



## China's Efforts to Shape the Information Environment in Laos

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## Abstract

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has embarked on a campaign to shape what audiences around the world read, hear, and watch about China. This report is part of a series that examines Beijing's efforts to influence the media environment in the neighboring Mekong countries—Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand. This report focuses on China's efforts to shape the information environment of its neighbor, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (or Laos). In order to place China's efforts into context, this report begins by providing an overview of Laos' information environment—the aggregate of individuals, organizations, and systems that play a key role in shaping opinions through the dissemination of news and information. Next, we examine each of the ways that China is shaping the information environment in Laos in order to promote its preferred narratives. The report concludes with a brief discussion of issues to consider as the Laos information environment—and China's footprint there—evolves.

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# Executive Summary

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## Introduction

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has embarked on a campaign to shape what audiences around the world read, hear, and watch about China. This report examines China's efforts to shape the information environment of its neighbor, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (or, Laos). It is part of a series of reports that examines Beijing's efforts to influence the media environment in the neighboring Mekong countries.

## Key findings

***China enjoys privileged access to Laos' tightly controlled information environment. The only other country with similar access is Vietnam.***

- The only foreign media outlets permitted to publish and broadcast in Laos are from China and Vietnam. This is largely due to the close political relationship between Laos' ruling communist party and the ruling communist parties of China and Vietnam.
- China's outsized footprint in Laos' media environment is also due to Laos' heavy reliance on Chinese-backed infrastructure development projects.
- Historically, Vietnam has enjoyed greater cultural and political influence in Laos; however, China is actively working to eclipse Vietnam's footprint in the local information environment.

***China has established a significant presence in the Laos information environment in the following ways:***

- ***PRC state-run media outlets have established a physical presence in Laos and produce Lao-language content.*** China's official news agency Xinhua and its official overseas broadcaster China Radio International (CRI) both have bureaus in Vientiane that generate content in Lao.
- ***PRC media content is widely distributed to Laos audiences via content-sharing agreements with major news outlets and a robust presence on social media.*** PRC media outlets have signed content-sharing agreements with major Laos media outlets and have an active presence on Facebook, the most popular social media platform in Laos.
- ***Sponsoring media training and hosting forums.*** For instance, Laos media personnel have participated in three semi-annual "Lancang (Mekong) National News and Media Reporting"

training programs hosted by China. China also offers Laos journalists all-expense-paid reporting trips to China that include stays at four-star hotels and other perks.

- ***Exporting Chinese entertainment and documentaries to portray positive images of Chinese culture and development.*** Since 2015, China's Guangxi People's Radio has dubbed more than 200 Chinese television programs into Lao, from cartoons to political documentaries, for broadcast on Lao National Television. In 2019, the first film jointly produced by Laos and PRC entertainment companies was released.
- ***Establishing a foothold in Laos' information, communications, and technology infrastructure.*** China has sought to generate new channels for distributing its messages to audiences in Laos by participating in the development of Laos' information and communications infrastructure. For instance, Beijing gave Vientiane a \$20 million loan to build internet infrastructure and provide training for the Lao National Internet Center (LANIC).

***Key narratives that China promotes to audiences in Laos include the following:***

- Laos benefits from cooperation with China.
- China is a responsible foreign partner.
- China is the primary source of assistance fighting the COVID-19 pandemic.

***China's efforts to promote its COVID-19 narrative appear to have been particularly successful in Laos.***

- Xinhua and CRI reporting on PRC government, military, and commercial entities' efforts to provide COVID-19 relief to Laos has been shared widely on social media and republished by key media outlets in Laos.
- The positive perceptions engendered by PRC COVID-19 relief to Laos may mitigate any anti-China sentiment surrounding Chinese investment and infrastructure projects.

***Audiences in Laos appear relatively receptive to PRC efforts to shape the information environment.***

- According to public opinion survey data, citizens of Laos generally have favorable views of China. For instance, the results of one survey indicated that 75.9 percent of Lao people—the largest of any Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) country polled—view BRI as beneficial for regional economic development.
- The CRI Laos Facebook page is the second most followed Facebook page in Laos. The importance of Facebook in the Laos information environment and the popularity of CRI Laos' Facebook page suggests that local audiences are receptive to CRI news and information.

## Issues to watch

*China has made a significant investment in shaping the information environment in Laos. As China's presence there continues to evolve and adapt, key issues to watch include the following:*

- ***An increase in the number of PRC media outlets producing Lao-language content.*** The number of PRC state-run media outlets producing content in Lao-language appears to be growing. Prior to March 2020 only CRI was producing Lao-language reporting. As of March, a consortium of CRI, CMG, CCTV, and CNR began producing brief news videos in Lao.
- ***Further efforts to tailor PRC news reporting to appeal to domestic audiences.*** Currently, PRC media reporting focuses on events that involve China. PRC media outlets may seek to increase their appeal to local audiences by reporting on purely domestic events—a tactic that PRC media has used in other countries such as Cambodia and the United States.
- ***Criticism of China in local media in Laos.*** Although popular views of China tend to be favorable in Laos, there are areas of the country where locals' views have been shaped by the negative impact of Chinese projects. In some instances, there have even been targeted attacks against Chinese citizens working in Laos. The degree to which criticism of China finds an outlet in local media in these areas is an issue to watch as it could undermine Beijing's efforts to promote its preferred narratives.

## Recommendations from experts & media professionals in the region

The Laos media professionals and experts with whom we spoke over the course of our research suggested ways that the international community could help to support the integrity of Laos' information environment. These include the following:

- ***Focus on skills training, not politics.*** Participants suggested that providing discrete skills training for journalists in partnership with the Laos Institute of Mass Media, Culture, and Tourism (IMMC) is likely the most successful strategy for helping support Laos media. Conversely, attempts to provide broader media development or capacity building are likely to trip political sensitivities that would prohibit any international organization's involvement.
- ***Be patient and persistent.*** Decisions about media engagement in Laos are subject to lengthy bureaucratic processes. According to one local media expert, it took two years for one international organization to receive the required approvals to host a training program for Laos journalists.
- ***When possible, work with Vietnamese organizations.*** Several participants emphasized Vietnam's role in the Laos information environment, through the presence of Vietnamese

media and Vietnamese-run journalist training programs. Partnering with Vietnamese entities may improve access to the Laos information environment.

- ***Support efforts to promote digital literacy.*** The complexity of the modern information environment and the rise of social media can work to the advantage external actors like China. Improving digital literacy in Laos would provide media consumers with the skills to identify and utilize reputable sources of news.

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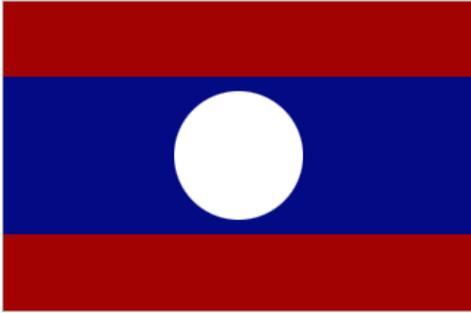
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# 1. Overview of Laos' Information Environment

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## *Quick Country Facts*

- Literacy rate (2015): 84.7%<sup>1</sup>
- Internet penetration (2019): 39%<sup>2</sup>
- Mobile phone subscriptions (per 100 people in 2018): 51.9<sup>3</sup>
- Total population (2018): 7,234,171<sup>4</sup>
- Languages: Lao (official), French, English<sup>5</sup>
- UN Least Developed Country status<sup>6</sup>

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## 1.1 Introduction

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has embarked on a campaign to shape what audiences around the world read, hear, and watch about China.<sup>7</sup> In a report to the 19th Party Congress, Chinese president and CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping voiced the aspirations of this campaign, stating, “We will improve our capacity for international communication so as to tell China’s stories well, present a true, multi-dimensional, and panoramic view of China, and enhance our country’s cultural soft power.”<sup>8</sup> This report is part of a series that examines Beijing’s efforts to influence the media environment in the neighboring Mekong countries—Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand.

This report focuses on China’s efforts to shape the information environment of its neighbor, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (or, Laos). In order to place China’s efforts into context, this report begins by providing an overview of Laos’ information environment—the aggregate of individuals, organizations, and systems that play a key role in shaping opinions through the dissemination of news and information. Next, we examine each of the ways that China is shaping the information environment in Laos in order to promote its preferred narratives. The report concludes with a brief discussion of issues to consider as the Laos information environment—and China’s footprint there—evolves.

## 1.2 Background & key developments

***The ruling communist Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP) exercises tight control over the media.*** According to studies by Reporters without Borders (RSF) and Freedom House, the Lao media is far from free. Reports by both organizations assign Laos a low score for a government that “exercises absolute control over the media,” putting the country just several points ahead of China.<sup>9</sup> The government, which is synonymous with the ruling communist Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP), owns most of the mainstream outlets including key daily newspapers, and national TV and radio networks.<sup>10</sup> Khaosan Pathet Lao (KPL), the central state-run news agency, is the primary source of news and information. All media outlets are expected to use news issued by KPL.<sup>11</sup>

***The Laos media serves as a mouthpiece of the government.*** The LPRP government uses media as a mouthpiece to generate support for national policies and to broadcast positive messages about the direction of national development. In an article authored by Deputy Minister of Information, Culture, and Tourism Savankhone Razmountry, and published in China’s *People’s Daily*, the minister explains why:

*In Laos, the media pays special attention to the promotion of joint ventures and the promotion of investments, mainly from parties in ASEAN member countries and China. It does this with an emphasis on... recording the exchanges between key functionaries that bring about these investments and ventures.*<sup>12</sup>

The Laos Constitution defines the role of the media as a state mouthpiece and a link between the state and the people, not as a watchdog of society.<sup>13</sup> As a result, media outlets in Laos do not provide views that are critical of the government or its policies.

***The LPRP has a close relationship with China.*** The Lao and Chinese governments have a close relationship for a variety of reasons, including shared communist ideology and economic ties. Laos looks to Beijing as a key source of investment. However, China is not the *only* foreign actor in Laos’ media environment. The Lao government has received technical support, training, and equipment from Vietnam, with which it shares close historical ties, as well as Thailand, Japan, and others.<sup>14</sup>

***Laos media promotes a positive image of China.*** As noted above, the media in Laos is charged with promoting support for the ruling Lao People’s Revolutionary Party and its policies. The Lao government places a great deal of importance on successfully implementing major development projects, such as the Kunming-Vientiane high-speed rail. China is the main investor and contractor for these large-scale development projects. The result of Lao media’s responsibility to popularize these development projects—which are tightly and conspicuously linked to China—is that it widely echoes positive messaging about China.

***Because of its close political relationship with Laos and willingness to submit to Lao government regulation, China enjoys a privileged place in the media environment of Laos.***

The foreign media presence in Laos is largely confined to state-run Chinese and Vietnamese outlets, both of which are willing to submit their content to the Lao government for approval. From its privileged position, Chinese state-run media disseminates pro-China content, some of which is rebroadcast through Lao media. This will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent sections of this report.

***Laos' geography and economy shape how its citizens consume information.*** Laos is a mountainous, landlocked country with UN Least Developed Country (LDC) status. The challenges the government faces in development—including access to resources and technology, vulnerability to economic shocks, and limited human capital—have an important effect on the domestic information environment. Lao citizens' access to media is as follows:

- **Online** news, information, and entertainment, primarily accessed via mobile phone and Facebook, are increasingly popular. According to a 2019 report by FOJO Media of Linneaus University “media consumption in Laos has rapidly shifted from traditional to online platforms.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the Lao National Internet Center projected that 39 percent of the population was on social media in 2019—up from 19 percent in 2016. The development of information, communication, and technology (ICT) infrastructure has helped make online media cheaper and more readily available.<sup>16</sup> The growth of social media has also resulted in increasing government scrutiny and control.
- **Radio** is an important medium for the spread of news and information because of a combination of infrastructure deficits, the low cost of program production, affordability of in-home receivers, and the country's mountainous terrain.<sup>17</sup>
- **Television** is dominated by state-sanctioned content and government-owned free-to-air channels. With a paid subscription to satellite TV—a cost that largely prohibits access beyond elites and expatriates—a broad selection of international news and programming is available.
- **Print** media circulation is largely constrained to the capital, Vientiane, due to limited distribution infrastructure.

## 1.3 Key media outlets

According to a Lao government report issued in mid-2019, Laos has 33 newspapers, 46 TV stations, and 76 radio stations broadcasting content in a combination of Lao, English, and French.<sup>18</sup> A summary of key local actors in the media is included in Table 1.

**Table 1. Laos: Key local media actors: TV, radio, print**

Name	Type of Media	Description	Ownership
Lao National TV (LNTV1, LNTV3)	TV, free-to-air	Broadcasts a mix of news, cultural shows, and Chinese dramas; LNTV3 is a DTMB digital channel	Government-owned
Lao Public Security TV (Lao PSTV)	TV, free-to-air	Ministry of Public Security channel providing news and entertainment	Government-owned <sup>19</sup>
Lao Star Channel	TV, free-to-air	Entertainment and news	Public-private partnership through contract with LNTV, under supervision of MICT <sup>20</sup>
MV Lao	TV, free-to-air	Sports news, entertainment and movies for viewers around the country	Private, under supervision of MICT <sup>21</sup>
Lao National Radio (LNR)	Radio	Available on FM, AM, and shortwave across 70 percent of the country; broadcasts international news sourced from CNN, BBC, Xinhua, and KPL	Government-owned
<i>Passasson</i>	Daily newspaper	Key mouthpiece of the LPRP	Government-owned <sup>22</sup>
<i>Pathet Lao</i>	Daily newspaper	Newspaper of the state news agency KPL	Government-owned <sup>23</sup>
<i>Vientiane Times</i>	Daily newspaper	English-language daily published by the MICT Lao Press in Foreign Languages; also produces French (print and online) and Chinese (online only) editions	Government-owned <sup>24</sup>

Source: CNA.

## 1.4 Key factors that shape Laos' information environment

Several key factors shape the information environment in Laos. These include the following:

- Regulations on press or individual freedoms of speech
- Regulations on foreign actors in the domestic information environment
- Foreign media presence and availability
- Diversity of foreign partners who can assist with deficits in media content, training, or infrastructure

## 1.4.1 Regulations on press or individual freedoms of speech

The Laos government closely regulates media content, programming, and licensing through national legislation and oversight by the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism (MICT) and the Ministry of Post and Telecommunication (MPT).<sup>25</sup> Existing legislation explicitly defines media content that can be published or broadcast in Laos:

- Media outlets cannot produce, publish, or circulate any information that is critical of the Laos government and ruling LPRP. In several instances, the government has employed the 2008 *Law on the Media* to accuse citizens who write critical Facebook posts of producing “anti-government propaganda.” This crime is punishable by imprisonment or death.<sup>26</sup>
- Post-publication monitoring of media content is routine. Outlets can be penalized for covering issues beyond the scope of official government guidance.<sup>27</sup>

The MICT regulates programming, licensing, and network development; MPT manages spectrum and frequency licensing.<sup>28</sup> The MICT enforces censorship and other forms of control through a variety of mechanisms. According to a 2013 presentation by the deputy director of Lao National Radio (LNR), Vorasack Pravongviengkham, the MICT conducts weekly meetings with newsroom editorial staff to discuss reporting and provide direct feedback on any coverage that will have a negative effect on the government.<sup>29</sup>

Recent legislation has extended state control of media content and restrictions on freedoms of speech to new media platforms, including social media. In September 2014, the Laos government passed a “Decree on Internet Information Management,” which introduced criminal penalties for publishing false information online about the government, or information that was intended to discredit the government.<sup>30</sup> Under this legislation, internet service providers (ISPs) are liable for permitting users to publish derogatory information. In an effort to mitigate the spread of false information from anonymous sources, the 2014 legislation also requires private individuals in Laos to use their full names and correct addresses when registering on social media websites. In July 2019, the government issued an additional order that requires the administrators of news outlets on Facebook and other social media platforms to use their full names and addresses when registering their accounts.<sup>31</sup> The purpose of the 2019 order was reportedly to crack down on the spread of “fake news and disinformation on social media.”<sup>32</sup>

### Government crackdown on critical social media voices

In a media environment that is tightly controlled by the government, the people of Laos have turned to social media to air views critical of the government. In several recent cases, such criticism has come at a cost.

- In 2016, three Laos citizens working in Thailand posted critical content on Facebook—and were accused of threatening national security. They were arrested upon returning to Laos and sentenced to prison terms ranging from 12 to 20 years.<sup>33</sup>
- Following devastating floods in July 2018, citizens took to Facebook seeking information about the aftermath and the government’s planned recovery. One woman, who voiced her concern about the government’s response in southern provinces, was sentenced to five years in prison for “campaigning against, defaming, and attempting to overthrow, the party, state, and government.”<sup>34</sup>

As these examples suggest, the freedom to use social media is overshadowed by increasing government efforts to patrol and control the type of information that is shared.

## 1.4.2 Regulatory framework for managing foreign media actors

The Lao government actively promotes some cooperation between its media and certain foreign actors. For example, the 2008 *Law on the Media* encourages specific types of cooperation with foreign media, such as technical operations, education and training, modernization of media capabilities, and media ethics.<sup>35</sup> The Lao Journalists Association (LJA), which is under MICT supervision, is the primary organization charged with organizing international support for media training.<sup>36</sup> LJA has organized trainings with various regional and Western partners, but according to LJA press releases, the two most important foreign actors are the Vietnamese Journalists’ Association and the *People’s Daily*.

Media products produced by a foreign organization or actor must be submitted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) “for consideration in collaboration with relevant sectors to inspect the content before permitting dissemination.”<sup>37</sup> The timeline for receiving government approval varies by the type of content.<sup>38</sup> A 2016 decree by the prime minister allows foreign media to set up offices in Laos on the condition that they submit their content to LPRP censorship.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, any foreign organization or journalist seeking to disseminate content in the local media must request government approval to do so.<sup>40</sup>

Laos law does not place any restrictions on foreign ownership of media-related infrastructure, including ICT, telecommunications, and ISPs. The primary ICT and telecommunications companies operating in Laos are either owned by the government or jointly owned in partnership with foreign telecommunications companies (see Table 2).<sup>41</sup>

**Table 2. Foreign investment in Lao ICT infrastructure**

<b>Company</b>	<b>Ownership (percent ownership)</b>
ETL	Lao government (49%) Jiafu Holdings – China (51%)
Lao Telecom	Lao government (51%) Shinnington – Thailand (49%)
LaoSat <sup>42</sup>	Lao government (45%) China Asia-Pacific Mobile Telecommunications Satellite Co. (35%) Space Star Technology Co., Ltd. (China) (15%) Asia-Pacific Satellite Technology of China (5%)
Sky Telecom	Lao government (100%)
TPLUS Digital <sup>43</sup>	Lao government (100%)
Unitel	Lao government (51%) Vietel – Vietnam (49%)

Source: CNA; Ministry of Post and Telecommunication, ICT Infrastructure and Telecom Companies in Laos, Mar. 14, 2019, accessed Dec. 23, 2019, <https://meetings.internet2.edu/media/medialibrary/2019/03/14/20190305-sithavong-ict-in-laos-Xza2NHS.pdf>.

LaoSat and ETL are both majority-owned by Chinese companies. The three Chinese companies with stakes in LaoSat are affiliated with state-owned enterprise, China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC), which is the main vehicle for China’s national space program.<sup>44</sup> The Chinese company with majority ownership of ETL, Jiafu Holdings, is a wholly owned subsidiary of Hong Kong-based Comba Telecom, a wireless service provider. Comba Telecom’s board of directors includes former ZTE executives.<sup>45</sup>

ISPs are required to register with the Lao National Internet Center (LANIC). ISPs are obligated to “terminate access” and “temporarily or permanently block users” who are found to be violating government decrees and other regulations.<sup>46</sup> According to the LANIC Director General, the ISP regulations make it “easy for the government to control information [like] an immigration checkpoint.”<sup>47</sup> ISPs are not permitted to provide assistance or opportunities to individuals, legal entities, or organizations that seek to undermine the party and government policies.<sup>48</sup> This stipulation indicates that ISPs may have some resilience against use by foreign actors who seek to undermine the Laos government.

### 1.4.3 Foreign media presence and access to foreign media

While access to foreign news and information is not restricted, foreign media still has a limited footprint in the domestic information environment. Table 3 shows key foreign media actors that are present in or broadcast within Laos.

The foreign news media presence in Laos is largely confined to state-run Chinese and Vietnamese outlets, which are willing to submit their content to the Lao government for approval. Chinese and Vietnamese state-run media broadcast and publish Lao-language content from bureaus in Vientiane.<sup>50</sup> Chinese and Vietnamese state-run media also have content-sharing agreements with Laos' national news agency, KPL. Under these agreements, Chinese and Vietnamese reporting is translated into Lao and published directly in Lao media.<sup>51</sup> There is limited foreign content in the Lao language on free-to-air TV. Indeed, China appears to be the only country with media outlets that dub programming into Lao to provide on local free-to-air channels.<sup>52</sup> China's media presence is discussed in greater detail in a subsequent section of this report. Thai-language media is also popular among Laos audiences. Thai film, television, and radio programming's popularity is the result of the similarities between the two languages and neighboring Thailand's relatively developed media and entertainment sector.<sup>53</sup> According to one expert on Laos' media environment, many people source news from Thai media because it is viewed as more reliable than local sources.<sup>54</sup>

*"The main sources of foreign news and feature stories come from Chinese media outlets such as the Xinhua News Agency, China Daily and People's Daily."  
– Savanhone Razmouny, Deputy Minister of Information, Culture, and Tourism, 2015<sup>49</sup>*

In addition to China and Vietnam, a few other foreign news media outlets reach audiences in Laos. Voice of America, for instance, also produces and broadcasts Lao-language content.<sup>55</sup> In addition, some foreign media is available in print, but primarily in English, French, and Chinese. KPL also republishes content from the Associated Press (AP).

#### **Low digital literacy in Laos**

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines digital literacy as the ability to use digital technology to find, critically evaluate, and produce information.<sup>56</sup> With the rapidly growing number of Facebook users and a shifting preference for consuming news and information via the platform, there is concern among local journalists that low digital literacy in Laos enables the spread of misinformation.

*Vientiane Times* journalist Keoxomphou Sakdavong spoke to dozens of National University of Laos students on the importance of increasing digital literacy at a 2018 US Embassy-sponsored event, "How to Spot Fake News," saying, "It's important to check the source of the news you're reading online, you need to think more critically about what you see on Facebook."<sup>57</sup>

**Table 3. Foreign media in Laos information environment**

Name	Type of Media	Description	Ownership
China Radio International (CRI) <sup>58</sup>	Radio, online, Facebook page	Direct programming relayed from Vientiane bureau in Chinese, English, and Lao from 0300 to 1530 daily	Government of China
France 24	Television	News programming relayed from Paris in French and English	State-owned by France Médias Monde
<i>Nhan Dan</i> <sup>59</sup>	Newspaper	Voice of the Communist Party of Vietnam; bureau in Vientiane	Communist Party of Vietnam
Radio Australia <sup>60</sup>	Radio	FM content available via online streaming	Funded by the Australian government
Radio France International	Radio	24/7 relay of French-language content from Paris <sup>61</sup>	Government of France
Voice of America <sup>62</sup>	Radio, online, Facebook page	English and Lao language programs relayed from Bangkok Thailand <sup>63</sup>	US Agency for Global Media
Voice of Vietnam <sup>64</sup>	Radio, online	One hour of Lao-language radio daily; presence on social media, including Facebook and Zalo	Government of Vietnam
Xinhua <sup>65</sup>	Online	Xinhua content widely re-published by domestic media outlets	Government of China

Source: CNA.

### 1.4.4 Diversity of foreign partners

The UN classifies Laos as a Least Developed Country (LDC). This status is reflective of significant across-the-board deficits. The government of Laos is addressing these deficits with the explicit intent to “graduate” from LDC status by 2024.<sup>66</sup> In order to achieve this development, Laos relies on foreign assistance in many areas, including ICT infrastructure.

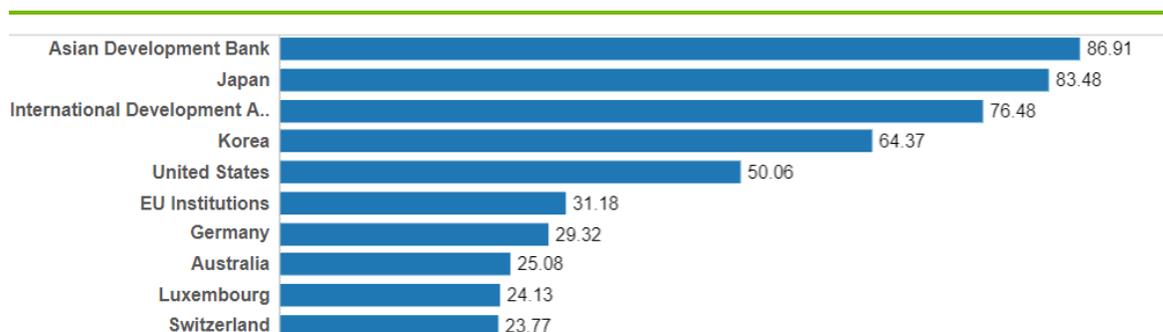
The OECD indicates that Laos has a wide range of foreign partners that provide overseas development assistance (ODA), and is not overly dependent on a single partnership.<sup>67</sup> The top three primary sources of ODA (see Figure 1) are the following:<sup>68</sup>

- The Asian Development Bank (ADB)
- The government of Japan
- The World Bank’s International Development Association

Lao media praises foreign economic assistance, regardless of its origin. For example, recent Lao National Television (LNTV) programs have praised US support for expanding US-

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) business dealings, Russian military assistance with unexploded ordnance disposal, and development assistance from the Republic of Korea.<sup>69</sup>

Figure 1. Top ten ODA donors to Laos (2017–2018, in US \$ millions)



Source: OECD, Top Ten Donors of Gross ODA, Dec. 21, 2018, accessed Jul. 15, 2020, [https://public.tableau.com/views/OECDDACAidataglancebyrecipient\\_new/Recipients?:embed=y&:display\\_count=yes&:showTabs=y&:toolbar=no?&:showVizHome=no](https://public.tableau.com/views/OECDDACAidataglancebyrecipient_new/Recipients?:embed=y&:display_count=yes&:showTabs=y&:toolbar=no?&:showVizHome=no).

Although it is not one of the top ten ODA donors to Laos, China appears to be one of its largest sources of foreign direct investment (FDI). According to a report on Lao National Television, China is the largest investor in Laos, with over US \$12.5 billion in investments in 782 different projects between 1988 and June 2019. The majority of this investment has been for infrastructure projects such as hydropower plants, highways, and power grids, though it also includes investment in telecommunications infrastructure.<sup>70</sup>

#### Chinese development assistance in Laos

Large scale, China-backed infrastructure projects are a popular topic in the Laos media. Among China's investments, the media provides regular updates on the Kunming-Vientiane high-speed railway. The railway, which is slated for completion in 2021, carries a US \$6.2 billion price tag. The Chinese government is covering most of the cost and has also issued Laos a \$480 million loan, with five of Laos' potash mines as collateral. According to one scholar, "the rationale for China's taking most of the project's risk is that it would benefit Chinese passengers and cargo much more than Laos."<sup>71</sup>

Since the 1990s, several foreign partners—including China, which will be discussed later in this report—have provided technical and financial assistance and training for the media sector in Laos. Examples include the following:

- **Japan.** The Japanese government provided new equipment and technical experts to upgrade LNTV studio facilities in the early 1990s.<sup>72</sup> Recent projects funded by Japan have focused particularly on ensuring a stable electricity supply for Laos, as the “battery” of the Mekong region.<sup>73</sup>
- **Thailand.** In 2019, the Thai government sponsored skills training courses organized under a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the Laos Journalists’ Association (LJA) and the Radio and Television Association (RTA) of Thailand.<sup>74</sup> The vice president of the Laos Journalists’ Association (LJA) noted that the courses “will help develop the skills of our media human resources.”<sup>75</sup>
- **Vietnam.** The government of Vietnam has provided infrastructure, training, and content to Laos state-run media outlets.<sup>76</sup>

## 2. China's Efforts to Shape the Media Environment in Laos

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The Chinese Party-state has developed an extensive and wide-ranging array of tactics, techniques, and tools for shaping narratives in the international media. These include the following:

- Tailoring the content produced by China's state-run media outlets so that it is more accessible, credible, and compelling to foreign audiences.
- Maximizing channels for distributing Chinese-produced media content in order to reach as broad an audience as possible.
- Influencing foreign media outlets and journalists to promote China-friendly narratives and suppress narratives that China finds objectionable.
- Using entertainment as a means of promoting China's narratives to global audiences beyond the news media.

This section focuses on China's employment of these tactics, techniques, and tools to shape the media environment in Laos. The checklist in Table 4 offers a framework that can be used to take stock of China's efforts to shape the media environment in a particular place, in this case Laos. The checkmarks indicate tools China currently employs in Laos' information environment; question marks indicate tactics for which we have not yet observed evidence of their use in Laos, but are areas worthy of continued monitoring.

Table 4. Checklist: China's Efforts to Shape the Information Environment in Laos

	<b>China's Efforts to Shape the Information Environment in Laos</b>
<b>Tailoring PRC media content to appeal to Lao audiences</b>	
✓	Producing content in Lao language
?	Reporting on local events that do not necessarily involve China
✓	Recruiting Lao voices
<b>Maximizing channels for distribution of China's narratives</b>	
✓	Selling or providing content for free to media in Laos
✓	Jointly producing content with media outlets in Laos
✓	Authoring opinion pieces for Lao media outlets
?	Buying space in Lao media
✓	Establishing a presence on Lao social media
✓	Investing in media outlets in Laos
✓	Investing in overseas telecommunications infrastructure
<b>Influencing foreign media to promote only China-friendly narratives</b>	
?	Promoting self-censorship among Lao journalists and scholars
✓	Purchasing a right to shape content
✓	Hosting international media forums and conferences
✓	Hosting education and training programs
<b>Using entertainment to promote Chinese narratives</b>	
✓	Exporting Chinese-produced entertainment
✓	Investing in the film industry in Laos
✓	Promoting PRC-controlled social media platforms

### ***Chinese Academics Advocate Strategy for Tailoring Content to Southeast Asian Audiences***

In a 2019 article in the Chinese journal *International Communications*, Chinese academics advocated the development of a long-term strategy for strategic communications targeted at Southeast Asia. The objective would be to promote Chinese messages, as well as counter US strategic communications aimed at the region. Elements of the proposed strategy include

- ***Precise communication*** tailored to each country, with a unique communication strategy designed to meet audience needs;
- ***Increased Chinese language teaching*** in order to “tell China’s story to the target country in a subtle way;”
- ***An emphasis on economic, social, and environmental issues***, which the US “tries to wield to serve its political purposes,” but are issues on which “China has become closer and closer to Southeast Asian countries.”

Source: Chen Jingjing (陈静静), “A Comparative Study of US and Chinese International Broadcasting For/To Southeast Asian Countries” (*zhong mei dui dongya guojia guoji zhuanbo de bijiao yanjiu*; 中美对东亚国家国际转播的比较研究, *International Communications (Duiwai Zhuanbo; 对外转播)*, no. 9 (2019), accessed Jan. 17, 2020, <http://mall.cnki.net/magazine/Article/DWDC201909006.htm>.

## **2.1 PRC narratives targeted at audiences in Laos**

China promotes narratives that it wants told in the international media. It does this in order to: (1) promote a positive image of China, (2) counter Beijing’s critics, and (3) support China’s national objectives (See Appendix C for China’s global narratives). China promotes three key narratives in Laos:

- ***Cooperation with China benefits Laos.*** China uses its footprint in Laos’ media to promote the narrative that cooperation with China is beneficial to Laos. It does this by highlighting PRC investment in projects that appear to help Laos achieve its development goals.
- ***China is a responsible member of the international community.*** PRC media promotes the narrative that China is a responsible member of the international community that provides public goods, including in Laos. PRC media does this by

highlighting China’s contributions of education, humanitarian, and environmental aid to the Lao government.

- ***China is the primary source of assistance fighting the COVID-19 pandemic.*** China has sought to portray itself as the sole provider of assistance combatting the spread of the virus and mitigating its effects.

## 2.2 Tailoring PRC media content

China’s state-directed media outlets tailor content in a variety of ways in order to make it accessible, credible, and compelling to audiences in Laos. The tools that China uses to achieve this include the following:

- Producing content in languages spoken in Laos
- Reporting on local events
- Recruiting local voices



### 2.2.1 Producing content in Lao

Two Chinese state-run media outlets—China Radio International (CRI) and China Media Group (CMG)—produce content in Lao, the country’s official language.<sup>77</sup> (See Table 5.) Nearly all of the major PRC state-run media outlets produce content in the unofficial languages of French and English. Chinese state-run media does not appear to produce content in any of the dozens of ethnic languages spoken across Laos.

Table 5. Chinese state-run media outlets producing content in Laos

Media Outlet	Lao**	French	English
China Media Group (CMG; 中央广播电视总台)	✓	✓	✓
China Radio International (CRI; 中国国际广播电台)	✓	✓	✓
Xinhua News Agency (新华社)	✗	✓	✓
China News Service (中国新闻社)	✗	✗	✓
China Daily	✗	✓	✓
People’s Daily (人民日报)	✗	✓	✓
Global Times (环球时报)	✗	✗	✓

Source: Data were compiled by CNA from the websites of each state-run media outlet.

(\*\*) Denotes official language; other languages are unofficial

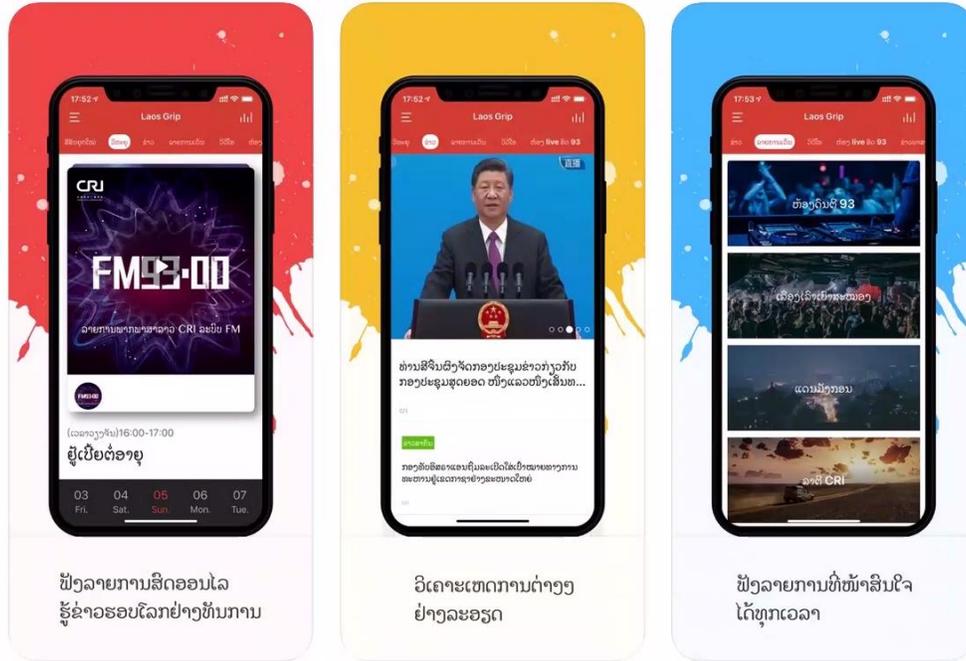
CRI Vientiane broadcasts in Lao, English, and Chinese. CRI began broadcasting locally on FM 93.0 in November 2006 from a facility located between the Lao Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Finance.<sup>78</sup> It broadcasts content in all three languages relayed directly from Beijing from 0300 to 1530 daily, including two 1-hour Lao-language news segments and 19 hours of Chinese and other foreign language content.<sup>79</sup> CRI has a Lao-language version of its website, which provides online news on Laos-China relations, China, and the world; a daily radio programming schedule; an information page with basic facts about China (“ChinaABC”); and a language education section, called “Everyday Chinese” (*Meiri Hanyu*; 每日汉语) co-sponsored by the Confucius Institute.<sup>80</sup> CRI Laos developed a mobile news app called Laos Grip in 2017 that serves as a mobile platform for Lao-language CRI reporting and streaming live CRI Vientiane broadcasts. According to the Google Play app store, the CRI Laos Grip news application has more than 10,000 downloads.<sup>81</sup>

Figure 2. China Radio International Bureau in Vientiane



Source: Google Maps, ວິທະຍຸສາກົນແຫ່ງປະເທດຈີນປະຈຳ ສປປ ລາວ Lao CRI FM 93.0Mhz, accessed Jan. 8, 2020.

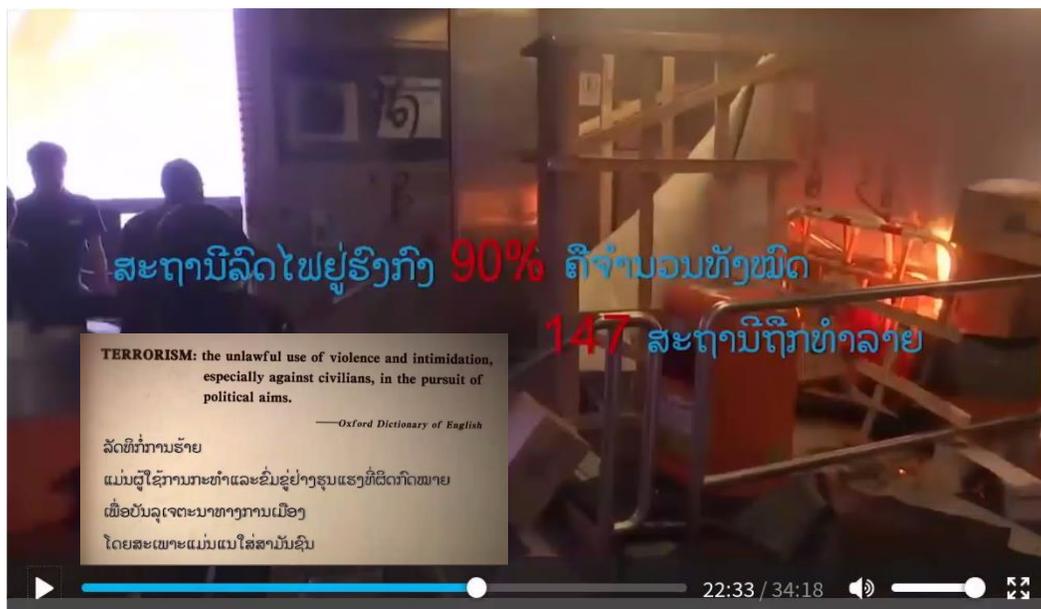
Figure 3. CRI “Laos Grip” news mobile application



Source: Apple App Store, Laos Grip, CRI Online, accessed Jul. 16, 2020, <https://apps.apple.com/de/app/laos-grip/id1221751063>.

Starting in March 2020, a series of five-to-ten minute Lao-language video newsreels produced by China Media Group (CMG) began appearing on the CRI Laos website and Facebook page; approximately one new video per week. These videos may be the result of the CCP Central Propaganda Department’s establishment of the China Media Group (CMG) Asia Africa Language Program Center in July 2019 to strengthen PRC state-run media’s reach and resonance across Asia and Africa. In addition to weekly short-form news videos, CMG has also dubbed and subtitled at least one longer documentary into Lao language. This July 2020 documentary, *The Other Side of Hong Kong*, was published in two 35-minute episodes on the CRI Laos website with the description: “[R]eveal[ing] the background of the unrest in Hong Kong... that has caused chaos and violence, destroying Hong Kong Society, and severely affecting ‘one country, two systems.’” The documentary depicts the 2019 pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong as violent and destructive, portraying them as rioters and terrorists.<sup>82</sup>

Figure 4. CMG-produced Lao-language weekly newsreel (top) and Hong Kong documentary in support of 2020 National Security Law (bottom)



Source: ຜູ້ເປັນພະຍາດໂຄວິດ-19 ໃນປະເທດລາວໄດ້ຮັບການປິ່ນປົວໃຫ້ຫາຍຂາດແລະອອກໂຮງໝໍໝົດແລ້ວ, CRI Laos, Jun. 11, 2020, accessed Jul. 1, 2020, <http://laos.cri.cn/20200611/ae9485f6-2f6c-2a01-a6ba-3a97a57462b2.html>.; "The other side of Hong Kong-1," ອີກດ້ານໜຶ່ງຂອງຮົງກົງ-1, CRI Laos, Jul. 9, 2020, accessed Jul. 16, 2020, <http://laos.cri.cn/20200709/96b284a5-545b-5217-4373-e019ab2e527b.html>.

### New CMG Asia Africa Media Center

The CCP Central Publicity Department (also known as the Central Propaganda Department) established the China Media Group (CMG) Asia Africa Language Program Center (中央广播电视总台亚洲非洲地区语言节目中心) in July 2019 to strengthen PRC state-run media's reach and resonance across Asia and Africa. According to the center's director, An Xiaoyu (安晓宇), the center will plan, produce, edit, and integrate media across platforms in 24 languages:

Arabic	Hausa	Korean	Pashto	Tamil
Bengali	Hebrew	Lao	Persian	Thai
Burmese	Hindi	Malay	Persian	Turkish
Cambodian	Indonesian	Mongolian	Sinhala	Urdu
Filipino	Japanese	Nepali	Swahili	Vietnamese

According to a 2019 CCTV report, the new center will serve to improve the localization, timeliness, quality, subtlety, and popularity of media from and about China for the target countries. The report asserts that this will improve China's political position by "raising international public opinion about China." The report says that the new center will do this in several ways, including the following:

- **Cooperate with local media to "subtly influence" consumers.** The report suggests that by working with local media, it can "imperceptibly influence the target audience."
- **Produce locally tailored content faster.** The center will promote the integration of foreign agencies, expatriates, and foreign PR firms in order to respond more quickly to breaking events.
- **Produce media with the best user experience for local consumers.** The center will focus on localizing its media, emphasizing clear and easy to understand online and mobile content. The center will also explore new communication models like "celebrity studios."
- **Create a multilingual, "invincible media army" of popular media personnel dedicated to the party.** The center asserts that its multilingual staff will serve as "magnets" in the local information environment.

Source: "CMG Asia and Africa Language Program Center Established." (CCTV online; 央视网). CCTV. (*zong tai yazhou feizhou diqu yuyan jiemu zhongxin chengli*; 总台亚洲非洲地区语言节目中心成立). Aug. 2, 2019. Accessed May 19, 2020. <http://www.cctv.com/2019/08/02/ARTIZfrIU6sSG7P7AhwCvdAv190802.shtml>.



## 2.2.2 Reporting on local events that involve China

PRC media's Lao-language and English reporting on Laos tends to be Sino-centric, focusing on China's activities in Laos. Xinhua News Agency's Vientiane bureau covers local events in Laos that involve China, publishing reporting on these events in both English and Chinese.<sup>83</sup> A selection of these Xinhua news stories are read in the nightly Chinese-language news broadcast on LNR.<sup>84</sup> The Laos government has also publicly honored Xinhua's Vientiane bureau, awarding the former bureau chief, Mr. Rong Zhongxia (荣忠霞), with a friendship medal in 2016 for "fostering cooperation between Xinhua...and its Lao counterpart [KPL]."<sup>85</sup> Appendix B contains a list of journalists who appear in Xinhua Vientiane article bylines. Similarly, CRI's Lao-language reporting falls into three news categories: China News, Global

News, and ASEAN News. While CRI Laos does not publish a local news section, several CRI reports on Laos' COVID-19 case numbers did not reference China.<sup>86</sup>

Figure 5. Selection of Xinhua coverage of news in Laos

The screenshot displays two versions of a news article from Xinhua. On the left is the English version, titled "Feature: 'Bright Journey' to Lao capital highlights China-Laos friendship". It reports on a medical team from China's Yunnan province performing cataract surgeries for 94 Lao patients in Vientiane. On the right is the Chinese version, titled "老挝官员认为构建命运共同体为老中两国人民带来福祉". It features a photo of a Lao official and a video thumbnail titled "镜头下的医患现场".

Source: Xinhua webpages (English and Chinese).

The Xinhua Vientiane bureau is often the originator of reporting that highlights China's contributions of education, humanitarian, and environmental aid to Laos. This reporting is then republished in Lao-language media through its content-sharing agreements with Laos state media (see section 3.3.1). Examples of news stories that follow this formula include stories about Chinese scholarships granted to Laos students, Chinese-funded renovation of Laos schools, Chinese provision of relief aid, and environmental protection efforts made by Chinese companies operating in Laos.<sup>87</sup>

**Positive portrayals of Chinese development projects in Laos media**

Local Lao-language news and the English-language *Vientiane Times* exclusively portray Chinese development projects in a positive light. This may be due in part to the directives of the 2008 *Law on the Media*, which requires "...all types of Lao media...to stimulate, organize, and direct the masses to implement...the socio-economic development plan."<sup>88</sup> Notably, according to a regional expert, Laos media tends to portray all development projects—not just Chinese-funded ones—in a positive light.<sup>89</sup>

Figure 6. PRC Embassy and Passasson reporting on Chinese scholarships to Laos students



Source: “Chinese Embassy in Laos Holds Farewell Party for Chinese Government Scholarship Winners,” (驻老挝使馆举办中国政府奖学金获得者赴华欢送会) Chinese Embassy of the PRC in the Lao PDR, Aug. 21, 2015, <http://la.china-embassy.org/chn/dssghd/t1290356.htm>; “Lao students get scholarships to study in China,” (ເຫຼົ່າຂໍ້: ນັກສຶກສາລາວ ໄດ້ຮັບອົບໂປສູນຕໍ່ ທີ່ປະເທດຈີນ) *Khaosan Pathet Lao*, Dec. 12, 2019, <http://kpl.gov.la/detail.aspx?id=47786>.



## 2.2.3 Recruiting foreign voices

PRC media often seeks to “borrow” foreign voices in order to amplify and lend credence to Chinese narratives by creating the appearance that they are espoused by others outside of China. Chinese state-run media routinely quotes Lao government officials, industry leaders, and average citizens in an effort to portray cooperation with China as beneficial. For instance, a *People’s Daily* report on the Kunming-Vientiane railway opens with positive quotes from a LPRP official.

Figure 7. Scene from the “drill through” ceremony for the longest tunnel in the railway line



*“After the opening of the China-Laos railway, development between Laos and other ASEAN countries will also speed up and the railway will become a major transportation artery that runs through the north and south of Laos. It will also become a new engine for the modernization of Laos.” –Khamsovok Bounyavong, LPRP Central Committee’s Inspection Committee*

Source: “Lao Officials Speaks Highly of China-Laos Railway,” *People’s Daily Online*, Apr. 1, 2019, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2019/0401/c90000-9562759.htm>.

Chinese state-run media has also been known to hire local reporters in an effort to appeal to local audiences. This does not appear to have been the case in Laos. According to the CRI website, most of the 13 staff members employed by CRI in Laos appear to be Chinese nationals.<sup>90</sup> The CRI Vientiane page further indicates that some of the key actors in the organization’s local outreach are Chinese nationals living in Laos and working for CRI.<sup>91</sup>

Figure 8. CRI's staff in Laos



Source: "CRI Online: About Us," China Radio International Laos, accessed Dec. 19, 2019, <http://laos.cri.cn/us>.

## 2.3 Maximizing channels for distribution of China's narratives

In addition to tailoring content, China also seeks to maximize the number and types of channels that it uses to distribute PRC-produced media content in Laos. China's efforts to do so include the following:

- Using Laos media outlets as channels for distributing Chinese-produced media content
- Establishing a presence on social media platforms popular in Laos, especially Facebook
- Creating new channels for distribution by investing in the development of telecommunications infrastructure and media outlets in Laos



### 2.3.1 Providing content to media in Laos

PRC media outlets actively seek to place their content in Lao media through content-sharing agreements. Chinese state-run media has signed multiple memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with state-run media outlets in Laos. Examples include the following:

- A 2015 MOU between the Chinese and Lao national news agencies in which CRI, China Central Television (CCTV), and networks from Guangxi, Nanning, and Yunnan pledged to provide support for Lao National Radio (LNR) and Lao National Television (LNTV).<sup>92</sup>
- A 2015 agreement between the Yunnan Communication Company and Lao National TV has provided Chinese-produced TV programs for broadcast on LNTV-3, including Chinese dramas and a series on agriculture and how to harvest buffalo milk.<sup>93</sup>
- In October 2018, the Xinhua and KPL presidents met in Beijing and signed a new agreement to “promote exchange of news content, images, and videos between the national news agencies of Laos and China.”<sup>94</sup>

Our review of media in Laos indicates that Lao media outlets often republish content produced by Chinese state-run media. State news agency KPL, the main source of news and information in Laos, republishes content produced by Chinese state-run media. KPL collects and supplies news to all other media outlets in Laos, including in key print and online outlets such as *Pasaxon* (ປະຊາຊົນ), *Pathet Lao* (ປະເທດລາວ), *Vientiane Mai* (ວຽງຈັນໃໝ່), and *Vientiane Times* (ໜັງສືພິມວຽງຈັນທາຍ).<sup>95</sup> KPL’s website notes that in syndicating foreign news for domestic dissemination, it has “especially strong standing with Vietnam and information from China.”<sup>96</sup> Notably, KPL publishes articles and content from Xinhua and CRI in both Lao and English languages.<sup>97</sup> KPL also receives news from foreign outlets—including PRC media outlets—as a member of the Organization of the Asian and Pacific News Agencies (OANA). The executive board of OANA consists of vice presidents from state-run news agencies in Azerbaijan, China, Russia, and Turkey.<sup>98</sup>

Figure 9. KPL’s “partners”



From left to right: Mitsubishi Motors, Xinhua, OANA, CRI, *Pasaxon*, Lao Press in Foreign Languages/*Vientiane Times*, *Vientiane Mai*, Lao National Radio, Lao Army News, and Halcyon<sup>99</sup>

Figure 10. State-run KPL use of Xinhua and China Radio International content



Source: “China Will Supply 97 Medicines for the New National Health Insurance,” *Khaosan Pathet Lao* (KPL), Dec. 30, 2019, <http://kpl.gov.la/detail.aspx?id=50008>.

The *Vientiane Times*, an English-language newspaper that is part of the Lao Press in Foreign Languages, a specialized agency of the Ministry of Information and Culture, relies on content from Xinhua and *China Daily* in both local and world news (see Figure 11).<sup>100</sup> Of note, the *Vientiane Times*, along with *China Daily*, is also a member of the Asia News Network (ANN), a coalition of 23 leading news organizations in the region.<sup>101</sup> The network fosters content sharing, enabling ANN members to share stories from other member news outlets.

Figure 11. Chinese state-run media in *Vientiane Times* “World News” section

**World News**  
www.vientianetimes.org.la

Home About Us Lao French Chinese Facebook Clips What's on Previous E-Paper Links Partners

**LAO PRESS**  
IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

**Web Service**  
[About us](#)  
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**US House passes Trump impeachment, trial uncertainty remains**  
 WASHINGTON (Xinhua) -- The Democrat-led US House of Representatives voted on Wednesday to impeach President Donald Trump for abuse of power and obstruction of Congress.  
 .. More >>>

**December 19, 2019**  
 - **Demonstrators take to the streets in New York to rally for Trump impeachment**  
 NEW YORK (China Daily) -- Demonstrators rallied in New York on Tuesday night to .. More >>>

**December 18, 2019**  
 - **Regional media cooperation forum opens in China**  
 Chengdu, Sichuan province: The Tenth 10+3 Media Cooperation Forum kicked off on Sunday in Chengdu, .. More >>>

**December 17, 2019**  
 - **UN climate talks end with no deal on key issue**  
 MADRID, (Xinhua)--The UN Climate Change Conference (COP25) came to an end on Sunday .. More >>>

**December 16, 2019**  
 - **Adherence to Paris accord key**  
 BEIJING (China Daily/ANN)--China called upon parties to adhere to the Paris climate agreement and uphold multilateralism and the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, as the 2019 .. More >>>

**December 13, 2019**  
 - **Friendship, cooperation with Russia a priceless asset**  
 MOSCOW (Vietnam News/ANN) -- National Assembly (NA) Chairwoman Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan attended a plenary session of the .. More >>>

**December 12, 2019**  
 - **China's civil-use observation satellite sends back 1st detailed images**  
 BEIJING (China Daily/ANN) -- China's best optical Earth observation satellite for civil use has started. .. More >>>

**December 11, 2019**  
 - **No signs of life after New Zealand volcanic eruption: PM**  
 WELLINGTON, (Xinhua) -- New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern confirmed Tuesday that .. More >>>

**December 10, 2019**  
 - **Death toll in Delhi fire reaches 43**  
 NEW DELHI (Xinhua) -- The death toll in a fire incident in Delhi on Sunday morning has reached .. More >>>

Source: “World News,” *Vientiane Times*, accessed Dec. 20, 2019, [http://www.vientianetimes.org.la/Region\\_world/Reworld\\_Index.php](http://www.vientianetimes.org.la/Region_world/Reworld_Index.php).

In addition, LNR broadcasts Chinese-language news sourced from Xinhua. LNR has broadcast Chinese-language news daily from 21:00 to 21:30 since 2015.<sup>102</sup> These broadcasts, which are intended to serve Chinese audiences in Laos and worldwide, are uploaded daily to the LNR website and SoundCloud.<sup>103</sup> Each broadcast usually includes three stories on Laos-China relations or international news headlines.<sup>104</sup> Since 2017, LNR has also hosted a “Radio Confucius Classroom” to teach Chinese and promote Chinese culture. According to a news release from Hanban, the parent organization of Confucius Institutes worldwide, the radio program reaches all of Laos and the northern part of Thailand.<sup>105</sup>



### 2.3.2 Jointly producing content with media outlets in Laos

The first film jointly produced between Laos and China debuted in September 2019. The film *Champa Blossom* features Chinese and Lao actors and “tells beautiful love stories between Lao and Chinese nationals, and shows the friendly relations between the two countries as well as their sceneries and cultural features.” According to the MICT’s Cinema Department, the opening of the movie intentionally coincided with the official “Year of Visiting Laos and China 2019” initiative.<sup>106</sup>

Figure 12. First ever Lao-Chinese film co-production, Champa Blossoms



*“The filming of the first ever Lao-Chinese film, ‘Champa Ban,’ or ‘Blossoming Champa’ (frangipani), portrays the beauty of the nature, culture and traditions, as well as the livelihoods of people in Laos and China.”*

*– Director of Film and Animation at the Department of Cinema, Mr. Khamphao Vannavong*

Source: *Vientiane Times* Facebook page, accessed Jan. 17, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/vientianetimesonline/photos/the-first-ever-lao-chinese-film-co-production-dorkchampaban-or-champa-flower-won/1899926190074825/>.



### 2.3.3 Authoring opinion pieces for Lao media outlets

PRC officials and CCP-approved surrogates often write opinion pieces for publication in foreign media outlets. These opinion pieces invariably promote CCP-approved, pro-China narratives. Perhaps the most conspicuous of these are the signed letters that Xi Jinping publishes in local media ahead of state visits to foreign nations. For example, prior to his state visit to Laos in November 2017, Xi Jinping authored an article titled “China and Laos: Working Together for a Community of Shared Future with Strategic Significance,” which was published in Lao-language state-run media outlets including *Passasson*, *Pathet Lao*, and the English-language daily *Vientiane Times*.<sup>107</sup>

Similarly, the Chinese Embassy in Vientiane promotes the narrative that China is Laos’ critical partner, including in efforts to fight COVID-19. For example, after a second Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) delivery of COVID-19 test kits arrived in Laos in March, an unnamed Chinese Embassy contact is quoted in the *Vientiane Times*, stating, “The Chinese government will offer more assistance to Laos in disease prevention and control based on the needs of the evolving situation... On behalf of a partner of common destiny, the Party, government, and people of China... are ready, together with Laos, to overcome the difficulty.”<sup>108</sup>



### 2.3.4 Establishing a presence on social media in Laos

Facebook is synonymous with the internet in Laos, and 100 percent of social media users are active Facebook users. According to the Lao National Internet Center, the number of social media users reached 2.7 million (39 percent of the population) in 2019, and Facebook data show that there were 2.7 million active monthly users on its platform in Laos.<sup>109, 110</sup>

CRI Vientiane (FM93) has the second most popular Facebook page in Laos. CRI Vientiane’s Facebook page shares local news, news about Laos-China relations, and human interest stories to over 1.19 million followers (Laos has a population of just under 7 million).<sup>111</sup> Despite the large number of followers, it is noteworthy that most posts have low user engagement, with 50 or fewer likes on many posts.

Table 6. China’s presence in Laos social media

	Facebook	YouTube	Twitter
Top 3 pages (total user number)	Una Studio ຜູ້ນາສະຕູດີໂອ (1,257,994)	RFA Laotian ວິທຍຸອັດລ້ຽງເສລີ (30,200)	LaosSimplyBeautiful (10,925)
	CRI-FM93 (1,194,945)	Laos Pictures ຮູບພາບປະເທດລາວ (27,400)	UK in Laos (2,923)
	ໂທລະໂຄ້ງ THOLAKHONG (1,017,747)	VOA Lao (3,190)	ໂທລະໂຄ້ງ THOLAKHONG (1,932)

Source: “Social Media Statistics,” Socialbakers, 2019, accessed Dec. 20, 2019, <https://www.socialbakers.com/statistics>.

CRI's Lao-language reporting on China's COVID-19 support to Laos appears to have reached a broad audience, supporting China's narrative that it is the sole provider of assistance combatting the spread of the virus in Laos. CRI Laos Facebook posts about China's help to Laos in combating COVID-19 receive relatively high levels of engagement (i.e., likes, shares, and comments). For example, in four days (June 26–29, 2020), a CRI Laos post about the Lao Ministry of National Defense awarding a Friendship Medal to Chinese military specialists who, along with the provision of medical supplies, have “strongly supported Laos in the fight against COVID-19” received over 320 likes, 30 shares, and 10 comments—higher engagement than any other post during the same period.<sup>112</sup>

Thanks to CRI's Lao-language presence on Facebook, PRC photos and reports of “handover events” of COVID-19 tests and PPE from Chinese entities (including the PLA, Jack Ma Foundation, and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) working on the Kunming-Vientiane railway) to local organizations in Laos circulate widely on social media. According to one expert, these images and reports have likely contributed to a widespread sense that China is the most helpful international partner supporting Laos during the pandemic. As one expert put it, China has by far the most successful COVID-19 public diplomacy in Laos, and the goodwill this has engendered is likely to blunt any rise in anti-Chinese sentiment for several years.<sup>113</sup>

Figure 13. Laos media coverage of Chinese and Vietnamese COVID-19 supply “handover events”



Source: KPL Facebook, ປະເທດລາວ Pathedlao Apr. 24, 2020, accessed May 21, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/421087478095038/photos/a.421521294718323/1309821465888297/?type=3&theater>.

## ¥ 2.3.5 Investing in Lao media outlets

China uses its vast economic resources to acquire and, in some cases, create new channels for distributing Chinese-produced media content. In Laos, this investment is largely confined to Chinese-language media. Four key Chinese-language media outlets have ties to the Chinese corporate sector and regularly republish articles from Xinhua and *Global Times* (a subsidiary of CCP mouthpiece *People's Daily*). These outlets are shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Chinese ownership of local media in Laos

Outlet name	Description	Ownership
Lao Wo Tong News Portal (老挝通)	The largest Chinese-language online news and community forum, with WeChat, Weibo, QQ, and other platforms. News content primarily reposted from <i>Vientiane Times</i> Chinese language edition	Jing Yun Long, a Hunan, China registered company that operates two other Laos online shopping websites; website hosted by Changsha Lingyi Network Technology Co. Ltd. <sup>114</sup>
Xin Lao Wo News Portal (新老挝网)	Provides users with Laos-related information, Laos news, Laos travel information, Laos videos, Laos photos	Ownership unknown, registered in Beijing; advertisers included PRC Embassy in Laos, PRC Economic and Commercial Counsellor's Office in Laos, ICBC, BCEL (Laos state-owned commercial bank)
<i>Lao Future Magazine</i> (老挝商业资讯杂志)	A China-Laos business and commerce focused print magazine with a Weibo online microsite	Lao Future Media Group Co. Ltd.; associated with PRC state run China News Service (CNS) Yunnan branch
Chinese Times-Laos (中华时报--老挝)	A Chinese and English language news site focused on commerce, finance, and security between China and Laos. English content is predominately sourced from CGTN and <i>Global Times</i>	Chinese Chamber of Commerce – Laos, guidance from Chinese Embassy

Sources: Lao Wo Tong (laowo tong; 老挝通), Forum Announcement - About Us (luntan gonggao guanyu women; [论坛公告] 关于我们), accessed Dec. 31, 2019, <http://www.laowotong.com/thread-2-1-1.html>; Xin Lao Wo News Portal (xin laowo wang; 新老挝网), About (guanyu women; 关于我们), accessed Dec. 31, 2019, <http://www.xinlaowo.com/about.html>; 360 Laos News Portal (laowo zixun wang; 老挝资讯网), accessed Dec. 31, 2019, 32613092@qq.com [https://website.informer.com/360laos.com#tab\\_stats](https://website.informer.com/360laos.com#tab_stats); China News Agency Yunnan Branch Signs Strategic Cooperation Agreement with Laos Future Media Co., Ltd., (zhong xin she yunnan fenshe yu laowo weilai chuanmei youxian gongsi gianshu zhanlue hezuo xieyi; 中新社云南分社与老挝未来传媒有限公司签署战略合作协议), China News Agency (zhong xin xhse; 中新社), Jan. 13, 2015, <http://www.yn.chinanews.com/news/2014/1105/163.html>; Chinese Times – Laos (Zhonghua shibao - laowo; 中华时报 – 老挝), Chinese Times, accessed Dec. 6, 2019, <https://www.chinesetimes-laos.com/>.



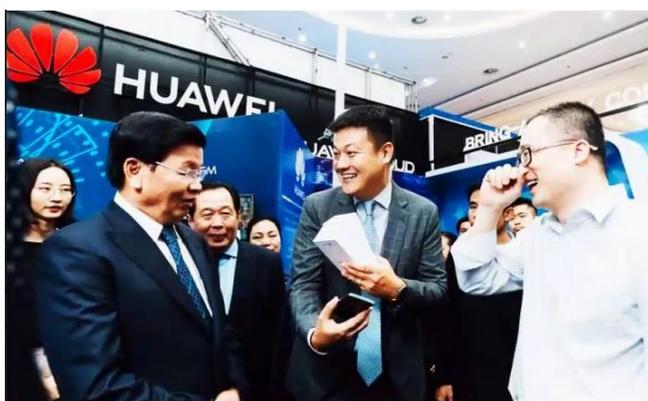
## 2.3.6 Investing in telecommunications infrastructure

China is a major source of development assistance and investment in Laos, including in ICT and media-related infrastructure projects. According to AidData, Laos has received over \$11 billion in official finance—including non-concessional assistance—from China.<sup>115</sup> Chinese assistance in the media and ICT sectors has focused on bringing newer technologies into Laos. For instance, in 2008, Laos received a soft loan from China valued at \$20 million to build

internet infrastructure and provide training for the Lao National Internet Center (LANIC). More than half of the LANIC staff have trained in China and Vietnam to operate the Laos internet grid.<sup>116</sup> According to a 2018 report on Lao governance by the German-based research foundation Bertelsmann Stiftung, China has also provided Laos with technology to censor online communications.<sup>117</sup>

Huawei, a Chinese state-owned telecommunications company, has sought to expand its presence in Laos. Huawei is already the third largest mobile vendor in Laos by market share (holding 15.36 percent of the market), following Samsung (37.4 percent) and Apple (21.75 percent).<sup>118</sup> In 2017, Huawei donated “critical communications systems and police terminal equipment” to the Lao Ministry of Public Security.<sup>119</sup> Huawei and MPT representatives have said that Huawei’s 5G and Smart Cities technologies are “in line with Laos’ digital transformation vision.” Of note, Huawei has been under sanctions from the US government since May 2019.

Figure 14. Lao PM Thongloun Sisoulith and Minister of Lao Ministry of Post & Telecommunication at Huawei ICT event in Vientiane



*“Huawei is committed to providing quality equipment and services for local carriers, and transferring knowledge and nurturing talent, so as to develop more communications talent for Laos and push the local ICT industry forward.”*  
*–Huawei in Laos, “Seeds for the Future”<sup>120</sup>*

Source: (Photo) Lao News Agency (KPL). “Embrace 5G Cloud Future: Huawei’s Debut at Lao Expo,” *Vientiane Times*, Jul. 1, 2019, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/business/embrace-5g-cloud-future-huaweis-debut-lao-expo>.

China has helped to fund Laos’ transition from analog to digital broadcast technologies. The Lao and Chinese governments signed agreements for China to provide key technological updates to Laos’ broadcasting sector. The most prominent agreement is for China’s provision of a three-phase overall plan to expand satellite broadcast coverage (completed), digitization of Lao National Television (LNTV) Channel 3 (completed), and upgrading all LNTV standard definition broadcasting equipment to high definition (initiated 2019, ongoing).<sup>121</sup>

As part of its switch from analog to digital broadcasting technology, Laos intends to fully integrate the Chinese broadcast standard—Digital Terrestrial Multimedia Broadcast (DTMB)—by 2020.<sup>122</sup> By mid-2018, DTMB networks were functional in three provinces: Savannakhet, Champassak, and Luang Prabang.<sup>123</sup> As of December 2019, Laos has one digital free-to-air channel, LNTV-3, which was upgraded from analog to digital by a consortium of Chinese companies.<sup>124</sup> The switch to DTMB is likely to increase cooperation with neighboring Cambodia, where DTMB was rolled out in 2012.<sup>125</sup>

The Lao government views the upgrade to DTMB as an important step for providing rural people with better systems and spurring growth in the television broadcast sector.<sup>126</sup> While the Lao government has explicitly prioritized the upgrades to DTMB, it is not the only broadcast standard in use; some systems have also upgraded to the Vietnamese broadcast standard, DVB-T, with assistance from the Vietnam government.<sup>127</sup>

#### **The growth of China's digital television standard**

DTMB is a Chinese mobile and fixed digital television standard that was released in 2006 and became the official PRC standard in August 2007.<sup>128</sup> The Chinese standard has spread abroad and competes with other major standards like the North American ATSC, European DVB-T, and Japanese ISDB-T. These competing digital standards require dedicated hardware to receive the signal and display or project the audio and video.

Chinese support for the expansion of DTMB in Laos has created opportunities for China to provide more television programs. Chinese media actors have partnered with the Lao government to provide television networks in Laos with channels that feature programs offered in both Lao and Chinese. In May 2019, for instance, LNTV and the Yunnan Media Group signed an agreement to collaborate on the creation of more digital channels “to allow Lao and Chinese television audiences a broader range of programs.”<sup>129</sup> According to Xinhua, new digital channels will cover a wide range of programs in both Lao and Chinese languages, including news and current affairs, entertainment, Chinese movies, and travel documentaries.<sup>130</sup>

In addition to funding Lao's transition to DTMB, the Chinese government has donated funding to ensure LNR has adequate resources to fund its Chinese-language operations. To this end, from 2016 to 2017, the Chinese government donated FM transmitters and other radio production equipment to LNR earmarked to be used for its Chinese language programming.<sup>131</sup>

Lao Asia Pacific Satellite Co Ltd. (LaoSat), a Chinese-financed company operated as a joint venture between Laos and China's Asia Pacific Mobile Telecommunications Satellite (APMT), is the only satellite operator in Laos.<sup>132</sup> It is one of two satellite companies relaying direct-to-home (DTH) satellite television to Laos audiences. LaoSat offers “more Chinese [content] than [from] any other foreign country” to paying subscribers. Customers can get the set-top box at

no charge but must pay anywhere from \$15 to \$42 for subscriptions to access all 130 channels.<sup>133</sup> Though over 300,000 Chinese families live in Laos—a key customer group for LaoSat programming—there are only 10,000 paying subscribers to LaoSat DTH channels.<sup>134</sup>

## 2.4 Attempting to influence Lao media to promote China-friendly narratives

In addition to using its own state-run media to promote its narratives, Beijing seeks to influence reporting by foreign media outlets and journalists. It does this by promoting censorship and seeking to shape the perceptions of foreign media professionals. There is evidence that Beijing is using the following tools to do this in Laos:

- Hosting international media forums and conferences
- Hosting education and training programs for foreign media professionals



### 2.4.1 Hosting international media forums & conferences

Lao officials and media professionals have participated in numerous media-related forums hosted or organized by China. For example, in early 2018, Lao Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith met in Vientiane with Xinhua News Agency President Cai Mingzhao to discuss bilateral media cooperation with respect to the Laos-China Belt and Road Cooperation Forum. This forum was co-organized by Xinhua and the Commission for Propaganda and Training of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, MICT, and KPL.<sup>135, 136</sup>

The governments of the PRC and Laos jointly host a key annual regional media summit, the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation Media Summit (*Lancang Jiang Meigong He Hezuo Meiti Fenghui*; 澜沧江湄公河合作媒体峰会). This summit for journalists and media executives from China and the Mekong countries has taken place in China and alternating Mekong country capitals since 2017.<sup>137</sup> Recent summits include the following:

- China's *People's Daily* and the Lao Ministry of Information and Culture jointly hosted the 2018 summit in Vientiane as part of “the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative.”<sup>138</sup> Over 100 media professionals from the five Mekong countries—22 of whom were from Laos—convened for three days to discuss “consumption upgrading and tourism development” and “media transformation.”<sup>139</sup>

- In 2019, the third iteration of the summit was held in Kunming, Yunnan province. *Vientiane Times* reporting on the summit emphasized communication on the China-Laos railway, set to open in 2021.<sup>140</sup>

Participating countries in the annual Mekong-Lancang summits have also sent media professionals to China for training. In December 2019, Lao Foreign Languages Press (*Vientiane Times*) reporters traveled to China’s Guangxi province for training (see Figure 15). According to the *Vientiane Times*’ Chinese-language edition, training included “negotiations on the Southeast Asian Multimedia Translation and Dubbing Center, China-ASEAN Cloud, trends in traditional and new media, [and] the application of WeChat on interactive radio programs.”<sup>141</sup>

Figure 15. 2019 Lancang-Mekong New Media Training in Guangxi, China



Source: Visith Teppalath, “Guangxi New Media Training Strengthens Links between Mekong Countries ” (*guangxi xin meiti peixun jiaqiangle meigonghe guojia zhi jian de lianxi*; 广西新媒体培训加强了湄公河国家之间的联系), *Vientiane Times* Chinese Edition, (*wanxiang shidai zhongwen ban*; 万象时代中文版), Dec. 16, 2019, [https://www.weibo.com/6933083751/1l3cjg6d?type=comment#\\_rnd1577816603898](https://www.weibo.com/6933083751/1l3cjg6d?type=comment#_rnd1577816603898).

China-Laos media cooperation also takes place at the local level in Laos. For instance, since at least 2016, there has been an annual meeting between the Lao Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism and the Chinese Consul General in Luang Prabang on “information and media work in northern Laos.” A Xinhua Vientiane bureau article quoted a Laos official as suggesting “the northern part of Laos take advantage of its border position and further strengthen [media] exchanges and cooperation with Yunnan and Guangxi of China... [and] hoped that China will

intensify efforts in training media personnel, upgrading media equipment and the broadcasting of Chinese radio and television programs in Laos.”<sup>142</sup>



## 2.4.2 Hosting education and training programs

Cooperation between Chinese and Lao state-run media includes technical training, personnel training, and “exposure” trips for Lao media professionals.<sup>143</sup> Training programs provided by China include both technical and professional training, as well as trips to Chinese cities to “enable [Lao] journalists to broaden their ideas about China... [and] strengthen friendship and deepen mutual trust.”<sup>144</sup> According to a local media expert, China’s training assistance to Laos focuses on providing individual journalists with skills training and cultivating a positive impression of China. In their words, China’s strategy, is “targeted towards journalists” while media development support from Western-based organizations tends to focus on long-term capacity building and development of the media sector. The Laos government appears to have been more receptive to China’s approach to training. Several examples of China’s media training programs include the following:

- In July 2019, journalists from the *Vientiane Times* and *Passasson*, as well as LNTV and MICT personnel, traveled to Zunyi, Guizhou province. According to *Vientiane Times* coverage, the trip occurred at the invitation of a large Chinese tour company and the participants stayed at a four-star hotel and toured numerous local sites, including the Red Soldiers Monument and the Mao-tai liquor processing facility.<sup>145</sup>
- In addition to providing Laos with technological upgrades for digital TV, the Chinese government is also providing ongoing technical and operational training courses for Lao personnel associated with the LNTV-3 upgrade through August 2022.<sup>146</sup>

Media professionals from Laos have also participated in skills training hosted by Chinese provincial governments and state-run media. Media personnel have participated in three semiannual “Lancang (Mekong) National News and Media Reporting” training programs. These weeklong trainings—billed as opportunities to deepen exchange, understanding, and collaboration—are likely intended to help China advance its narrative within the Laos

media. After completing a training program in Yunnan, Panyasith Thammavongsa, the Director of the Editorial Department of *Vientiane Times*, was quoted in a provincial newspaper praising

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*Xinhua “is willing to strengthen cooperation with the KPL and other Lao media organizations to convey to the world true information about China and the Laos.”*

*—Cai Mingzhao, President of Xinhua News Agency*

*Source: Yan, “Lao Prime Minister Meets Xinhua News Agency President,” Xinhua, Feb. 02, 2018, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-02/03/c\\_136947013.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-02/03/c_136947013.htm).*

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Chinese technology and the China-Lao relationship. He said, “During this training, we took a train from Kunming to Chuxiong Lufeng County, which only took about 20 minutes. Such speed and convenience make me think of and look forward to the Sino-Lao Railway that Laos and China have jointly built.”<sup>147</sup>

State-owned telecommunications company Huawei provides annual training for 10 undergraduate students from Laos each year in China as part of its “Seeds for the Future” program. The “Seeds for the Future” program has been operating in Laos since November 2016.<sup>148</sup> According to the CEO of Huawei’s branch in Laos, Wang Qi, the program “aims to facilitate the transfer of ICT knowledge, thus assisting Laos to be a digitally empowered nation.”<sup>149</sup> As part of the program, the Lao students are hosted on a study-trip to China where they learn about 5G, LTE, cloud computing, and other technologies in visits to Huawei research laboratories.<sup>150</sup>

## 2.5 Using entertainment to promote Chinese narratives

In recent years, Beijing has sought to expand its footprint in the global entertainment industry as a means of promoting a positive image of China to global audiences. In Laos, there is evidence that China is doing this by exporting Chinese-produced entertainment and promoting PRC-controlled social media platforms.



### 2.5.1 Exporting Chinese-produced entertainment

Chinese television and radio entertainment programming appears in Lao-language free-to-air television and on Lao National Radio. Since 2015, China’s Guangxi People’s Radio has dubbed more than 200 Chinese television programs into Lao for broadcast on LNTV. China has also paid for several famous literary dramas—“Journey to the West” and “Dream of the Red Chamber”—and an educational program on agricultural methods to be dubbed into Lao and made available on LNTV1 and LNTV3.<sup>151</sup> In addition, in 2015, Xinhua and KPL signed an agreement to establish relay stations for Chinese radio and television channels in Vientiane.<sup>152</sup> To facilitate dubbing of Chinese entertainment content into Lao language, LNTV’s “voiceover center” was launched in 2014 with financial and technical support from Guangxi People’s Radio.<sup>153</sup>

Figure 16. Chinese-produced TV programs are dubbed and broadcast on LNTV



Source: “Three Chinese TV Programmes Set to Air on Lao National Television LNTV Channels 1 and 3 at the End of this Month,” Lao National Television English Program, Facebook Page, May 11, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/159023380915975/videos/503876093097367/>.



## 2.5.2 Promoting PRC-controlled social media platforms

While Facebook is the most popular social media platform in Laos, other Chinese-owned platforms—including WeChat, TikTok, and Weibo—have a significant presence. TikTok, an app for short-form videos, registered as the fifth most popular application in Laos in June 2019. Growth in WeChat, Weibo, and other Chinese mobile applications appears to be driven by an increasing number of Chinese tourists and expatriates living in Laos.<sup>154</sup> Evidence of these platforms footprint in Laos includes the following:

- As of 2019 Banque Pour Le Commerce Exterieur Lao Public (BCEL), one of the largest state-owned commercial banks in Laos, allows merchants to accept mobile payments through WeChat Pay.<sup>155</sup>
- The Laos government-run *Vientiane Times* launched its Chinese edition in October 2019 on an external Weibo website, increasing the paper’s reach to Chinese users. As of January 2020, the Weibo page has 1,259 “fans” (see Figure 17).<sup>156</sup>

Figure 17. *Vientiane Times* on Weibo



Source: "Vientiane Times Chinese Edition," (*Wanxiang shidai zhongwen ban*; 万象时代中文版), Weibo, accessed: Jan. 10, 2020, [https://www.weibo.com/u/6933083751?is\\_hot=1](https://www.weibo.com/u/6933083751?is_hot=1).

# 3. Assessing the Impact of Chinese Narratives

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## 3.1 Reach and resonance

This report offers an understanding of the variety and scope of Beijing’s efforts to shape the information environment in Laos, but should not be viewed as a comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of China’s efforts. Such an assessment would require extensive polling data and sentiment analysis that goes beyond the scope of this report and is difficult to conduct during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, during the course of our research, we did identify several factors appear to affect the reach and resonance of PRC narratives in Laos. These include the following:

***Audiences in Laos appear relatively receptive to PRC efforts to shape the information environment.*** According to a 2019 study from the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, public views in Laos of China are generally favorable:

- 75.9 percent—the largest of any ASEAN country polled—of people in Laos view the Belt and Road Initiative as beneficial for regional economic development and enhanced ASEAN-China relations.<sup>157</sup>
- 48.3 percent of those surveyed believe that China will remain a status quo power that continues to support the existing regional order.<sup>158</sup> By comparison, 41.4 percent expressed uncertainty about the reliability of the US commitment in the region.<sup>159</sup>

***China appears to have achieved a broad reach in Laos’ media environment, poising itself to overtake Vietnam.*** Historically, Vietnam has

enjoyed greater cultural and political influence in Laos; however, China is actively working to eclipse Vietnam’s footprint in the local information environment. Beijing is doing this by running two news bureaus in Vientiane, increasing content-sharing agreements with local media outlets, running training programs for Lao journalists, growing its presence on social media, jointly producing entertainment

with local entities, and establishing a foothold in Laos’ internet and telecommunications sector. According to local experts, China’s efforts to saturate the local media have paid off. One expert

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*“Vietnam has the longest history of working on media in Laos, but now when you go into office buildings in Vientiane, Xinhua is on the table and CCTV is on the television.” – Local media expert, 2020*

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told us, “Vietnam has the longest history of working on media in Laos, but now when you go into office buildings in Vientiane, Xinhua is on the table and CCTV is on the television.”<sup>160</sup>

***But not all of Laos’ citizens view China favorably.***

Indeed, in the northern part of the country, where Chinese investments have brought a surge of Chinese labor, views of China may be less rosy. According to one expert, “stories of a rising China’s encroachment into northern Laos often dominate the headlines of regional media outlets and draw criticism from inside Laos.”<sup>161</sup> In some instances, the Chinese presence—and the effects China’s investments have had upon the local population—have spurred targeted attacks against Chinese citizens.<sup>162</sup>

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*“Northern Laos is now like a Chinese colony. Everything in Laos is ‘Made by China, Made for China.’ We hear these words everyday on the streets of Vientiane, but since we’re a small country, there’s little we can do to stop it.” – Lao finance professional, 2016*

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**What can the international community do to support the integrity of the Laos information environment?**

Between March and July 2020, CNA held discussions with media professionals and experts on the information environment in Laos. During these discussions, participants offered several suggestions about how the international community could help to support the integrity of Laos’ information environment. These included the following:

- ***Focus on skills training, not politics.*** Participants suggested that providing discrete skills training for journalists in partnership with the Laos Institute of Mass Media, Culture, and Tourism (IMMC) is likely the most successful strategy for helping support local media. Conversely, attempts to provide broader media development or capacity building, is likely to trip political sensitivities that would prohibit any international organization’s involvement.
- ***Be patient and persistent.*** Decisions about media engagement in Laos are subject to lengthy bureaucratic processes. According to one participant, it took two years for one international organization to receive the required approvals to host a training program for Lao journalists.
- ***When possible, work with Vietnamese organizations.*** Several participants emphasized Vietnam’s role in Laos’ media environment, through the presence of Vietnamese media and Vietnamese-run journalist training programs. Partnering with Vietnamese entities may facilitate access.
- ***Support efforts to promote digital literacy.*** The complexity of the modern information environment and the rise of social media can work to the advantage external actors like China. Improving digital literacy in Laos would provide media consumers with the skills to identify and utilize reputable sources of news.

## 3.2 Issues to watch

The media in Laos is characterized by a dominant central government voice—and voices that criticize, undercut, or otherwise undermine the government are actively quieted. However, the Lao government has chosen to allow China and Vietnam to play active roles in Laos' domestic media landscape. In this environment—a centrally controlled media with a significant Chinese presence—there are several issues that are worth monitoring:

- ***An increase in the number of PRC media outlets producing Lao-language content.*** The number of PRC state-run media outlets producing content in Lao language appears to be growing. Prior to March 2020, only CRI was producing Lao-language reporting. As of March, a consortium of CRI, CMG, CCTV, and CNR began producing brief news videos in Lao.
- ***Further efforts to tailor PRC news reporting to appeal to domestic audiences.*** Currently, PRC media reporting focuses on events that involve China. PRC media outlets may seek to increase their appeal to local audiences by reporting on purely domestic events—a tactic that PRC media has used in other countries such as Cambodia and the US.
- ***Criticism of China in local media in Laos.*** Although popular views of China tend to be favorable in Laos, there are areas of the country where locals' views have been shaped by the negative effects of Chinese projects. In some instances, there have even been targeted attacks against Chinese citizens working in Laos. The degree to which criticism of China finds an outlet in local media in these areas is an issue to watch.

# Appendix A: China Radio International on Facebook

China Radio International (CRI) has a noteworthy presence on Facebook in the five Mekong countries. CRI uses Facebook in each of these countries to broadcast content produced by Chinese state-media outlets in local languages.

The reach of CRI to Facebook audiences is indicated, by follower numbers, in Table 8. Of note, data from SocialBakers indicates that CRI is the second most popular page in Laos by number of followers.

Table 8. China Radio International on Facebook in the Mekong countries

Country	Facebook Account	Followers	Facebook Page URL
<b>Cambodia</b>	CCFR Beijing (China-Cambodian Friendship Radio)	1,214,192	facebook.com/ccfrbeijing/
<b>Laos</b>	CRI-FM 93 Vientiane	1,185,992	facebook.com/crifm93/
<b>Myanmar</b>	CRI Myanmar	1,182,951	facebook.com/myanmar.cri/
<b>Thailand</b>	China Face	2,453,364	facebook.com/ChinafacecriThai/
<b>Vietnam</b>	Đài Phát thanh Quốc tế Trung Quốc	1,961,314	facebook.com/criviet
<b>Global</b>	China Plus News	20,941,191	facebook.com/chinaplusnews/

Source: Facebook, CNA.

## Appendix B: Xinhua's Vientiane Bureau

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Xinhua News Agency has a bureau in the capital city of Vientiane, where it relies on at least 10 Chinese journalists to provide content and analysis.<sup>163</sup> The following Chinese journalists have had bylines in Xinhua (Vientiane) between 2016 and 2019:

1. Zhang Jianhua (章建华)
2. Lin Hao (林昊)
3. Rong Zhongxia (荣忠霞)
4. Zheng Mingda (郑明达)
5. Mao Lili (毛丽丽)
6. Xiong Tianze (熊天泽)
7. Chen Erhou (陈二厚)
8. Xie Meihua (谢美华)
9. Zhou Na (周娜)
10. Tan Junjie (谭俊杰)<sup>164</sup>



Figure 18. Xinhua's Vientiane bureau

# Appendix C: China's Global Narratives

<p><b>China is peaceful</b></p>	<p>China portrays itself as an inherently peaceful country that would never intentionally start a conflict.<sup>165</sup></p>
<p>How it supports PRC objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Promotes a positive image of China:</b> Portrays China as peaceful and non-threatening</li> <li>• <b>Counters critics:</b> Counters concerns about the rapid growth of China's military power and regional assertiveness</li> <li>• <b>Supports China's foreign policy objectives:</b> Seeks to foster receptivity to China's diplomatic overtures</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Cooperation with China is beneficial</b></p>	<p>China claims its approach to cooperation with other countries is mutually beneficial and "win-win."<sup>166</sup></p>
<p>How it supports PRC objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Promotes a positive image of China:</b> Portrays China as generous and helpful</li> <li>• <b>Counters critics:</b> Counters criticism of China's economic aid and investment practices as being exploitive</li> <li>• <b>Supports China's foreign policy objectives:</b> Seeks to foster support for cooperation with China on a range of issues, including economic, technological, and security matters</li> </ul>	
<p><b>China is a responsible member of the international community</b></p>	<p>China portrays itself as an upholder of the international system that provides public goods such as contributions to peacekeeping efforts, support to antipiracy missions in the Gulf of Aden, and disaster relief.<sup>167</sup></p>
<p>How it supports PRC objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Promotes a positive image of China:</b> Portrays China as a responsible and active contributor to the international system</li> <li>• <b>Counters critics:</b> Counters accusations that China is a revisionist power that seeks to reshape the international system; also counters concerns about the Chinese military's expanding overseas operations</li> <li>• <b>Supports China's foreign policy objectives:</b> Seeks to foster support for China's expanding global presence and position China as a leader in the international community</li> </ul>	
<p><b>China's approach to development and international affairs is different from that of the US/West</b></p>	<p>China often contrasts its approach to development and foreign policy with that of the US and other Western nations.<sup>168</sup></p>
<p>How it supports PRC objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Promotes a positive image of China:</b> Portrays China as better than the US and the West</li> <li>• <b>Counters critics:</b> Deflects criticism by the United States and other Western countries, often by seeking to delegitimize their policies, positions, and activities</li> <li>• <b>Supports China's foreign policy objectives:</b> Portrays China as a more desirable partner</li> </ul>	

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# Abbreviations

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AP	Associated Press
ADB	Asian Development Bank
ANN	Asia News Network
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ATSC	Advanced Television Systems Committee
BCEL	Banque Pour Le Commerce Exterieur Lao Public
CASC	China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCTV	China Central Television
CGTN	China Global Television Network
CNS	China News Service
CRI	China Radio International
DTH	direct-to-home
DTMB	Digital Terrestrial Multimedia Broadcast
DVB-T	Digital Video Broadcasting - Terrestrial
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
ICT	information and communications technology
ISDB-T	Integrated Services Digital Broadcasting-Terrestrial
ISP	internet service provider
KPL	Khaosan Pathet Lao
LANIC	Lao National Internet Center
LDC	Least Developed Country
LJA	Lao Journalist Association
LNR	Lao National Radio
LNTV	Lao National Television
LPRP	Lao People's Revolutionary Party
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MICT	Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism
MOU	memorandum of understanding
MPT	Ministry of Post and Telecommunication
OANA	Organization of the Asian and Pacific News Agencies
ODA	overseas development assistance
RFI	Radio France International
RSF	Reporters Without Borders

RTA	Radio and Television Association
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
VOA	Voice of America

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aggression and wars” and “will never inflict such sufferings on any other country.” “China’s National Defense in the New Era,” *State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China*, July 24, 2019.

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