



China 201

China's External Propaganda Activities

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For CCP leaders, influencing how the outside world views and engages with China is a matter of regime survival and a means of advancing national interests. The Party-state recognizes that the success of certain objectives—such as the CCP's unquestioned rule over China, the absence of criticism regarding CCP policies, the Party's unequivocal claim to speak for the Chinese diaspora in a way the outside world acknowledges, and the unification of Taiwan with the Mainland—depends partly on the behavior of foreign leaders and publics. In the same vein, CCP leaders understand that foreign parties' reactions to their efforts may impact the effectiveness of China's signature foreign policy initiatives, foreign investment, and technology transfer as well as the attractiveness of its global image.

Under Xi's rule, China's overseas influence activities are now more prevalent, institutionalized, technologically sophisticated, and aggressive than under his predecessors. China's overseas influence activities involve many actors within the Party-state and can be found in countries around the world, regardless of their form of government or level of development.

In the media sphere, China's Party-state aims to bolster its global image by encouraging positive coverage,

manipulating local media environments, and silencing critical voices. Content sharing agreements between Chinese state media and foreign media outlets, CCP-sponsored media training programs, investments in local media, disinformation propagated through social media, and intimidation of media figures are all avenues through which the Party-state seeks to control foreign coverage of China.

Defining China's Overseas Influence Activities and a Theory of Harm

This document defines "overseas influence activities" as the wide range of actions the CCP leadership undertakes to shape other countries' perceptions and their policy choices in ways that advance Chinese national interests. Furthermore, the document restricts its focus to only those influence activities that plausibly cause *harm*

* Minor modifications may have been made for readability or to provide clarity as to the date information in the excerpt is current. 201 products are not updated, so information is only current as of the "cut-off" date of the Annual Report publication(s) from which the 201 is excerpted. 201 products are focused on "evergreen" issues for which the lack of currency will not affect the core analysis.

to the targeted country.* Harm to a country can be construed in a variety of overlapping ways:

- *Compromising political processes and institutions:* This includes corrupting the integrity of political deliberation and its associated processes as well as manipulating political or social activity to disguise actions that advance China's interests as the efforts of domestic constituencies.¹
- *Manipulating the information environment:* This includes undermining the ability of media or other civil society actors to hold domestic and foreign actors accountable for choices contrary to the public interest; it also includes restricting the availability of knowledge that domestic policymakers require as the basis for sound decision-making.²
- *Encroaching on civil liberties:* This includes preventing citizens in democratic countries from exercising the freedoms to which they are entitled (such as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, and freedom of the press) and may take the form of state-sponsored transnational repression schemes carried out by China's security services.³
- *Undermining the commercial environment:* This may involve elite capture and other forms of corruption to create commercial conditions that advance Chinese objectives, including awarding contracts to Chinese firms, deepening dependence on China, and achieving preferential access to resources or export markets. Dependence on China as an export market or as a supplier of critical goods and technology can then be leveraged for coercive purposes.⁴

Some of China's harmful overseas influence activities may be illegal in the targeted country, but others may

be entirely legal or occupy a legal gray zone that makes them difficult to mitigate effectively. Some of these activities may exploit differences between federal, state, and local regulations.⁵ In some cases, a discrete instance of the influence activity may not be problematic, but the cumulative impact of China's activities may cause harm to the targeted society.

Influencing Hearts and Minds Abroad: China's United Front and External Propaganda Activities²

CCP leaders believe they must influence the outside world in order to protect themselves from threats to their regime and to advance China's national interests, including its "national rejuvenation."⁶ Since the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, the Party-state has assessed that it faces a hostile Western bloc bent on undermining China's political stability by spreading "subversive" ideas within China as well as among the Chinese diaspora.⁷ At the same time, it maintains that Western countries unfairly smear China's international image and aim to constrain its emergence as a global power.⁸ As a result, the Party-state seeks to influence the world in which it operates and shape how China is perceived by foreign audiences in ways observers often label "influence operations" or "foreign interference."⁹ Drawing from the ideology developed by Russian political theorist and Marxist revolutionary Vladimir Lenin, the Party-state structures its efforts to influence foreign

* In contrast to activities that could be understood as beneficial and purely intended to build "soft power," which refers to the ability of a country to persuade others to do what it wants without force or coercion. Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2004.

† The CCP's narrative of "national rejuvenation" promises to increase China's material power and redress grievances from what Chinese leaders call the "century of humiliation," which Beijing believes robbed it of its rightful place as a global leader. Xi has repeatedly stated that unification with Taiwan is an important part of national rejuvenation. For more on the national rejuvenation concept, see U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Chapter 1, Section 2, "The China Model: Return of the Middle Kingdom," in *2020 Annual Report to Congress*, December 2020, 89.

perceptions around two longstanding Leninist* approaches to foreign policy: “united front work” and “external propaganda work.”¹⁰ United front work involves rallying support for the CCP and neutralizing opposition to its policies and authority, while external propaganda work aims to control international perceptions of China and increase the CCP’s sway over global narratives.¹¹

The Party-state conducts united front and external propaganda work against a variety of overseas populations† to rally them in support of its agenda or counter threats to the success of that agenda.¹² The CCP’s targets include foreign government officials, businesspersons, human rights advocates, and other influential figures the Party-state believes have the clout needed to advance or impede policies aligned with its goals.¹³ Another major target is the Chinese diaspora, whom the Party-state views as resources for advancing its overseas interests and consolidating its global influence.¹⁴ Beijing lays claim to all “sons and daughters of the Chinese nation in China and abroad,” including PRC nationals overseas as well as ethnically Chinese citizens and residents of foreign countries in its expansive target of what it means to be “Chinese.”¹⁵ A third target is persecuted ethnic and religious minorities whom the CCP perceives as threats to territorial integrity and social cohesion, such as but not limited to Tibetans, Uyghurs, Mongolians, and members of the Falun Gong movement outlawed in China.¹⁶ A fourth target is citizens of Hong Kong who have resisted Beijing’s imposition of the National Security Law and other encroachments on the formerly free territory.¹⁷ A fifth category is citizens of Taiwan, where the Party-state’s goals include cultivating

support for unification with the Mainland and opposing *de jure* independence.¹⁸

External propaganda aims to control international perceptions of China and increase the CCP’s sway over global narratives.

“Telling China’s Story Well”: CCP External Propaganda Work

External propaganda work refers to the Party-state’s efforts to shape the attitudes of foreign audiences through propaganda.¹⁹ Like united front work, external propaganda is also based on Leninist principles of information control and has been practiced by the CCP since the 1920s.²⁰ The CCP leaders of the past and present have viewed external propaganda work as a means of cultivating positive global attitudes toward China, countering what they view as hostile foreign propaganda about China, publicizing the CCP’s stance on important issues, promoting Chinese culture abroad, and enhancing China’s ability to set the global agenda.²¹ External propaganda work reinforces united front work by influencing the attitudes of key overseas constituencies and is sometimes implemented by the same organizations within the Party-state bureaucracy.²²

* Developed by Lenin in the early 1900s and deployed by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Leninism is typically understood as an action-oriented ideology that builds upon the intellectual groundwork laid by Marxism. Leninism builds on Marxism in holding that there exists a singular, collective, utopian goal that polity and society should be organized and mobilized toward reaching. Leninism supplements Marxism, however, in holding that a vanguard Party, operating under the pretense of representing the working class or the “proletariat,” is both uniquely qualified and necessary for achieving Marxism’s prophesied communist future. The core legacy of Leninism is a blueprint for creating an “organizational weapon,” namely a set of organizational tactics for achieving, maintaining, and enacting societal control and influence. The organizational weapon in Lenin’s framework is the Communist Party, which, operating under regimented hierarchical control of “democratic centralism,” is meant to thoroughly penetrate every sphere of society and implement plans from the top down. Philip Selznick, “The Organizational Weapon,” *McGraw Hill (RAND series)*, 1952, 3–8; U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *The China Rising Leaders Project, Part 1: The Chinese Communist Party and Its Emerging Next-Generation Leaders*, March 23, 2012, 55; Vladimir Lenin, “What Is to Be Done?: Burning Questions for Our Movement,” in *Lenin’s Collected Works*, 1902; Daniel Tobin, written testimony for U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on a ‘China Model?’ Beijing’s Promotion of Alternative Global Norms and Standards*, March 13, 2020.

† While this chapter focuses on the Party-state’s overseas united front work and propaganda work, it is important to note that China also conducts these activities within its borders toward its own population. Ryan Fedasiuk, “How China’s United Front System Works Overseas,” *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, April 13, 2022.

‡ Propaganda is information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote or publicize a particular political cause or point of view. European Parliament, *Understanding Propaganda and Disinformation*, November 15, 2025.

Since coming to power in 2013, Xi has repeatedly spoken about the importance of improving China's image by breaking what he alleges is a Western, biased monopoly on international information about China.²³ Frequently, he describes the work of improving China's image through external propaganda in terms of "strengthen[ing] China's international communication capabilities" or "telling China's story well."²⁴ In a 2015 speech, Xi underscored the global reach of propaganda work by stating, "Wherever the readers are, wherever the viewers are, that is where propaganda reports must extend their feelers, and where the focus and foothold of propaganda and ideological work must be placed."²⁵ In 2022 at the 20th Party Congress, Xi made clear that the priority remains to "better tell China's stories, make China's voice heard, and present a China that is credible, appealing, and respectable."²⁶ He vowed to make China's external propaganda work more effective and "to strengthen China's voice in international affairs so it is commensurate with our composite national strength and international status."²⁷

Xi has also intensified the external propaganda drive that began under his predecessor Hu Jintao by directing changes to the way China's propaganda apparatus produces and disseminates content to foreigners.²⁸ Since highlighting external propaganda work during a 2016 visit to the headquarters of *People's Daily*, Xinhua News Agency, and China Central Television (CCTV), Xi has spoken repeatedly of its global propaganda efforts.²⁹ He also oversaw the 2018 consolidation of three state television and radio broadcasters aimed at overseas audiences—China Global Television Network (CGTN), China Radio International, and China National Radio—into a

mega-broadcaster supervised by the CCP Central Propaganda Department and referred to as the "Voice of China" in media intended for foreigners.³⁰ In line with Xi's exhortations to improve external propaganda work, state media-affiliated newspapers and broadcasting platforms have increased their production of content for foreign audiences, launched new overseas bureaus,^{*} hired large numbers of foreign journalists, and increased their social media presence.³¹

China's System for External Propaganda Work

China's external propaganda system encompasses many agencies that work to influence the international media environment on the CCP's behalf or in ways that advance its interests.³² The government and nongovernment actors within China's propaganda system listed below engage in a mixture of propaganda, censorship, and disinformation[†] to shape foreign media discourse.³³ The CCP's Propaganda Department issues guidance regarding specific messages to be conveyed to foreign audiences that are then implemented by state media outlets, ministries, and Party bodies.³⁴ As with united front work, the top CCP leadership expects organizations at all levels within China's Party-state—and increasingly within Hong Kong—to contribute to external propaganda work.³⁵ Entities contributing to China's

^{*} As of 2021, Xinhua has 181 overseas bureaus, while GCTN has offices in more than 70 countries. China Radio International also has a presence in at least 14 countries. By contrast, the *Associated Press* has around 250 bureaus worldwide. Both Xinhua and *China Daily* also pay for online and print inserts in U.S. news outlets. Between 2019 and 2021, *China Daily* spent more than \$7 million buying ad space in both print and online publications. Additionally, it claims to have 300 thousand copies in circulation daily in the United States and 600 thousand overseas. As a state-owned company, *China Daily* provides Beijing with a direct platform to spread propaganda in the United States, primarily reaching an older generation of readers. Alternatively, an increasing number of Americans rely on new media, like TikTok, for their news. TikTok, which is privately owned by a Chinese company but ultimately [as of the 2023 original date of publication this report] must be responsive to the demands of the Party-state, provides Beijing with a potential avenue to reach its more than 150 million users in the United States. Catherine Thorbecke, "TikTok Says It Has 150 Million US Users amid Renewed Calls for a Ban," *CNN Business*, March 21, 2023; Christopher Paul, "How China Plays by Different Rules—at Everyone Else's Expense," *RAND Corporation*, February 7, 2022; Joshua Kurlantzick, "China Wants Your Attention, Please," *Council of Foreign Relations*, December 28, 2022; Hadas Gold, "State Department Asks Americans Working for Chinese Media to Share Personal Details," *CNN Business*, May 22, 2020.

[†] Censorship is the suppression of ideas and information that some individuals, groups, or government officials find objectionable or dangerous. Disinformation refers to politically motivated messaging designed to engender public cynicism, uncertainty, apathy, distrust, and paranoia for the purpose of depressing citizen engagement. *American Library Association*, "First Amendment and Censorship," October 2021; *National Endowment for Democracy*, "Issue Brief: Distinguishing Disinformation from Propaganda, Misinformation, and 'Fake News,'" October 17, 2017.

external propaganda work, officially directed or not, include:

- **Chinese state-owned media outlets, such as Xinhua News Agency, China Daily, China Global Television Network (CGTN), and China Radio International, which disseminate news and other programming around the world in dozens of local languages.**³⁶ Joshua Kurlantzick, a senior fellow for Southeast Asia at the Council on Foreign Relations, observes that CGTN, China Radio International, and most other Chinese state media outlets have struggled to grow their audience share in many regions of the world despite their efforts to replicate the sleek and professional appearance of international media counterparts.³⁷ An important exception is *Xinhua*, which maintains cooperation and content-sharing agreements with numerous foreign news outlets and wire services that distribute its stories or advertisements directly to local audiences.³⁸ Mr. Kurlantzick notes that in places where it has relatively more reporters, such as Africa and Southeast Asia, *Xinhua* is beating competitor wire services to stories and is not under the same pressure as its competitors to turn a profit.³⁹
- **The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which oversees the activities of China’s diplomatic corps, training programs for journalists from other countries, and the accreditation of foreign journalists working in China.**⁴⁰ Sarah Cook, the senior advisor for China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan at Freedom House, observed in testimony before the Commission that Chinese diplomats frequently promote falsehoods, such as conspiracies regarding the origins of COVID-19, the source of prodemocracy protests in Hong Kong, and the atrocities committed against Uyghurs in Xinjiang.⁴¹ Chinese diplomats have also pressured foreign media executives and journalists
- in private and public settings to censor critical coverage about China.⁴² For example, in 2021, the Chinese embassy in Sweden sent a threatening email to Swedish journalist Jojje Olsson demanding that he stop his critical coverage of Beijing.⁴³
- **The Ministry of Education, which oversees the promotion of officially approved versions of Chinese history and state-sponsored educational initiatives.**⁴⁴ The Ministry of Education oversees the parent body funding Confucius Institutes, which have come under fire in the United States over concerns they facilitate censorship and promote China’s worldview as well as sovereignty claims over Taiwan.⁴⁵ In fact, Politburo member Li Changchun openly described Confucius Institutes as “an important part of our country’s external propaganda layout” as early as 2007, leaving no doubt as to Confucius Institutes’ supportive role in China’s global propaganda activities.⁴⁶ Since June 2022, 104 of 118 U.S.-based Confucius Institutes have closed, but some new programs and initiatives have already emerged to replace the closed institutes.⁴⁷ According to Ian Oxnevad, a senior fellow at the National Association of Scholars, some U.S. universities have transferred language instruction previously held at Confucius Institutes to extant partnerships with Chinese universities, while others are establishing new partnerships with the Chinese government agency responsible for administering the Confucius Institutes (previously known as the *Hanban*, but now called the Ministry of Education Center for Language Exchange and Cooperation).⁴⁸ [Note: This information was current as of October 2023 and as noted on the cover page, has not been updated.]
- **The Ministry of Culture and Tourism, which oversees the promotion of officially approved versions of Chinese art and culture abroad.**⁴⁹ The Ministry

* While some major U.S. news outlets, like the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal* discontinued their content-sharing agreements with Xinhua, as of at least 2021, others such as *USA Today*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Financial Times* continue to permit inserts from Xinhua News Agency or *China Daily*. The paid inserts are sometimes labeled as being from *China Daily*, but they often fail to note their ties to the Chinese government. In 2022, CNN also published an advertisement for Xinhua advertising the Beijing Winter Olympics. *Freedom House*, “Beijing’s Global Media Influence 2022,” 2022.

† The Center for Language Exchange and Cooperation in turn oversees an organization called the Chinese International Education Foundation, which funds Confucius Institutes and their replacement programs. Rachele Peterson, Flora Yan, and Ian Oxnevad, “After Confucius Institutes: China’s Enduring Influence on American Higher Education,” *National Association of Scholars*, June 2022, 8; Zhuang Pinghui, “China’s Confucius Institutes rebrand after overseas propaganda rows,” *South China Morning Post*, July 4, 2020.

of Culture and Tourism oversees multi-channel networks (MCNs), which are agencies that manage online influencers and help them produce content approved and, in some cases, directly commissioned by the Party-state.⁵⁰ Some of these influencers produce propaganda specifically designed for overseas audiences and post their videos on foreign platforms, such as YouTube.⁵¹ A report by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute highlighted one set of MCN-backed YouTube accounts that publish content depicting the supposedly joyous lifestyles of residents in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia, a clear effort to counter media reporting of Chinese atrocities in these regions.⁵²

- **The People’s Liberation Army (PLA), the MSS, and other state-linked actors that conduct disinformation campaigns targeting foreign audiences.**⁵³ While the PLA is most likely behind many disinformation campaigns targeting Taiwan, others, such as the coordinated DRAGONBRIDGE* campaign that propagated divisive content ahead of the U.S. midterms in November 2022, are likely state-linked but difficult to attribute to a particular Chinese government agency or military unit.⁵⁴
- **Chinese law enforcement agencies, which have been linked to a massive online influence campaign targeting more than 50 platforms, including Meta, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, YouTube, and others.**⁵⁵ In August 2023, Meta announced it had removed 7,704 accounts, 954 pages, and 15 groups linked to a larger influence effort by Chinese law enforcement that sought to promote pro-China talking points and attack CCP critics.⁵⁶ Content included criticisms of the United States and positive commentary on China’s governance of Xinjiang, among other issues related to Beijing’s global interests.⁵⁷
- **The Hong Kong government, which has jailed local journalists, barred foreign journalists from permission to cover certain events, and forced the closure of free media in the territory.**⁵⁸ Once a

bastion of press freedom in Asia, Hong Kong plummeted from 18th place to 148th place in Reporters Without Borders’ annual index on press freedom between 2002 and 2022.⁵⁹

- **Local media owners and political elites in foreign countries, who may favor closer ties with Beijing.**⁶⁰ Ms. Cook from Freedom House argued these local media owners and political elites have often “taken action—either at the direct behest of Chinese officials or for their own pre-emptive business interests—to suppress critical reporting or amplify pro-Beijing propaganda and falsehoods.”⁶¹

CCP Propaganda Pushes Tailored Messages to Global Audiences

China’s external propaganda features both positive stories about China and negative stories about the United States.⁶² Rebecca Fair, vice president of information advantage at the technology services firm Two Six Technologies, testified before the Commission on March 23, 2023 that “almost 30 percent of PRC tweets in the last 12 months use cultural content to promote a positive image of China” and speculated that this positive message over the past year by official Chinese government accounts was intended to counter perceived bad publicity in international media.⁶³ During the same period, Ms. Fair noted, official and pro-Beijing social media accounts also spread negative narratives portraying the United States as a “global destabilizer” with severe internal problems.⁶⁴ Prominent topics included the United States’ alleged escalation of the war with Ukraine, U.S. support for Japan’s defense, and parallels between the January 8, 2023, insurrection in Brazil and the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol.⁶⁵

* DRAGONBRIDGE is a cyber threat group linked to China that uses an expansive network of inauthentic social media accounts to influence Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the United States. *Mandiant Intelligence*, “Pro-PRC DRAGONBRIDGE Influence Campaign Leverages New TTPs to Aggressively Target U.S. Interests, Including Midterm Elections,” October 26, 2022; Andy Greenberg, “A Pro-China Disinfo Campaign Is Targeting US Elections—Badly,” *WIRED*, October 26, 2022.

Chinese propaganda on social media is often tailored to audiences in different geographic regions in a variety of languages.⁶⁶ According to Ms. Fair, between 2022 and 2023, official Chinese government-affiliated tweets as well as inauthentic tweets likely linked to the Chinese government targeting audiences in East Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa tended to emphasize negative depictions of the United States.⁶⁷ By contrast, Chinese-government-sponsored tweets targeting audiences in Australia and Oceania, Latin America and the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South and Central Asia focused on Chinese infrastructure and investment.⁶⁸

More broadly, Chinese media outlets frequently amplify the Russian media's messages, a phenomenon that Caitlin Dearing Scott, a technical and team lead at the International Republican Institute's Center for Global Impact, described in her testimony before the Commission as "narrative collusion."⁶⁹ Chinese coverage of Russia's war in Ukraine is a clear recent example of this collusion.⁷⁰ Chinese officials and state media have adopted the Kremlin's sanitized language about the war, propagated claims that the United States and NATO are to blame for tensions, and provided vastly more air time to Russian perspectives than Ukrainian ones.⁷¹ Chinese state media outlets have also consistently reposted social media content promoting the Kremlin's claim that the United States is running more than 30 bioweapons labs in Ukraine.⁷²

China's Harmful Media Influence Activities

The CCP is intensifying its global campaign to shape the media environments of foreign countries, relying on more sophisticated and coercive tactics than in the past.⁷³ These efforts occur in all regions of the world but appear especially vigorous in developing countries.⁷⁴ Content sharing, media training programs, investments in local media, disinformation propagated through social media, and intimidation of media figures are five tactics that exemplify China's efforts to influence foreign media systems.⁷⁵ Beijing's efforts to influence global media discourse have been challenged by the resistance

of local media establishments—especially in democratic countries—and the rigidity of its official messaging system, but they may become more effective if the Party-state continues to deploy narratives that resonate with local audiences and adapt to emerging social media platforms.⁷⁶

Content-Sharing Agreements Inject CCP Narratives into Mainstream Media

Content-sharing agreements and other partnerships with mainstream media are the most important way official Chinese messaging reaches large local audiences.⁷⁷ Under such agreements, Chinese state media organizations such as Xinhua and China News Service typically provide paid-for or free news stories, photos, or videos to foreign media outlets, disguising CCP propaganda as legitimate coverage for local audiences.⁷⁸ According to a 2022 Freedom House report, at least 130 news outlets in the 30 countries surveyed published Chinese state-produced content in print, on television, or on the radio between 2019 and 2021.⁷⁹ Chinese state media or other state-backed entities may also cooperate with foreign media to coproduce film and television content, sometimes presenting themselves as private media groups even as they expose foreign audiences to official programming.⁸⁰ [Note: As noted in the first footnote, the information below has not been updated since the October 2023 "cut-off" date for publication of the original Report from which this 201 is excerpted.]

- *China Daily's* previous deals with at least 30 foreign newspapers—including the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, the *UK Telegraph*, and the *Sydney Morning Herald*—to carry four- or eight-page propaganda inserts called *China Watch*.⁸¹ A number of media outlets later dropped *China Watch* amid the pandemic and public scrutiny.⁸² Several U.S. newspapers, such as the *Los Angeles Times*, continue to publish *China Watch* [as of the original date of publication of this Report].⁸³
- Content-sharing agreements between *Xinhua* and three influential state-run media outlets in Ghana: Ghana News Agency, the *Ghanaian Times*, and *Daily Graphic*.⁸⁴

- Agreements between the China International Communication Center* and media groups in the United States and Southeast Asia over the past seven years [preceding the 2023 Annual Report] to co-produce or distribute documentaries favorably portraying China. For instance, [in 2017] Discovery Channel aired a documentary series called “China: Time of Xi,” which presented a one-sided, positive overview of Xi Jinping’s tenure.⁸⁵ In Southeast Asia, the National Television of Cambodia co-produced a documentary [in 2022] that discussed China-Cambodia relations and praised the CCP’s response to the COVID-19 virus.⁸⁶ The Chinese Embassy in Cambodia promoted the documentary, noting that the production deal had been led by the Central Propaganda Department’s Overseas Promotion office.⁸⁷

CCP Media Training Programs Encourage Foreign Journalists to “Tell China’s Story Well”

The Party-state also brings foreign journalists to China for all-expenses-paid “trainings” and “exchanges” that expose them to official talking points, cultivate goodwill toward China, and promote the CCP’s state-controlled model of journalism.[†] Media training and exchange programs are managed jointly by China’s Foreign Ministry and the China Public Diplomacy Association and coordinated by press centers for journalists from the Asia Pacific, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, aligning with Beijing’s efforts to expand its presence in developing countries.[‡] Generally speaking, the programs prioritize journalists from developing or middle-income countries and range from four days to ten months long.⁸⁸ Foreign journalists receive housing and a stipend for living expenses; visit or intern with Chinese media organizations; interview Chinese officials; take classes in Chinese politics, approach to development, and media practices; and participate in trips to popular tourist attractions.⁸⁹ Anecdotal evidence suggests the programs

do not give foreign journalist opportunities to ask critical questions of Chinese interlocutors, tend to restrict participants’ freedom of movement within China, and sometimes provide participants with instructions on how they should report on China when they return home.⁹⁰ Interviews with former participants suggest the trips successfully influence some journalists’ perceptions of China but fail with others.⁹¹ More broadly, the participation of foreign journalists in these programs confers legitimacy on the Chinese media and creates the impression of widespread approval for CCP policies.⁹²

While the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted in-person international media trainings and exchanges for several years, recent evidence suggests China restarted these programs in late 2022 and that they remain global in scope.⁹³

- Prior to the pandemic, a 2019 Reporters Without Borders report estimated that about 3,400 journalists from at least 146 countries had come to China for some sort of training or exchange program, though this figure was likely an overestimate.⁹⁴
- In June 2022, 73 journalists from 54 countries arrived in Beijing for a six-month fellowship program during which they were told there would be ample opportunity to study and cover the upcoming 20th Party Congress.⁹⁵
- In early 2023, journalists from 51 countries in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Central Europe began a four-month exchange program that promised opportunities to extensively cover the meetings of China’s National People’s Congress and the CPPCC in March.⁹⁶

* The China International Communication Center is a company operated by the State Council Information Office (SCIO) that shares an address with the Central Propaganda Department’s Office of Foreign Propaganda. David Bandurski, “Co-Producing with the CCP,” *China Media Project*, February 17, 2023.

† China’s model of state-controlled journalism views information as a resource to be controlled by the state rather than a public good grounded in journalistic standards. Journalists are trained to cover events without criticizing domestic or Chinese officials and to portray a positive image of China. *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, “China’s Influence on African Media,” May 12, 2023.

‡ Similar programs exist for journalists from Europe and Central Asia. *Reporters Without Borders*, “China’s Pursuit of a New World Order,” 2019, 33.

Ownership of Media Outlets, Digital Platforms Threatens Editorial Independence

China's Party-state also influences media coverage abroad through Chinese companies' shares in or complete ownership of media outlets.⁹⁷ Even when privately owned, Chinese media and technology companies maintain close ties with the CCP and may act as "gatekeepers" that veto or otherwise influence editorial coverage of China at outlets in which they invest.⁹⁸ Chinese companies are also at the forefront of digital television broadcasting on the African continent and are expanding the reach of Chinese social media platforms around the world, creating new avenues through which the CCP can influence news distribution outside of China.⁹⁹ There is already evidence that Chinese companies have used their control over foreign media outlets and digital platforms to suppress reporting critical of China, ensure coverage reflects CCP preferences, or crowds out coverage by other international broadcasters with content produced by Chinese state media.¹⁰⁰

Social Media Posts Spread CCP Propaganda and Disinformation

China's Party-state increasingly relies on social media platforms to spread propaganda and disinformation in foreign media environments.¹⁰¹ Chinese embassies, consulates, diplomats, and state media outlets have created hundreds of new accounts on Facebook and Twitter[†] since 2019, disseminating China's official views on international events in a variety of languages to millions of followers worldwide.¹⁰² Networks of fake accounts linked to the CCP* frequently and rapidly share posts from official Chinese accounts as well as articles containing disinformation on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, artificially inflating the statistics measuring engagement with these official accounts and accelerating the spread of falsehoods across the internet.¹⁰³ The kinds of content shared by Chinese state-affiliated

media has grown more creative over time, with outlets such as the *Global Times* and *People's Daily* posting videos set to music on YouTube or posting memes that convey anti-U.S. messages with references to popular culture in a comical fashion.¹⁰⁴ State media organizations also pay Chinese and foreign social media personalities to serve as "influencers" on YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok, promoting views sympathetic to the CCP without disclosing their state affiliation.¹⁰⁵ In 2022, the Digital Threat Analysis Center (formerly the research firm Miburo) catalogued at least 200 influencers with connections to the Chinese government or state media operating in 38 different languages.¹⁰⁶ Examples of China's manipulation of social media include:

- Researcher's discovery in August 2023 of networks of Chinese state-linked social media accounts spreading disinformation about the Maui wildfires, including content claiming the fires were the result of a "weather weapon" allegedly created by the U.S. government.¹⁰⁷ Reports of these disinformation activities, including from cybersecurity firm Recorded Future and Microsoft, note that the social media networks posted in more than 25 languages and used AI-generated images to sow discord in the United States and elsewhere.¹⁰⁸
- Xinhua's posting on Twitter of a "Tetris"-themed meme criticizing the United State's handling of the COVID-19 virus in 2021.¹⁰⁹
- Chinese state media collaboration with an Israeli social media influencer who contradicted international reporting on China's atrocities in Xinjiang through trips to the province in which he interviewed local cotton farmers and claimed, "It's totally normal here."¹¹⁰ In an interview conducted with CGTN during the visit, the influencer asserted that there was "true harmony" between the Uyghurs and Han Chinese in Xinjiang.¹¹¹

* Section 310(a)(b) of the 1934 Communications Act prohibits the Federal Communications Commission from granting broadcast, aeronautical radio, or common carrier licenses to any U.S. entity that has more than a 25 percent investment by a foreign corporation, government, or individual. Federal Communications Commission, *Foreign Ownership Rules and Policies for Common Carrier, Aeronautical En Route and Aeronautical Fixed Radio Station Licenses*.

† In July 2023, Twitter was rebranded as X. Wes Davis, "Twitter is being rebranded as X," *The Verge*, July 23, 2023.

* Such as those run by OneSight Technology which held a contract with state-owned China News Service. Jeff Kao and Mia Shuang, "How China Built a Twitter Propaganda Machine Then Let It Loose on Coronavirus," *ProPublica*, March 26, 2020.

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China's Diplomats Pressure Foreign Journalists to Avoid Critical Coverage

Chinese diplomats routinely pressure media executives and journalists of China to alter coverage they view as unfavorable—behavior that Freedom House observes has become more aggressive in recent years.¹¹³ This pressure typically involves demands to edit or delete unfavorable content as well as threats to pursue defamation lawsuits or withdraw advertising if the offending media outlet or journalist does not comply.¹¹⁴ Chinese diplomats may castigate the media outlet or journalist

publicly, but Freedom House observes that more often, pressure is exerted privately in phone calls urging a retraction or apology.¹¹⁵ Online harassment or cyberattacks by actors linked to Beijing may occur in tandem with Chinese diplomats' complaints about critical coverage.¹¹⁶ Chinese authorities may also harass or detain the China-based relatives of foreign journalists to punish them for critical coverage.¹¹⁷

According to Ms. Cook, a recent Freedom House study of Chinese influence on foreign media between 2019 and 2022 found at least one incident of censorship or intimidation aimed at suppressing reporting or viewpoints critical of the Chinese government and companies in 24 of the 30 countries assessed.¹¹⁸ About half of these incidents involved Chinese diplomats or state-owned enterprises, Ms. Cook noted, but the other half involved "local officials or media executives from outside China who attempted to suppress the critical reporting because of their own interest[s] related to the Chinese government."¹¹⁹

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