xhsjj/xhsjj.htm).

Outlet	Description
<b>China News Service (CNS; <i>Zhongguo Xinwen She</i>; 中国新闻社)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• China's second-largest press agency</li> <li>• State-level organization directly under the United Front Work Department (in its state capacity as the State Council's Overseas Chinese Affairs Office)<sup>33</sup></li> <li>• Primarily geared toward overseas Chinese</li> </ul>
<b>China Military Online (<i>Zhongguo Junwang</i>; 中国军网)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English version of <i>PLA Daily</i>, the official newspaper of the Chinese military</li> <li>• Vice-ministerial-level news outlet under the Central Military Commission (CMC)</li> <li>• Authorized by the CMC and sponsored by the PLA News Media Center</li> <li>• China's "only official English-language military news website"<sup>34</sup></li> </ul>
<b>China Daily</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• China's national English-language newspaper</li> <li>• Frequently runs paid supplements called "China Watch" in a variety of prestigious foreign newspapers<sup>35</sup></li> </ul>

Source: CNA.

<sup>33</sup> "Public Announcement of Written Examination for Recruiting 2019 Graduates for Institutions Directly under the Central United Front Work Department," (*Zhongyang Tongzhanbu Zhishu Shiye Danwei 2019 Nian Gongkai Zhaopin Yingjie Biyesheng Bishi Gonggao*; 中央统战部直属事业单位 2019 年公开招聘应届毕业生笔试公告), United Front Work Department of the CCP Central Committee, (*Zhonggong Zhongyang Tongyi Zhanxian Gongzuobu*; 中共中央统一战线工作部), May 6, 2019, accessed Mar. 3, 2020, [zytb.gov.cn./gsgg/309173.jhtml](http://zytb.gov.cn./gsgg/309173.jhtml).

<sup>34</sup> "About Us," (*Guanyu Women*; 关于我们), China Military Online, (*Zhongguo Junwang*; 中国军网), 2019, [http://www.81.cn/aboutus/node\\_73809.htm](http://www.81.cn/aboutus/node_73809.htm).

<sup>35</sup> "China Daily: Connecting the World," *China Daily* Online, 2005, accessed Feb. 7, 2020, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/static/aboutus.html>.



## China Media Group

The 2018 reforms integrated China's official radio and television stations into a new organization, "China Media Group" (CMG) (*Zhongyang Guangbo Dianshi Zongtai*; 中央广播电视总台). CMG consists of China's official television network, CCTV, and its foreign-language broadcasting arm, China Global Television Network (CGTN), along with the PRC's two state-run radio stations, China Radio International (CRI) and China National Radio (CNR). CMG uses the name "Voice of China" externally and is a state-sponsored organization under the State Council, but it is led by the CPD. The new super network is charged with spreading Party policies and views, creating and broadcasting propaganda reports, strengthening China's international broadcasting capacity, and promoting multimedia news integration. See Figure 5 below for an illustration of the new network's organizational structure.

Source: CCP Central Committee (*Dangzhongyaoang Weiyuanhui*; 党中央委员会), "Program for the Deepening Reform of Party and Government Organs," (*Shenhua Dang he Guojia Jigou Gaige Fang'an*; 深化党和国家机构改革方案), *Xinhua*, (新华), Mar. 21, 2018, Section 36, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-03/21/c\\_1122570517.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-03/21/c_1122570517.htm).

Figure 5. China Media Group structure



\* Institution directly under State Council. Domestically, will keep original names; externally will be referred to as "Voice of China"

Source: Translated from "Three Platforms Uniting Together, Producing a Stronger 'Voice of China,'" (*Santai Heyi, Fachu Geng Qiang de 'Zhongguo zhi Sheng'*; 三台合一, 发出更强的 '中国之声'), *People's Daily*, (*Renmin Ribao*; 人民日报), Mar. 22, 2018, <http://media.people.com/cn/n1/2018/0322/c40606-29883409.html>.

## Conclusion

These Party-state organs and the PLA's News Media Center are the main producers of Chinese foreign-directed media, although many other bureaucratic organizations contribute to Beijing's external propaganda efforts. They include the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the CCP International Liaison Department, the CCP United Front Work Department, various state and Party-affiliated news outlets, the Ministry of Culture, the Office of Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, the Taiwan Affairs Office, and the Ministry of Education, among others. All of these organizations and others have input into the content of foreign-directed media and journalist exchange programs that relate to issues under their purview. To understand what steps Beijing has taken to improve its foreign-directed media, it is first necessary to understand the structures and policies that guide, govern, and implement Chinese propaganda work. These structures are mutable and opaque, although the enduring primacy of the Party is unquestionable.

# Chapter Three: Foreign-Directed Media Objectives under Hu and Xi

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The structures discussed in Chapter Two evolved over time as a result of changing CCP policies on external propaganda work. Although these policies changed as Beijing attempted to adapt the media system to shifting realities such as globalization and the rise of the internet, most of the core objectives these policies attempt to achieve have remained relatively consistent for nearly 20 years. This chapter identifies Beijing's main objectives in strengthening its foreign-directed media capabilities, traces the origins of these goals, and examines recent attempts by Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping to accomplish them.

## Hu Jintao's approach to improving foreign-directed media

The CCP's current efforts to improve the reach and resonance of China's foreign-directed media have their origins in the early years of the Hu Jintao administration (2002–2012). As China's share of the world economy grew, and especially after Beijing was selected to host the 2008 Olympics and joined the World Trade Organization (WTO), PRC leaders began to prioritize China's role in international media. Hoping to combat a perceived anti-China bias in Western media and develop international influence commensurate with its growing economic power, Beijing released a series of directives in 2004 that, in many ways, formally set China on its current, outwardly expanding trajectory in foreign-directed media. The Party also re-established the External Propaganda Work Leading Small Group in 2004, indicating CCP leaders' commitment to placing increased emphasis on foreign-directed media.<sup>36</sup>

### 2004 policies

The April 2004 Central External Propaganda Work Conference produced two important policies that shaped the development of Chinese foreign-directed media throughout the Hu era. CPD head and Politburo Standing Committee member Li Changchun (李长春) outlined these policies during a keynote speech at the conference. The first policy, the “three foci of external

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<sup>36</sup> This leading small group is rarely mentioned in PRC media or official documents. It is unclear if the group still exists today. Zhang, “Case Study of External Propaganda Systems in Cities with Separately Designated Planning.”

propaganda work,” is shown in Table 2 below. The content of the second policy, a three-step plan for improving external propaganda, is outlined in Table 3.<sup>37</sup>

**Table 2. Three foci of Chinese external propaganda work**

Three Foci of External Propaganda Work
1. Focus on safeguarding national security and stability
2. Focus on creating an international public opinion environment favorable to China
3. Focus on establishing a good image of China in the international community

Source: “Li Changchun: External Propaganda Must Be Close to Foreign Audiences, Create Favorable Public Opinion Environment,” (*Li Changchun: Waixuan Yao Tiejin Guowai Shouzhong Yingzao Youli Yulun Huanjing*; 李长春: 外宣要贴近国外手中营造有利舆论环境), *China News Service*, (*Zhongguo Xinwenshe*; 中国新闻社), Apr. 21, 2004, <http://www.chinanews.com/n/2004-04-21/26/428312.html>.

**Table 3. 2004 three-step plan for improving external propaganda work**

Three-Step Plan for Improving External Propaganda Work
<b>1. Within two years (~2006):</b> Straighten out relations and coordination, improve institutions, expand channels for foreign propaganda, and establish the unified leadership of the central government. The Office of External Propaganda should coordinate and guide cooperation with local governments, departments, overseas embassies and consulates, and foreign news organizations. Establish an orderly system and mechanism to form a comprehensive, multi-tiered, and wide-ranging “big external propaganda” pattern.
<b>2. Within five years (~2009/2010):</b> Use one news agency (Xinhua News Agency), two platforms (CCTV and China Radio International), two newspapers ( <i>China Daily</i> and <i>People’s Daily Overseas Edition</i> ), and key websites as the main agents to form media groups with international competitiveness and influence so that the position of China’s media in the field of international communications is elevated and China’s influence on international public opinion increases.
<b>3. In a further ten years (~2019/2020):</b> Further strengthen China’s foreign propaganda power so that China occupies a more favorable position in international public opinion patterns and has external propaganda power commensurate with China’s international status.

Source: “Provincial Foreign Propaganda Work Conference Proposes: Establishing a Big Foreign Propaganda Pattern to Create a New Foreign Propaganda Work Situation,” (*Quansheng Duiwai Xuanchuan Gongzuo Huiyi Tichu: Jianli Da Waixuan Geju Kaichuang Waixuan Gongzuo Xin Jumian*; 全省对外宣传工作会议提出:建立大外宣格局开创外宣工作新局面), *Hainan Today*, (*Jinri Hainan*; 今日海南), no. 7, 2004, 7, <http://mall.cnki.net/magazine/magadetail/JRHN200407.htm>.

<sup>37</sup> Ohlberg appears to be the first Western scholar to identify the 2004 plan.

The three foci of external propaganda work were noteworthy because they mark the first explicit, public linkage of external propaganda work with national security and stability. The three-step plan is significant because it outlined specific goals for improving China's external propaganda work through 2020.

This three-step plan became a blueprint for Beijing's foreign-directed media development under Hu Jintao.<sup>38</sup> The timeline it outlines is largely consistent with Chinese Party-state media's gradual expansion overseas and movement toward diversifying the languages in which they publish. Chapter Four will examine in greater detail the steps that Party-state media have taken to improve Beijing's external propaganda efforts.

## Possible drivers of 2004 changes

Neither the Party nor the government has publicly addressed why this plan was released in 2004, although it was likely the result of years of internal deliberations. Several developments in the preceding years likely played a role in Beijing's decision to prioritize the strengthening of its external propaganda, including:

- Beijing winning the bid to host the 2008 Summer Olympics in July 2001, at which point the CCP knew the eyes of the world would be on China in seven years. Beijing thus likely wanted to guarantee that the games, and China's hosting, were covered in a positive way.
- Beijing's accession to the WTO in December 2001, as Chinese leaders faced uncertainty about Chinese media's ability to compete with foreign media outlets. The 2004 regulations may have been intended to further strengthen these core PRC publications in their competition with Western outlets.
- China's economic policy of "Going Out" overseas, launched in the late 1990s, may have been extended into the media sector via the 2004 plan.

However these factors came together, as China's economic influence grew, PRC leaders began to prioritize strengthening China's role in international media and combating a perceived anti-China bias in Western coverage.

## Possible drivers of 2008 changes

Hu Jintao continued to affirm the importance of news and propaganda work, especially foreign-directed media, throughout his tenure as CCP general secretary. The importance of this work

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<sup>38</sup> Ohlberg provides an excellent overview of external propaganda policies under different Chinese leaders in "Creating a Favorable International Public Opinion Environment: External Propaganda (*Duiwai Xuanchuan*) as a Global Concept with Chinese Characteristics."

was reinforced after a series of public relations disasters plagued the run-up to the Olympic games in August 2008. The Olympic torch relay drew thousands of protesters across multiple continents who condemned Beijing's human rights record on issues like Tibet and Darfur; many called for an Olympic boycott.<sup>39</sup> Positive news coverage from China's foreign-directed media outlets proved largely ineffective in countering negative Western reporting. Having spent billions of dollars preparing to host the games, which were supposed to celebrate China's successes on an international stage, this public relations disaster was likely considered an embarrassing failure for China's external propaganda.<sup>40</sup>

While visiting the *People's Daily* headquarters after the torch relay and a month before the games started, Hu noted that "doing a good job in news and propaganda is related to the Party and government's overall work situation and the long-term stability of the country."<sup>41</sup> In the same speech, he also asserted that, despite improvements in Chinese foreign-directed media, the "West is strong and China is weak" (*Xiqiang Woruo*; 西强我弱) phenomenon "had not fundamentally changed." Citing increased global ideological and cultural exchanges, Hu contended that improving China's international influence in public opinion was "increasingly important."<sup>42</sup>

## 2008 policies

In 2008, the CCP and State Council created a new plan for foreign-directed media growth that built on the steps outlined in 2004. This plan was likely a response to Hu Jintao's 2007 call to "increase China's soft power," as well as Beijing's embarrassment over negative foreign press coverage of both the Olympic games and 2008 protests in Tibet.<sup>43</sup> This plan, the 2009–2020 Master Plan for Building International Communications Capacity of China's Key Media (*2009–2020 Nian Woguo Zhongdian Meiti Guoji Chuanbo Nengli Jianshe Zongti Jihua*; 2009–2020 年我国重点媒体国际传播能力建设总体规划), called for increased government investment in six Chinese media outlets (CCTV, CRI, *People's Daily*, *China Daily*, Xinhua, and China News Service)

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<sup>39</sup> "Timeline: Olympic Torch Protests around the World," Reuters, Apr. 28, 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-olympics-torch-disruptions/timeline-olympic-torch-protests-around-the-world-idUSSP17070920080428>.

<sup>40</sup> "Torch Relay a 'Public Relations Nightmare,'" CNN, Apr. 7, 2008, <https://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/europe/04/07/olympic.wrap/index.html>.

<sup>41</sup> "Speech during Inspection of *People's Daily*," (*Zai Renmin Ribaoshe Kaocha Gongzuoshi de Jianghua*; 在人民日报社考察工作时的讲话), *People's Daily*, (*Renmin Ribao*; 人民日报), Jun. 20, 2008, <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1024/7408514.html>.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> "Hu Urges Enhancing 'Soft Power' of Chinese Culture," *China Daily*, Oct. 15, 2007, [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-10/15/content\\_6226620.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-10/15/content_6226620.htm).

to bolster their international communications abilities.<sup>44</sup> Although neither the Chinese government nor China's principal authoritative media outlets have publicly disclosed the amount of funding involved, Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post* reported in January 2009 that Beijing was investing roughly \$6 billion USD in these outlets to "improve the country's image internationally."<sup>45</sup> This is borne out by significant changes in the respective overseas footprints of many of these outlets in the years that followed, a development that will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

## Xi Jinping's approach to improving foreign-directed media

Although references to the 2004 three-step plan trailed off around the time Xi Jinping came to power in November 2012, Xi has continued the push initiated under his predecessor to make China's foreign-directed media more influential internationally. Efforts to enhance Beijing's external propaganda powers in the Xi era can be characterized as follows:

- Pursued through Xi's "telling China's stories well" (*jianghao zhongguo gushi*; 讲好中国故事) initiative
- Increasingly prioritized in government planning documents
- Consolidated under formal Party control rather than administered by state institutions

Xi's signature propaganda initiative since assuming leadership of the CCP has been to stress the importance of "telling China's story well" to foreign audiences.<sup>46</sup> This slogan, which advocates telling Chinese stories from a Chinese perspective in ways palatable to foreign audiences, has since been adopted throughout the foreign affairs, external propaganda, and propaganda and ideological systems. The slogan remains one of the overarching objectives of

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<sup>44</sup> The full text of the plan is not publically available, although its contents have been summarized in secondary sources. See, for example, Peilei Ye and Luis A. Albornoz, "Chinese Media 'Going Out' in Spanish Speaking Countries: The Case of CGTN-España," *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 13, no. 1 (2018), <https://www.westminsterpapers.org/articles/10.16997/wpsc.277/>.

<sup>45</sup> "Beijing in 45b Yuan Global Media Drive."

<sup>46</sup> Xi first used this phrase at his first National Propaganda and Ideology Conference in August 2013 and has repeated it many times since. The full quote is: "[We] must do a good job in external propaganda/publicity work, innovate new methods of external propaganda, strive to create new concepts, new categories, and new formulations for integrating China and foreign [countries], and tell Chinese stories and spread Chinese voices well." "Xi Jinping's Views of News and Public Opinion," (*Xi Jinping De Xinwen Yulunguan*; 习近平的新闻舆论观), *People's Daily*, (*Renmin Ribao*; 人民日报), Feb. 25, 2016, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0225/c1001-28147851.html>.

China's foreign-directed media under Xi Jinping and will be addressed in greater detail in the section that follows on external propaganda objectives.

The growing importance of foreign-directed media in Xi Jinping's China is also visible in the 13th Five-Year Plan (FYP). FYPs are CCP policy guidelines that paint a clear picture of leadership priorities and objectives.<sup>47</sup> These plans are legacies of the Soviet-style planned economy pursued by Mao, but they have expanded to include broader social development goals.<sup>48</sup> Published in 2016, the 13th Plan was the first FYP released under Xi's leadership, and it is the only FYP issued this century to include a section specific to China's international communications power. The section calls for expanding China's foreign communications networks and diversifying its communications channels. It also advocates "building flagship media, promoting communications cooperation, and strengthening joint ventures with large international media groups."<sup>49</sup> The inclusion of a foreign-directed media section in a FYP underscores how important these efforts have become over the last decade.

Xi Jinping's speeches are another valuable source of insight into the importance of media and external propaganda in China today, and they reveal how much Xi values Party control over the media. His speeches emphasize loyalty, innovation, and expansion as keys to Chinese news and public opinion work. In a 2016 address, for example, Xi stated that Party and government sponsored media "must be surnamed Party.... [and] should mirror the Party's views, safeguard the authority of the Party, preserve Party unity, and achieve love for, protection of, and service to the Party."<sup>50</sup> While touring *PLA Daily* headquarters in 2015, Xi noted that a way to preserve Party control was to ensure that news and propaganda work leaders were "people who are

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<sup>47</sup> To date, the PRC has produced four such plans this century. The 10th was released in 2001 under Jiang Zemin (江泽民), the 11th and 12th in 2006 and 2011 respectively under Hu Jintao, and the 13th in 2016 under Xi Jinping.

<sup>48</sup> The Chinese title of these documents changed in 2006 with the 11<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan. In an attempt to play up the market-orientation of its economy (which PRC leaders are trying to emphasize is no longer completely a "planned" economy), subsequent versions have been called five-year "guidelines" (*guihua*, 规划) rather than five-year "plans" (*jihua*, 计划), although plan is still used by Chinese English-language media. "What Are China's Five-Year Plans?," *China Daily*, Oct. 29, 2015, [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015cpcplenarysession/2015-10/29/content\\_22311061.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015cpcplenarysession/2015-10/29/content_22311061.htm).

<sup>49</sup> "Outline of the 13th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China," (*Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Guomin Jingji he Shehui Fazhan Di Shisan ge Wunian Guihua Gangyao*; 中华人民共和国国民经济和社会发展第十三个五年规划纲要), Central Government of the People's Republic of China, (*Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Zhongyang Renmin Zhengfu*; 中华人民共和国中央人民政府), Mar. 17, 2016, [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-03/17/content\\_5054992.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-03/17/content_5054992.htm).

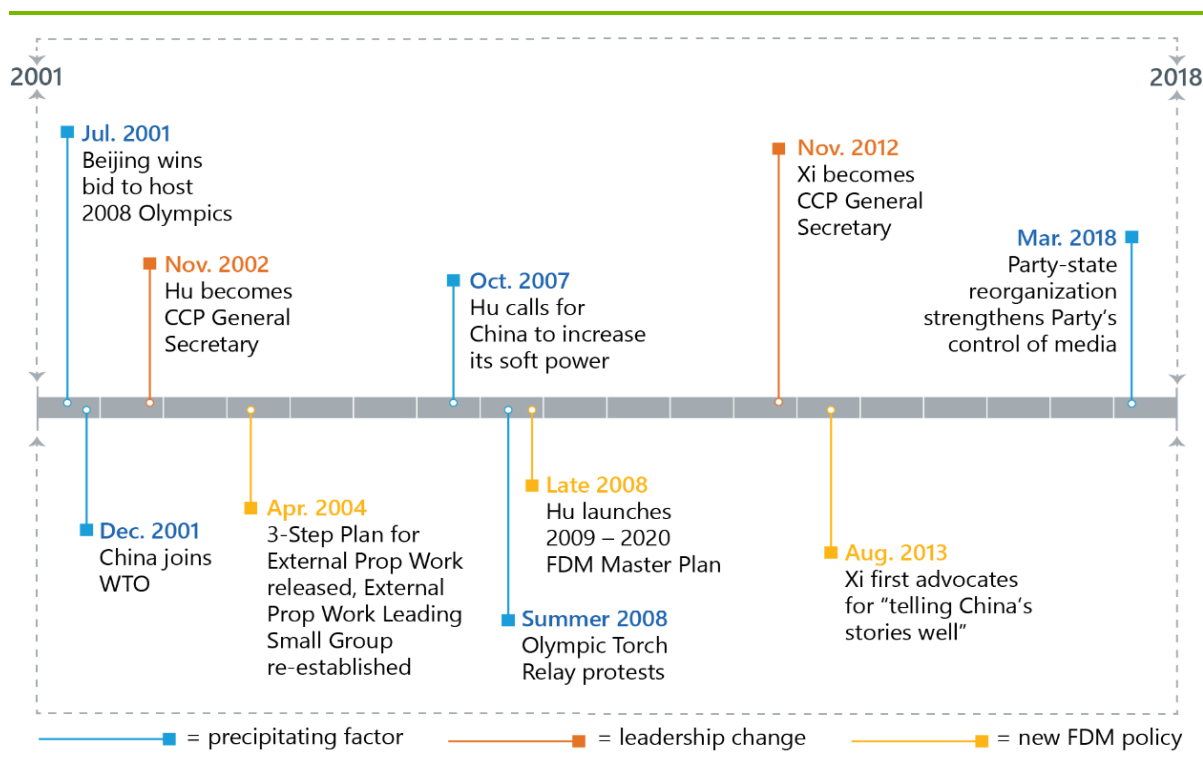
<sup>50</sup> "Xi Jinping's Views of News and Public Opinion."



reliable and loyal to the Party.” In the same speech, Xi asserted that “where the reader is, where the audience is, that is where the tentacles of propaganda reporting should extend.”<sup>51</sup>

Under Xi Jinping’s leadership, foreign-directed media have gained increasing prominence, as illustrated by the 13th Five-Year Plan. Xi has firmly embraced core tenets of Chinese media governance such as loyalty to the Party, as evidenced by his speeches. He has also sought to guarantee Party control over the industry through the 2018 organizational reforms. Figure 6 provides an overview of major media developments under Hu and Xi.

**Figure 6. Inflection points in Chinese foreign-directed media since 2000**



Source: CNA.

## Current objectives

While different Chinese leaders have put their own spin on external propaganda goals, the overarching objectives of this work have remained fundamentally consistent since the Hu Jintao era. Xi Jinping has built on the successes of Hu’s push to improve Chinese external propaganda and sought to strengthen areas where earlier efforts proved ineffective. The three

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

overarching objectives behind Beijing's attempts to improve its external propaganda work in the Xi Jinping era can be broadly summarized as follows:

- Developing international media influence commensurate with China's power
- Spreading positive, convincing images of China abroad
- Improving multimedia and internet-based media integration

Each of these objectives is discussed below.

## Developing international media influence commensurate with China's power

Beijing's desire to ensure that Chinese media have a level of international influence on par with China's global status, especially its economic power, is one of the primary driving forces behind China's foreign-directed media expansion. The Chinese refer to this influence as "discourse power" or the "right to speak" (*huayuquan*; 话语权).<sup>52</sup> In the Chinese view, Western media are currently monopolizing this power, and Beijing must fight to make sure Chinese voices are heard in international media. This is evident in the continued use by Chinese scholars and officials of the phrase "the West is strong, China is weak" to describe the international media environment.<sup>53</sup> To make China stronger, Chinese officials and policy guidelines have explicitly called for improving China's international media influence since around 2004 and continue to do so today.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> This is not an inherently Chinese concept; Beijing has adopted the idea of discursive power from French social theorist Michel Foucault. See Liu Xiaoying (刘笑盈), "Case Study on Discourse Power: Using Cultural 'Mutual Tolerance and Learning Theory' to Contain 'Clash of Civilizations Theory,'" (*Huayuquan Ge'an Yanjiu: Yong Wenhua 'Baorong Hujianlun' Hanhua 'Wenming Chongtulun'*; 话语权个案研究: 用文化'包容互鉴论' 涵化'文明冲突论'), *International Communications (Duiwai Chuanbo; 对外传播)* (2019), <http://m.fx361.com/news/2019/0806/5384660.html>.

<sup>53</sup> Even Chinese leaders have used this phrase in the context of international influence in the last decade. See, for example, Yao Dawei (姚大伟), "Foreign Media Heatedly Debate Hu Jintao's *Qiushi* Article: 'China Will Do Everything It Can to Resist Western Cultural Attacks,'" (*Waimei Reyi Hu Jintao 'Qiushi' Wenzhang Zhongguo Jiang Fenli Diyu Xifang Wenhua Gongji*; 外媒热议胡锦涛《求是》文章 中国将奋力抵御西方文化攻击), *People's Daily (Renmin Ribao; 人民日报)*, Jan. 5, 2012, <http://media.people.com.cn/GB/40606/16799589.html>.

<sup>54</sup> See step three of the 2004 Three-Step Plan for Improving External Propaganda Work, outlined in Table 3. Xi Jinping himself asserted that China needs to develop international discourse power equal to its "comprehensive national strength" in his January 2019 speech at the Politburo's Collective Study Session on Media Development. Xi Jinping (习近平), "Xi Jinping: Accelerating the Push for Integrated Media Development, Building a Pattern of All Media Communication," (*Xi Jinping: Jiakuai Tuidong Meiti Ronghe Fazhan Goujian Quan Meiti Chuanbo Geju*; 习近平: 加快推动媒体融合发展 构建全媒体传播格局), *Qiushi (求是)* (2019), [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2019-03/15/content\\_5374027.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2019-03/15/content_5374027.htm).

It is important to note that securing this level of international influence is both a means and an end. Improving China's discourse power is a means to spread Beijing's viewpoints, improve China's image abroad, and maintain regime stability.<sup>55</sup> As Xi Jinping has defined the "Chinese Dream" (*Zhongguo Meng*; 中国梦) as "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese people," ensuring that Beijing is a global media power is a way of demonstrating to domestic audiences that Xi is restoring China's international standing, and thereby gives the CCP legitimacy.<sup>56</sup> A recent article by Hua Chunying (华春莹), director of the PRC MFA's Information Department and a spokeswoman for the ministry, described the current disparity in China's international discourse power in relation to the West as "a barrier that must be passed" in order to achieve national rejuvenation.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, foreign-directed media are important for advancing China's strategic goals. With greater international media influence, Beijing can shape foreign audiences' views on topics such as One Belt One Road, Taiwan, or the US military presence overseas.

Moreover, this increased voice in international media is an end unto itself; it is a demonstration of Chinese power and prowess on the world stage. Although this goal did not originate in the Xi era, securing a louder international voice is another dimension of China's comprehensive power, and is thus one of the most important overarching objectives behind Beijing's push to improve its foreign-directed media.

## Spreading positive, convincing images of China abroad

Another main objective of China's efforts to strengthen its external propaganda capabilities is to propagate positive and persuasive images of China to foreign audiences. This goal is derived from China's view of the international media environment as being dominated by the West; Beijing perceives its own voice as not being heard and is also concerned that the voices that carry the most say have an anti-China bias and are spreading a "China threat" theory.<sup>58</sup> The

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<sup>55</sup> Ohlberg, "Creating a Favorable International Public Opinion Environment: External Propaganda (*Duiwai Xuanchuan*) as a Global Concept with Chinese Characteristics," 418-419.

<sup>56</sup> "Outline of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era: Four – Achieving the Chinese Dream of the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation," (*Xi Jinping Xinshidai Zhongguo Tese Shehui Zhuyi Sixiang Xuexi Gangyao - Si. Shixian Zhonghua Minzu Weida Fuxing de Zhongguo Meng*; 习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想学习纲要 - 四。实现中华民族伟大复兴的中国梦), *People's Daily Online*, (*Renminwang*; 人民网), Jul. 26, 2019, <http://chuxin.people.cn/n1/2019/0726/c428144-31257619.html>.

<sup>57</sup> Hua Chunying (华春莹), "Occupy the Moral High-Ground, Raise International Discourse Power," (*Hua Chunying Zai Xuexi Shibao Zhuanwen: Zhanju Daoyi Zhigaodian, Tisheng Guoji Huayuquan*; 华春莹在学习时报撰文: 占据道义制高点, 提升国际话语权), *Study Times*, (*Xuexi Shibao*; 学习时报) (2019), [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_3900567](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_3900567).

<sup>58</sup> For a discussion of these biases, see Zhang Yuqiang (张毓强) and Huang Shan (黄姗), "Information Production, Information Presence, and Communication Achievement in China's International Communications," (*Zhongguo Guoji Chuanbo Zhong de Xinxu Shengchan, Xinxu Zaichang yu Goutong Dacheng*; 中国国际传播中的信息生产、信息在

goal of propagating a positive image of China abroad was explicitly enshrined in PRC government policy in 2004 and has been reiterated in different forms since.<sup>59</sup>

Xi Jinping has framed this concept of spreading positive images of China as “telling China’s story well.” He has called for Chinese media to depict China as a “civilized” and “responsible country.” Specifically, Xi wants China portrayed as:

- A nation with rich history, ethnic unity, and cultural diversity.
- An Eastern power with “good government,” a developed economy, national unity, and natural beauty.
- An advocate for peace and common development.
- A safeguard of international justice that makes positive “contributions to humanity.”
- An “open, amicable, promising, and vibrant” socialist country.<sup>60</sup>

Replacing allegedly negative Western portrayals of China with these positive ones furthers Beijing’s strategic economic and security interests. In the words of Chinese scholars, countries that are seen positively abroad and are deemed trustworthy “incur lower costs and have higher effectiveness” in their diplomatic and economic activities.<sup>61</sup> Foreign companies and countries are more likely to do business with China if they view it in a positive light. As for how convincing foreigners that China is a force for good in the world advances Beijing’s security interests, the more people who believe Chinese viewpoints, the fewer who will challenge them. Hu Jintao formally integrated this goal into Chinese external propaganda policy, and Xi Jinping has continued to call for positive Chinese perspectives to spread internationally with his “telling China’s story well” initiative.

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场与沟通达成), *International Communications (Duiwai Chuanbo, 对外传播)*, no. 9 (2019), <http://www.fx361.com/page/2019/0909/5522906.shtml>.

<sup>59</sup> “Li Changchun: External Propaganda Must Be Close to Foreign Audiences, Create Favorable Public Opinion Environment,” (*Li Changchun: Waixuan Yao Tiejin Guowai Shouzhong Yingzao Youli Yulun Huanjing*; 李长春: 外宣要贴近国外手中营造有利舆论环境), China News Service, (*Zhongguo Xinwenshe*; 中国新闻社), Apr. 21, 2004, accessed Dec. 4, 2019, <http://www.chinanews.com/n/2004-04-21/26/428312.html>.

<sup>60</sup> “Xi: China to Promote Cultural Soft Power,” Xinhua, Jan. 1, 2014, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/201401/01/c\\_125941955.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/201401/01/c_125941955.htm).

<sup>61</sup> Lu Qiang (卢强) and Han Jun (韩军), “Review of Current External Propaganda Work from Three Dimensions: Dissemination, Transformation and Organization,” (*Cong Chuanbo, Zhuanhua, Zuozhi San Ge Weidu Dui Dangqian Waixuan Gongzuo de Shenshi*; 从传播、转化、组织三个维度对当前外宣工作的审视), *International Communications (Duiwai Chuanbo; 对外传播)*, no. 2 (2019), <http://www.fx361.com/page/2019/1103/5953171.shtml>.

## Improving multimedia and internet-based media integration

Another enduring goal of Beijing's push to strengthen its external propaganda capabilities is to enhance and integrate internet-based media to maximize the reach and appeal of its news content. Beijing has long recognized the utility of the internet in sharing Chinese foreign-directed media coverage with overseas audiences. In 1995, for example, when Jiang Zemin (江泽民) was CCP general secretary, *China Daily* became the first major PRC media outlet to establish a website, *a year before the internet was even available to the Chinese public*.<sup>62</sup> Efforts to improve the internet presence of foreign-directed media outlets continued under Hu Jintao as news publications increased the number of languages available on their websites. Enhancing and leveraging internet-based communication tools is now a central part of Xi Jinping's strategy for improving the efficacy of Beijing's foreign-directed media.

Xi has repeatedly emphasized the importance of "strengthening internet thinking" and integrating emerging media with traditional reporting to ensure that Party-state media outlets are connecting with the broadest possible audience.<sup>63</sup> In this sense, integration refers to redundancy of media messaging across multiple platforms and mediums that, when successful, maximizes the number of users reached. Chinese publications and officials have swiftly embraced Xi's calls to improve internet-based communications, with MFA spokeswoman Hua Chunying (华春莹) calling for more "enthusiastic" promotion of media integration and for "deeper" foreign social media use.<sup>64</sup>

As few foreigners subscribe to Chinese newspapers, the internet provides a cost-effective way to connect with large audiences overseas that likely would not otherwise see Chinese news stories. By joining popular pre-existing platforms like Twitter, Chinese officials and publications can interact with foreign audiences directly. Improving media integration across multiple platforms enables Chinese publications to maximize the possibility of connecting with audiences that do not get their news through traditional media like newspapers. Under Xi Jinping, media integration remains one of the key objectives behind the expansion of China's external propaganda.

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<sup>62</sup> "China Daily: Connecting the World," and Simon Denyer, "China's Scary Lesson to the World: Censoring the Internet Works," *The Washington Post*, May 23, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/chinas-scary-lesson-to-the-world-censoring-the-internet-works/2016/05/23/413afe78-fff3-11e5-8bb1-f124a43f84dc\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/chinas-scary-lesson-to-the-world-censoring-the-internet-works/2016/05/23/413afe78-fff3-11e5-8bb1-f124a43f84dc_story.html).

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, his speech at the January 2019 Collective Study Session on Media Development. Xi, "Xi Jinping: Accelerating the Push for Integrated Media Development, Building a Pattern of All Media Communication"

<sup>64</sup> Hua, "Occupy the Moral High-Ground, Raise International Discourse Power."

## Conclusion

The overarching objectives behind Beijing's efforts to improve the efficacy of its external propaganda have proven enduring over the last two decades. As China continues its international rise, Beijing's urgency to develop a corresponding level of international influence will persist. The next chapter provides an overview of ways in which Party-state affiliated media have attempted to improve their international influence.

# Chapter Four: How China Has Improved Its Foreign-Directed Media

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The PRC has employed multiple strategies to achieve its goals of improving China's international media influence and telling Chinese stories from Chinese perspectives. Most of these efforts can be grouped broadly into two camps: attempts to maximize the distribution of China's message and attempts to tailor content to target audiences. Each of these different strategies is composed of smaller steps, the most salient of which include telling China's stories through new channels, using foreign voices to convey Chinese viewpoints, expanding Chinese media's physical presence overseas, and enhancing the degree to which content is tailored to local audiences. Each of these steps is examined below.

## Increasing channels of distribution

Beijing has made a concerted effort over the last several decades to diversify the means by which Chinese messages reach foreign audiences. By increasing the number of points of contact between China and overseas audiences, Beijing hopes to improve foreigners' exposure to Chinese viewpoints.<sup>65</sup> Increasing channels of distribution also enhances China's ability to compete with Western media outlets in foreign countries. Some of the most prominent new channels of communication Beijing has pursued in recent years include:

- Establishing a government spokesperson system.
- Publishing Chinese-made content in foreign media outlets.
- Improving Chinese media and diplomats' presence on foreign social-media platforms.
- Creating new Chinese outlets producing content specific to overseas markets.

## Government spokesperson system

Beijing first started designating government spokespersons in the early 1980s. Since then, using spokespersons has evolved into the most routinized method that the Chinese government employs to interact with foreign audiences. The use of spokespersons is now widespread across almost every government ministry and extends across lower levels of

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<sup>65</sup> See, for example, Renmin University of China Media Studies Professor Zhao Yonghua's (赵永华) comments in Zhang Yuqiang and Huang Shan, "Information Production, Information Presence, and Communication Achievement in China's International Communications."

government.<sup>66</sup> Although Chinese media refer to the use of spokespersons throughout the Chinese government as the “spokesperson system,” each ministry or local government has its own internal spokesperson system specific to that organization. For example, the MFA has multiple spokespersons who rotate press conference responsibilities, and a designated team of MFA experts to help these spokespersons prepare for briefings.<sup>67</sup> Spokespersons come from within their respective ministries or administrative unit and are responsible for the timely release of information to the public.

The spokesperson system has become increasingly ubiquitous across almost all levels of the Chinese government over the last decade. Ministries that rarely used to have a public presence are now at the forefront of Chinese responses to trade issues, cross-Strait relations, and governance and discontent in Hong Kong. Spokespersons now play a leading role in communicating in a timely and authoritative manner with domestic Chinese audiences in addition to remaining one of the most direct ways in which Beijing conducts foreign-directed media outreach.

### Development of MFA spokesperson system

At the time of the PRC’s first press conference in 1982, the MFA spokesperson was the only official government spokesperson in China.<sup>68</sup> The spokesperson system was formally implemented in early 1983 based on a regulation from the External Propaganda Leading Small Group, indicating a close relationship between the spokesperson system and foreign-directed

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<sup>66</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the PRC government’s spokesperson system, including how the system has developed over time and how spokespersons are selected and trained, see: Ni Chen, “The Evolving Chinese Government Spokesperson System,” in *Soft Power in China: Public Diplomacy through Communication*, ed. Jian Wang (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 73-93.

<sup>67</sup> Tan Jingjing (谭晶晶), Liang Linlin (梁淋淋), and Zhang Pengxiong (张鹏雄), “Witness China’s Opening Up - 30 Years of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson System’s Going Out,” (*Jianzheng Zhongguo Kaifang - Waijiaobu Fayanren Zhidu Zougou 30 Nian*; 见证中国开放——外交部发言人制度走过 30 年), Xinhua, (新华), Dec. 12, 2013, accessed Jan. 7, 2020, [http://www.gov.cn/jrzg/2013-12/12/content\\_2546978.htm](http://www.gov.cn/jrzg/2013-12/12/content_2546978.htm).

<sup>68</sup> The PRC government and media cite China’s first press conference as being conducted by MFA News Division head Qian Qichen (钱其琛) on March 26, 1982; he gave a three sentence response to Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev’s call to reduce Sino-Soviet tensions at a speech in Tashkent. Sun Shaolong (孙少龙) and Huang Xiaoxi (黄小希), “Steady Progress and Many Bright Spots - China’s News Release Work Has Made New Progress, Results,” (*Wenzhong Youjin Liangdian Fencheng - Woguo Xinwen Fabu Gongzuo Qude Xinjin Zhanxin Chengxiao*; 稳中有进亮点纷呈——我国新闻发布工作取得新进展新成效), Xinhua, (新华), Jul. 22, 2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2019-07/22/c\\_1124784085.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2019-07/22/c_1124784085.htm).



media efforts since its inception.<sup>69</sup> Because of this relationship, most other ministries originally neglected to name their own spokespersons and hold regular press conferences because they saw the spokesperson system as a matter of external propaganda work.<sup>70</sup>

In the early 1980s, the MFA held weekly press conferences, but they consisted essentially of stilted recitations of government statements as journalists were barred from asking questions. Over time, the MFA became more open to question-and-answer sessions. By 1988, MFA spokespersons were expected to answer questions at every weekly press conference.<sup>71</sup> This practice was further reinforced when, in 1997, the MFA lifted restrictions on the number of queries and amount of time journalists had to pose questions to the spokesperson.<sup>72</sup> Beginning in September 2011, the MFA spokesperson system assumed its current form, with regular press conferences held every weekday.<sup>73</sup> The Chinese government spokesperson system was created specifically to convey official government talking points to foreign media, and it remains one of the most routine and visible ways that Beijing attempts to communicate with foreign audiences.

### Ministry of National Defense spokesperson system

In 2008, the MND officially set up a spokesperson system with the explicit goal of “furthering military exchanges and cooperation and enhancing mutual military confidence.”<sup>74</sup> Regular monthly press conferences, conducted on the last Thursday of every month, began in 2011 and foreign reporters were allowed to attend starting in 2014.<sup>75</sup> The then newly founded MND

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<sup>69</sup> The regulation was issued in November 1983 and was titled “Provisional Regulations on Spokesperson Work.” “Review of and Reflection on China’s Press Spokesperson System since Reform and Opening,” (*Gaige Kaifang Yilai Woguo Xinwen Fayanren Zhidu de Huigu yu Sikao*; 改革开放以来我国新闻发言人制度的回顾与思考), State Council Information Office, (*Guowuyuan Xinwen Bangongshi*; 国务院新闻办公室), Mar. 18, 2011, <http://www.scio.gov.cn/xwfbh/llyj/Document/876991/876991.htm>.

<sup>70</sup> Aside from the MFA, only a handful of government ministries and agencies had spokespersons; these include the National Bureau of Statistics, the State Council’s Taiwan Affairs Office, and the forerunner of the current Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations and Trade. Tan, Liang, and Zhang, “Witness China’s Opening Up – 30 Years of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ Spokesperson System’s Going Out.”

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. The government spokesperson system expanded and become highly routinized throughout the Chinese government, especially after the 2003 SARS outbreak. See: Chen, “The Evolving Chinese Government Spokesperson System.”

<sup>74</sup> “China’s National Defense in 2008,” State Council Information Office, (*Guowuyuan Xinwen Bangongshi*; 国务院新闻办公室), Jan., 2009, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/publications/2017-04/11/content\\_4778231.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/publications/2017-04/11/content_4778231.htm).

<sup>75</sup> “China’s National Defense in the New Era, Section IV. Actively Contributing to Building a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind,” Xinhuanet, (新华网), Jul. 17, 2019, accessed Feb. 4, 2020, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/publications/2019-07/24/content\\_4846452.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/publications/2019-07/24/content_4846452.htm), and “PLA Lets Foreign Press Attend Monthly Briefing for First Time in a Bid for Greater Transparency,” *South China Morning Post*, Jul. 31, 2014,

Information Office, an organization similar to the SCIO but for the military, also released “important military information” through regular or irregular press conferences and written statements.<sup>76</sup>

Theater command and PLA service spokespersons were later added to the military’s media apparatus as a result of recent reforms. Each now has its own spokesperson. Following the February 2016 establishment of the new theater commands, in November 2018, the first theater spokesperson, from the Southern Theater Command, made his media debut in response to a freedom of navigation operation conducted by the US Navy in the South China Sea.<sup>77</sup> The theater commands do not have public websites, but the Southern Theater Command spokesperson is often quoted in authoritative English and Chinese-language PRC media when responding to an event, and the MND often reposts the statements on its website.<sup>78</sup>

## “Borrowing a Boat to Go Out to Sea”

Another method by which Chinese media attempt to spread their message to foreign audiences is by “borrowing a boat to go out to sea” (*jiechuanchuhai*; 借船出海). This strategy refers to the use of foreign communication channels (the “boats” in the Chinese analogy) to deliver Chinese perspectives to foreign audiences (“going out to sea”). By using pre-existing communication channels and media outlets, Chinese media can reach a wider foreign audience at cheaper costs than developing China’s own media.<sup>79</sup> Many of the foreign news publications carrying Chinese-

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<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1563427/pla-allows-foreign-reporters-attend-its-monthly-news-briefing-first-time#>.

<sup>76</sup> “China’s National Defense in the New Era, Section IV. Actively Contributing to Building a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind.”

<sup>77</sup> Jiang Ziwen (蒋子文), “Li Huamin Appointed Southern Theater Command Spokesperson, Makes First Public Appearance of Theater Command Spokesperson,” (*Li Huamin Ren Nanbuzhanqu Xinwen Fayanren, Xishou ge Gongkai Liangxiang Zhanqu Xinwen Fayanren*; 李华敏任南部战区新闻发言人, 系首个公开亮相战区新闻发言人), *The Paper*, (Pengpai; 澎湃), Nov. 30, 2018, [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_2693125](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_2693125).

<sup>78</sup> For a response to a November 2019 US Navy freedom of navigation operation, see, for example, “PLA Spokesperson Makes Remarks on US Provocative Acts in South China Sea,” China Military Online, (*Zhongguo Junwang*; 中国军网), Nov. 22, 2019, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2019-11/22/content\\_4855405.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2019-11/22/content_4855405.htm), and “US Navy Vessels in China’s Territorial Waters Criticized,” *China Daily*, Nov. 22, 2019, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201911/22/WS5dd76323a310cf3e3557956b.html>. The theater commander’s comments generally refer to US Navy actions as “provocative,” and assert that China has “undisputable sovereignty” over the South China Sea.

<sup>79</sup> See, for example, Cui Binzhen (崔斌箴), “Cui Binzhen: Using Xi Jinping Thought on Media and Public Opinion to Guide Innovation in External Propaganda Work,” (*Cui Binzhen: Yi Xi Jinping Xinwen Yulun Sixiang wei Zhidao Chuangxin Duiwai Xuanchuan Gongzuo*; 崔斌箴: 以习近平新闻舆论思想为指导创新对外宣传工作), *Qiushi* (求是)

produced content are well known and respected in their markets, which, in the eyes of foreign audiences, lends a degree of credibility to the Chinese content that might not exist if it were published in a Chinese outlet.

One of the most common ways that Chinese media “borrows boats” is through content sharing agreements with foreign media. The use of these agreements to spread Chinese-produced content has increased significantly under Xi Jinping.<sup>80</sup> Recent examples include agreements between Party mouthpiece *People’s Daily* and outlets in the UK such as the *Mail Online*; in Portugal with the news agency Lusa; and in Argentina with one of the country’s most-read newspaper, *La Nación*.<sup>81</sup> China’s state television broadcaster CCTV (officially CGTN overseas) has also signed numerous content-sharing agreements, including with TV broadcasters in Nepal, Pakistan, and the Ivory Coast.<sup>82</sup> China’s official wire service, Xinhua, has similarly established cooperative relationships with news outlets in Belarus, Bangladesh, Kenya, and Egypt, among other countries.<sup>83</sup> Not all of the Chinese-produced content carried by these overseas outlets is labeled clearly, which can mislead the audience into thinking the content is produced locally.

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(2018), [http://www.qstheory.cn/2018-04/13/c\\_1122677611.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/2018-04/13/c_1122677611.htm). Cui notes that “borrowing a boat” allows for both effective resource optimization and content localization.

<sup>80</sup> Samantha Custer, et al., “Influencing the Narrative: How the Chinese Government Mobilizes Students and Media to Burnish Its Image,” *AidData* (2019), [http://docs.aiddata.org/ad4/pdfs/Influencing\\_the\\_Narrative\\_Report.pdf](http://docs.aiddata.org/ad4/pdfs/Influencing_the_Narrative_Report.pdf).

<sup>81</sup> Emma Graham-Harrison, “*Mail Online* Teams up with Chinese Newspaper the *People’s Daily*,” *The Guardian*, Aug. 12, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/aug/12/mail-online-teams-up-chinese-newspaper-peoples-daily>; “Portugal’s Lusa and People’s Daily from China Sign Content Sharing Agreement,” Permanent Secretariat of the Forum for Economic and Trade Co-operation between China and Portuguese-speaking Countries (Macao), Jul. 27, 2016, <https://www.forumchinaplp.org.mo/lusa-peoples-daily/>; and “Agreement with the *People’s Daily* of China,” (Acuerdo con el Diario del Pueblo, de China), *La Nación*, Jun. 14, 2015, <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/sociedad/acuerdo-con-el-diario-del-pueblo-de-china-nid1801618>.

<sup>82</sup> “KMG and CCTV Sign Framework Agreement for Content Exchange,” *Kathmandu Post*, May 14, 2016, <https://kathmandupost.com/miscellaneous/2016/05/14/kmg-cctv-sign-framework-agreement-for-content-exchange>; “PTV, CCTV Sign MoU to Enable Chinese Television to Get Landing Rights in Pakistan,” *Express Tribune*, Apr. 12, 2014, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/694732/ptv-cctv-sign-mou-to-enable-chinese-television-to-get-landing-rights-in-pakistan/>; and “China Enhances Cooperation with African Media Industry,” China Internet Information Center, Nov. 5, 2015, [http://www.china.org.cn/arts/2015-11/05/content\\_36985140.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/arts/2015-11/05/content_36985140.htm).

<sup>83</sup> See, for example: “Radio Belarus, China’s Xinhua Sign Agreement on Cooperation,” Official Website of the Republic of Belarus, Sept. 11, 2018, [https://www.belarus.by/en/press-center/press-release/radio-belarus-chinas-xinhua-sign-agreement-on-cooperation\\_i\\_0000085491.html](https://www.belarus.by/en/press-center/press-release/radio-belarus-chinas-xinhua-sign-agreement-on-cooperation_i_0000085491.html); “UNB, Xinhua Sign News Exchange Agreement,” *United News of Bangladesh*, Sept. 27, 2018, <http://www.unb.com.bd/category/Bangladesh/unb-xinhua-sign-news-exchange-agreement/3046>; and “Daily News Egypt Signs Content, Images Sharing Agreement with Xinhua,” *Daily News Egypt*, Oct. 19, 2019, <https://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2019/10/19/daily-news-egypt-signs-content-images-sharing-agreement-with-xinhua/>. Sarah Cook has written prolifically on Chinese media and external propaganda, including on content sharing agreements. For more content sharing examples, see: Sarah Cook, “Beijing’s Global Megaphone: The Expansion of Chinese Communist Party Media Influence since 2017,” Freedom House, Jan., 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2020/beijings-global-megaphone>.

In fact, as China's foreign-directed media have grown increasingly professionalized and sophisticated, their ability to produce content that blends in with Western reporting has improved. *China Daily's* paid inserts in overseas news outlets are a prominent example of sophisticated content that aims to replicate Western reporting styles. Although most outlets provide disclaimers that these inserts are sponsored content, these "China Watch" supplements can sometimes dupe readers of well-known Western outlets, which include the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times* in the US; *The Daily Telegraph* in the UK (until April 2020); and *Le Figaro* in France.<sup>84</sup> An extremely targeted version of these supplements ran in the *Des Moines Register* ahead of the 2018 midterm elections in the United States, aiming to "undermine farm-country support for President Donald Trump's escalating trade war."<sup>85</sup> These inserts attempt to capitalize on pre-existing and reputable outlets to spread Chinese talking points.

*China Daily* is required to make annual disclosures to the US Department of Justice under the Foreign Agents Registration Act. These filings reveal that between November 2016 and April 2020, *China Daily* spent nearly \$11.4 million USD advertising in North American media.<sup>86</sup> The *Des Moines Register* insert was a small fraction of this total spending: just \$34,600 USD. The vast majority of this money was spent advertising in the *Wall Street Journal* (nearly \$6 million USD) and the *Washington Post* (cumulatively over \$4.5 million USD over this period).<sup>87</sup> In the UK, until April 2020, the *Telegraph* reportedly received nearly \$1 million USD a year to publish "China Watch" supplements once a month.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Sun Jingxin (孙敬鑫) and Wu Gang (伍刚), "Report on the International Communication Power of the Central Government's Main News Websites," (*Zhongyang Zhuyao Xinwen Wangzhan Guoji Chuanboli Baogao*; 中央主要新闻网站国际传播力报告), *Online Communication Magazine* (*Wangluo Chuanbo Zazhi*; 网络传播杂志) (2016), [http://www.cac.gov.cn/2016-12/22/c\\_1120167875.htm](http://www.cac.gov.cn/2016-12/22/c_1120167875.htm).

<sup>85</sup> Donnelle Eller, "Chinese-backed Newspaper Insert Tries to Undermine Iowa Farm Support for Trump, Trade War," *The Des Moines Register*, Sept. 24, 2018, <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/money/agriculture/2018/09/24/china-daily-watch-advertisement-tries-sway-iowa-farm-support-trump-trade-war-tariffs/1412954002/>.

<sup>86</sup> China Daily Distribution Corporation, "Amendment to Registration Statement Pursuant to the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938," US Department of Justice, Jun. 1, 2020, <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/3457-Amendment-20200601-2.pdf>.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* For a full graphical representation of *China Daily* expenditures in the US since 2009, including printing costs, see: "Beijing's Global Megaphone: The Expansion of Chinese Communist Party Media Influence since 2017."

<sup>88</sup> Louisa Lim and Julia Bergin, "Inside China's Audacious Global Propaganda Campaign," *The Guardian*, Dec. 7, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/dec/07/china-plan-for-global-media-dominance-propaganda-xi-jinping>.

Other examples of Chinese attempts to “borrow a boat to go out to sea” involve more traditional public diplomacy—Chinese diplomats and leaders writing signed opinion pieces in local media. In 2019, for instance, Xi Jinping visited 12 foreign countries and published signed letters in local media in 7 of them.<sup>89</sup> The countries where he published signed letters were all hosting him on official state visits.

### Influencing Foreign Reporting

Another way that the Chinese government and foreign-directed media outlets attempt to use overseas reporting to promote PRC talking points is by offering foreign journalists training programs in China. These programs aim to develop China’s soft power by giving foreign journalists free trips to China, where they are exposed firsthand to Chinese viewpoints and communications styles. The goal is to have these journalists “tell China’s stories well” when they return to their own countries. These programs range from 10-day seminar series to 10-month certificate courses.

Most of these training programs target journalists from specific geographic areas, especially Africa, Southeast Asia, Oceania, Latin America, and the Caribbean, or from One Belt One Road participant countries. Chinese press centers such as the China-Africa Press Center and the China-Asia Pacific Press Center coordinate the training. The MFA, Ministry of Education, and the China Public Diplomacy Association manage them. Chinese foreign-directed media outlets, such as *China Daily*, Chinese state-owned enterprises, and Communications University of China or Renmin University of China, also jointly sponsor most training courses. How effective these programs are at shaping foreign reporting on China is difficult to measure. A 2019 Reporters without Borders report estimated that over the last decade, over 3,400 journalists from nearly 150 countries had participated in government-sponsored media training programs in China. However, it remains to be seen if these programs persuade reporters to cover China more sympathetically.

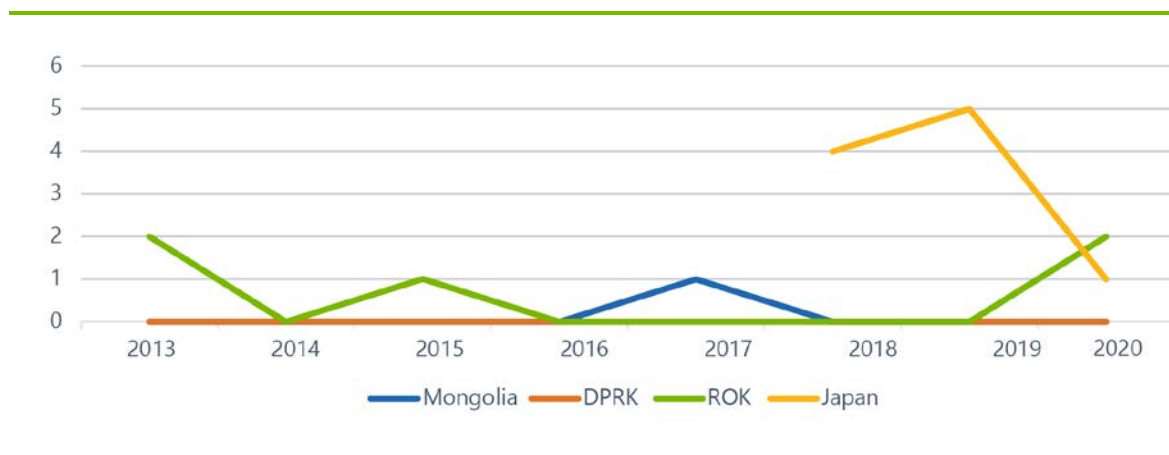
Sources: Yuan Zhou and Zhang Zhihao, “China Boosts Soft Power by Training Foreign Journalists,” *China Daily*, Oct. 17, 2016, [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-10/17/content\\_27077588.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-10/17/content_27077588.htm), and “China’s Pursuit of a New World Media Order,” *Reporters without Borders*, Mar. 22, 2019, <https://rsf.org/en/reports/rsf-report-chinas-pursuit-new-world-media-order>.

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<sup>89</sup> Xi published signed letters in Italy, France, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, North Korea, Nepal, and Greece prior to or during his visit. He also visited Monaco, Russia, Japan, India, and Brazil for unofficial summits or multilateral meetings but did not publish signed letters in local media in those countries. A full list of these articles, as well as their contents is available in the “2019 Bulletin of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China,” (*Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Guowuyuan Gongbao*; 中华人民共和国国务院公报), Central Government of the PRC, (*Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Zhongyang Renmin Zhengfu*; 中华人民共和国中央人民政府), 2019, [http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/2019/issue\\_8066.htm](http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/2019/issue_8066.htm).

Likewise, many PRC ambassadors write opinion pieces in host country media to convey Chinese viewpoints in ways they hope will resonate with local audiences. For example, the Chinese ambassador to the UK, Liu Xiaoming (刘晓明), once wrote an opinion piece in a British newspaper referring to Japanese militarism as a kind of “Voldemort,” perhaps hoping the *Harry Potter* reference would draw in British audiences.<sup>90</sup> The same ambassador regularly publishes opinion pieces in UK news outlets; recently, he has written pieces advocating that the UK government allow Huawei to be used in the country’s 5G network, criticizing Washington for US-China trade tensions, and pushing back at a former UK defence secretary’s calls to send an aircraft carrier to operate near China in the Pacific.<sup>91</sup> Other PRC ambassadors around the world also use this form of “borrowing a boat” to connect with local audiences in ways that likely provide more exposure than they would if their opinion pieces were published in Chinese media. Figure 7, Figure 8, and Figure 9 below show how many signed opinion pieces PRC ambassadors in particular regions have published in host country media since Xi Jinping came to power.

**Figure 7. PRC ambassadors’ opinion pieces in East Asian countries, 2013–May 2020**



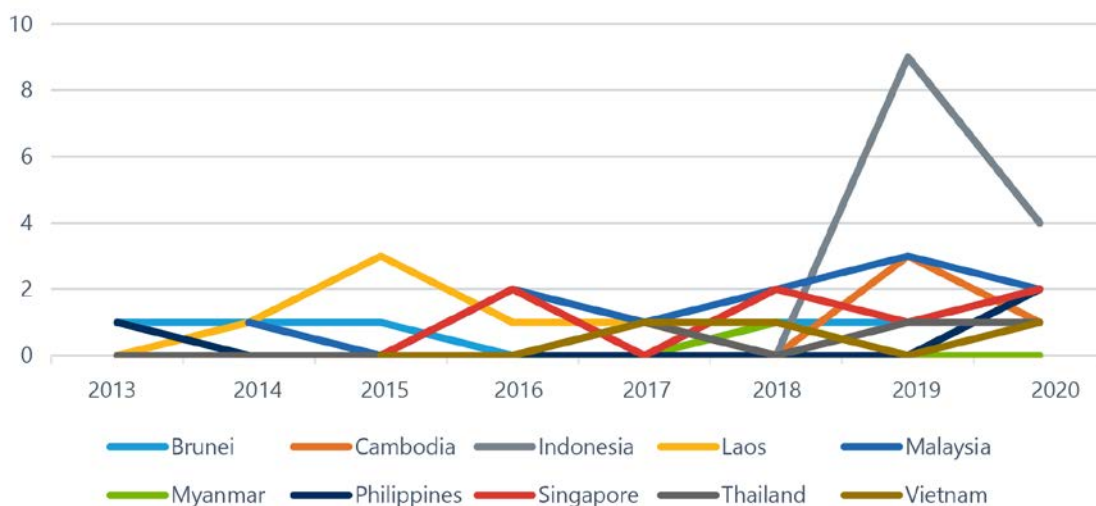
Source: CNA, based on data from PRC Embassy websites’ news section for each country.

<sup>a</sup> Data for Japan was unavailable prior to July 2017.

<sup>90</sup> Liu Xiaoming (刘晓明), “Liu Xiaoming: China and Britain Won the War Together,” *The Telegraph*, Jan. 1, 2014, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/10546442/Liu-Xiaoming-China-and-Britain-won-the-war-together.html>.

<sup>91</sup> Liu publishes in a variety of outlets, including *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph*. See, for example, Liu, “Gunboat Diplomacy Can Only Harm Britain’s Relationship with China,” *The Guardian*, Feb. 26, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/feb/26/gunboat-diplomacy-britain-china>.

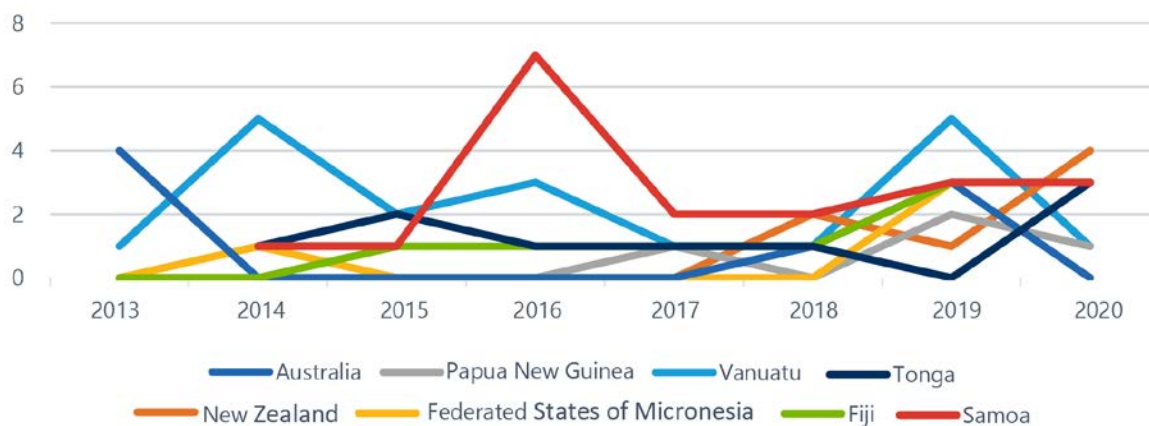
Figure 8. PRC ambassadors' opinion pieces in Southeast Asian countries, 2013–May 2020



Source: CNA, based on data from PRC Embassy websites' news section for each country.

<sup>a</sup> Data for Cambodia was unavailable prior to June 2015; data for Malaysia was unavailable prior to December 2013; data for Vietnam was unavailable prior to November 2014.

Figure 9. PRC ambassadors' opinion pieces in Pacific Island countries, 2013–May 2020



Source: CNA, based on data from PRC Embassy websites' news section for each country.

<sup>a</sup> Only data for countries with PRC Embassy websites are shown. Data for Samoa and Tonga was unavailable prior to January 2014.

### Influencing Overseas Chinese-Language Media

The CCP actively tries to sway public opinion among overseas Chinese communities in an effort to promote Beijing's foreign policy goals. One way the Party does so is by influencing Chinese-language media produced outside of the PRC. The efforts can be direct, as is the case when Chinese-backed companies buy shares in local Chinese-language media abroad, or when Chinese media outlets like the *Global Times* set up partnerships with these overseas papers. Furthermore, Chinese expats who formerly worked for PRC state-run media outlets like CNS now run some of these papers (this is true of the largest Chinese-language newspaper in the US, *Qiao Bao*).

These publications tend to echo Beijing's talking points on China-related issues. Other efforts to shape Chinese-language media overseas are less direct. Chinese diplomats in Australia and New Zealand have repeatedly worked to disadvantage independent Chinese-language publications economically by pressuring local businesses to stop advertising in these outlets. The PRC cultural attaché in New Zealand has been accused of "planning, coordinating, and controlling the New Zealand Chinese media." By limiting the number of critical voices speaking to Chinese diaspora communities, Beijing can ensure that its talking points spread overseas. Although these kinds of influence activities are well documented in places like Canada, the US, New Zealand, and Australia, Chinese foreign-directed media appears to have made significant inroads in these and other countries through its influence on overseas Chinese-language media.

Sources: Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "Beijing Builds Its Influence in the American Media," *Foreign Policy*, Dec. 21, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/12/21/one-of-americas-biggest-chinese-language-newspapers-toes-beijings-party-line-china-influence-united-front/>; Anne-Marie Brady, "Magic Weapons: China's Political Influence Activities under Xi Jinping," *The Wilson Center*, Sept. 18, 2017, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/magic-weapons-chinas-political-influence-activities-under-xi-jinping>; Cook, "Beijing's Global Megaphone"; and Laura Walters, "Who Is Watching NZ's Chinese-Language Media?" *Newsroom*, Sept. 30, 2019, <https://www.newsroom.co.nz/2019/09/30/832210/who-is-watching-nzs-chinese-language-media>.

## Leveraging foreign social media platforms

Although the "borrowing a boat to go out to sea" strategy itself is not new (Chinese media argue that Zhou Enlai [周恩来], who later served as Chinese premier, came up with the concept in the 1940s), PRC media and officials engaged in foreign-directed media efforts have recently adopted new vessels for reaching overseas audiences. Using foreign social media platforms, most of which are blocked within the PRC, has become a popular method by which Chinese media attempt to communicate directly with foreign audiences. As with the other techniques Chinese media employ to "borrow a boat," using foreign social media platforms enables these outlets to reach larger overseas audiences at a cheaper cost than they would if they were



posting only on Chinese social media or tried to set up their own foreign-directed platforms. This strategy also answers Xi Jinping’s calls to “strengthen internet thinking” and improve integration between traditional and emerging, internet-based media.<sup>92</sup>

All of China’s major foreign-directed media outlets run Twitter and Facebook accounts, and many have started using Instagram.<sup>93</sup> On Twitter, Chinese news outlets have created multiple different accounts to tweet in different languages or carry region-specific content. CGTN, for example, has five different Twitter accounts: CGTN, CGTN Africa, CGTN America, CGTN Europe, and CGTN en Español. Some of these outlets are more successful than others in building up follower bases, but it remains unclear how many of these followers are bots rather than real people. Table 4 shows Twitter follower statistics for some of China’s most important foreign-directed media outlets.

**Table 4. Twitter follower statistics of key Chinese foreign-directed media accounts**

Twitter Account	Joined Twitter	Followers (as of 6/30/2020)
CGTN	January 2013	13,924,124
Xinhua News	February 2012	12,688,549
People’s Daily	May 2011	7,118,067
China Daily	November 2009	4,393,246
Global Times	June 2009	1,862,909
Xinhua (Chinese Language)	August 2015	1,357,405
CCTV	July 2009	1,039,666
People’s Daily (Chinese Language)	June 2013	740,539
CGTN en Español	August 2016	605,158
CGTN America	June 2012	288,715
Pueblo en Línea (People’s Daily in Spanish)	December 2012	150,293
CGTN Africa	June 2012	145,998
Xinhua Español	July 2012	117,766
CGTN Europe	December 2016	7,974

Source: Twitter.

Chinese diplomats have rapidly adopted Twitter as a method to communicate directly with foreign audiences. Only 17 PRC diplomats or diplomatic missions had Twitter accounts in

<sup>92</sup> Xi, “Xi Jinping: Accelerating the Push for Integrated Media Development, Building a Pattern of All Media Communication.”

<sup>93</sup> YouTube is another platform which Chinese foreign-directed media outlets, especially CGTN, use to share their content with foreign audiences.

October 2018; that number has since more than quadrupled.<sup>94</sup> The MFA itself joined Twitter in October 2019, although it did not start tweeting until December. In its first three months, it amassed nearly 50,000 followers.

One of the earliest Chinese diplomats to embrace Twitter is Zhao Lijian (赵立坚), formerly China's deputy chief of mission in Pakistan. He has blocked American subject matter experts on Twitter and tweeted comments about race relations in the US that were seen as so inflammatory that a former US national security advisor called him a "racist disgrace."<sup>95</sup> Despite the undiplomatic tone of some of these tweets, Zhao's strident Twitter presence has actually led to a promotion. As he managed to draw widespread international attention to his comments, he now serves as an MFA spokesperson and deputy director general of the MFA's Information Department.<sup>96</sup> His acceptance within China's foreign affairs system indicates that his approach to foreign social media use may be seen as effective.

#### **MND and PLA Yet to Establish Foreign Social Media Presence**

Although China's most recent defense white paper emphasizes improving mechanisms for releasing information in order to explain China's national defense and military development to both domestic and foreign audiences, there are still no official MND or PLA-related accounts on popular foreign social media sites. Similarly, military media outlets like *PLA Daily* and China Military Online also do not maintain accounts on foreign social media platforms. They do, however, maintain accounts on Chinese social media sites, indicating that they currently prioritize domestic propaganda efforts.

*Source: "China's National Defense in the New Era, Section IV. Actively Contributing to Building a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind."*

Although tweeting is clearly intended to engage foreign audiences (Twitter is banned in China), Chinese officials and media outlets have faced pushback as they open themselves up to direct engagement with overseas audiences. Indeed, they face a steep learning curve in operating in an information environment far removed from its domestic Chinese counterpart, where the

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<sup>94</sup> "China Finds a Use Abroad for Twitter, A Medium It Fears at Home," *The Economist*, Feb. 20, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/china/2020/02/20/china-finds-a-use-abroad-for-twitter-a-medium-it-fears-at-home>.

<sup>95</sup> Zhao's comments were apparently made in response to US criticism of China's treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Laura Zhou, "Former US National Security Adviser Susan Rice Calls Chinese Diplomat Zhao Lijian 'A Racist Disgrace' after Twitter Tirade," *South China Morning Post*, Jul. 15, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3018676/susan-rice-calls-chinese-diplomat-zhao-lijian-racist-disgrace>. Bonnie Glaser, of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington D.C., has been blocked by Zhao: Bonnie Glaser, Twitter, Feb. 23, 2020, <https://twitter.com/BonnieGlaser/status/1231630075872890880>.

<sup>96</sup> Zhao Lijian (赵立坚), Twitter, Feb. 24, 2020, <https://twitter.com/zlj517/status/1231883110138228737>.

government can sanitize and censor public reactions online. Unlike at home, Beijing does not have the authority to punish foreigners outside China who push back against Chinese tweets (although it can employ coercive measures like denying visas to encourage self-censorship). Instead, Chinese official Twitter accounts must contend with trolls and callouts challenging their “positive news” on their own. While Beijing has apparently attempted to harness Twitter trolling to advance its own talking points (Twitter suspended some 200,000 accounts associated with a state-directed disinformation campaign to undermine Western support for antigovernment protestors in Hong Kong in August 2019), the negative press created when these efforts are exposed potentially renders them counterproductive.<sup>97</sup> It remains to be seen how, if at all, Chinese media and diplomats will adapt their Twitter use to improve effective international communication, although Chinese diplomats have indicated that their Twitter use will become even more widespread in the future.<sup>98</sup>

Of note, Facebook announced in early June 2020 that it would begin labeling “state-controlled” media on its platform.<sup>99</sup> Twitter announced in August 2019 that it would not accept ads from state-controlled news media outlets. Thus, while Chinese media still have access to Western social media platforms, they are now facing increased regulations governing how their content is presented to overseas audiences.<sup>100</sup>

## Using foreign voices to convey Chinese talking points

A strategy similar to using foreign communication channels to transmit Chinese voices is using foreign commentators to convey Chinese talking points. The CCP has relied on “friends of China” to spread pro-CCP messaging for decades, even predating the establishment of the PRC.<sup>101</sup> Publishing the viewpoints of sympathetic foreigners in Chinese foreign-directed media is one way that these outlets attempt to improve their credibility among overseas audiences. Because of Chinese foreign-directed media’s relationship to the Party-state,

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<sup>97</sup> See, for example, Raymond Zhong, Steven Lee Myers, and Jin Wu, “How China Unleashed Twitter Trolls to Discredit Hong Kong’s Protesters,” *The New York Times*, Sept. 18, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/09/18/world/asia/hk-twitter.html>.

<sup>98</sup> Hua Chunying, “Occupy the Moral High-Ground, Raise International Discourse Power.”

<sup>99</sup> Nathaniel Gleicher, “Labeling State-Controlled Media on Facebook,” Facebook, Jun. 4, 2020, <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/06/labeling-state-controlled-media/>.

<sup>100</sup> “Updating Our Advertising Policies on State Media,” Twitter, Aug. 19, 2019, <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/06/labeling-state-controlled-media/>.

<sup>101</sup> See, for example, Edgar Snow’s *Red Star over China*. Edgar Snow, *Red Star over China*, (New York: Random House, 1938).

many foreign readers tend to regard these outlets as having a pro-China bias. The Chinese assess that bringing in non-Chinese commentators to write opinion pieces for these outlets helps to mitigate some of these bias concerns.

Multiple Chinese foreign-directed media outlets employ or contract foreigners to write for them. For example, in PRC English-language media, *China Daily*, *People's Daily*, and CGTN regularly publish opinion pieces by US and UK expats employed by these outlets that criticize Western media and politicians for their negative portrayals of China.<sup>102</sup> Some recent opinion pieces authored by these individuals include those titled “American Fear of Chinese Media is Unfounded,” “How US War against China Extends to the Internet,” and “How Western Media Distorts Xinjiang Boarding Schools.”<sup>103</sup> These media outlets also rely on foreign commentators in non-English reporting. This strategy has become so widespread that China Online, an official PRC portal site run by the SCIO and China International Publishing Group, is described as having an overseas commentary team of 250 experts and commentators across 69 regions who regularly contribute positive news pieces about China.<sup>104</sup> Chinese foreign-directed media use these non-Chinese contributors to try to gain credibility among foreign audiences, and to shift international communications from a “China says its own viewpoints” to a “you [foreigners] say Chinese” viewpoints model.<sup>105</sup>

Although Chinese media themselves portray both the “borrowing a boat” and using foreign voices strategies as valuable for increasing foreign exposure to and acceptance of Chinese perspectives, reliance on these strategies also reveals an awareness of deep international credibility issues with Chinese media. Chinese media professionals themselves argue that using foreign outlets and voices to convey Chinese messages is only a first step toward

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<sup>102</sup> See, for example: Curtis Stone, “Fear Mongers Ignore the Facts to Fit Their ‘Evil China’ Narrative,” *People's Daily Online*, (*Renminwang*; 人民网), Feb. 27, 2020, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/0227/c90000-9662649.html>, and Curtis Stone, “The Revival of China as a Great Power Is a Blessing to the World,” *People's Daily Online*, (*Renminwang*; 人民网), Mar. 27, 2019, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2019/0327/c90000-9561111.html>.

<sup>103</sup> Tom Fowdy, “American Fear of Chinese Media is Unfounded,” CGTN, Feb. 19, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-02-19/American-fear-of-Chinese-media-is-unfounded-OcFKLDC7rW/index.html>; Tom Fowdy, “How US War against China Extends to the Internet,” CGTN, Mar. 8, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-03-08/How-U-S-war-against-China-extends-to-the-internet-OGHXHIIuQw/index.html>; and Tom Fowdy, “How Western Media Distorts Xinjiang Boarding School,” CGTN, Jan. 20, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-01-20/How-Western-media-distorts-Xinjiang-boarding-schools-Np53Eu6Wpq/index.html>.

<sup>104</sup> Sun and Wu, “Report on the International Communication Power of the Central Government’s Main News Websites.”

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

strengthening China's international media influence, and that more work is required to overcome skepticism of China's major foreign-directed media outlets.<sup>106</sup>

## Creating additional production centers and channels

In addition to making use of foreign channels of distribution and foreign voices, Beijing has also made an effort to create additional channels of Chinese foreign-directed media. These new channels include English versions of the *Global Times* and other Chinese outlets and new television programs created locally in overseas production centers for China's state TV broadcaster, CGTN. By creating new channels of flagship PRC foreign-directed media to communicate with international audiences, Beijing can improve its overseas reach and enhance its level of content localization, all of which makes Chinese media more competitive with foreign news outlets.

China's state broadcaster developed an English language channel (CCTV-English International/CCTV-9) in September 2000 "targeting broadcasts to mainstream overseas audiences."<sup>107</sup> It changed its name multiple times before "China International Television (known overseas as CGTN)" was officially established on 31 December 2016.<sup>108</sup>

CGTN and its CCTV predecessors also moved to produce localized content overseas beginning in 2012, when it opened its African production center in Nairobi, Kenya, and its Americas production center in Washington, D.C. Its European broadcast center in London aired its first live program in October 2019.<sup>109</sup> Prior to the opening of the European production center, CGTN aired 13 hours of programming produced by its mainland Chinese broadcasting center in

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<sup>106</sup> For example, a CCTV Development Center researcher explicitly argued that "borrowing a boat to go out to sea is not the ultimate goal of media integration," and that other strategies were needed to strengthen China's international media influence. Huang Li (黄鹂), "Deeply Integrating External Propaganda Media," (*Waixuan Meiti de Shendu Ronghe Shijian*; 外宣媒体的深度融合实践), *International Communications (Duiwai Chuanbo*; 对外传播) (2019), <http://www.fx361.com/page/2019/0625/5257472.shtml>.

<sup>107</sup> Li Xueqiong (李雪琼), "The Development Status and Optimization Recommendations for CGTN English Language Channel," (*CGTN Yingyu Pingdao Fazhan Xianzhuang he Youhua Jianyi*; CGTN 英语频道发展现状和优化建议), *Global Communication (Guoji Chuanbo*; 国际传播) (2019), <http://www.yidianzixun.com/article/0MiSNJo7>.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. CGTN is now part of China Media Group, the super network composed of CGTN, CRI, and CNR.

<sup>109</sup> CGTN Africa, "CGTN Europe Broadcasts Live from London," YouTube, Oct. 7, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HnUgN9bHCXs>.

Beijing every day; the Washington, D.C. center produced 7 hours of content and the Nairobi center 4 hours of content for the channel each day, respectively.<sup>110</sup>

## Expanding Chinese media’s physical presence overseas

Related to Chinese foreign-directed media’s efforts to create new channels geared for foreign audiences are their efforts to increase their geographic footprint outside of China. By sending reporters to new areas, Chinese media increase their competitive capabilities relative to other outlets by filling an on-the-ground reporting void previously present in Chinese coverage. The presence of these Chinese journalists in new areas enables PRC media to reach new markets by creating localized content in regions they had not previously covered.

Most large Chinese foreign-directed media publications now have dozens of overseas reporters. As previously mentioned, CGTN has even developed production centers abroad to improve its ability to create content that will appeal to overseas audiences that are interested in issues in their own areas. Similarly, *People’s Daily* has developed specialized overseas editions published locally, and has numerous reporters posted at its bureaus in Tokyo, New York, San Francisco, Seoul, London, Moscow, Johannesburg, Sydney, Paris, and Sweden.<sup>111</sup> Xinhua has also developed a robust contingent of overseas journalists; their numbers have expanded significantly in recent years. In 2013, for example, Xinhua listed the approximately 100 locations in which they maintain branches across the world (see Appendix B for the complete list). Table 5 shows Xinhua’s overseas regional headquarters.

Table 5. Xinhua overseas regional headquarters

Regional Headquarters	Location
Asia Pacific	Hong Kong
Middle East	Cairo, Egypt
Latin America	Mexico City, Mexico
Africa	Nairobi, Kenya
Europe	Brussels, Belgium
North America	New York, USA
Eurasia	Moscow, Russia

Source: “Overseas Branch Structure,” (*Guo [Jing] Wai Fenzhi Jigou*; 国[境]外分支机构), Xinhua, (新华), 2013, <http://203.192.6.89/xhs/zwfs.htm>.

<sup>110</sup> Patricia Nilsson, “China’s State Broadcaster Set for UK Launch,” *Financial Times*, Aug. 28, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/71d0e972-c998-11e9-a1f4-3669401ba76f>.

<sup>111</sup> “About Us,” *People’s Daily* Online, (*Renminwang*; 人民网), Jul., 2012, [en.people.cn/102840/7560415.html](http://en.people.cn/102840/7560415.html).

By 2017, Xinhua had expanded to maintain “180 overseas branches, including seven overseas headquarters across 142 countries and regions.”<sup>112</sup> Although Xinhua no longer provides a comprehensive list of these overseas branches, overseas expansion has clearly been one step in its attempts to improve the reach and resonance of its foreign-directed reporting.

Despite the expanding footprint of these foreign-directed media outlets, many are facing challenges operating in Western countries, where governments increasingly view them as state-sponsored propaganda tools. In the US, for example, eight of China’s most prominent media outlets have been required to register as “foreign missions.”<sup>113</sup> The State Department has also capped the number of Chinese nationals who can be employed by these outlets in the US.<sup>114</sup> In the UK, the opening of CGTN’s London production center was delayed by nearly a year. CGTN is now at risk of losing its broadcasting license there as it faces at least six UK government investigations. They stem from multiple complaints alleging that CGTN violated British broadcasting standards by airing forced confessions and providing biased coverage of the 2019 Hong Kong antigovernment protests.<sup>115</sup> It remains to be seen how these Chinese foreign-directed media outlets will alter their operations in response to increasing scrutiny.

## Tailoring content to different regions and audiences

In addition to the steps Chinese foreign-directed media have taken to increase the channels by which they reach overseas audiences, many outlets have made a concerted effort to increase the sophistication and relevance of their reporting to better appeal to foreigners. By improving

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<sup>112</sup> “Xinhua News Agency: Announcing Opinion on Strengthening Party Building and Clean Government Work in Overseas Branches,” (*Xinhuashe: Chutai Jiaqiang Chuwai Fenshe Dang Feng Lianzheng Jianshe Gongzuo Yijian*; 新华社：出台加强驻外分社党风廉政建设工作意见), Xinhua, (新华), Nov. 28, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/legal/2017-11/28/c\\_129750701.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/legal/2017-11/28/c_129750701.htm).

<sup>113</sup> Xinhua, CGTN, CRI, and *China Daily* were designated foreign missions in February 2020. Glen Carey, “US Puts Restrictions on Five Chinese State Media Outlets,” *Bloomberg*, Feb. 18, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-02-18/u-s-imposes-restrictions-on-five-chinese-state-media-outlets>. CCTV, China News Service, *People’s Daily*, and the *Global Times* were then designated foreign missions in June 2020. Edward Wong, “US Designates Four More Chinese News Organizations as Foreign Missions,” *The New York Times*, Jun. 22, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/22/us/politics/us-china-news-organizations.html>.

<sup>114</sup> The cap limited the number of Chinese nationals employed by these outlets in the United States to 100, which required at least 60 to leave to meet the quota. David Welna, “Five Chinese State Media Outlets in US Told to Reduce Nationals on Staff,” *National Public Radio*, Mar. 2, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/02/811383599/5-chinese-state-media-outlets-in-u-s-told-to-reduce-nationals-on-staffs>.

<sup>115</sup> Jim Waterson, “Ofcom Investigates CGTN over Coverage of Hong Kong Protests,” *The Guardian*, Sept. 23, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/sep/23/ofcom-investigates-cgtn-over-coverage-of-hong-kong-protests-china>.

the style and presentation of their content, as well as adapting Chinese-produced content to foreign tastes, Chinese foreign-directed media hope to become more credible and popular with overseas audiences.

## Publishing/broadcasting in foreign languages

Many outlets have attempted to tailor their content better by providing coverage in a wider variety of languages. Chinese foreign-directed media have gradually enhanced their linguistic capabilities beyond Chinese and English offerings (although some are still limited solely to English).<sup>116</sup> China's largest outlets engaged in foreign-directed media efforts now produce content in the following languages in an attempt to connect with audiences in their own tongue:

- **CGTN:** Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, Spanish<sup>117</sup>
- **China Daily:** Chinese, English, French<sup>118</sup>
- **China Radio International:** Albanian, Arabic, Bengali, Belarusian, Bulgarian, Burmese, Cambodian, Croatian, Chinese, Czech, English, Esperanto, Filipino, French, German, Greek, Hausa, Hebrew, Hindi, Hungarian, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Lao, Malay, Mongolian, Nepali, Pashtu, Persian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Sinhalese, Spanish, Swahili, Tamil, Thai, Turkish, Urdu, Ukrainian, Vietnamese<sup>119</sup>
- **People's Daily:** Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Japanese, Kazakh, Korean, Mongolian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Tibetan, Uyghur, Yi, Zhuang<sup>120</sup>
- **PLA Daily:** Chinese and English (China Military Online)<sup>121</sup>
- **Xinhua:** Arabic, Burmese, Chinese, English, French, German, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Thai<sup>122</sup>

## Sophistication of content

Chinese media have also started trying to adapt their writing style to be more appealing to foreign audiences. As early as 2003, Beijing explicitly recognized that external propaganda

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<sup>116</sup> China Military Online is one such example.

<sup>117</sup> "About Us - CGTN," CGTN, 2018, <https://www.cgtn.com/about-us>.

<sup>118</sup> "About China Daily Group," *China Daily*, 2020, [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/e/static\\_e/about](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/e/static_e/about).

<sup>119</sup> "Who We Are."

<sup>120</sup> "About Us."

<sup>121</sup> "About Us."

<sup>122</sup> Languages listed on homepage of Xinhuanet, May, 2020: [xinhuanet.com](http://xinhuanet.com).



must be “close to the thinking patterns and cultural habits of foreign audiences” and “close to the needs of foreign audiences for Chinese information.”<sup>123</sup> Outlets like the *Global Times*, a nationalistic commercial subsidiary of *People’s Daily*, created English versions of their papers to make them more accessible to foreign audiences.<sup>124</sup> In contrast to the often stilted and formulaic language used by Party mouthpieces in English in years past, the English edition of the *Global Times* has tailored its style to appeal to foreign readership, presenting multiple perspectives on issues and employing an approach that is intended to convey a sense of balanced reporting. The English paper also has broader coverage of Chinese domestic issues than its Chinese-language counterpart and greater leeway to publish politically sensitive stories. By tailoring its writing style to better suit foreign audiences’ tastes, Chinese foreign-directed media outlets such as the *Global Times* improve the possibility that overseas readers will find their content engaging and credible.

Outlets like Xinhua have also attempted to improve the sophistication of their content by adding infographics, cartoons, and charts to draw in foreign readers.<sup>125</sup> According to one Chinese media professional, these graphics, which can make content posted on social media particularly eye catching, are designed to improve readers’ “visual experience” and conform to “international style.”<sup>126</sup> Improving the “readability” of Chinese foreign-directed media has been a major point of emphasis for many outlets in recent years, although some have less freedom to change their content and style than do others.<sup>127</sup> *China Daily* started publishing political cartoons in the early 1980s, but only began to produce them regularly in the mid-2000s. Examples of two recent *China Daily* cartoons are included in Figure 10 and Figure 11. One criticizes the US for alleged interference in China’s affairs, while the other denounces Western media coverage of Beijing’s treatment of Muslim ethnic minorities in Xinjiang.

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<sup>123</sup> These are two of the “three closenesses” of Chinese external propaganda work. The other is that this content should be “close to the reality of China’s socioeconomic, political, and cultural development.” “Li Changchun: External Propaganda Must Be Close to Foreign Audiences, Create Favorable Public Opinion Environment.”

<sup>124</sup> *The Global Times* launched its English version in 2009, coinciding with the PRC plan to invest more in external propaganda that year.

<sup>125</sup> Tao Yiping (陶一萍), “Exploration and Practice of Mainstream Media App International Communication,” (*Zhuliu Meiti Kehuduan de Duiwai Chuanbo Tansuo Shijian*; 主流媒体客户端的对外传播探索实践), *International Communications (Duiwai Chuanbo; 对外传播)* (2019), <http://www.fx361.com/page/2019/0909/5522914.shtml>.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> *People’s Daily*, as the voice of the Party, is unlikely to stop using CCP slogans and presenting pro-China viewpoints, even if that style or content does not gain traction with foreign readers.

Figure 10. Recent China Daily cartoon (1)



Source: Luo Jie, "Mind Your Own Business," *China Daily*, Oct. 17, 2019, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201910/17/WS5da7af1ca310cf3e35570ed8.html>.

Figure 11. Recent China Daily cartoon (2)



Source: Luo Jie, "Liar," *China Daily*, Dec. 27, 2019, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201912/27/WS5e0548dfa310cf3e35580ed4.html>.

Another way that Chinese foreign-directed media have attempted to appeal to foreign audiences is through cultural and human-interest pieces. A CCTV subsidiary, for example, airs a 24-hour a day panda live feed called “iPanda” online.<sup>128</sup> Other outlets, like *China Daily*, frequently share cooking and travel stories from across China. By providing this kind of content, Chinese media outlets can draw in foreign audiences (and create “panda fever”) in the hopes that covering these topics will soften foreigners’ images of China and instead leave them with positive impressions of the PRC.

## Case Study: Coronavirus

The following section uses the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19) as a case study to show how several of the Chinese foreign-directed media strategies outlined work in practice. Beijing has attempted to shape international messaging on the coronavirus in ways it hopes will burnish China’s image as domestically capable and internationally dependable while also combating foreign criticism. Despite the wide range of efforts Beijing has made to spread its coronavirus messaging, not all of these efforts have been well received overseas, and, in multiple cases, may actually have turned public opinion against China.

### China’s “Wolf Warrior” Diplomats

Throughout the pandemic, many Chinese diplomats have become more assertive in their defense of China and their critiques of other countries, especially on foreign social media platforms. Labeled “Wolf Warriors” after a popular Chinese movie series of the same name in which Chinese special forces operators defeat Western mercenaries, these diplomats are similarly aggressive in their displays of PRC nationalism. It remains to be seen whether Chinese diplomats, and the foreign-directed media outlets that amplify their comments, will continue to use this unapologetic and strident tone after the world recovers from the virus. Some Chinese ambassadors have begun to push back against this appellation, saying that they should be referred to as “Kungfu Pandas” rather than “Wolf Warriors.”

Sources: Shashank Bengali and Alice Su, “Put on a Mask and Shut Up’: China’s New ‘Wolf Warriors’ Spread Hoaxes and Attack a World of Critics,” *The Los Angeles Times*, May 4, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-05-04/wolf-warrior-diplomats-defend-china-handling-coronavirus>, and Guido Santevecchi, “Beijing Respects the Alliance between Italy and the United States,” (*Pechino Rispetta l’Alleanza tra l’Italia e gli Stati Uniti*), *Corriere della Sera*, May 20, 2020, [https://www.corriere.it/esteri/20\\_maggio\\_20/pechino-rispetta-l-alleanza-l-italia-stati-uniti-8ca95952-99c0-11ea-b9f2-25b3e76a2ab9.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/esteri/20_maggio_20/pechino-rispetta-l-alleanza-l-italia-stati-uniti-8ca95952-99c0-11ea-b9f2-25b3e76a2ab9.shtml).

<sup>128</sup> iPanda is operated by China National Television Network, a web-based state broadcaster owned by CCTV. Sun and Wu, “Report on the International Communication Power of the Central Government’s Main News Websites.”

## “Borrowing a Boat”

One means by which Chinese media and officials have attempted to spread Chinese perspectives on coronavirus is by publishing them in foreign news outlets. Despite these efforts, PRC diplomats and media have not always managed to persuade foreign audiences to accept Chinese narratives on coronavirus. Many Chinese ambassadors have attempted to sway thinking on China during the coronavirus crisis by writing opinion pieces and giving interviews in host country media. Additionally, Beijing has capitalized on content sharing agreements with overseas media outlets to spread Chinese-produced coronavirus coverage in foreign markets. Both of these methods are discussed below.

PRC ambassadors to countries across the world have written opinion pieces defending China’s response to COVID-19. Chinese envoys to the US, Japan, and Nigeria, among other countries, have all attempted to connect with foreign audiences by publishing their viewpoints in local newspapers.<sup>129</sup> Others have given interviews to foreign news outlets, although some of these have created more problems than they have solved. For example, after the Australian government called for an independent investigation into the origins of the coronavirus, the Chinese ambassador in Canberra told the *Australian Financial Review* that Chinese consumers and tourists may “have second thoughts” about visiting Australia or purchasing Australian goods. The Australian foreign minister denounced these comments as “economic coercion,” and Australian-Chinese relations seem to be deteriorating in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak.<sup>130</sup>

Other aspects of “borrowing a boat to go out to sea” that have had mixed results in coronavirus messaging are advertorials and reports published abroad through content sharing agreements. In late January, when COVID-19 cases were still confined mostly to China, a large portion of coronavirus coverage in Thai media was written by Chinese foreign-directed media outlets (more than a dozen of the most popular Thai news agencies have content sharing agreements

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<sup>129</sup> See, for example: Cui Tiankai, “Blaming China Will Not End This Pandemic,” *The Washington Post*, May 5, 2020, <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zmgxs/zxxx/t1776394.htm>. Opinion pieces written by the PRC ambassador to Nigeria were carried in multiple local outlets; for one example, see: Zhou Pingjian, “Solidarity and Cooperation Most Potent Weapons,” *Daily Trust*, May 12, 2020, <http://ng.china-embassy.org/eng/zngx/cne/t1778059.htm>, and Kong Xuanyou, “Keeping Watch and Protecting One Another, Overcoming Hard Times Together,” (*Shouwangxiangzhu, Gong Ke Shijian*; 守望相助，共克时艰), *Yomiuri Shimbun*, Apr. 25, 2020, <http://www.china-embassy.or.jp/chn/sgxs/t1773374.htm>.

<sup>130</sup> Kirsty Needham, “Australia Rejects Chinese ‘Economic Coercion’ Threat amid Planned Coronavirus Probe,” *Reuters*, Apr. 27, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-australia-china/australia-rejects-chinese-economic-coercion-threat-amid-planned-coronavirus-probe-idUSKCN2290Z6>.

with Xinhua).<sup>131</sup> At the time, Thailand had the second highest number of COVID-19 cases in the world, behind only China. Although China's access to the Thai media market proved effective in spreading Chinese viewpoints, Beijing's strident tone in coronavirus messaging is starting to affect its access to other markets. In April 2020, after publishing "China Watch" inserts and *People's Daily* content for over a decade, British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* stopped carrying Chinese-produced content. It also deleted this sponsored content, including an article titled "Coronavirus Outbreak Is Not an Opportunity to Score Points against China," from its website.<sup>132</sup>

## Leveraging foreign social media

Chinese officials and foreign-directed media have also used foreign social media platforms as a central component of their coronavirus messaging. According to the Alliance for Securing Democracy, between April and the third week of May 2020, about 200 Chinese media and diplomatic accounts tweeted over 90,000 times (a nearly two-fold increase from January) in support of China's COVID-19 messaging efforts.<sup>133</sup> The tone of many of these tweets has become increasingly brash as diplomats have sought both to protect China's image and to sow doubt as to the origins of the coronavirus to deflect blame for the pandemic from Beijing. Figure 12 shows screenshots of some of the more strident tweets from PRC diplomatic accounts.

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<sup>131</sup> Jasmine Chia, "Thai Media Is Outsourcing Much of Its Coronavirus Coverage to Beijing and That's Just the Start," *Thai Enquirer*, Jan. 31, 2020, <https://www.thaienquirer.com/7301/thai-media-is-outsourcing-much-of-its-coronavirus-coverage-to-beijing-and-thats-just-the-start/>.

<sup>132</sup> Jim Waterson and Dean Sterling Jones, "Daily Telegraph Stops Publishing Section Paid for by China," *The Guardian*, Apr. 14, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/apr/14/daily-telegraph-stops-publishing-section-paid-for-by-china>.

<sup>133</sup> Anna Schecter, "China Launches New Twitter Accounts, 90,000 Tweets in COVID-19 Info War," NBC News, May 20, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/china-launches-new-twitter-accounts-90-000-tweets-covid-19-n1207991>.

Figure 12. Tweets from PRC diplomatic accounts on COVID-19

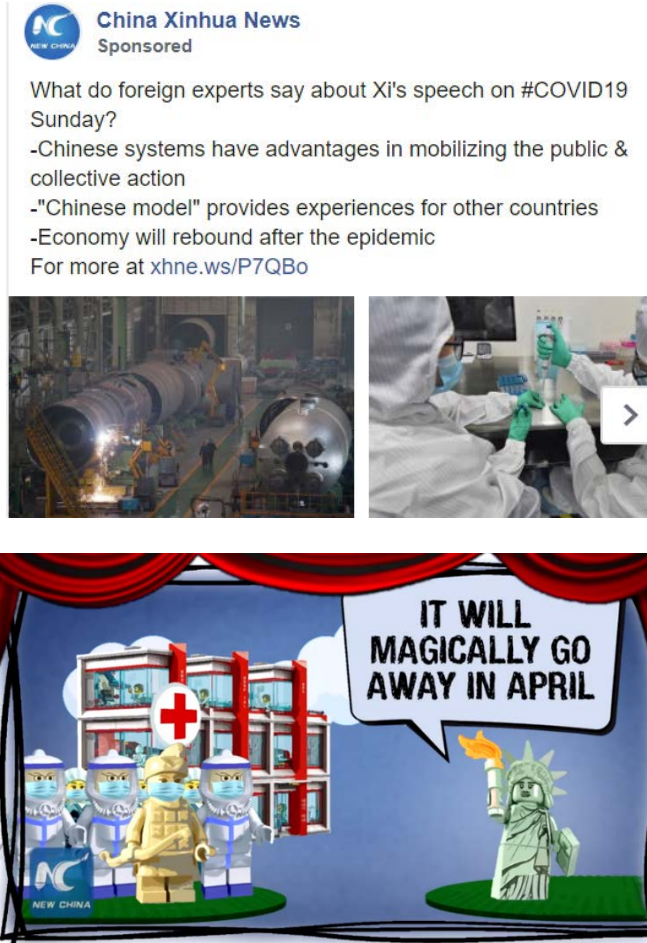


Source: Zhao Lijian, Twitter, Mar. 12, 2020, <https://twitter.com/zlj517/status/1238269193427906560>; PRC Embassy in Venezuela, Twitter, Mar. 18, 2020, [https://twitter.com/Emb\\_ChinaVen/status/1240367619200495616](https://twitter.com/Emb_ChinaVen/status/1240367619200495616). Hua Chunying, Twitter, May 8, 2020, <https://twitter.com/spokespersonchn/status/1258780531707109377>; Zhao and Hua are MFA spokespersons and the deputy director and director of the MFA's Information Department, respectively. The PRC embassy tweet translates to "hurry up and ask for proper treatment. The first step might be to use masks and shut up."

PRC foreign-directed news agencies on social media complemented tweets such as these from Chinese officials. News outlets like *China Daily* criticized Washington's handling of the coronavirus on Facebook and Twitter, while Xinhua made a short video titled "Once Upon a Virus" that used Lego figures to mock Washington's COVID-19 response. The video amassed over 2 million views on YouTube in under two months. Additionally, CGTN, Xinhua, and the *Global Times* ran ads on Facebook without political disclaimers in English, Chinese, and Arabic that commended China's handling of the virus and "debunked" Western "fallacies" about COVID-19.<sup>134</sup> Figure 13 shows a screenshot from a Facebook ad about coronavirus and the Xinhua video.

<sup>134</sup> Laurence Dodds, "China Floods Facebook with Undeclared Coronavirus Propaganda Ads Blaming Trump," *The Daily Telegraph*, Apr. 5, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2020/04/05/china-floods-facebook-instagram-undeclared-coronavirus-propaganda/>.

Figure 13. Foreign social media posts from Chinese media on coronavirus



Source: Facebook Ad Library, "China Xinhua News," Feb. 24-25, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?id=818837588630727>, and Xinhua New China TV, "Once Upon a Virus..." YouTube, Apr. 29, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q5BZ09iNdvo&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q5BZ09iNdvo&feature=emb_title).

## Using foreign voices to convey Chinese talking points

In addition to these efforts to deliver Chinese-produced content to foreign audiences, Chinese external propaganda has relied on foreign commentators to bolster Beijing's coronavirus messaging. Some of these commentators were willing participants, while others accused Chinese media of twisting their words to fit Beijing's COVID-19 narrative.

Foreigners who regularly write for Chinese media continued to produce content for these outlets during the pandemic. Curtis Stone wrote opinion pieces in *People's Daily* online titled "Fear Mongers Ignore the Facts to Fit Their 'Evil China' Narrative," and "US Attack on World Health

Organization Is a Red Herring to Distract from ‘Colossal Leadership Failure’ in Washington,” among others.<sup>135</sup> Similarly, for CGTN, Tom Fowdy has written pieces titled “The Virus Exposes Weaknesses in America’s Political System,” “A COVID-19 Inquiry is Part of the China Blame-Game,” and “How America’s System is Ill-Suited to Combat the COVID-19 Outbreak.”<sup>136</sup>

Chinese media also used interviews with foreign experts to try to support Beijing’s coronavirus narrative. For example, the *Global Times* published an interview with British scholar Martin Jacques in which he argued that China’s state capacity is “far more developed and far more capable” than Western governments, and therefore “China is the best” at handling a situation like the pandemic.<sup>137</sup> In a more predatory example, the *Global Times* and other Chinese media misconstrued comments made by an Italian doctor in an NPR interview to cast doubt on the origins of the coronavirus, implying that it might have originated in Italy.<sup>138</sup> The doctor later clarified to Western media that it is “beyond the shadow of a doubt” that the coronavirus originated in Wuhan, although Chinese media never retracted their characterization of his earlier comments.<sup>139</sup>

Chinese foreign-directed media have continued to turn to foreigners in their efforts to lend credibility to PRC narratives on the virus. Some regularly provide content to these outlets, but Chinese media’s attempts to misrepresent other experts’ comments as supportive of Beijing’s COVID-19 messaging are unlikely to prove persuasive to overseas audiences.

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<sup>135</sup> Stone, “Fear Mongers Ignore the Facts to Fit Their ‘Evil China’ Narrative,” and Stone, “US Attack on WHO Is a Red Herring to Distract from ‘Colossal Leadership Failure’ in Washington,” *People’s Daily Online*, (*Renminwang*; 人民网), Apr. 30, 2020, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/0430/c90000-9685954.html>.

<sup>136</sup> Tom Fowdy, “The Virus Exposes Weaknesses in America’s Political System,” CGTN, Apr. 19, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-04-19/The-virus-exposes-weakness-of-America-s-political-system-POb6LEyKA0/index.html>; Tom Fowdy, “A COVID-19 Inquiry is Part of the China Blame-Game,” CGTN, Apr. 27, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-04-27/A-COVID-19-inquiry-is-part-of-the-China-blame-game-Q0MRuckbTy/index.html>; and Tom Fowdy, “How America’s System Is Ill-Suited to Combat the COVID-19 Outbreak,” CGTN, Mar. 13, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-03-13/How-America-s-system-is-ill-suited-to-combat-the-COVID-19-outbreak-OOPXCDri6I/index.html>.

<sup>137</sup> “Politicizing the Epidemic ‘Disgraceful’: Martin Jacques,” *The Global Times*, (*Huanqiu Shibao*; 环球时报), Feb. 29, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1181143.shtml>.

<sup>138</sup> The full tweet, which does not link to any other article, reads “#Italy may have had an unexplained strain of pneumonia as early as November and December 2019 with highly suspected symptoms of #COVID19, reports say.” *The Global Times*, Twitter, Mar. 21, 2020, <https://twitter.com/globaltimesnews/status/1241559268190343168>.

<sup>139</sup> Mattia Ferraresi, “China Isn’t Helping Italy. It’s Waging Information Warfare,” *Foreign Policy*, Mar. 31, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/31/china-isnt-helping-italy-its-waging-information-warfare/>.



## Diversifying languages

Beijing's coronavirus messaging offensive has not been confined to English; Chinese diplomats and foreign-directed media have used multiple languages to try to push China's viewpoints.

Using these languages, Chinese officials and media have highlighted China's aid to other countries, defended Beijing's handling of the virus and its subsequent "mask diplomacy," called into question the veracity of COVID-19 originating in China, and accused the US of mishandling the epidemic. In Spanish and French, for example, Chinese diplomats touted their medical donations to other countries while pushing back against accusations that these donations were intended to curry political favor. In Arabic, Chinese commentator "Miss V" argued on CGTN that the US military might have brought coronavirus to Wuhan as part of the World Military Games in October 2019. Figure 14, Figure 15, and Figure 16 show illustrative screenshots of these efforts in multiple languages across social media and Chinese news outlets.

Figure 14. PRC Embassy in France criticizes US, touts Chinese help to other countries



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Source: PRC Embassy in France, Twitter, Mar. 27, 2020, <https://twitter.com/AmbassadeChine/status/1243584788814053378>. The tweet says, "When the pandemic began to rage everywhere, the whole world asked for help from China, and not the US, the "beacon of democracy." It's China that has extended a helping hand to over 80 countries, not the US."

Figure 15. CGTN Arabic coverage of COVID-19 questions virus origins



Source: CGTN, “Did the United States Make the New Coronavirus (هل الولايات صنع من الجديد كورونا فيروس هل) (الأمريكية؟ المتحدة)”, YouTube, Mar. 17, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dIGj1RdUHUM>. Chinese commentator “Miss V” made a six-minute video in fluent Arabic for CGTN suggesting that the US military brought the coronavirus to Wuhan when it participated in the World Military Games in October 2019.

Figure 16. CGTN en Español Facebook ad says “mask diplomacy” not for political gain



Source: Facebook Ad Library, “CGTN en Español,” Mar. 31, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?id=248430239620960>. The caption reads, “China will continue to help countries in need. Beijing rejects the statements of a French minister that China, through its provision of equipment and medical workers, was using the pandemic to win favor from the international community. The PRC MFA notes that China is playing its part in the global fight...”

These are just three examples of how Chinese officials and foreign-directed media have produced coronavirus-related content in languages beyond English. By tailoring this content to audiences in non-English speaking countries, Beijing hope its narrative will resonate better and with a wider audience.

## Conclusion

Chinese foreign-directed media is not a monolith; different outlets have taken different steps to improve the reach and resonance of their reporting among foreign audiences. The steps outlined in this chapter present some of the most common ways that these news sources have attempted to improve their international influence. Although certain steps have proven more effective at appealing to foreign audiences than others, China is likely to continue trying to increase the channels by which it tells China’s stories and trying to ensure that those stories are tailored appropriately to attract foreign readers. China’s coronavirus messaging is an illustrative example of how many of the steps described in this chapter work in concert to amplify Chinese messaging, although they are not always persuasive.

# Chapter Five: Chinese Perspectives on Beijing's Foreign-Directed Media Strategy

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Beijing has pursued a variety of strategies to strengthen its foreign-directed media in an attempt to manage perceptions in support of its foreign and domestic policy objectives. How successful these strategies have proven in realizing this goal is a matter of debate, even among Chinese subject matter experts. To understand better how Chinese scholars, experts, and practitioners evaluate Beijing's success to date, as well as what they see as areas for improvement, this chapter analyzes a number of journal articles from Party- and state-affiliated publications on international communications and external propaganda.

Written in Chinese and analyzed by CNA researchers, these articles provide important insights into how Beijing's efforts are perceived domestically. They offer a broad range of recommendations for further improving China's foreign-directed media and, as Party-state-affiliated publications, they help illustrate the bounds of government-permissible discussion. Most of the articles are from the journal *International Communications* (*Duiwai Chuanbo*; 对外传播), which is published under SCIO guidance by the China International Publishing Group, a subordinate unit of the CCP Central Committee that is responsible for external propaganda publishing for the Party and government.<sup>140</sup> This chapter draws from these articles to analyze Chinese-identified strengths, shortcomings, and possible new strategies in China's foreign-directed media.

## Strengths

While these Chinese journal articles emphasized recent, positive developments in China's foreign-directed media, they tended to be more specific in identifying shortcomings than strengths. The strong points they did cite were framed as building blocks upon which further improvements in foreign-directed media should be made. The main strengths, which will be

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<sup>140</sup> "Media Journal Show: *International Communications*," (*Chuanmei Qikanxiu: Duiwai Chuanbo*; 传媒期刊秀: 对外传播), *People's Daily Online*, (*Renminwang*; 人民网), 2019, <http://media.people.com.cn/GB/22114/41180/index.html>. For more information on China International Publishing Group (in Chinese), see: "Organizational Overview," (*Jigou Jianjie*; 机构简介), China International Publishing Group, (*Zhongguo Guoji Chuban Jituan*; 中国国际出版集团), 2019, [http://www.cipg.org.cn/node\\_1006430.htm](http://www.cipg.org.cn/node_1006430.htm).

discussed below, therefore prove useful in evaluating which areas Chinese commentators view as the most successful in China's foreign-directed media development. These strengths include:

- Expanding Chinese media's physical presence overseas.
- Spreading positive messages about China's economic development.

## Expanding global footprint

One common strength that PRC media commentators identified was the overseas expansion of Chinese foreign-directed media. The ability to draw from on-the-ground reporting by overseas reporters was portrayed as a major factor in improving Chinese media's competitiveness with Western outlets; Xinhua's network of reporters in Middle Eastern warzones was cited as a particular advantage.<sup>141</sup> CGTN's overseas stations, which are responsible for producing just under half of the channel's 24 hours of daily programming, were also credited with improving the quality and reach of Chinese foreign-directed media.<sup>142</sup>

A number of Chinese commentators also pointed out that Chinese journalists working overseas were a valuable source of cultural and linguistic expertise. One journal article indicated that these reporters were a solution to the lack of tailoring and targeting in Chinese foreign-directed media.<sup>143</sup> Because these reporters have spent time in target countries and understand the linguistic and cultural nuances specific to these areas, they can be used to ensure that Chinese media content is appropriately "specialized" to appeal to the target demographic.<sup>144</sup> The Chinese journal articles cited in this chapter universally depicted the overseas expansion of China's media footprint positively, noting that it helped provide diversified and competitive content while also producing subject matter experts who can ensure that Chinese-produced content is tailored to foreign audiences.

## Promoting narratives on China's economic development

Multiple Chinese commentators highlighted Chinese foreign-directed media's success in spreading stories about China's economic development. The journal articles asserted that

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<sup>141</sup> Tao, "Exploration and Practice of Mainstream Media App International Communication." Xinhua was the first news agency in the world to report the outbreak of the Iraq War live from Baghdad in 2003. "Chinese Media: Breaking New Ground," *China Daily*, Aug. 22, 2003, [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2003-08/22/content\\_257190.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2003-08/22/content_257190.htm).

<sup>142</sup> Li, "The Development Status and Optimization Recommendations for CGTN English Language Channel."

<sup>143</sup> Lü Ling (吕翎), "Tell China's Story Well, Taking into Account Domestic and Foreign Differences," (*Jianghao Zhongguo Gushi, Neiwai Youbie ye Yao Neiwai Jiangu*; 讲好中国故事, 内外有别也要内外兼顾), *International Communications (Duiwai Chuanbo; 对外传播)* (2018), <http://duiwaichuanbo.1she.com/11071/370977.html>.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

these types of stories are the most compelling to foreign audiences. For example, a researcher at Communication University of China described Beijing as having succeeded in securing high degrees of foreign exposure to “China’s overall image in rapid development...and economic achievements” because China’s economic performance was “self-evident.”<sup>145</sup> Similarly, a 2016 report from *Online Communication Magazine*, a periodical sponsored by the Cyberspace Administration of China, cited Chinese-conducted surveys of international audiences, which found that “Chinese culture, technology, and economics” were the main topics that overseas audiences found interesting about China.<sup>146</sup>

However, a number of these articles also mentioned that, while foreign audiences were generally receptive to Chinese reporting on China’s economic achievements, they were much less interested in and much less influenced by Chinese foreign-directed media coverage of other topics. Specifically, the 2016 report stated that China “still lacks competitiveness with Western media when it comes to political, military, and diplomatic issues, especially those that touch on regional and global issues.”<sup>147</sup> Considering that these types of issues (such as the status of Taiwan and China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea) are considered central interests by the CCP, Chinese foreign-directed media’s ineffectiveness on these topics is a notable shortcoming and likely an area targeted for improvement.

## Shortcomings

Although most articles emphasized China’s achievements to date in foreign-directed media and new strategies for further development, many included frank assessments of Beijing’s external propaganda shortcomings. These critiques ranged from the vague and oblique to the detailed and direct. Some of the most salient shortcomings identified in these journal articles are examined below and include:

- Failing to achieve international media influence on par with China’s economic clout.
- Insufficiently tailoring content to appeal to foreign audiences.
- Adapting too slowly to new platforms and models of communication.

There are also enduring constraints that limit the ways in which Chinese foreign-directed media can adapt their style and content while still adhering to governing principles of Chinese

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<sup>145</sup> Zhang and Huang, “Information Production, Information Presence, and Communication Achievement in China’s International Communications.” Ji Deqiang (姬德强) is an associate research at Communication University of China’s National Communication Innovation Research Center.

<sup>146</sup> Sun and Wu, “Report on the International Communication Power of the Central Government’s Main News Websites.”

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

media and propaganda work, although Chinese experts did not explicitly frame these as shortcomings.

## PRC international influence not yet commensurate with international status

Although Beijing has made a concerted effort to strengthen its foreign-directed media over the last 15 years, Chinese subject matter experts agree that more work is needed to secure the international influence it desires. For example, Lü Ling, the director of the *Beijing Review*'s multimedia editing department, wrote in a July 2018 *International Communications* article that China should continue striving to “progressively build international communications strength commensurate with China’s economic strength and international standing.”<sup>148</sup> Had this goal

already been achieved, the author would not be calling for renewed efforts to accomplish it. Claims that Beijing is still fighting to win the “international discourse power” it deserves were echoed in a July 2019 article written by MFA spokesperson and director of the Foreign Ministry’s Information Department Hua

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*China’s “speaking power and overall power are severely mismatched...[Beijing] still does not grasp the microphone in its hand and is often in the awkward situation of being unable to speak or not being heard.” – Hua Chunying*

*Source: Hua, “Occupy the Moral High-Ground, Raise International Discourse Power,” Study Times, July 12, 2019.*

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Chunying in the *Study Times*, the official paper of the CCP’s Central Party School.<sup>149</sup> Hua contended that while China has the second-largest economy in the world, “its speaking power and overall power are severely mismatched...it still does not grasp the microphone in its hand and is often in the awkward situation of being unable to speak or not being heard.”<sup>150</sup> Despite the goal of the 2004 three-step plan for improving external propaganda—to develop “external propaganda power commensurate with China’s international status” by 2020—many Chinese experts agree that, to date, this objective has not been achieved.

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<sup>148</sup> *Beijing Review* (*Beijing Zhoubao*; 北京周报) is the only weekly national Chinese news magazine published in English. It is published by the Chinese International Publishing Group (also known as the China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration), and is a subordinate unit of the CCP Central Committee. Lü, “Tell China’s Story Well, Taking into Account Domestic and Foreign Differences.”

<sup>149</sup> The Central Party School is a professional school that trains CCP officials. It is a CCP Central Committee institution.

<sup>150</sup> Hua Chunying, “Occupy the Moral High-Ground, Raise International Discourse Power.” Hua also perpetuates the “West is strong and China is weak” (*Xiqiang woruo*; 西强我弱) narrative in this article, as do a number of the other Chinese commentators cited in this chapter.

Other authors offered similar critiques. An expert at Xinhua News Agency's New Media Center, for instance, argued that China still needed to develop communications advantages further to "break the Western monopoly on discourse."<sup>151</sup> Of note, the US was identified as China's main international communications competitor, especially in Southeast Asia.<sup>152</sup> Likewise, a former *Global Times* English-edition current affairs section director and *China Daily* reporter asserted that "biases" held by foreign audiences against China because of Western reporting were "still a problem requiring continued attention."<sup>153</sup>

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### *China needs to "break the Western monopoly on discourse." – Tao Yiping*

Source: Tao, "Exploration and Practice of Mainstream Media App International Communication," *International Communications*, September 2019.

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The same article carried an even more blunt assessment from a professor at Communication University of China: "The effectiveness of China's international communications is not satisfactory, at most it is only halfway effective. The persuasion effect is very disproportionate compared to the

resources we invest in communications."<sup>154</sup> The prevailing consensus among Chinese commentators is that China, despite recent progress, does not yet have external propaganda power on par with its international status.

## Failure to tailor content and style sufficiently

Writers in *International Communications* and other professional journals cited a variety of lower-level shortcomings as contributing to the failure to win Beijing's desired level of international influence. One of the most common explanations was that Chinese foreign-directed media, despite recent efforts to improve, too frequently neglected to adapt and customize domestically produced content to foreign audiences. An article in *Global Communications*, an academic journal run by the National Radio and Television Administration, emphasized that in the context of China, this type of content tailoring requires adaptation

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<sup>151</sup> Tao, "Exploration and Practice of Mainstream Media App International Communication."

<sup>152</sup> Chen Jingjing (陈静静), "A Comparative Study of US and Chinese International Broadcasting to Southeast Asian Countries," (*Zhongmei dui Dongnanya Guojia Guoji Chuanbo de Bijiao Yanjiu*; 中美对东南亚国家国际传播的比较研究), *International Communications (Duiwai Chuanbo; 对外传播)*, no. 9 (2019), <http://www.fx361.com/page/2019/1103/5953171.shtml>.

<sup>153</sup> Wu Gang (吴钢) formerly directed the current affairs section of the English-edition of the *Global Times* and served as a reporter for *China Daily*. Zhang Yuqiang and Huang Shan, "Information Production, Information Presence, and Communication Achievement in China's International Communications."

<sup>154</sup> Ibid. Liu Peng (刘朋) is an associate professor at Communication University of China's School of Advertising.



rather than “copying the domestic speech system.”<sup>155</sup> The author, who works at CCTV’s Overseas Communications Center, accused CGTN English of “habitually” failing to edit domestically produced content to make it more palatable to foreign audiences.<sup>156</sup> Many of these journal articles came with explicit warnings that foreign-directed media cannot simply translate Chinese domestically produced news reports verbatim and expect them to be appealing to foreign audiences.

Other articles noted that this problem was not confined to CGTN. A February 2019 article in *International Communications*, for example, contended that in foreign-directed media and exchanges, Beijing’s target audience has always been “imprecise, broad, and vague,” and has failed to differentiate between different types of “foreigners.”<sup>157</sup> The authors further argued that this failure to target different audiences precisely “greatly weakens our propaganda’s effectiveness,” and that using domestic propaganda content that was too “aggrandizing, firm, and Party-like” for foreign audiences was “irresponsible.”<sup>158</sup> Similarly, a 2016 article in *Online Communication Magazine* stated that “target [audiences] should be clear and not blurred,” further specifying that what may appeal to American audiences might not have the same pull for Canadian ones “even though they are both English-speaking countries.”<sup>159</sup> That this theme was so widespread across multiple journal articles indicates that it is seen as a common shortcoming in Chinese foreign-directed media.

## Adherence to outdated communication paradigm

As social media has provided platforms for more and more people to make their own voices heard, Chinese foreign-directed media have struggled to adapt their content and dissemination methods to compete with and draw in overseas social media users. Multiple authors cited Chinese foreign-directed media’s continued reliance on ineffective, linear patterns of communication as another prominent shortcoming. This model of communication involves an information producer transmitting content to a passive audience (one Chinese expert referred

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<sup>155</sup> Li, “The Development Status and Optimization Recommendations for CGTN English Language Channel.” In her *Study Times* article, Hua Chunying referred to this as a problem of “formalism and dogmatism.” Hua, “Occupy the Moral High-Ground, Raise International Discourse Power.”

<sup>156</sup> Li, “The Development Status and Optimization Recommendations for CGTN English Language Channel.”

<sup>157</sup> Lu Qiang and Han Jun, “Review of Current External Propaganda Work from Three Dimensions: Dissemination, Transformation and Organization.”

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Sun and Wu, “Report on the International Communication Power of the Central Government’s Main News Websites.”

to this as the “you listen, I talk” model).<sup>160</sup> Although this was the main model of traditional news media communication for decades, multiple Chinese experts criticized this “linear logic” as “ill-suited to the era of mixed media.”<sup>161</sup> With the rise of the internet, audiences are no longer passive recipients, and can instead play an active role in shaping how stories are reported. As an expert at the PLA Nanjing Political Academy’s Department of Journalism put it, this shift away from the linear communications “greatly weakens China’s ability to control media broadcast to the masses,” and, in turn, means that “external propaganda agencies and media have... lost their monopoly and authority over foreign-directed communications.”<sup>162</sup>

Reorienting from linear communications models has profound implications for both Chinese foreign-directed media and domestic social media management. Multiple Chinese commentators touted the opening of foreign social media accounts by Chinese foreign-directed media outlets and government offices, although they acknowledged that “China’s voice on overseas social media platforms is overall still quite weak.”<sup>163</sup> Many authors advised Chinese foreign-directed media to produce original content intended for foreign social media audiences, rather than trying to repackage domestic propaganda content.<sup>164</sup>

The recognition that foreign social media sites present valuable opportunities to connect with foreign audiences has also come with the realization that Chinese domestic social media is also subject to international attention. Because Chinese foreign-directed media often report on domestic Chinese issues, some experts warned that newsworthy events in the PRC “are highly vulnerable to the attention of foreign media.”<sup>165</sup> In light of this attention, Chinese commentators argued, proper public opinion “guidance” must be applied to domestic social media to ensure that foreign media “can see the true Chinese thinking” when reading domestic posts.<sup>166</sup> These euphemisms essentially advocate for tighter domestic censorship to allay fears that Chinese netizens’ posts will contradict narratives promoted by the Party and be seen by

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<sup>160</sup> Li, “The Development Status and Optimization Recommendations for CGTN English Language Channel.”

<sup>161</sup> See, for example, Liu Peng’s discussion of “linear logic” in Zhang and Huang, “Information Production, Information Presence, and Communication Achievement in China’s International Communications.”

<sup>162</sup> The article was originally published in *Today’s Mass Media (Jin Chuan Mei; 今传媒)*, a professional journal formerly approved by SAPPRFT and presumably now subject to CPD approval. Lian Xiaotong (连小童), “The Tradition, Difficulties, and Future of the ‘Differences in Internal and External’ Principle,” (*‘Neiwai Youbie’ Yuanze de Chuantong, Kunjing yu Weilai; ‘内外有别’ 原则的传统、困境与未来*), *Today’s Mass Media (Jin Chuan Mei; 今传媒)* (2016), <http://media.people.com.cn/n1/2016/1221/c408986-28966526.html>.

<sup>163</sup> Sun and Wu, “Report on the International Communication Power of the Central Government’s Main News Websites.”

<sup>164</sup> See, for example, Tao, “Exploration and Practice of Mainstream Media App International Communication.”

<sup>165</sup> Lü, “Tell China’s Story Well, Taking into Account Domestic and Foreign Differences.”

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

foreign audiences. Chinese media's emphasis on "positive news" about China requires tight domestic social media management to guarantee that domestic social media is not undermining foreign-directed reporting. This effort to ensure consistency between the domestic and foreign was an explicit PRC objective of the 12th FYP (released in 2011) and remains important for ensuring consistent messaging.<sup>167</sup>

#### A Note on Metrics

The Chinese journal articles analyzed in this chapter mentioned few measures of success, and almost all were broad and vague (e.g., one article implied that the desired end-state of improving Beijing's external propaganda power was to "become the 'first and last definer' in public opinion events concerning China"). The few times that Chinese commentators did use quantitative indicators, they often included caveats that there was room for improvement in these areas and that audience engagement should become a higher priority than merely growing follower statistics. The metrics that Chinese experts cited in their journal articles included:

- Overseas social media followers, including on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other platforms.
- Alexa Internet Traffic Rankings for Chinese foreign-directed media websites.
- Citations to or reposting of Chinese media in foreign outlets.

The journal articles also made clear that Chinese media outlets pay close attention to domestic and international public opinion. Xinhua Online conducts public opinion surveys that track foreign perception of China, while outlets like CCTV rely on domestic data collected by firms such as CSM Media Research to understand trends among Chinese viewers.

Some authors called for Chinese foreign-directed media outlets to use Western counterparts as "benchmarks." Outlets they singled out for comparison included the Associated Press, Reuters, BBC, CNN, Agence France-Presse, and the *Wall Street Journal*.

*Sources: Li, "CGTN English Language Channel," Tao, "Exploration and Practice," Sun and Wu, "Report on International Communication Power" and Huang, "Deeply Integrating External Propaganda Media." CSM Media Research (Yangshi Suofurui Suo; 央视索福瑞所) is a joint venture between a subsidiary (China International Television Corporation) of a Chinese state-owned enterprise that is funded wholly by CCTV and Kantar Group, a media monitoring and consulting company based in London.*

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<sup>167</sup> "Outline of the 12th Five-Year Plan For National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China," (*Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Guomin Jingji he Shehui Fazhan Di Shi'er ge Wunian Guihua Gangyao*; 中华人民共和国国民经济和社会发展第十二个五年规划纲要), Central Government of the People's Republic of China, (*Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Zhongyang Renmin Zhengfu*; 中华人民共和国中央人民政府), 2011, accessed Nov. 9, 2019, [http://www.gov.cn/2011lh/content\\_1825838.htm](http://www.gov.cn/2011lh/content_1825838.htm).

## Other constraints

Just as the objectives of strengthening China's external propaganda work have persisted for over 15 years, there are also enduring constraints that limit the ways in which Chinese leaders and policies can pursue these goals. Despite decades of political and economic reform since the end of the Mao era, certain Chinese media principles are still considered inviolable. Any attempts to improve China's foreign-directed media, therefore, must be made while adhering to these governing rules and values, many of which likely undermine these outlets' credibility in the eyes of foreign audiences. Of note, while many Chinese subject matter experts generally seem to recognize that these principles may undermine Chinese media's overseas credibility, they do not explicitly refer to these constraints as shortcomings. The most salient of these principles to foreign-directed media are that central news outlets are expected to serve the Party, and that Chinese news coverage is primarily supposed to provide "positive propaganda."

## Serving the Party

In the Mao era, the Party-state owned and controlled all Chinese media outlets. As such, publications were universally expected to uphold the "principle of Party character" (*Dangxing Yuanze*; 党性原则). To this day, outlets are expected to spread and support Party narratives and goals in their reporting. Despite the fact that close ties to the Party-state likely undermine Chinese foreign-directed media's credibility among foreign audiences, Xi Jinping continues to emphasize the importance of central news outlets upholding their "Party character" by maintaining "a high level of uniformity with the Party's ideology, politics, and actions."<sup>168</sup>

The "Party character" of these outlets persists despite the permitted commercialization and consolidation of large parts of the Chinese media sector in the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> "Xi Jinping's Views of News and Public Opinion."

<sup>169</sup> While previously, newspapers and other broadcasters were funded with Party-state subsidies, in 1992, the state administration in charge of regulating the press released a new policy requiring that all papers, with the exception of a handful of central Party-affiliated media like *People's Daily*, achieve financial independence within two years. Despite this movement away from complete Party-state subsidizing of the media, the Party maintains control over the sector through licensing requirements that mandate all newspapers must have a registered institutional sponsor and by maintaining control of outlets' editorial departments. Zhao, "From Commercialization to Conglomeration," 6. This effectively led to a system that was still under Party-state ownership but was managed and operated like a commercial entity. Around the same time, Beijing implemented a "three percent 'propaganda industry tax.'" The tax was assessed on profits of "all enterprises managed within the CCP propaganda system." See Brady, "Plus ça Change?: Media Control Under Xi Jinping," 132.

### Media Commercialization and Party Control

Although private investment has gradually been allowed in media outlets not affiliated with the central government, the CCP conserves control of its principle authoritative media outlets by maintaining a majority stake in the publication's ownership and by prohibiting investment in publications' editorial departments. By hiving off the editorial department, the operational side of the paper can function as a publicly traded commercial entity while the Party's editorial authority persists.

Additionally, many Party-state controlled foreign-directed media outlets are parts of larger media groups that contain multiple publications, many of which have been allowed to commercialize completely. The Party can use revenues from these commercial outlets to cross-subsidize Party-state run papers within the same group. Therefore, large central media outlets like *People's Daily* do not have to function as profit-maximizing commercial entities. In other words, Beijing's largest foreign-directed media outlets (state funding permitting) adjust and expand in ways they are politically mandated to and are not beholden to market incentives the same way they would be if they were fully commercialized.

Sources: Chengju Huang, "Trace the Stones in Crossing the River: Media Structural Changes in Post-WTO China," *The International Communication Gazette*, Vol. 69, no. 5, 2007, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1748048507080867>, and Yuezhi Zhao, "From Commercialization to Conglomeration: The Transformation of the Chinese Press Within the Orbit of the Party State," *Journal of Communications*, Vol. 50, Issue 2, June 2000, 11-12, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2000.tb02839.x>.

Although the Chinese government has allowed a controlled degree of commercialization into the media sector, the "principle of Party character" of its most important foreign-directed media outlets endures. The CCP's editorial control over these publications means that they cannot adapt their content or distribution in ways that the Party does not approve, even if changes would make them more profitable or internationally accepted. While maintaining Party control of these publications enables them to pursue the CCP's political objectives without having to focus on maximizing profits, the Party nature of these news outlets remains a challenge to their credibility in the eyes of many foreigners.

### Positive propaganda

Another potential constraint on Chinese foreign-directed news media's international success is that they are expected to produce primarily "positive propaganda." "Positive propaganda" (*zhengmian xuanchuan*; 正面宣传) is a guiding principle of Chinese news reporting and stems from the media's "Party character."<sup>170</sup> The concept refers to providing positive news coverage

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<sup>170</sup> Zhu Qinghe (朱清河) and Zhao Caiwen (赵彩雯), "The Evolution, Theoretical Logic, and Value of 'Positive Propaganda,'" (*Zhengmian Xuanchuan Weizhu' de Lishi Yanjin, Lilun Luoji yu Jiazhi Yiyun*; '正面宣传为主'的历史演进, 理论逻辑与价值意蕴), *Journalism and Communication Review (Xinwen yu Chuanbo Pinglun*; 新闻与传播评论) 72, no. 4 (2019): 5-17, [http://journal.whu.edu.cn/uploadfiles/jcr2019no4/201907059wcul\\_7677.pdf](http://journal.whu.edu.cn/uploadfiles/jcr2019no4/201907059wcul_7677.pdf).

while downplaying or excluding “negative” reports that may be politically sensitive or damaging; it is openly discussed by Chinese leaders and academics, who stress the need for audiences to receive correct “public opinion guidance.”<sup>171</sup> This directive to frame coverage in a positive light has been a core tenet of CCP news reporting for decades. In fact, some scholars trace the idea of playing up positive reporting to Mao Zedong prior to the founding of the PRC.<sup>172</sup>

The concept of “positive propaganda” has evolved over time. One way the Party ensures that media produce positive reporting is through a 1953 regulation issued by the CPD stating that Chinese newspapers “cannot criticize the Party committee of the same level without the committee’s permission.”<sup>173</sup> This regulation is still in effect today and essentially prohibits horizontal criticism, as Party committees are unlikely to approve their own disparagement.<sup>174</sup>

By the early 1980s, propaganda officials in the central government called for “praise-based” reporting to be the basis of Chinese news coverage. By November 1989, just five months after the Tiananmen Square massacre, a Politburo Standing Committee member gave a speech stating that “news reporting must adhere to the principle of positive propaganda” to ensure a “stable public opinion environment.”<sup>175</sup> As CCP general secretary, Jiang Zemin reiterated the centrality of “positive propaganda” in Chinese reporting in 2001 and 2002; Xi Jinping has also embraced the concept of “positive propaganda” wholeheartedly.<sup>176</sup> In speeches in 2013, 2016, and 2018, Xi repeatedly emphasized that news reports “must firmly uphold correct public opinion guidance and firmly uphold an emphasis on positive propaganda.”<sup>177</sup> Although many

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>172</sup> Mao emphasized that the role of newspapers was to publicize the Party’s policies and work, and while criticism should be allowed, news reports “should not be centered around [negative] exposure.” Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Jing Ming (靖鸣), “Repetition and Reassessment of News and Public Opinion Supervision in the Early Period of the Founding of the People’s Republic of China,” (*Jianguo Chuqi Woguo Xinwen Yulun Jiandu de Fanfu yu Fansi*; 建国初期我国新闻舆论监督的反复与反思), *People’s Daily*, (*Renmin Ribao*; 人民日报), Sept. 21, 2017, <http://media.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0921/c414426-29550744.html>.

<sup>174</sup> Therefore, national-level outlets such as *People’s Daily* cannot criticize the national government (in the case of *People’s Daily*, the CCP Central Committee), but can (when sanctioned by the central government) criticize lower levels of government. Lower levels of government are often used as scapegoats by the central government if something goes wrong, so this kind of downward criticism is politically convenient for the Party.

<sup>175</sup> Li Ruihuan (李瑞环), “Li Ruihuan: Adhering to the Main Principle of Positive Propaganda,” (*Li Ruihuan: Jianchi Zhengmian Xuanchuan Weizhu de Fangzhen*; 李瑞环：坚持正面宣传为主的方针), Nov. 25, 1989, <http://www.reformdata.org/1989/1125/4077.shtml>.

<sup>176</sup> Zhu and Zhao, “The Evolution, Theoretical Logic, and Value of ‘Positive Propaganda,’” 10.

<sup>177</sup> The speeches were given on 19-20 August 2013 at the National Propaganda and Ideological Work Meeting, on 19 February 2016 at the Party’s News and Public Opinion Work Meeting, and on 21 August 2018 at the National Propaganda and Ideological Work Meeting. “Xi Jinping’s Views of News and Public Opinion.”

aspects of Chinese news media have changed over time, the importance of “positive propaganda” has endured.

As with the constraints posed by serving the Party, this focus on providing “positive propaganda” potentially alienates foreign readers in countries with a relatively free press who value balanced and impartial coverage. If foreign-directed media outlets consistently downplay or omit factual information because it could prove politically damaging, foreign audiences are less likely to trust and believe their reporting. Although focusing on “positive propaganda” likely serves to undergird a positive image of the CCP domestically, it may undermine the PRC government’s credibility internationally among discerning foreign audiences.

## Strategies for improvement

Chinese commentators provided myriad methods to improve the effectiveness of China’s foreign-directed media. Some were more practical than others, but all agreed that to develop international media influence commensurate with China’s economic clout, Beijing’s approach to foreign-directed media requires modification. Suggested improvement strategies fall into three large categories that will be discussed below. They include:

- Better integrating traditional and emerging/new media
- Utilizing new technologies
- Improving localization and diversifying overseas content offerings

### Better integrating traditional and emerging/new media

One of the most consistent recommendations across the analyzed articles was to improve integration of traditional media with newer, web-based media.<sup>178</sup> A 2019 article posted on the CAC website identified the internet as “the main frontline of public opinion propaganda” and the “forefront” of the struggle over public opinion.<sup>179</sup> Given the increasing importance of internet-based communications, successful media integration is essential to the Party’s ability to control media narratives at home and abroad. A 2018 article in *Qiushi* (“*Seeking Truth*”), the flagship theoretical journal of the CCP published by the Central Party School, asserted that

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<sup>178</sup> The near universality of calls to improve media integration are unsurprising considering Xi Jinping has consistently listed this as a necessary step to improve Chinese news reporting over the last seven years.

<sup>179</sup> “Improving Mechanisms for Upholding the Correct Orientation in Public Opinion Guidance Work,” (*Wanshan Jianchi Zhengque Daoxiang de Yulun Yindao Gongzuo Jizhi*; 完善坚持正确导向的舆论引导工作机制), CAC, (*Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Guojia Hulianwang Xinxi Bangongshi*; 中华人民共和国国家互联网信息办公室), Dec. 17, 2019, [http://www.cac.gov.cn/2019-12/17/c\\_1578118239436134.htm](http://www.cac.gov.cn/2019-12/17/c_1578118239436134.htm).

successful integration of traditional and emerging media in external propaganda work would “have the effect of 1+1>2.”<sup>180</sup> The publication of this article in a journal as closely tied to Party leadership as *Qiushi* indicates that the CCP endorses this viewpoint. The increasing relevance of emerging media was also echoed in MFA spokeswoman Hua Chunying’s *Study Times* article. In the article, Hua called for “enthusiastic exploration” of media integration and “deep development and advancement on foreign social media.”<sup>181</sup> Given that Hua is a current MFA spokeswoman and director of the MFA’s Information Department, her exhortation to improve social media usage likely indicates that Chinese diplomats using platforms like Twitter will become increasingly routine, despite the fact that these sites are blocked in mainland China.<sup>182</sup>

Other commentators suggested organizational and personnel changes to improve media integration. CGTN’s integrated News Media Center was frequently highlighted as an effective method to coordinate and optimize resources and reporting across languages, mediums, and geographic areas.<sup>183</sup> Considering that the PLA established its own News Media Center in April 2018, other Chinese outlets engaged in foreign-directed media may soon move to create their own media centers to centralize editing, content coordination, and dissemination across various platforms, languages, and mediums. To help streamline integration, other commentators also suggested hiring journalists and editors to be “all-media” professionals, rather than specializing in one particular medium.<sup>184</sup> Ensuring that reporters have the skill and know-how to produce content across different types of media allows Chinese foreign-directed media outlets to grow their integrated capabilities and reach foreign audiences through a wider range of platforms.

## Utilizing new technologies

Many commentators suggested making use of new technologies to enhance media integration, improve the quality of external propaganda content, and appeal to younger overseas

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<sup>180</sup> Cui Binzhen, “Cui Binzhen: Using Xi Jinping Thought on Media and Public Opinion to Guide Innovation in External Propaganda Work.”

<sup>181</sup> Hua, “Occupy the Moral High-Ground, Raise International Discourse Power.”

<sup>182</sup> The PRC MFA joined Twitter in December 2019. For more on Chinese diplomats’ Twitter activity, see: Zhaoying Feng, “China and Twitter: The Year China Got Louder on Social Media,” BBC News, Dec. 29, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-50832915>.

<sup>183</sup> A more literal Chinese translation is “integrated media center” (*rong meiti zhongxin*; 融媒体中心). The center is often referred to in Chinese as a “central kitchen” powering CGTN. It oversees CGTN’s daily operations and acts as CGTN’s “editorial department.” See Li, “The Development Status and Optimization Recommendations for CGTN English Language Channel,” and Huang, “Deeply Integrating External Propaganda Media.”

<sup>184</sup> Cui, “Cui Binzhen: Using Xi Jinping Thought on Media and Public Opinion to Guide Innovation in External Propaganda Work.”



audiences. Artificial intelligence (AI) and big data analytics in particular were described as important areas for further development. Xinhua debuted an AI news anchor in November 2018 and is attempting to broaden the use of these hosts to save costs and improve efficiency.<sup>185</sup> By September 2019, CGTN had already experimented with AI to “better distribute videos and push products that users want” and will likely further refine the use of this technology.<sup>186</sup> Technology-enabled analysis, like big data analytics, was touted as another way to appeal to mobile and internet users. These analytic tools improve customization; by tracking what articles people read, apps can suggest related content they may find appealing and keep the user engaged.<sup>187</sup>

Other new technologies highlighted for their possible application in foreign-directed media include 5G and virtual reality (VR). CCTV established a partnership with an unspecified Chinese mobile carrier in early 2019 to build a “5G New Media Lab,” and CGTN used 5G, which significantly improves the speed of video transmission, in its live coverage of the 2019 “Two Sessions.”<sup>188</sup> Commentators also suggested that Chinese foreign-directed media outlets leverage China’s 5G capabilities to make immersive VR news media products.<sup>189</sup> The novelty of these technologies might draw in large, young foreign audiences eager to see how these technological advancements can be used in everyday life.

## Improving localization and diversifying overseas content offerings

While “borrowing a boat to go out to sea” and Chinese media’s expanding global footprint were cited as strong points of Beijing’s current foreign-directed media strategy, many commentators suggested improvements in related areas. Multiple authors highlighted the need to strengthen localization of Chinese media overseas to optimize resources and appeal to foreign audiences. Employing more local workers overseas was a common suggestion to save money and produce

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<sup>185</sup> Helen Regan, “China Has Developed a Virtual Anchor to Deliver the News,” CNN, Nov. 9, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/09/media/china-xinhua-ai-anchor/index.html>. and Tao, “Exploration and Practice of Mainstream Media App International Communication” .

<sup>186</sup> Huang, “Deeply Integrating External Propaganda Media.”

<sup>187</sup> Lian Xiaotong, “The Tradition, Difficulties, and Future of the ‘Differences in Internal and External’ Principle.”

<sup>188</sup> The “Two Sessions” (*Lianghui*; 两会) are the annual meeting sessions of the Chinese National People’s Conference and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. Huang, “Deeply Integrating External Propaganda Media.”

<sup>189</sup> Ibid. These technology-related efforts are largely targeted at younger overseas audiences.

tailored content.<sup>190</sup> A professional at CCTV's Overseas Communication Center even suggested that CGTN hire some of its overseas app users as "citizen journalists" to create "professional user generated content."<sup>191</sup> Other commentators recommended that China's central news outlets develop a greater number of foreign language websites so that a broader range of foreign audiences could read Chinese-produced content in their native tongue.<sup>192</sup> Many authors saw improved localization as a way to address previous failures to tailor content and target overseas audiences.

Another consistent area of interest for many commentators was improving globalization. CGTN, which opened two overseas production centers in 2012 and another in 2019, was encouraged to produce more content from its overseas stations rather than having Beijing produce the majority of its broadcasted content.<sup>193</sup> Others promoted additional joint ventures with foreign media outlets to produce content catered to specific target audiences. Chinese outlets ranging from wire services to publishing houses were all encouraged to seek out local partners to help break into new markets.<sup>194</sup> Many of these strategies were framed as cost-effective ways of building upon already successful strategies to improve China's international media influence and address current shortcomings in China's foreign-directed media.

## Strategy Debate: "Positive Propaganda" versus Telling the Truth

The 12 journal articles analyzed in this chapter presented contradictory views regarding the need to balance telling the truth and spreading "positive propaganda." Some called solely for "positive news," arguing that Western media could not be trusted to "correct errors" in how China is portrayed, as those outlets were the ones advancing biased views of the PRC.<sup>195</sup> Others criticized the focus on "blindly instilling the positive" in Chinese media for "lacking persuasiveness" with foreign audiences.<sup>196</sup> Instead, these authors called for TV programs to

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<sup>190</sup> See, for example, Sun and Wu, "Report on the International Communication Power of the Central Government's Main News Websites," and Li, "The Development Status and Optimization Recommendations for CGTN English Language Channel."

<sup>191</sup> Li, "The Development Status and Optimization Recommendations for CGTN English Language Channel." The author credited CNN with pioneering the use of citizen journalists.

<sup>192</sup> Sun and Wu, "Report on the International Communication Power of the Central Government's Main News Websites."

<sup>193</sup> Li, "The Development Status and Optimization Recommendations for CGTN English Language Channel."

<sup>194</sup> See, for example Cui, "Cui Binzhen: Using Xi Jinping Thought on Media and Public Opinion to Guide Innovation in External Propaganda Work," and Sun and Wu, "Report on the International Communication Power of the Central Government's Main News Websites."

<sup>195</sup> Tao, "Exploration and Practice of Mainstream Media App International Communication."

<sup>196</sup> Li, "The Development Status and Optimization Recommendations for CGTN English Language Channel."

invite guests with “varied backgrounds” to display the “collision of their opinions” and thus provide audiences a more holistic understanding of the topic.<sup>197</sup> Still others took a more nuanced (albeit contradictory) approach. One article, for example, called for Chinese media to “calmly speak of [China’s] inadequacies,” while never “giving up” or “blindly obeying Western ideology” on “fundamental issues.”<sup>198</sup> The diverse range of viewpoints presented in these articles indicates that Chinese commentators are still grappling with how Chinese foreign-directed media coverage should weigh propaganda goals (promoting positive news stories about China) with the need to appear credible to foreign audiences by telling the truth. Although this debate is unlikely to be settled in the near future, this conversation sheds light on how Chinese foreign-directed media attempt to prioritize contradictory goals, and how they may attempt to resolve this contradiction in the future.

## Conclusion

The journal articles analyzed in this chapter provide key insights into how Chinese subject matter experts, in their own words, describe and appraise Beijing’s foreign-directed media. This perspective is often overlooked in Western discussions of China’s external propaganda work and offers an understanding of what Chinese scholars and practitioners view as having been successful, as well as areas where Beijing’s efforts have fallen short. Given that these articles were published in prominent Party- and state-affiliated publications, it is likely that the suggested improvements that they contain will be considered, if not implemented, by the CCP as it seeks to improve China’s international influence.

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Fundamental issues were described as “national interests and national dignity.” Lu Qiang and Han Jun, “Review of Current External Propaganda Work from Three Dimensions: Dissemination, Transformation and Organization.”

## Chapter Six: Concluding Thoughts

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Beijing's foreign-directed media ambitions are enormous. As Xi Jinping himself has described it, "where the reader is, where the audience is, that is where the tentacles of propaganda reporting should extend."<sup>199</sup> Following this logic, anyone and everyone around the world is a potential target.

Successful external propaganda work facilitates the achievement of national policies, and Chinese external propaganda goals are so expansive because of how central these efforts are to accomplishing other strategic objectives. Since 2004, Beijing has directly linked foreign-directed media to China's national security.<sup>200</sup> Strengthening foreign-directed media enables the Party to guide the international narrative on important issues like Taiwan, the South China Sea, the US military presence in Asia, and China's economic and military activities overseas. Moreover, achievement of foreign-directed media objectives would enable China to capitalize on its positive international image, thus allowing Beijing to use the power of attraction rather than coercion in its foreign policy.

In this sense, foreign-directed media is an important component of Chinese soft power. While Beijing has made significant strides in improving its hard power since the end of the Mao era, Chinese soft power has not developed at the same pace. As this study suggests, the current lack of Chinese soft power vis-à-vis the West is a primary concern for Beijing. The CCP appears to view the international information arena in fundamentally threatening terms; internationally, "the West is strong and China is weak" phenomenon in international discourse power is seen as enabling the West to promote a "China threat theory" around the world. Domestically, the CCP endeavors to shield the Chinese news environment from foreign input out of fear that critical coverage may lead to social or regime instability. As long as the CCP views the international media and information environment as threatening and beyond its control, it will continue its efforts to strengthen foreign-directed media in an attempt to compete more effectively. In doing so, the Party is likely trying to neutralize and shift a domain it sees as hostile toward China into an asset in its pursuit of foreign policy and security goals.

Beijing's current view of the international information environment as monopolized by the West shows that the Party sees this domain as inherently competitive and zero-sum. In other words, the CCP views foreign-directed media and soft power through the lens of strategic competition. As Washington has embraced great power competition in its strategic outlook,

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<sup>199</sup> "Xi Jinping's Views of News and Public Opinion."

<sup>200</sup> This connection was explicitly made in the "Three Foci of External Propaganda Work." "Li Changchun: External Propaganda Must Be Close to Foreign Audiences, Create Favorable Public Opinion Environment."

external propaganda and information warfare have quickly become one of the most acute frontlines in US-China competition. Winning the information competition, therefore, has profound implications not just for US-China relations but also for the balance of power globally.

Beijing's attempts to win international discourse power and thereby shape global public opinion is a matter of concern for all countries as Chinese foreign-directed media could potentially influence audiences worldwide. This is particularly true for countries with regional or global aspirations, as the battle to control the international narrative plays out in places like Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Oceania. If Beijing can use its external propaganda to sway the public in democracies or influence political elites in authoritarian regimes, China could shape other states' policies in ways more beneficial to the CCP. Examples of targeted "China Watch" inserts on election issues, as was the case in the *Des Moines Register* ahead of the 2018 US midterm elections, remain relatively rare, but they open up Chinese media to allegations of political interference.

Democracies in particular face unique challenges in countering China's information offensive. Because most democratic countries guarantee press freedom, they must carefully balance constitutionally guaranteed liberties with security concerns. Doing so as Chinese foreign-directed media become increasingly assertive and sophisticated is a growing challenge for many governments around the world. It is worth noting that Beijing does not have to worry about this kind of media influence in its own political system as most Western media outlets are blocked in mainland China.

Given these concerns, it is imperative that the US and other countries concerned with Beijing's attempts to shape public opinion abroad understand Chinese-identified goals and shortcomings in PRC foreign-directed media. Understanding how the Chinese view their external propaganda work enables other countries to develop more effective countermeasures and potentially anticipate how Beijing will try to strengthen its foreign-directed media work in the future.

At present, despite over 15 years of efforts to develop external propaganda power commensurate with China's global status, Beijing, in the words of its own scholars and officials, has not yet secured the level of international discourse power it seeks. One major failing of Chinese foreign-directed media is its lack of credibility among many foreign audiences. Beijing has already developed strategies to obscure links between the Party-state and Chinese media, including using foreigners to convey Chinese talking points and distributing Chinese-made reports through content sharing agreements. However, as long as Chinese foreign-directed media are subject to Party-state control, these credibility issues are likely to persist. As the CCP is unlikely to abandon the "principle of Party character" of these news agencies, audiences will likely remain skeptical of content that appears to be state-sponsored propaganda. Accordingly, a potential countermeasure for countries attempting to prevent Chinese media from

influencing public opinion is to highlight the links between Chinese foreign-directed media and the Party-state to ensure that audiences understand the news sources they consume.

It remains to be seen if Beijing's coronavirus messaging offensive, replete with vociferous defenses of China's pandemic response and insinuations that the virus originated in the US, marks a lasting tonal shift in Chinese external propaganda. Whether Beijing's coronavirus messaging has been effective in shaping global views in China's favor is also unclear at present. As the world emerges from the pandemic, Beijing will be faced with a choice: either double down on strident messaging or return to a less confrontational approach to external propaganda. The CCP will have to weigh whether maintaining a combative tone will alienate foreign audiences and undermine the achievement of other national priorities (e.g., if a country is sufficiently offended by Chinese external propaganda, it may adversely affect China's economic relations with said country). Although the more strident tone serves to build nationalism among Chinese domestic audiences, the opportunity cost of this type of messaging may lead Beijing to shift back to a less aggressive approach to foreign-directed media.

Finally, more research is required to understand Chinese foreign-directed media's resonance among overseas audiences. Without a baseline sense of how overseas audiences respond to Chinese external propaganda, it will be difficult to measure how any changes in Chinese external propaganda strategy or tone affect the resonance of its messaging. What is certain is that Chinese foreign-directed media have attempted to secure a greater voice for China in the international media environment since 2004, and that as long as Beijing views external propaganda as an important tool to realize its international and security interests, it will continue to support the strengthening of this work.

# Appendix A: SCIO/Office of External Propaganda Bureaus

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These bureaus are not mentioned on the SCIO's English website, and the English description presented there glosses over many of the office's functions mentioned on its Chinese-language site. A complete translation of the Chinese descriptors are as follows:

- “The First Bureau is responsible for press releases and external reporting on major events; [it] compiles Chinese government white papers and promotes external/foreign reporting in Chinese media.”
- “The Second Bureau is responsible for developing international public relations and promoting exchanges and cooperation with foreign news agencies and other relevant organizations.”
- “The Third Bureau is responsible for planning, preparing, and organizing the manufacturing and publication of foreign books, movies, and television programs, and comprehensive foreign exchange activities.”
- “The Fourth Bureau is responsible for researching policies, plans, and methods that introduce China externally, and analyzing international public opinion.”
- “The Fifth Bureau organizes and coordinates online news work, guides the planning and construction of news websites, and bears responsibility for work related to international exchanges and cooperation in Internet news.”
- “The Sixth Bureau guides the work of provincial (including autonomous regions and cities’) news/information offices, and provides services for visiting reporters from Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan covering the Mainland.”
- “The Seventh Bureau promotes the introduction of China’s human rights causes and Tibet’s development situation externally, and organizes foreign reports and exchange activities relating to human rights and Tibet.”
- “The Eight Bureau is responsible for managing and approving foreign institutions and news agencies operating within China and providing them with financial information in accordance with the law.”
- “The Ninth Bureau is responsible for guiding the construction and management of internet culture and coordinating, supervising, and promoting such work.”<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> “Screenshot of ‘Organizational Structure.’”

## Appendix B: Xinhua Overseas Bureaus

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### Xinhua Branches in the Asia Pacific

Asia Pacific Headquarters (Hong Kong)	Macau
Seoul, South Korea	Hanoi, Vietnam
Kathmandu, Nepal	Phnom Penh, Cambodia
Colombo, Sri Lanka	Manila, Philippines
Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia	New Delhi, India
Islamabad, Pakistan	Yangon, Myanmar
Dhaka, Bangladesh	Tokyo, Japan
Wellington, New Zealand	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Kabul, Afghanistan	Canberra, Australia
Bangkok, Thailand	Pyongyang, North Korea
Singapore	Jakarta, Indonesia

### Xinhua Branches in Eurasia

Europe Headquarters (Brussels, Belgium)	Almaty, Kazakhstan
Belgrade, Serbia	Budapest, Hungary
Tirana, Albania	Bucharest, Romania
Riga, Latvia	Lisbon, Portugal
Madrid, Spain	Stockholm, Sweden
Sofia, Bulgaria	Vienna, Austria
Paris, France	Berlin, Germany
Prague, Czech Republic	Helsinki, Finland
Warsaw, Poland	Kyiv, Ukraine
London, United Kingdom	Rome, Italy
Moscow, Russia	Geneva, Switzerland
Athens, Greece	



### **Xinhua Branches in the Middle East**

Middle East Headquarters (Egypt)	Jerusalem, Israel
Nicosia, Cyprus	Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
Cairo, Egypt	Khartoum, Sudan
Damascus, Syria	Beirut, Lebanon
Ankara, Turkey	Algiers, Algeria
Tunis, Tunisia	Sana'a, Yemen
Rabat, Morocco	Kuwait City, Kuwait
Gaza, Palestine	Tehran, Iran
Baghdad, Iraq	Amman, Jordan
Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates	

### **Xinhua Branches in the Americas**

Latin America Headquarters (Mexico)	United Nations Branch (USA)
San José, Costa Rica	Ottawa, Canada
Rio de Janeiro Portuguese Editing Department, Brazil	Brasilia, Brazil
Quito, Ecuador	Mexico City, Mexico
Montevideo, Uruguay	Panama City, Panama
Washington, D.C., USA	Havana, Cuba
Santiago, Chile	Lima, Peru
Buenos Aires, Argentina	Los Angeles, USA
Santa Fe/Bogotá, Colombia	Managua, Nicaragua
Caracas, Venezuela	

## Xinhua Branches in Africa

Africa Headquarters (Kenya)	Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire
Dar es Salaam, Tanzania	Harare, Zimbabwe
Lagos, Nigeria	Libreville, Gabon
Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo	Maputo, Mozambique
Antananarivo, Madagascar	Johannesburg, South Africa
Brazzaville, Congo	Dakar, Senegal
Lusaka, Zambia	Kampala, Uganda
Luanda, Angola	Lomé, Togo
Nairobi, Kenya	Yaoundé, Cameroon
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia	

Source: "Overseas Branch Structure," (*Guo [Jing] Wai Fenzhi Jigou*; 国[竟]外分支机构), Xinhua, (新华), 2013, <http://203.192.6.89/xhs/zwfs.htm>.

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# Abbreviations

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AI	artificial intelligence
CAC	Cyberspace Administration of China
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCTV/CGTN	China Central Television/China Global Television Network
CMC	Central Military Commission
CMG	China Media Group
CNR	China National Radio
CNS	China News Service
COVID-19	coronavirus disease
CPD	Central Propaganda Department
CRI	China Radio International
FYP	Five-Year Plan
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MND	Ministry of National Defense
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
SAPPRFT	State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television
SCIO	State Council Information Office
VR	virtual reality
WTO	World Trade Organization

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