

Countering China's Information Manipulation in the Indo-Pacific and Kazakhstan: **A Framework for Understanding and Action**



1225 Eye Street NW, Suite 800 | Washington, DC 20005 | info@iri.org



Countering China's Information Manipulation in the Indo-Pacific and Kazakhstan: A Framework for Understanding and Action

Copyright © 2023 International Republican Institute. All rights reserved.

Permission Statement: No part of this work may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the International Republican Institute.

Requests for permission should include the following information:

- The title of the document for which permission to copy material is desired.
- A description of the material for which permission to copy is desired.
- The purpose for which the copied material will be used and the manner in which it will be used.
- Your name, title, company or organization name, telephone number, e-mail address and mailing address.

Please send all requests for permission to:

Attention: Communications Department

International Republican Institute

1225 Eye Street NW, Suite 800 Washington, DC 20005

info@iri.org

This compendium was made possible through IRI's collaboration with the following talented authors: Niva Yau, Dr. Mareike Ohlberg, Dr. Alvin Camba, Lilly Min-Chen Lee, Dr. Benjamin Loh, and one researcher who wished to remain anonymous. It was edited by IRI's Advisor for Countering Authoritarian Influence (CFAI) Matt Schrader, who wishes to extend deep thanks to J. Michael Cole, Caitlin Dearing Scott, Alison Schafer and the entire CFAI team for their unflinching support. IRI is grateful to the Global Engagement Center at the United States Department of State for its funding of this initiative.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Regional Study

Dr. Mareike Ohlberg is a senior fellow in the Indo-Pacific Program at the German Marshall Fund based at GMF's Berlin Office. Niva Yau is a nonresident fellow with the Atlantic Council's Global China Hub.

Thailand

Lilly Min-Chen Lee is a Doctoral Fellow in the International Security Studies Program at The Fletcher School, Tufts University. Mrs. Lee research focuses on the state security strategy of the Chinese Communist Party and the People's Liberation Army information and influence operations.

The Philippines

Dr. Alvin Camba is an Assistant Professor at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver. His research areas include, among others, China's disinformation strategies and investments in rare earths.

Malaysia

Dr. Benjamin Yew Hoong Loh is a senior lecturer at the School of Media and Communication in Taylor's University. He is a media scholar studying emergent cultures and the digital public sphere.

Kazakhstan

Authored by **Niva Yau** and one researcher who wished to remain anonymous.

ABOUT THE CFAI INITIATIVE

Over the past five years, IRI has developed and implemented a framework to build resiliency against growing foreign authoritarian influence and interference through its Countering Foreign Authoritarian Influence (CFAI) practice. IRI deploys a three-pronged approach to mitigate the impact of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) authoritarian influence on developing democracies:

- 1) Sharing research on how the PRC undermines democratic processes and governance institutions with IRI's global network of partners;
- 2) Empowering local stakeholders with the means to conduct similar research independently, the skills to execute advocacy campaigns to hold leaders accountable, and the tools and resources to devise and advance policy solutions to bolster their countries resilience to external influence; and
- 3) Catalyzing the development and adoption of locally appropriate policy solutions that mitigate PRC authoritarian influence.

By engaging stakeholders across sectors — including government officials, political parties, media, private enterprise, and civil society activists — IRI's work promotes broad awareness of authoritarian tactics and the keys to shoring up vulnerable democratic institutions. The research presented in this report is part of a growing compendium of case studies documenting the CCP's varied authoritarian influence tactics across countries and the elements of effective democratic resilience, which directly informs CFAI programming.

ACRONYM	DEFINITION
ACC	ASEAN-China Centre
ACCCIM	Associated Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry of Malaysia
ACRFROC	All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BOT	Build-Operate-Transfer
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil Russia India China South Africa
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CGTN	China Global Television Network
CI	Confucius Institute
CIMA	Chinese International Media Association
CMG	China Media Group
CP Group	Charoen Pokphand Group
CPAFFC	Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries
CPD	Central Propaganda Department (a department of the Chinese Communist Party)
CRI	China Radio International
EEC	Eastern Economic Corridor
FFCCCII	Federation of Filipino Chinese Chamber of Commerce Inc
GCMCU	Global Chinese Media Cooperation Union
GTNR	Global Talk News Radio (a radio program in The Philippines)
ICMU	International Chinese Media Union
IDSI	Integrated Development Studies Institute
ILD	International Liaison Department (a department of the Chinese Communist Party)
KMT	Kuomintang
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
MCCC	Malaysia-China Chamber of Commerce
MCIL	Media Chinese International Limited
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China
MICT	Ministry of Information and Communication Technology (of Thailand)
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MSS	Ministry of State Security
NEP	National Economic Policy (of Malaysia)
OCMCO	Overseas Chinese Media Cooperation Organization
PACS	Philippine Association for Chinese Studies
PCOO	Presidential Communications Operations Office (of the Philippines)
PHP	Philippine pesos
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PNA	Philippine News Agency
PNG	Papua New Guinea
PRC	People's Republic of China
RT	Russian state-owned television and media network formerly known as Russia Today
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SICFA	Solomon Islands China Friendship Association
TCCEA	Thai-Chinese Culture and Economy Association
TCJA	Thai-Chinese Journalist Association
UFWD	United Front Work Department (a department of the Chinese Communist Party)

All Rights Reserved	2
Acknowledgments and About CFAI	3
Acronyms	4
How to Use this Compendium	6
Regional Study Executive Summary	7
REGIONAL STUDY	10
THAILAND CASE STUDY	41
PHILLIPPINES STUDY	58
MALAYSIA STUDY	71
KAZAKHSTAN STUDY	83

Overview of the Compendium

This compendium attempts to explain how the People’s Republic of China (PRC) manipulates the information space in the Indo-Pacific and Kazakhstan and offers initial suggestions for how democratically-minded stakeholders should respond. It consists of one large regional study, which offers a broad framework for understanding how the PRC thinks of – and puts into practice – information manipulation, as well as four smaller studies mapping PRC influence in the information space in Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Kazakhstan. Although the regional study focuses on China’s near abroad, its authors believe that the framework it presents can be applied generally throughout the world.

Why does it exist?

The framework at the heart of the regional study – which the country-level studies amplify and expand upon through a rich body of examples – emerged because of its authors’ strong sense that existing frameworks for talking about PRC “disinformation”, “misinformation”, or “information operations” do not adequately capture how Beijing thinks about shaping other countries’ information spaces. Specifically, they do not capture how Beijing consciously uses all elements of national power – including and especially its economic power – to shape elite perception and public discussion of China in other countries, in ways that are notably corrosive to transparent, vibrant democratic discourse. The regional-level study attempts to capture this approach in a framework and explain how this framework emerges inextricably from Beijing’s distinctive approach to maintaining unchecked power over the PRC’s domestic information space. The study authors have termed this a “United Front approach” to manipulating perceptions. Simply put, when it comes to manipulating other countries’ information spaces, Beijing does not operate in the same manner as democratic countries. Understanding how it does is paramount to building an effective response.

Terms and Methodology

“Information shaping” vs. “information operations” vs. “mis/disinformation”

The compendium uses the terms “information shaping” or “information manipulation” instead of more commonly used terms like “information operations” or “spreading mis/disinformation”. Although the compendium does not rigorously define information shaping/manipulation, it is the authors’ sense that the terms better capture the PRC’s approach to foreign information spaces, because it 1) emerges from the continual functioning of multiple, overlapping systems – rather than discrete, preplanned operations, and 2) comprises a broader collection of tools, methods, and systems than is traditionally associated with the terms “misinformation” and “disinformation”.

Mapping versus Impact

Although the country studies do in some cases attempt to assess the impact of PRC information shaping, they are best read as a mapping of PRC information manipulation in the country in question. While the authors did not use the same methodology, all case studies sought to address the same central question: how does the PRC get its voice heard amid each country’s competitive information environment? That is, which parts of the PRC party-state are active in shaping the country’s information spaces, who in the country can the PRC rely on to propagate its preferred narratives, and what channels do these actors use? Rigorously assessing the cumulative impact of these efforts is a more complicated, methodologically intense exercise that is beyond the scope of these studies.

“Chinese” versus “PRC”

Wherever possible, this compendium uses the word “PRC” instead of “Chinese” to describe actors connected with the PRC party-state. The authors chose to do so because many of the countries examined in the compendium have large, long-established Chinese diaspora populations, and the indiscriminate, incautious use of terms like “Chinese information manipulation”, “Chinese business”, or “Chinese community” may incorrectly conflate these populations with PRC efforts to undermine other countries information spaces. This can result in frequent use of awkward terms like “PRC-based businesses”, or “PRC nationals”. The authors felt the sacrifice in readability was worth the tradeoff in precision.

Introduction

Although China's ability to manipulate the global information environment has grown significantly in recent years, Beijing's distinct approach – both globally and in the countries of the Indo-Pacific – remains poorly understood. This report sheds light on this approach by presenting an original analytical framework, one that argues the People's Republic of China (PRC) approach to information relies on difficult-to-observe phenomena such as interpersonal diplomacy and the manipulation of economic incentives for societal elites, as well as high-profile phenomena such as social media bot networks or Confucius Institutes.

The report identifies this framework as a “united front approach” because it mirrors the “United Front” system the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) uses to maintain virtually unchallenged control of its domestic information space. The United Front operates domestically by shaping the interests of elite proxies – including leaders in business, media, and academia – through a combination of strong economic inducements and equally strong coercive techniques, co-opting them into aligning their public speech with the CCP's preferred narratives. The report then applies this framework to explain how the fundamental principles behind this system – one that explicitly legitimizes unrestrained state coercion of societal elites outside China's borders as a means to dominate narrative spaces – is applied to manipulate information spaces in the Indo-Pacific. This offers a deeper explanation of not just which techniques and targets the PRC chooses for information operations, but how and why it chooses them.

The report also argues that the PRC takes this approach because it views the ability to successfully manipulate information spaces in the Indo-Pacific as vital to regime security. Under current CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping, Beijing has said the PRC's lack of international “voice” is as damaging as China's 19th Century colonization by European powers. The PRC thus focuses on how to counter perceived challenges around its periphery, particularly in territorial disputes in the South China Sea and on its Himalayan border with India, or in Kazakhstan to stem the supposed threat of Uyghur “separatism”. In all these situations, the PRC leadership links its preferred policy outcomes with acceptance of its preferred framing of events, concepts, and policies, thus making its pursuit of a stronger regional “voice” inextricable from its security and economic objectives in the Indo-Pacific region.

The report details how the PRC pursues these information shaping objectives along its periphery through a wide variety of actors within and without the party-state. These include traditional government agencies like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but also includes CCP bodies such as the Ministry of Propaganda, and the United Front Work Department. The party-state also goes well beyond other governments' normal diplomatic messaging efforts through its maintenance of a vast array of state-managed “friendship” organizations, which are meant to convene PRC-friendly actors in target countries under the banner of nominally “independent, non-governmental” organizations. Targets for these organizations include both the Chinese diaspora and non-Chinese societal elites. Distinct from many other states' normal practice, the PRC also draws government and party bodies not traditionally associated with diplomacy and external messaging – such as the Ministry of Trade, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Education, and others – into the work of incentivizing foreign elites to propagate its preferred narratives. Understanding the PRC's information manipulation requires recognizing this division of labor, as well as recognizing the ways it is distinct from the way democratic states pursue their messaging objectives.

Key Takeaways

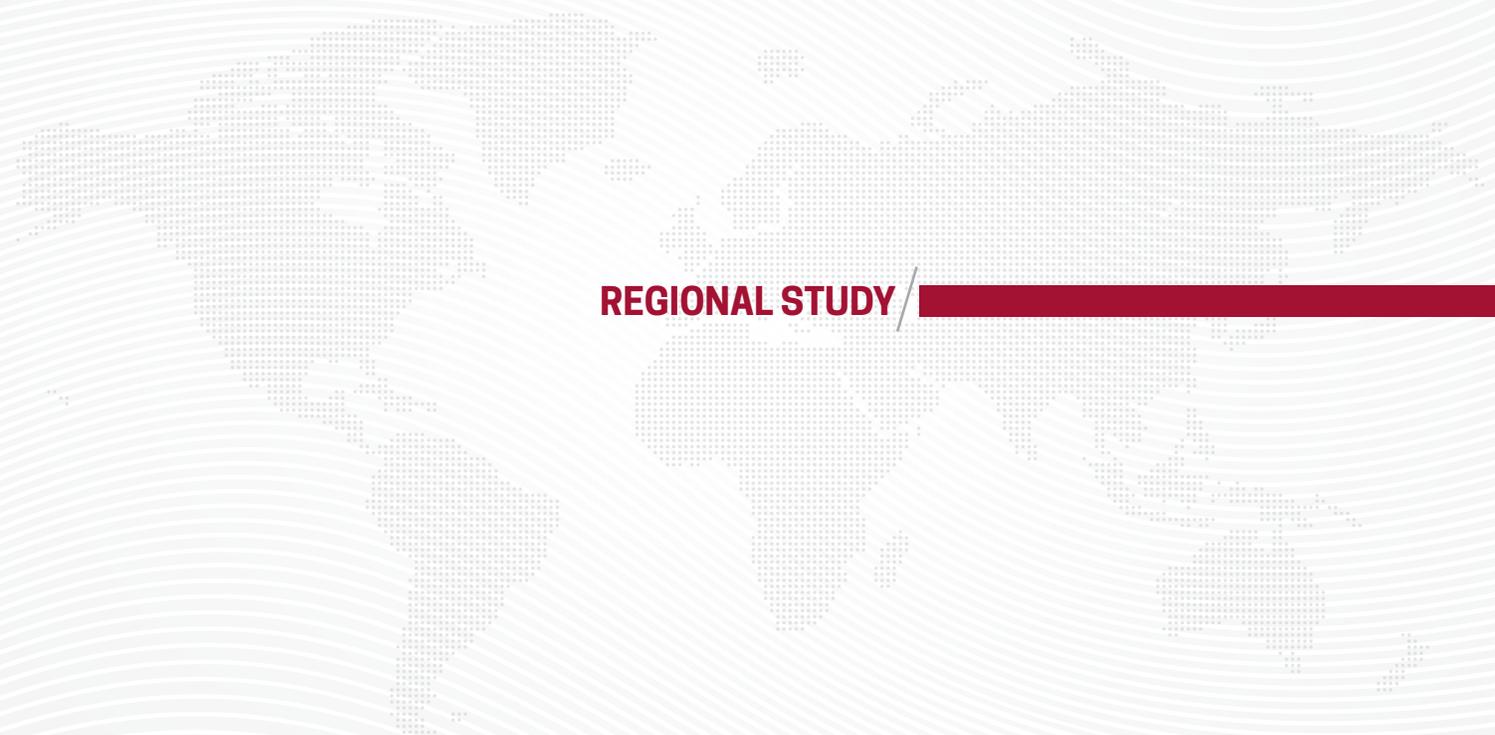
- The PRC-CCP's tactics and techniques for shaping other countries' information environments derive from United Front principles.
 - These principles include identifying friends (red actors), neutrals (grey actors), and enemies (black actors). The Party tries to reward red actors, win over grey actors, and discredit and isolate black actors.
 - The Party also attempts to create redundancy by cultivating various proxies, generating a perception of broader consensus. This means that duplicative efforts within the Party may not be seen as inefficient, but as redundant by design.

- o Foreign proxies and spokespeople are given a central role within the broader PRC information operations system.
- The CCP primarily targets local elites to shape their decisions and promote the adoption of narratives favorable to the PRC and CCP.
 - o The CCP engages with political elites through friendship associations, sister-city ties, and parliament-to-parliament groups, creating a wide network of support and influencing public discourse.
 - o Business communities and economic elites are targeted by the CCP as influential actors in public life, with extensive commercial cooperation allowing the CCP to tie a country's economic development and leadership's personal financial concerns to PRC interests.
 - o The CCP also directly targets the media and aims to establish itself as the authority on information about the PRC, limiting independent sources and creating pro-PRC narrative echo chambers. This accompanies various tactics used to crowd out other sources of information, such as targeting journalists and media organizations through revenue dependence, guided media tours, and co-option.
 - o The CCP targets elite level educational institutions to exert influence over foreign scholars, aiming to establish itself as the authoritative voice on PRC affairs. CCP affiliated organizations provide scholarships, trips, and academic funding to cut out alternate sources of Chinese academic expertise.
- The Chinese diaspora, particularly overseas Chinese in South-Southeast Asia, receives special attention in CCP information operations and is recognized as an opportunity and resource for PRC, but also as a potential threat.
 - o The CCP aims to establish itself as the authoritative voice on the PRC within the diaspora by capturing the diaspora media sector and cultivating a Chinese diaspora identity through the sponsoring Chinese culture and language activities and study opportunities.
 - o Local PRC embassies as well as CCP affiliated organizations are active and engaged in diaspora communities and frequently provide networking and businesses opportunities for Chinese diaspora economic elites.

Recommendations

The success of the PRC-CCP strategy depends on cultivating public support and finding influential individuals in their communities that can be targeted along the persuasion-coercion spectrum. Combatting the PRC's information operations requires mobilizing a broad range of actors from countries in and outside the region. Producing recommendations for action for such a disparate group of countries is a daunting task, but bolstering the key factors and institutions of liberal democracy provides the ideal framework and starting point. Specifically, activists, civil society, and governments should focus on the following key areas:

- **Institution Building:** Building democratic institutions is the strongest bulwark against the PRC's efforts to dominate the conversation. A coordinated effort is required across the region to bolster the fragile democratic institutions of many Indo-Pacific countries. Japan could play a particularly important role given its resources and experience in development support that has won it access and respect throughout the region.
- **Knowledge Building:** There is a lack of understanding among key stakeholders about the role of PRC party-state actors in shaping external perceptions. Interested scholars, policymakers, and leaders in low to middle income countries often turn to CCP-aligned organizations for resources for the study of China. Wealthy democracies should invest heavily to ensure that would-be China specialists in the Indo-Pacific have other options, including subsidizing the study of China in the academic and think tank spaces.
- **Network Building:** Journalists, civil society, and concerned government officials in the Indo-Pacific can help identify and call out the ways that the PRC tries to shape perceptions in their region. Greater, and more strategic efforts need to be made to bring together actors concerned about the PRC's impact on the regional information environment, in order to foster psychological and safety support, resource sharing, and collective advocacy.
- **Independence Building:** Democratic actors should seek to highlight the tradeoffs that come with growing economic linkages with the PRC. Our research has shown that elites with economic dependency on the PRC and CCP-aligned entities are often the most active in producing and disseminating pro-PRC information. Governments across the Indo-Pacific should diversify their trade and financial flows and deepen economic relations with their neighbors that reduce their reliance on the PRC. They should make the point that growing prosperous economies does not need to come at the expense of political independence and democratic governance.



REGIONAL STUDY /

I - Introduction

This report analyzes efforts by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to shape the information space in the Indo-Pacific region and Kazakhstan. It draws on primary sources, interviews with experts in countries in the region, and in-depth country reports commissioned separately to analyze PRC information operations and attempts to shape and control narratives. This study looks at twelve countries in the Indo-Pacific, as well as one Central Asian country, Kazakhstan.¹ It also develops an analytical framework for understanding how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) thinks of and approaches the manipulation of the information space in its near periphery that goes beyond that offered by most other analyses, which usually concentrate on the manipulation of media (either legacy media outlets or social media), academia, or think tanks.

In developing this framework, we contend that focusing only on these fields – important as they are – does not fully capture how the CCP approaches the manipulation of foreign information spaces and, indeed, may miss some of its most important parts. We have therefore adopted a framework that includes attempts to shape information spaces in countries around the PRC’s periphery by cultivating and shaping the interests of elite proxies through a calculated mix of inducement and coercion.

It is our assessment that this elite proxy focus emerges from a set of principles for acquiring and maintaining power that we term the “United Front approach.” Although much has been written about the role of the United Front Work Department in China and Chinese diaspora communities globally, this study is arguably the first to attempt to systemically describe how these principles shape the CCP’s attempts to use non-Chinese constituencies to shape foreign information spaces. This difference in analytical approach is significant because it shines a light on how political and economic factors underpin debate on China in foreign countries. Our approach, therefore, looks not only at what is said, but also at how the PRC shapes the decisions of people who have significant political or economic influence on their countries’ public conversation on China. We demonstrate that this relation-centric conception of informational manipulation emerges from the CCP’s embrace and application of the United Front approach.

In developing this framework, we first lay out the reasons the information space matters to the PRC party-state in the 13 countries examined in this study, and the policy goals it pursues through its manipulation. We demonstrate that the PRC views its ability to shape the global information environment through two interlinked lenses: 1) ensuring regime security by deflecting criticism, raising the CCP’s legitimacy, and strengthening the party’s global agenda setting power; and 2) great power competition against the United States in the Indo-Pacific. We show how geographic proximity to the PRC and the large number of conflicts and security issues mean that both rationales take on a more immediate urgency for the party than in other parts of the world.

We then discuss briefly the actors within the PRC party-state that are most directly responsible for shaping the information environment in neighboring countries. Although this includes actors traditionally included in similar analyses, such as the CCP’s Propaganda Department and the government’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we also show how the application of the United Front approach requires a lens that encompasses other actors, such as state-sponsored “friendship groups,” diaspora organizations sponsored by the United Front Work Department, and other segments of the party-state not traditionally thought of as information space actors, such as the finance or commerce ministries.

We go on to develop the report’s United Front approach framework through a brief explanation of the principles underlying this approach. The key component of this is the belief – repeatedly affirmed by a succession of paramount CCP leaders – that party policy should flow from a clear understanding of who are its “friends,” its “enemies,” and who is neutral. Further, the party should pursue its goals by rewarding friends and using those friends to coax and sway neutral parties, while punishing and isolating enemies. A number of information-shaping tactics observed repeatedly in the countries covered in this study emerge from this approach, which emphasizes developing and utilizing one-to-one relationships, as well as identifying and making use of individuals who wield significant political or economic power.

¹ As Kazakhstan is a special target for information and influence operations that accompany the CCP’s campaign against Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other ethnic populations in Xinjiang (East Turkestan), it is included in this pool of countries despite not being an Indo-Pacific country, according to most definitions. The other countries represent distinctive regions in the Indo-Pacific: Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Thailand in Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Nepal in South Asia, Mongolia in East Asia, and Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu in the South Pacific. Of these countries, two (the Philippines and Thailand) are U.S. treaty allies, and one (Tuvalu) recognizes Taiwan instead of the PRC.

We identify four such important tactics:

- 1) A central role for foreign proxies
- 2) Efforts on a spectrum of persuasion to coercion
- 3) Redundancy as method (also known as the “echo chamber approach”)
- 4) A special role for the Chinese diaspora

We then provide a regional application of this framework, demonstrating through extensive primary source research, interviews, and use of preexisting research how a United Front approach to information shaping plays out on the ground in countries as diverse and geographically disparate as Kazakhstan and Indonesia.

We believe this approach offers a powerful explanation for much of the PRC’s information-shaping efforts. For example, we found that in the countries covered in this study, the PRC or its proxies rarely directly attack national leaders, viewing them instead as part of the persuadable “neutral” center. When the PRC does apply pressure, it is typically behind the scenes or through proxies, in contrast to open attacks on national leaders who have placed themselves unambiguously in the “enemy” camp. It also illustrates why these countries may be viewed as neutral by the PRC, going beyond a simple geographic proximity = influence framework to suggest ways of understanding how the PRC party-state and its proxies use economic ties to shape both elite and public discourse on China in peripheral countries.

One important caveat to this framework is to note that, although its scope is expansive, it does not paint a picture of an all-powerful PRC. Although viewing information-shaping efforts through the lens of a United Front approach may lead us to regard such efforts as better resourced, more successful, and more powerful than suggested by previous such studies, in almost all of the countries included in this study, there remains significant local opposition to PRC goals or backlash against individual projects or policies. This is true even in Kazakhstan and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, where PRC attempts to inculcate and institutionalize its narrative power are particularly salient.

This research offers a more powerful framework for understanding how the CCP attempts to shape perceptions in its near abroad, and demonstrates that, ultimately, the agency and actions of the citizens of these countries will remain far more important to determining the shape of the Indo-Pacific information environment than decisions made in far-off Beijing.

II. The Information Space: Why it Matters to Beijing

Both regionally and globally, the party under PRC paramount leader Xi Jinping has consistently equated a lack of voice, or discourse power, with a lack of security. Under Xi, lack of a voice has been officially identified as the “third affliction,” on a par with the past afflictions of colonization and poverty, which China must solve before truly becoming a strong country.² PRC policy documents typically characterize voice in broad terms, as the ability to win other countries’ acceptance of Beijing’s preferred framing of events, concepts, and policies.³ Beijing has paid special attention to addressing this problem in China’s near abroad,⁴ and since the second half of the 1990s has devoted significant attention at both the central and the provincial level to shaping the information space in its neighboring countries, going so far as to list these countries as special targets in internal policy documents.⁵

² “The foundation of self-confidence on the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics” *CCP Theory*, 18 August 2017. <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0818/c838859-29478726.html>. “The Chinese Road: A Great Journey to Realize the Chinese Dream.” *CCP Theory*, 24 September 2015. <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2015/0924/c143844-27629774.html>. “Improve national cultural soft power and tell Chinese stories well.” *CCP Theory*, 7 January 2019. <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0107/c40531-30507321.html>. “Effectively maintain the cultural security of our country.”, *CCP Theory*, 18 July 2022. <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0718/c40531-32477854.html>.

³ “Enhance the international influence of Chinese terms and accelerate the construction of the Chinese discourse system.” *CCP Theory*, 19 April 2022. <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0419/c40531-32402402.html>.

⁴ The PRC has not adopted the organizing concept of the Indo-Pacific, viewing it as a terminological imposition by the United States and others to weaken and downplay the role of the PRC in the region. PRC texts use terms such as the Asia-Pacific the near-abroad, or neighboring countries. The term neighboring countries captures most - but not all - of the countries covered in this report.

⁵ Ohlberg, Mareike. “Creating a Favorable International Public Opinion Environment: External Propaganda (Duiwai Xuanchuan) as a Global Concept with Chinese Characteristics.” *Doctoral thesis, University of Heidelberg*, 2013, <https://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/17289/>, pp. 313-314, 378-380, 392

Having a voice in countries across the Indo-Pacific is critical to the PRC's wider security and economic objectives. For example, the continued success of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects across the region depends on a permissive and supportive environment enabled by local political and business elites. PRC policy documents have repeatedly designated Southeast and Central Asia as "core" regions for the BRI, while individual countries such as Kazakhstan have been described as a "core countries."⁶ From Beijing's perspective, the success of PRC economic and discursive efforts in these countries is irrevocably linked. One professor at a top party school described one of BRI's successes as shifting regional discourse from one dominated by the United States' "pivot to Asia" – carrying with it the implicit framing of China as a threat – to one centered on "win-win" economic cooperation, a much more advantageous framing to the PRC.⁷

Having the ability to win consent for its worldview in its near abroad is also critical to the PRC's sense of security. Beijing has territorial disputes with several countries in its vicinity, including with India and with Southeast Asian countries bordering the South China Sea. Two of the U.S.'s most important mutual defense partners, Japan and South Korea, lie immediately to China's east and could potentially play an important role in any conflict over Taiwan, whose population remains resistant to incorporation into the PRC. The restive western region of Xinjiang borders three countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan – with large Turkic populations potentially sympathetic to the plight of their religious and ethnic Uyghur kinspeople, and another, Afghanistan, where theocratic leadership might potentially view the abuse of Muslim coreligionists unkindly. Moreover, while Russia and China recently declared the dawn of a "no limits" partnership, nuclear-armed border standoffs between the two countries are within living memory for many policymakers in Moscow and Beijing.

Although PRC foreign policy has traditionally emphasized non-interference in other countries' affairs, voice necessarily implies an ability to shape nearby countries' internal politics and discourse in ways that advantage Beijing's economic and security concerns. As PRC policymakers look out across their near abroad, they will note no lack of grassroots resistance to their regional agenda, which is itself justification for a stronger regional "voice" for the PRC. In the past three years, protests against perceived PRC encroachment have rocked Kazakhstan, Nepal, and the Solomon Islands, among others.^{8,9} (In the Solomon Islands the protests turned violent, resulting in deadly attacks against Chinese shopkeepers and residents in the province of Malaita.)¹⁰ Unlike their relatively cooperative governments, Muslims in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Nepal have rallied against the PRC's policies targeting ethnic minorities, and in Kazakhstan, ethnic Kazakhs from Xinjiang have, for years, held daily protests outside of the PRC embassy to draw attention to their missing relatives.¹¹ Transnational activism also looms in the form of the Milk Tea Alliance, a loose coalition of youth activists from Thailand, Myanmar, Taiwan, and Hong Kong that crystallized dissatisfaction with authoritarian rulers around support for the 2019 pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong.¹²

Finally, in Beijing's conception, behind regional contests over voice looms a larger struggle: that with the United States. PRC policymakers, diplomats, and propaganda organs frequently characterize setbacks in the information environment as U.S. ploys in a zero-sum regional competition for influence, while downplaying the role of local agency or dissatisfaction with PRC actions. Although the PRC frequently references a desire for "every country to choose its own way," party publications often deny agency to foreign leaders or politicians viewed as antagonistic, characterizing them as U.S. proxies or puppets. Hence the PRC's decision to characterize anti-Chinese riots in the Solomon Islands as

6 "One Belt, One Road" elevates China's discourse power." *Guangming Daily*, 19 January 2016. <http://www.scio.gov.cn/zhzc/10/Document/1463646/1463646.htm>.

7 "One Belt, One Road" elevates China's discourse power." *Guangming Daily*, 19 January 2016. <http://www.scio.gov.cn/zhzc/10/Document/1463646/1463646.htm>.

8 "Dozens protest against Chinese influence in Kazakhstan." *Reuters*, 4 September 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kazakhstan-china-protests-idUSKCN1VP1BQ>.

9 "Voices against China continue to rise in Nepal; anti-China protests a daily affair." *ANI*, 12 January 2022. <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/voices-against-china-continue-to-rise-in-nepal-anti-china-protests-a-daily-affair20220112173348/>.

10 "Solomon Islands switches recognition from Taiwan to China." *Deutsche Welle*, 17 September 2019. <https://www.dw.com/en/solomon-islands-switches-recognition-from-taiwan-to-china/a-50453667>.

11 Toiken, Saniash. "Demonstrators Picket Chinese Embassy In Kazakh Capital As Chinese Minister Visits." *Radio Free Europe*, 8 June 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-protest-china-wang-visit/31888857.html>.

12 "Milk Tea Alliance: Twitter creates emoji for pro-democracy activists." *BBC*, 8 April 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56676144>.

instigated by Taiwan,¹³ or to paint the U.S. as the power behind opposition to PRC-built dams along the Mekong River.¹⁴

III. Organization

PRC efforts to shape the information environment in its near abroad are complex, operating through many actors inside and outside the party-state. These include government agencies with clear analogs in democratic systems (e.g., the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), as well as others, such as the Ministry of Propaganda and the United Front Work Department, that are more characteristic of Leninist political systems. They also include administrative organs, such as the ministries for finance and commerce, that are not traditionally thought of as important participants in shaping the external information environment. A clear understanding of PRC information-shaping efforts in its near abroad thus depends on a strong grasp of the division of labor within the party-state system, and how the individual components cooperate (or in some cases, compete) to serve the goals of the central party leadership.

The Organizational Structures Behind Information Shaping Efforts

Three party-state bureaucratic silos (known in Mandarin as *xitong*) lead PRC information-shaping in its near abroad: the propaganda system, the foreign affairs system, and the United Front system. Each of these systems encompasses dozens of organizations, many of which are also replicated at the provincial and municipal levels, resulting in a staggering number of actors with stakes in creating a more PRC-friendly external information environment. The responsibilities and major actors of each system are sketched out below.

These are not comprehensive descriptions and should not be understood as such. As is typical of Leninist political systems, each major actor oversees its own collection of daughter organizations, media, universities, and other entities which, to quote former East German Communist leader Walter Ulbricht, “have to look democratic but must be under tight party control.”¹⁵ Central party-state agencies also frequently have provincial and local counterparts, each orbited by their own similar collection of institutions and organizations, all working to implement the “spirit” of central instructions.

The Propaganda System

At the top of the propaganda system sits the Central Propaganda Department (CPD), overseen by a Central Propaganda and Thought Work Leading Small Group chaired by Xi. The CPD’s mandates are both theoretical and practical. It is tasked with defining and monitoring ideological correctness within the party-state system, as well as “developing and implementing external propaganda work.”¹⁶ It also has day-to-day oversight of the country’s extensive internet censorship regime, runs the state news and media apparatus, and manages provincial and local propaganda departments. The CPD has a stake in virtually all the party’s public-facing work, defining, monitoring, and managing compliance with the party line.

Institutions reporting to the CPD are active in every country examined in this study. These include the official news agency Xinhua, as well as state television broadcaster CGTN and China Radio International (CRI). CRI has programming and websites in Burmese, Filipino, Indonesian, Malay, Mongolian, Nepali, Sinhalese, Tamil, and Thai, among other languages,¹⁷ while Xinhua offers news services in Thai¹⁸ and also liaises heavily with journalists in Thailand via informal channels such

¹³ “The ‘big news’ used by the British media to smear China has instead hit the United States and Australia in the face.” *Shanghai Observer*, 20 April 2022. <https://www.jfdaily.com/news/detail?id=475081>.

¹⁴ Hu, Yuwei, and Juecheng Zhao. “GT investigates: Who are the mouthpieces of US-led war of public opinion on ‘Chinese dams’ threats” along Mekong River, and what are their typical methods?” *Global Times*, 28 March 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202203/1257016.shtml>.

¹⁵ Leonhard, Woifgaug. “It must look democratic....[Es muß demokratisch aussehen....” *Zeit Online*, 7 May 1965, <https://www.zeit.de/1965/19/es-muss-demokratisch-aussehen/komplettansicht>.

¹⁶ “Full text! ‘Regulations on the Propaganda Work of the Communist Party of China’ *The Paper*, 10 November 2021. https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_15323992.

¹⁷ *China Radio International Burmese Service*: <https://myanmar.cri.cn/>; *China Radio International Filipino Service*: <https://filipino.cri.cn/>; *China Radio International Indonesian Service*: <https://indonesian.cri.cn/>; *China Radio International Malay Service*: <https://malay.cri.cn/>; *China Radio International Mongol Service*: <https://mongol.cri.cn/>; *China Radio International Nepali Service*: <https://nepal.cri.cn/>; *China Radio International Sinhalese Service*: <https://sinhalese.cri.cn/>; *China Radio International Tamil Service*: <https://tamil.cri.cn/>; *China Radio International Thai Service*: <https://thai.cri.cn/>.

¹⁸ Xinhua Thai Service: <https://www.xinhuathai.com/>

as WhatsApp groups (see media section). CGTN added an Asian and African Language Programming Center in 2019.¹⁹

The Foreign Affairs System

The foreign affairs system includes, but is broader than, the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Like the propaganda system, it is also overseen by a small body chaired by Xi. Different actors within the system have responsibility for different channels of outreach. Broadly speaking, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs leads on government-to-government affairs and engagement with international organizations, while the CCP's International Liaison Department (ILD) manages political engagement with other countries' political parties (although, as with any large, competitive bureaucracy, their areas of responsibility can overlap).²⁰

Alongside the MFA and ILD, the foreign affairs system includes a large network of state-managed "friendship organizations" that liaise with non-state actors or individual politicians in target countries. These organizations typically present themselves as non-political, non-governmental organizations, despite clear party-state control. The most prominent is the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC), but there are corresponding associations for most regions and countries, including the China-ASEAN Association, the China-Oceania Friendship Association, the China-Central Asia Friendship Association, and bilateral friendship associations for Mongolia, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, and Nepal.²¹ Although most of these associations are overseen by the MFA, there are strong indications that some may be managed by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and/or the Ministry of State Security (MSS).²²

The United Front Work System

Centered around the CCP's United Front Work Department (UFWD), the United Front Work system has no ready analog within democratic political systems. Characteristic of Leninist systems across Asia (North Korea, Laos, and Vietnam also have United Front Work departments),²³ the UFWD's purpose is to co-opt and mobilize key parts of wider PRC society towards party policy goals. The department therefore specifically targets groups such as successful entrepreneurs, ethnic minorities, religious groups, and university professors. Since the CCP's definition of PRC society includes all people of Chinese ethnicity everywhere, the UFWD also targets the global Chinese diaspora. The department is focused on the Indo-Pacific and particularly Southeast Asia because of the region's large diaspora populations. Because of the importance of this work, the United Front *xitong* – including work targeting the Chinese diaspora – is traditionally overseen by a high-ranking member of the Politburo Standing Committee, the Party's highest leadership body.

Far more than the Propaganda and Foreign Affairs *xitong*, convening is central to the UFWD's work, both with the diaspora and with other target groups. One of the UFWD's most important missions is to create, promote, and co-opt organizations that serve a dual purpose: enabling influential non-party individuals to network with party officials, and creating ways for the party to mobilize and reward those who further party policy goals. One authoritative estimate puts the global Chinese diaspora at 45 million people (roughly 70 percent of whom live in Southeast Asia),²⁴ which means that central, provincial, and local UFWD units responsible for diaspora work oversee and engage with a truly astonishing array of diaspora organizations across the Indo-Pacific.²⁵

Because of its responsibility for work targeting the diaspora, the United Front Work system also oversees Chinese-

¹⁹ "Head Office Asia and Africa Language Program Center was established." CCTV, 2 August. 2019. <https://www.cctv.com/2019/08/02/ARTIZfrIU6sSG7P7AhwC-vdAv190802.shtml>.

²⁰ This division of labor naturally leads to a larger role for the ILD in countries with one-party rule or corresponding Leninist party structures, like Laos, Vietnam, and North Korea.

²¹ "Friendship Associations with Regions and other Countries." *The Chinese People's Association For Friendship with Foreign Countries*, <https://cpaffc.org.cn/index/xiehui/diquguobieyouxie/lang/2.html>.

²² "About Association." *Thai-Chinese Culture and Economy Association*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200930070929/https://thaizhong.org/zh/about-us/history.html>. Although the website is set up bilingually in Chinese and Thai, this information is only available in Thai.

²³ Dotson, John. "The United Front Work Department Assumes a Diplomatic Role" China Brief, Volume: 19 :17, *Jamestown Foundation*, 26 September 2019. <https://jamestown.org/program/the-united-front-work-department-assumes-a-diplomatic-role/>.

²⁴ Poston Jr, Dudley L., and Juyin Helen Wong. "The Chinese diaspora: The current distribution of the overseas Chinese population." *Chinese Journal of Sociology*, No. 3, 2016. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/307898102_The_Chinese_diaspora_The_current_distribution_of_the_overseas_Chinese_population.

²⁵ A full listing of organizations directly overseen by the UFWD is beyond the scope of this report. However, the most important are the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification and a broad range of organizations meant to convene overseas Chinese students, overseas Chinese businesspeople, and people whose ancestors are from particular provinces or cities in China.

language media targeted at overseas Chinese audiences. The most important is China's second-largest news agency, China News Service, which has branches in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand.²⁶ The UFWD also works with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Propaganda Department to organize the World Chinese Media Forum, bringing together co-opted and PRC-leaning Chinese language media outlets from around the globe.²⁷

The Rest of the Party

At a 2021 meeting of China's Politburo, Xi directed that enhancing the PRC's international communication capabilities be made an all-of-party effort. He required all levels of the party increase their investment in growing the PRC's voice, and, most importantly, instructed that this mission be integrated into the metrics used to evaluate cadres' ideological loyalty and performance (which are also critical for promotion decisions).²⁸

While in one sense Xi was simply reiterating longstanding policy, his instructions put new emphasis on an important fact: that even parts of the party with no nominal responsibility for ideology, propaganda, or external affairs must play a role in furthering the party's external messaging goals. In practical terms, this means that government and party bodies that interact with important foreign constituencies like multinational corporations, international investors, or universities have a responsibility to use their roles to strengthen PRC's voice, just as officials in the central Ministry of Propaganda or Ministry of Foreign Affairs do.

This is a key point of distinction with democratic systems. In such systems, senior finance, commerce, or education ministry officials may win jobs on the basis of political or ideological loyalty, but their day-to-day responsibilities do not normally include using the power of their bureaucracies to condition the speech of foreign partners. As later portions of this report illustrate, this "whole of party" diffusion of ideological responsibility is especially important in managing relationships with strong pro-PRC voices in the foreign business and academic communities, as well as punishing would-be opponents.

²⁶ "China News Service Overseas Branch." *China News Service*, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/cns60/news/166.shtml>.

²⁷ "About Us." *China News Service*, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/common/footer/intro.shtml>.

²⁸ "During the 30th collective study of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping emphasized strengthening and improving international communication work to show a true, three-dimensional and comprehensive China" *Xinhua*, 1 June 2021. http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2021-06/01/c_1127517461.html.

“Studying the Spirit:” Explaining Variation and Commonalities in PRC Messaging

Observers of PRC external messaging often note a high degree of variation among actors in tone, level of activity and aggression, and the degree to which content is tailored (or tone deaf) towards the target country. Internal party-state dynamics explain a much of this variation.²⁹ Despite the significant level of policy centralization under Xi, his subordinates are expected to adapt the spirit of central policies to their particular context. How to best accomplish this is often unclear, leaving latitude for a wide variety of strategies in a system characterized by intense pressure for career advancement. This dynamic can be clearly observed in the varying social media approaches adopted by the PRC’s ambassadors. The Twitter accounts of PRC ambassadors and embassies in the Indo-Pacific (see table “Ambassadors on Twitter”) exhibit broad variation in content, tone, level of activity, and degree of tailoring to local audiences. The messaging of some is relatively colorless and bureaucratic, while others adopt a livelier tone, often centered around the personality of the ambassadors themselves. The degree to which the accounts tweet in the local language also varies widely.

PRC Diplomatic Twitter Accounts in Report Countries

COUNTRY/ORGANIZATION	TYPE	ACCOUNT NAME	TWITTER HANDLE	CREATED	#FOLLOWERS	NOTES
ASEAN	Ambassador	Ambassador Hou Yanqi	@China2ASEAN	January 2020	108,300	
FIJI	Embassy	Chinese Embassy in Fiji	@ChineseEmb_FJ	January 2021	2,800	
INDONESIA	Ambassador	慷慷 LU Kang	@Amb_LuKang	April 2022	36,400	
KAZAKHSTAN	Embassy	Посольство КНР в Казахстане	@ChinaEmbKazakh	September 2019	3,000	
MALAYSIA	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No official accounts identified
MALDIVES	Ambassador	Ambassador Wang Lixin	@China_Amb_Mdv	June 2019	19,500	
MALDIVES	Embassy	Embassy of China in Maldives	@ChinaEmbassy_mv	November 2021	2,300	
MONGOLIA	Ambassador	Wenrui Chai 蔡文睿 柴文睿	@ChaiWenrui	November 2021	6,800	
MYANMAR	ASEAN	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No official accounts identified
NEPAL	Spokesperson	Spokesperson Of Chinese Embassy In Nepal	@PRCSpoxNepal	December 2021		
NEPAL	Ambassador	Ambassador Chen Song	@PRCAmbNepal	June 2019	71,000	
PHILIPPINES	Embassy	Chinese Embassy Manila	@Chinaembmanila	February 2017	13,900	
PNG	Embassy	Chinese Embassy in PNG	@ChineseEmb_PNG	February 2020	5,900	
SOLOMON ISLANDS	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No official accounts identified
SRI LANKA	Embassy	Chinese Embassy in Sri Lanka	@ChinaEmbSL	March 2020	25,000	
THAILAND	Embassy	Chinese Embassy Bangkok	@chineseembassy1	May 2019	988	
TUVALU	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No diplomatic ties with PRC

A large upsurge in the number of accounts from 2019 into 2020 clearly corresponds with a central directive to establish a stronger voice for the PRC on Twitter. However, the wide variation in observed messaging – including the mix of confrontational or conciliatory messaging adopted – can likely be attributed to variations in the personalities, capabilities, and strategies for bureaucratic advancement adopted by the relevant actors, as they vie to correctly interpret the spirit of central instructions. This dynamic – wide variation in implementation among disparate actors vying to “correctly” implement central policy – is a useful framework for understanding not only the behavior of PRC ambassadors on Twitter, but also the broader set of actors responsible for shaping the information environment in China’s near abroad.

²⁹ “Understanding Chinese “Wolf Warrior Diplomacy”” *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, 22 October 2021, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/understanding-chinese-wolf-warrior-diplomacy/>.

IV. Approaches and Tactics

The United Front Approach in the Information Space

Just as important to understanding the why and who of PRC information shaping in its near abroad is the how. In understanding the how, a first principles grasp of the philosophies shaping CCP actions is critical. The United Front is especially important in this respect, as the term encompasses more than just the United Front Work Department. The UFWD is meant to embody and implement a philosophy on how to maximize the party's leverage and freedom to maneuver within a large, complex, fractious society, and the set of tactics that flow from that objective.

This set of beliefs and practices, which we will here term the "United Front approach," was key to the party's victory its two-front war against Japan and the Kuomintang (KMT) in the 1940s, and its subsequent consolidation of power.³⁰ It has since shaped not only the party's approach to its own society but is also clearly reflected in how it works to shape information spaces in its near abroad and globally. Indeed, the party itself sometimes describes the United Front's most important function as essentially informational in nature, in that its main purpose is "to unite people's hearts" behind the party's goals.³¹

The section below presents a succinct explanation of what the United Front approach is, how it is applied to actors outside China's borders, and four important tactics for shaping the information space in the Indo-Pacific that flow from its use, which we consistently found applied by the PRC in the countries examined in this study.

What is the 'United Front approach'?

The first step in the United Front approach is establishing a clear understanding of who supports and opposes the party's goals. In a 2015 speech, Xi echoed predecessors like Deng Xiaoping and Mao Zedong in identifying three groups within PRC society: red, gray, and black.³² Red are those who sympathize with and promote party policy goals; gray is the persuadable middle; and black is the implacable opposition.

Broadly speaking, the United Front approach prescribes that the Party should reward red sectors for their loyalty; attempt to win over gray sectors through a mixture of potential rewards, patient persuasion, and implied threats; and isolate, and discredit black sectors.³³ Red and gray actors can and should be mobilized in the struggle against black.

Domestically, the UFWD oversees the application of this red/gray/black approach to PRC society. While the party does not generally frame its approach to foreign interlocutors in explicitly United Front terms, we argue that the terminology and tactics it uses to manage the information space along the PRC's periphery bear strong hallmarks of this "United Front "approach", making it a useful framework to apply more broadly.

The application of this approach in the information space means that, while coercion plays an important role in shaping discourse on China across the region (described in greater detail below), open rhetorical attacks on most countries in the Indo-Pacific are relatively rare, as these countries and their population tend to fall in the gray, persuadable middle. Instead, new PRC ambassadors to the Philippines and Nepal have distinguished themselves by being much more public relations-friendly than their predecessors.³⁴ So-called "public opinion struggle" is mainly reserved for the United States and other "black" countries such as Japan, and individual "black" policymakers in countries like Australia and India. PRC officials do sometimes openly attack local voices in the countries studied, but usually only those that explicitly fall into the enemy category, such as Uyghur activists, the Tibetan government in exile, Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party

³⁰ Van Slyke, Lyman. *Enemies and Friends: The United Front in Chinese Communist History*. Stanford University Press, 1967.

³¹ "The Historical Orientation and Development Space of Overseas United Front Work in the New Era" *Overseas Chinese Affairs Study*, No. 4, 2019, <https://qwgzyj.gqb.gov.cn/yjyt/207/3158.shtml>.

³² Xi Jinping: Speech at the National Party School Work Conference" *Qiushi*, 1 May 2016. <https://web.archive.org/web/20191130145633/http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0501/c64094-28317481.html>.

³³ See "Note by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on reinforcing and improving external propaganda work, Central Circular No. 21 (1990) in *Dang de xuanchuan gongzuo wenjian xuanbian* (1988-1992), 1922; and "Comrade Zeng Jianhui talks about a number of problems in external propaganda work, *Duiwai baodao cankao*, no. 7, 1990, p. 3.

³⁴ Camba, Alvin. "How the PRC shapes Philippine informational space: United Front activities with Filipino characteristics" Lecture, 9 June 2022.

Bhaya, Abhishek G. "Chinese envoy encourages Nepal tourism in stunning social media post." *CGTN*, 7 January 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-01-07/Chinese-envoy-encourages-Nepal-tourism-in-stunning-social-media-post-N3u86QqAx2/index.html>.

administration, or others the PRC considers irredeemably hostile.³⁵

Four important tactics flow from the CCP's application of this United Front approach to the informational space, observed repeatedly in the countries included in this study.

1) Boats and Mouths: The Central Role of Foreign Proxies

Large and powerful as it is, the Chinese Communist Party has a relatively limited voice in most foreign societies and must therefore often rely on others to speak for it. The party recognized the value of this tactic early in its history, famously cultivating foreign journalists like Edgar Snow at its base in Yan'an, where Mao and his lieutenants hosted Westerners and delegations of overseas Chinese and other people from the region (see below). The benefits of winning over foreign friends who could speak for China were summed up by Mao in 1937, who observed that, "The more foreign guests we receive, the more opportunities to publicize our party's policies, and to win more people's understanding, sympathy and support for us."³⁶

PRC publications regularly point to this tradition of using foreigners to tell China's story as an important asset.³⁷ There are many phrases used by the CCP to describe foreigners who speak up on the PRC's behalf, or the use of foreign resources to transmit PRC messages. These include "borrowing a mouth to speak," "borrowing a boat to sail the sea," "borrowing a stage to perform a play," or "borrowing a tube to transmit sound."³⁸ People who are willing to uncritically retransmit the PRC's views are referred to as "old friends" (mainly used for elder statesmen and -women), "friendly persons," or as China's "circle of friends."³⁹ As the party's power and global interests have grown, so has its list of potential friends.

In the contemporary Indo-Pacific, this proxy-centric approach to information-shaping recognizes that the list of friends who can shape discourse is longer than simply journalists or other members of the media. Across the Indo-Pacific, politicians at every level of society are key players in shaping the public discourse on China. So are businesspersons with large, diversified conglomerates, who often own influential media properties and business operations that rely, in one form or another, on the PRC market as either buyer or supplier. A university or think tank president can often be a more valuable ally in shaping opinion on China than the researchers or professors that work for them. China's regional economic gravity is such that powerful individuals across the Indo-Pacific may choose to advance narratives preferred by Beijing not because of any particular affinity for China, but because of a complex calculation of self- or national interest, shaped by the party-state's ability to reward or punish.

In this respect, the whole-of-party nature of the drive to grow China's international communications capabilities is key. The ability to shape foreign discourse by cultivating proxies or discouraging opposition relies on, to quote Mao, the ability to "bring material benefits" to the party's friends, while imposing tangible costs on enemies.⁴⁰ While the Foreign Ministry or the Propaganda Department have some ability to provide friends overseas with material benefits, the true locus of this influence lies with the parts of the party-state that mediate economic relationships between China and the outside world. This makes departments that regulate economics, finance, and trade important actors in growing China's network of friends, but also includes parts of the party-state as disparate as the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

³⁵ The United Front approach also maps well onto the role of the Indo-Pacific in the PRC's global informational strategy, harkening back to the CCP's strategy of "using the countryside to surround the city" during its civil war against the Kuomintang. The term refers to addressing enemy centers of power by eschewing frontal assaults, instead allying with surrounding smaller actors and building power bases where the main enemy is weak. As part of this strategy, the PRC often attempts to mobilize "gray" and "red" forces in the global s by positioning itself as a leader or spokesperson for the developing world vis-a-vis a hostile West, led by the United States, attempting to use the countries studied for this report to isolate the U.S. both inside the region and at a global level.

³⁶ "Mao Zedong attaches great importance to the battlefield of public opinion, emphasizing that the left hand holds the leaflet and the right hand holds the bullet." *China News Service*, 13 September 2010, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/cul/2010/09-13/2528710.shtml>.

³⁷ Yu, Haiqiu. "Yu Haiqiu: Telling the story of the Communist Party of China to the Mekong countries." *China (Kunming) Institute of South Asia and Southeast Asia*, 15 July 2021, <http://www.sky.yn.gov.cn/xsvj/zgsd/8108752248968527188>.

³⁸ "Liu Qibao emphasized vigorously promoting the construction of cooperative communication capacity during his research in Yunnan." *Xinhua*, 22 September 2015, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2015/0922/c1001-27620732.html>.

³⁹ Jiangmen builds an international communication system with the characteristics of overseas Chinese, from the Bay Area to the far-flung overseas." *Jiangmen Municipal People's Government*, 7 March 2022, http://www.jiangmen.gov.cn/home/zww/content/post_2545757.html.

⁴⁰ Zedong, Mao. "On Some Important Problems of the Party's Present Policy." *Marxists.Org*. 18 January 1948. https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-4/mswv4_26.htm.

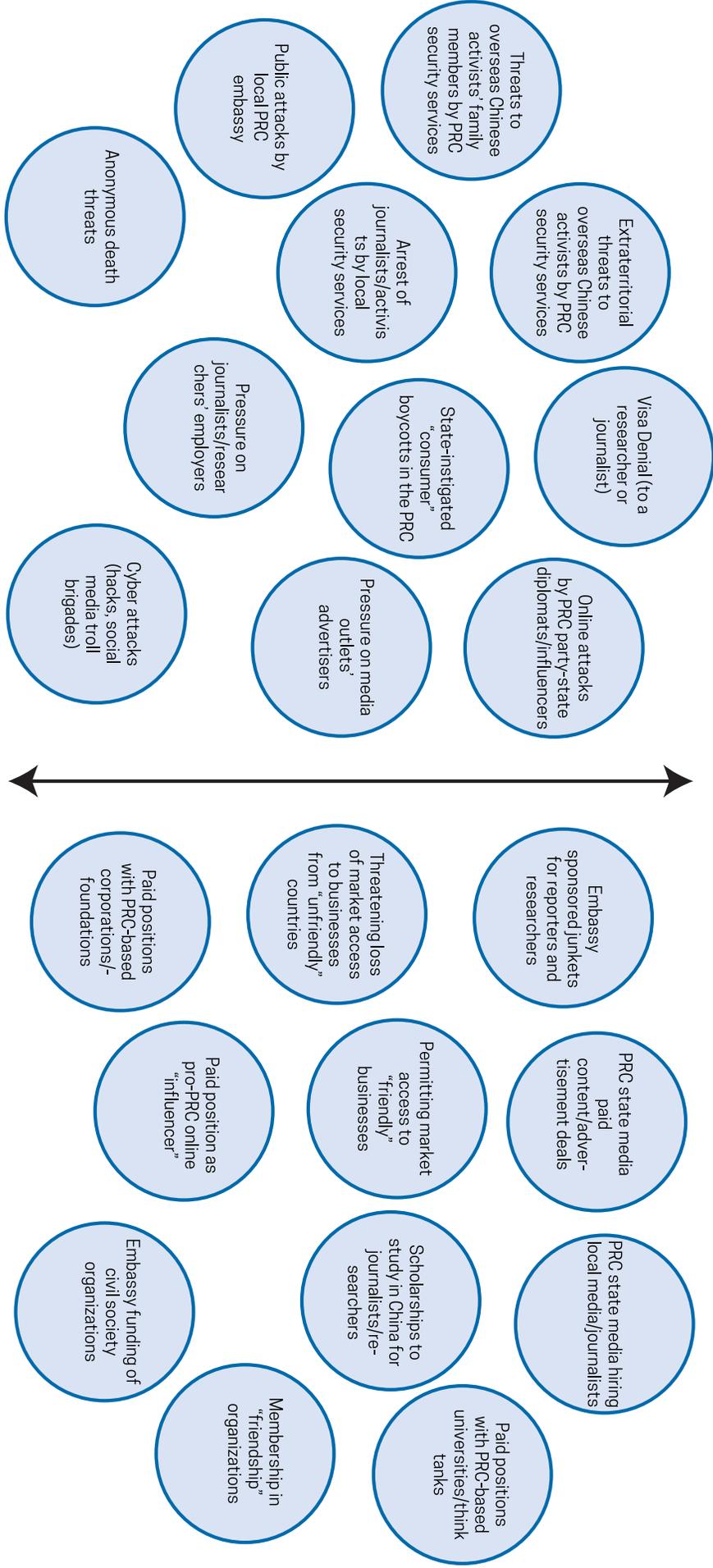
2) The Persuasion-Coercion Spectrum

All states exert power through a mixture of coercion and inducement, both inside and outside their borders. The United Front approach sets the PRC apart from many other states, however, in that it explicitly prescribes and legitimizes the coercive use of party-state power against perceived opponents as a way of shaping political discourse. PRC tactics for shaping discourse in the Indo-Pacific are therefore best understood as falling along a persuasion-coercion spectrum, with the state's permissive (or even encouraging) attitude towards coercion as a backdrop.

This dynamic means that efforts to build PRC-positive narratives are often accompanied by attempts to censor or suppress content that the party-state does not want in the public sphere. The range of tools used to effect this coercion fall along a spectrum, ranging from subtle public warnings that a country or politician should not endanger good relations with China all the way to kidnapping and murder (see Tactics-Target Matrix). Here the proxy-centric nature of the United Front approach again comes into play, as coercion is often implemented not by the party-state itself, but by proxies seeking to preserve relations with, head off punishment from, or preemptively respond to the wishes of party-state interlocutors. The simple knowledge that the PRC can and does retaliate against "enemies" is itself a form of information shaping, as punishment of one country for crossing the PRC's rhetorical red lines must be factored into other countries' calculations.

On the next page is an illustrative matrix of the spectrum of persuasive and coercive tactics the PRC uses to shape the information space in the Indo-Pacific, using examples drawn from our research. The spectrum is organized using the degree to which an action can be directly attributed to the PRC party-state, rather than the degree to which an action is carried out through a proxy, since some forms of coercive-but-difficult-to-attribute action (such as death threats) could be carried out directly by party-state actors or by proxies.

DIRECTLY ATTRIBUTABLE TO PRC PARTY-STATE



COERCION ← → **PERSUASION**

Unattributable (either covert or through proxy)

Spectrum of persuasive versus coercive actions in the information space by PRC party state

Examples of information shaping through coercion in the Indo-Pacific are numerous and discussed in greater detail in Section V. However, a few specific examples can serve to illustrate the range of the coercive spectrum and the complexity and ambiguity with which its use plays out on the ground.

- An Indonesian journalist taken on a tour to Xinjiang was publicly criticized by the PRC embassy in Indonesia for not writing a sufficiently positive article about the experience.⁴¹
- A Mongolian activist was arrested by the Mongolian government in 2022 after protesting against assimilationist PRC language policies in Inner Mongolia and expressing concern over the rights of ethnic Mongolians in the PRC.
- A Malaysian journalist was charged with causing public alarm for posting about the coronavirus outbreak in China in late January 2020 on her public Facebook account and criticizing the Malaysian government's decision to allow a cruise ship with passengers from the PRC. At least five other social media users were detained for sharing allegedly false information about the coronavirus outbreak.⁴²
- In 2020, a Nepali journalist was found dead under suspicious circumstances six months after the PRC embassy in Kathmandu protested his investigation exposing PRC military encroachment along Nepal's border with China.⁴³
- Prior to this, three journalists with Nepal's state-owned wire service were investigated in 2019 for publishing news about the Dalai Lama.⁴⁴

Where suppression of messages fails, PRC diplomats in the Indo-Pacific have sought to directly discredit critical media, research institutions, or the people who work for them, casting them as biased, untrustworthy, or as misled by "anti-China forces." In some countries, these attacks can also take root in local discourse. For example, narratives about "anti-China forces" are strong enough in Kazakhstan that even the head of state, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, referred to them in a January 2022 interview, suggesting that "anti-Chinese protestors are pursuing their political goals, perhaps they are paid for, because there is geopolitical clash in the world community."⁴⁵

3) Redundancy as Method

This tactic is applied both inside and outside the party-state system, seeking to cultivate as many proxies – or in some cases outright fronts – as possible to establish an "echo chamber" effect, creating the impression of greater support or uniformity of opinion on issues of interest to the party-state than actually exists.

As part of this effort, the party-state manages a large constellation of similar-sounding organizations dedicated to strengthening China's international voice. These include PRC-based "friendship organizations" with names like the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, the China Public Diplomacy Association, the Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs, the Chinese Association for International Understanding, and the China Association for International Friendly Contact. There are often multiple party-state-led "friendship societies" targeting individual countries, which are themselves often mirrored by friendship organizations established by would-be foreign "friends" in the target country.

Some of this duplication can be accounted for by the coordination issues inherent to any large bureaucracy, and it is not

⁴¹ Emont, Jon. "How China Persuaded One Muslim Nation to Keep Silent on Xinjiang Camps." *Wall Street Journal*, 11 December. 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-china-persuaded-one-muslim-nation-to-keep-silent-on-xinjiang-camps-11576090976>.

⁴² "Malaysian journalist charged over coronavirus Facebook posts." *Committee to Protect Journalists*, 6 February 2020, <https://cpj.org/2020/02/malaysian-journalist-charged-over-coronavirus-face/>.

⁴³ "Nepali editors condemn Chinese embassy's statement regarding the Post." *The Kathmandu Post*, 19 February 2020, <https://kathmandupost.com/2/2020/02/19/nepali-editors-condemn-chinese-embassy-s-statement-regarding-the-post>.

⁴⁴ "Nepali journalist Balam Baniya who reported on Chinese encroachment in Nepal village, found dead." *The Indian Express*, 14 August 2020, <https://www.newindian-express.com/world/2020/aug/14/nepali-journalist-balam-baniya-who-reported-on-chinese-encroachment-in-nepal-village-found-dead-2183424.html>.

⁴⁵ "Three journalists are under investigation over publishing news about the Dalai Lama." *The Kathmandu Post*, 12 May 2019, <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2019/05/12/three-journalists-face-probe-over-publishing-dalai-lama-news>.

⁴⁵ "Kasym-Jomart Tokaev: Civil rights will not be violated." *Vechny Almaty*, 31 January 2022, <https://vecher.kz/kasim-zhomart-tokaev-prava-grazhdan-narushat-sya-ne-budut>.

difficult to find PRC writings on the topic calling for less redundancy and duplication. However, these calls notwithstanding, the PRC's approach to information spaces continues to embrace redundancy, in large part because the Party's Leninist approach to managing discourse emphasizes the use of a large number of nominally independent organizations voicing similar views to convey the impression of a diversity of opinions, while in reality maintaining relative conformity.

4) The Special Role of the Chinese Diaspora

While the party does not explicitly prescribe the use of the United Front approach against foreign countries, one group of people outside the PRC is specifically targeted by the United Front Work Department – so-called “overseas Chinese” (a term used by the party to refer to people of Chinese descent, regardless of their country of origin or citizenship).

Writings on the diaspora frequently discuss overseas Chinese as an opportunity and an important resource for the party. Xi Jinping's 2017 remark that “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation requires the joint efforts of Chinese sons and daughters [both] at home and abroad” reflects a long-standing, high-level consensus within the CCP.⁴⁶ However, the party also recognizes the latent threat the diaspora presents. The nationwide protests in 1989 that included large protests in Tiananmen Square were strongly backed by many diaspora intellectuals and media outlets, and Beijing's image suffered among the diaspora after its bloody crackdown. The party identified this threat and has since worked with great success to curtail opposition in diaspora media spaces.⁴⁷

The party applies all the tactics described earlier – boats and mouths, the coercive-persuasive spectrum, and redundancy as method – in its efforts to use the diaspora to influence information spaces in the Indo-Pacific. United Front Work officials are encouraged to build bridges with diaspora members who are “politically influential, economically powerful, socially prestigious, academically accomplished representatives and community leaders.”⁴⁸ In countries along China's periphery, particularly in Southeast Asia, large ethnic Chinese populations offer more potential opportunities for United Front Work, and members of the diaspora are often influential in business, media, and political circles, offering several potential avenues for influencing discourse.

However, Beijing's policy goals are far from the only factor at play. The diaspora is large and extremely complex, and Beijing's relationship with it is more complex still. Persistent suspicion of ethnic Chinese communities as a fifth column for Beijing's influence means that important diaspora members may be hesitant to be too closely identified with the PRC. Likewise, large swathes of the diaspora are not favorably disposed to Beijing's opaque, repressive politics.

However, the diaspora remains uniquely positioned to capitalize on the range of commercial opportunities the PRC offers. As in other places along its periphery, economic influence serves as the primary entry point among the diaspora, opening opportunities for a range of other forms of influence in both the information and political spaces.

⁴⁶ “Xi Jinping made important instructions on the work of overseas Chinese affairs, emphasizing: Gather the hearts and strength of overseas Chinese and share the Chinese dream together.” *People's Daily*, 18 February 2017, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0218/c64094-29090242.html>.

⁴⁷ Diamond, Larry and Orville Schell. *China's Influence & American Interests*. Hoover Institution Press, 2019. https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/diamond-schell_chineseinfluence_oct2020rev.pdf

⁴⁸ “Overseas United Front Work.” *News of Communist Party of China*, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64107/65708/65722/4444411.html>.

V. PRC Influence and Information Operations by Sector

The preceding sections sought to establish a framework for understanding the CCP's approach to influencing the informational space and the set of tactics through which this approach manifests. The remainder of the report shows how these tactics play out in practice, through a sectoral approach that demonstrates how important sectors of societies around the Indo-Pacific are affected. We have chosen to focus on three sectors:

- Societal elites
- Media
- Education

Societal elites are further subdivided into political, business, and religious elites. The CCP's attempts to shape China-related discourse in nearby countries touches all these sectors, and in each we find all four of the tactics outlined above in play. This sectoral approach demonstrates that, while PRC information-shaping efforts are amply applied in sectors most traditionally thought of as connected with information and discourse, they reach far beyond that, especially by using societal elites to magnify efforts to shape the way that China is discussed, debated, and thought of in societies across the Indo-Pacific.

Targeting Elites

The CCP projects its domestic priority of ensuring elite support for the party onto its influence work overseas. In the Indo-Pacific and Kazakhstan, CCP influencers prioritize outreach to elites out of a belief that their adoption of CCP narratives is an indicator of discourse power. Influencing regional elites and their ideas ensures that CCP interests shape their decisions. In the long-run, Beijing believes that the adoption of CCP narratives by regional elites will promote a regional transition to the PRC's model of political and economic order.

For Beijing, discourse power signifies that regional elites publicly affirm the PRC's political position, recognize and praise the successes of the PRC and the CCP, repeat specific formulations used by the party-state, or express views, in their own words, that the party-state wants to propagate. To demonstrate the success of its discourse power — i.e., to give the impression that there is a unanimous chorus of pro-PRC elite voices affirming PRC goals and repeating talking points — regional elites' affirmation of PRC goals and talking points is often cited in party-state diplomatic readouts.

One salient example of such practices are statements highlighting strong support from the region for the Winter Olympics at a time when Western governments were announcing boycotts.⁴⁹ For the PRC, this was particularly relevant in the Central Asian region bordering Xinjiang, where Western governments have expressed concerns over the PRC's treatment of ethnic Muslim majorities, including Turkic populations. In other cases, foreign parties have affirmed their wish to learn from the CCP's experience in governance.⁵⁰ Similarly, PRC media often feature political elites from the Indo-Pacific and Kazakhstan praising PRC achievements. The key idea is to create the impression of the broadest possible support for the PRC and its policies in individual countries and on a global scale.

To do this, the CCP deploys a variety of liaison and friendship work targeting elites, using actors within different party structures to disseminate its narratives and obtain support from elites, including government-to-government channels, party-controlled organizations involved in building people-to-people" ties, as well as religious organizations. Through these organizations, the CCP has established a large and well-rounded presence among elites in the Indo-Pacific and Kazakhstan. This approach aims to institutionalize the means by which the PRC sustains its discourse power. The communication channels enabled by liaison and friendship work facilitates the constant repetition of narratives, winning friends in influential places with the goal of having their governments adopt policies and positions that are favorable to the PRC, and to further influence broader public opinion via elites, with the aim of moving the overall debate in a country in a direction that is more favorable to the PRC.

⁴⁹ E.g., "Luvsannamsrai Oyun-Erdene, MPP Chairman and Mongolian Prime Minister, Meets with Song Tao." *International Department of the Central Committee of CPC*, 5 February 2022, https://www.idcpc.org.cn/english/news/202202/t20220208_148341.html.

"Song Tao Holds a Video Call with Prawit Wongsuwon, PPRP Leader, Deputy Prime Minister and President of the National Olympic Committee of Thailand." *International Department of the Central Committee of CPC*, 23 December 2021, https://www.idcpc.org.cn/english/news/202112/t20211224_148133.html.

⁵⁰ International Department, Central Committee of CPC, <https://www.idcpc.org.cn/>

Political Elites

In the Indo-Pacific and Kazakhstan, the PRC often wins points simply by easing access to people in Beijing's opaque, byzantine bureaucracy, and uses the ability to grant or deny meetings to heads of state in bilateral and multilateral settings to support dissemination of its preferred narratives. While the scope of government-to-government channels varies, most officials in the region have frequent and regular access to officials in Beijing. This includes annual group meetings of heads of state such as the ASEAN-China Summit, ministry-level annual meetings under the framework of cooperation committees between the host country and the PRC, party-to-party channels led by the CCP's International Liaison Department, as well as issue-based multilateral mechanisms such as the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (transnational water), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (transnational terrorism).

For some countries, such as Kazakhstan, the head of state meets their PRC counterpart at least twice a year at the SCO summit and the China-Central Asia Summit. In 2015 and 2017, Kazakh First President Nursultan Nazarbayev met Xi on two additional occasions during that period, as a result of bilateral visits. These heads of state meetings are often accompanied by the signing of cooperation agreements, which further serves to incentivize the adoption of CCP narratives, silence over controversial PRC issues, or to discourage policy choices that are inconvenient for the CCP. Most cooperation agreements are economic in nature, including investment and development plans promoting bilateral trade. Those can, in turn, facilitate financial support for political elites and thus create dependencies on the PRC that can be exploited for influence purposes. The Solomon Islands, for instance, switched official diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing after China reportedly pledged US\$500 million in aid, and committed to building a stadium for the Solomons to host the 2023 Pacific Games.⁵¹

Meetings at the heads of state level are supported by implementation-minded bilateral cooperation committees headed by ministers from relevant ministries, binding together the work of narrative dissemination and subsequent cooperation. For example, between Kazakhstan and the PRC there are 13 such committees spanning security, cross-border riverine cooperation, economics and trade, finance, transport, energy, geology, mining, ports and customs, railways, science and technology, environmental protection, and culture.⁵² Like BRI-themed organizations, these committees also facilitate the PRC's efforts on discourse power by bolstering its agenda-setting ability.

For the PRC, the annual Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit is one of the best tools for narrative dissemination. The summit provides an opportunity to have member states reaffirm their commitment to combat the so-called "three evils" (terrorism, extremism, separatism), broad terminology coined in the 2000s to discredit Uyghur-led political movements in Xinjiang. This regional approach has been instrumental in the criminalization of Central Asia-based Uyghur-led political groups, the disintegration of Uyghur cultural groups, the deportation of members of the Uyghur community, heavy surveillance against Uyghurs and the elimination of almost all public discussion on Uyghur resistance to Han colonization.⁵³

Beyond heads of states and local governments, the PRC also engages with political elites who are not in power, attempting to create the impression of a PRC-friendly United Front abroad that reaches all classes of political elites. An example of the success of this type of wide outreach is provided by former Malaysian Minister of Transport Ong Tee Keat, who in an op-ed published in a popular Shanghai-based online news platform advised the PRC to "not bet all its friendly resources and chips on the ruling party in power" when dealing with "anti-Chinese voices" in South-East Asia.⁵⁴

The CCP carries out party-to-party diplomacy on a regular basis, primarily through the International Liaison Department (ILD), whose members regularly meet with political parties across the region. The ILD liaises with both governing and opposition parties as well as through pan-regional settings such as the International Conference of Asian Political Parties,⁵⁵ the China-Central Asian Political Parties Forum, as well as PRC-led BRI-themed platforms such as the China-

⁵¹ "2023 Pacific Games: China to gift stadium to Solomons." *Radio New Zealand*, 24 October 2019, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/401702/2023-pacific-games-china-to-gift-stadium-to-solomons> Whiting, Natalie., Zhou, Christina. and Feng, Kai. "What does it take for China to take Taiwan's Pacific allies? Apparently, \$730 million." *ABC*, 19 September 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-09-18/solomon-islands-cuts-ties-with-taiwan-in-favour-of-china/11524118>

⁵² Yau, Niva. "Operation Reality of the Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia" in "China's Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia: Ambitions, Risks and Realities." *OSCE Academy*, Special Issue 2, 2020, https://osce-academy.net/upload/file/BRI_08_07.pdf.

⁵³ Isa, Dolkun, "Uyghur situation in Central Asia countries (In Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan)" OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, 25 September 2007, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/1/27056.pdf>. "No Space left to Run: China's Transnational Repression of Uyghurs" *Uyghur Human Rights Project and Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs*, June 24 2021, <https://oxussociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/transnational-repression-final-2021-06-23.pdf>

⁵⁴ "Ong Tee Keat: What to do in the face of "suspicious China" and "anti-China" voices in Southeast Asia." *Guancha*, 2 March 2022, https://m.guancha.cn/wengshijie/2022_03_02_628324.shtml.

⁵⁵ "Guo Yezhou Attends the Working Meeting of the Executive Board of the ICAPP Standing Committee." *International Department of the Central Committee of CPC*, 11 February 2022, https://www.idcpc.org.cn/english/news/202202/t20220214_148352.html.

Southeast Asian and South Asian Countries Political Parties Belt and Road Joint Consultation Conference,⁵⁶ the Belt and Road Political Parties Forum for China and Southeast Asian and South Asian Countries,⁵⁷ and the South and Southeast Asian Countries-China Political Leadership Dialogue.⁵⁸

In other countries, the CCP has made inroads with political leaders who are not popular with the public. For example, in Kazakhstan and Nepal, the CCP has built strong friendships with the two countries' communist parties. Although perceptions of the Nepalese communists among the Nepalese public are largely positive, the Kazakh Communist Party has been isolated in national politics. The party was outright banned by First President Nazarbayev in 2015.⁵⁹ After it was renamed and re-established as the Communist People's Party of Kazakhstan, representatives of the party have regularly repeated CCP talking points on PRC and global affairs but have failed to become popular with the public.

Forming close ties with parties out of power is of a piece with a strategy that seeks the widest support possible from regional political elites. PRC state actors also engage with sub-national government actors through sister-city ties and parliament-to-parliament groups, allowing interaction with other political elites such as mayors and MPs. Some examples include the Malaysia-China Friendship Group of the Malaysian Parliament, the China-Maldives Parliamentary Friendship Group,⁶⁰ the Philippine-China Parliamentarians' Friendship Society, and the Thailand-China Parliamentary Friendship Group.⁶¹ There are also Friends of the Silk Road Clubs in six countries: Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Malaysia.⁶² Moreover, local friendship organizations set up by PRC-friendly local elites ensure friendly relations with Chinese entities on the ground.

These friendship groups and those who lead them often make political statements in their home countries in support of PRC goals at critical junctures, with wording that often closely mirrors Beijing's. For instance, according to the PRC embassy in Sri Lanka, five local friendship organizations published a statement praising the introduction of the National Security Law in Hong Kong and condemning "the escalating violence, terrorist activities, and shameless foreign interference in Hong Kong since 2019."⁶³ In another instance, members of the Pacific Islands Friendship Association sent a statement to the World Health Organization complaining about coronavirus origin tracing that unfairly targeted China, and demanding that the WHO start global origin tracing.⁶⁴

These local friendship organizations are often, though not always,⁶⁵ headed by individuals who also hold some form of political office in their country or are retired office holders, including former ambassadors. This highlights the broad nature of the CCP's strategy to garner support from the whole political class aboard. Examples include the Malaysia-China Friendship Association, chaired by the former Malaysian ambassador to the PRC, Abdul Majid Ahmad Khan, who also chairs the Malaysian Investment Development Authority; the Nepal-China Friendship Association, chaired by Agni Prasad Sapkota, Speaker of the House of Representatives; the Indonesia-China Friendship Association, chaired by Bondan Gunawan, former Minister of State Secretariat; the Thailand-China Friendship Association, chaired by Korn Dabbaransi, former Deputy Prime Minister; the Mongolia-China Friendship Association, chaired by Batsukh Galsan, former ambassador to the PRC who upon his return to Mongolia was appointed to the Board of Directors of Oyu Tolgoi, which exports raw materials from one of the world's largest copper mines to the PRC.⁶⁶

⁵⁶ "China-Southeast Asian and South Asian Countries Political Parties Belt and Road Joint Consultation Conference Held." *International Department of the Central Committee of CPC*, 24 January 2022, https://www.idcpc.org.cn/english/news/202201/t20220126_148283.html.

⁵⁷ "Chen Zhou Attends the Belt and Road Political Parties Forum for China and Southeast Asian and South Asian Countries." *International Department of the Central Committee of CPC*, 6 January 2022, https://www.idcpc.org.cn/english/news/202201/t20220110_148194.html.

⁵⁸ "South and Southeast Asian Countries-China Political Leadership Dialogue Held in Nanning." *International Department of the Central Committee of CPC*, 9 September 2021, https://www.idcpc.org.cn/english/news/202109/t20210913_147133.html.

⁵⁹ "The Communist Party of Kazakhstan was liquidated by court decision," *Nur KZ*, 4 September 2015, <https://www.nur.kz/politics/kazakhstan/878575-kommunisticheskuyu-partiyu-kazakhstan/>.

⁶⁰ "China-Maldives parliamentary friendship group holds a meeting with Chinese Ambassador." *MNN*, 23 October 2021, <https://www.maldivesnewsnetwork.com/2021/10/23/china-maldives-parliamentary-friendship-group-holds-a-meeting-with-chinese-ambassador/>.

⁶¹ "Thailand-China Parliamentarians Friendship Group paid a courtesy call on Ambassador of the People's Republic of China to Thailand to exchange their views about the diplomatic relations between Thailand and China." *Parliament of Thailand*, 19 June 2018, https://www.parliament.go.th/ewtadmin/ewt/parliament_parcy/download/article/article_20180705160850.pdf.

⁶² "Chen Zhou Attends Annual Meeting of Friends of Silk Road Club." *International Department of the Central Committee of CPC*, 10 March 2021 https://www.idcpc.org.cn/english/news/202103/t20210315_145336.html.

⁶³ "Five Friendship Organizations in Sri Lanka Issued Joint Statement on Hong Kong National Security Legislation." *Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka*, 1 June 2020, http://lk.china-embassy.org/eng/xwdt/202006/t20200601_1374734.htm.

⁶⁴ "Voice of Friendship." *Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries*, 27 December 2021, https://cpaffc.org.cn/uploads/admin/admin_thumb/20211228/e6c981f59607cb2c029e0a71929ceb98.pdf.

⁶⁵ For example: "Profile." *Sri Lanka-China Friendship Association*, <https://www.slcfal.org/profile/>.

⁶⁶ "Interview: China's transformation "not possible without the visionary leadership of CPC," says former Malaysian envoy." *Xinhua*, 17 June 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-06/17/c_1310013599.htm. "Abdul Majid Ahmad Khan appointed MIDA chairman." *The Star*, 26 April 2019, <https://www.thestar.com.my/business/business-news/2019/04/26/abdul-majid-ahmad-khan-appointed-mida-chairman>. "Lumbini-China Friendship Association held an event to celebrate the 65th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Nepal [藍毗尼尼中友好協會舉辦活動慶祝中尼建交65周年]." *Embassy of the*

Friendship Associations can precede the establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations, a tactic the PRC used as early as Mao's time, and which it continues to use today. For example, the Solomon Island China Friendship Association (SICFA), a member of the Pacific China Friendship Association, was set up in 2016, three years before the two countries established official diplomatic relations.⁶⁷ Before the switch of recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 2019, the SICFA functioned as an informal PRC embassy that also engaged with provincial governments in the Solomon Islands.⁶⁸ This raises the possibility that friendship associations in other South Pacific island nations that currently do not have official diplomatic relations with the PRC could play a similar role in preparing the ground for a switch away from the U.S.-allied Taiwan. At this writing there does not appear to be one in Tuvalu, but in Palau, the Palau China Friendship Society was established in 2018.⁶⁹

Among these Friendship Associations, the Thai-Chinese Culture and Economy Association (TCCEA) is one example of a friendship group that has had an impact both behind the scenes and on public discourse. Although it resembles other friendship groups, its history makes it stand out, and the functions it serves are different from what its name suggests. On its website, the TCCEA states as the first of its objectives/achievements that it is “the shortest bridge to connect and strengthen the relationship between the Thai Army and the Chinese People's Liberation Army.”⁷⁰ Its founding in 1993 followed closer military cooperation between the two countries. General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, who later became the founding president of the TCCEA, was among the key negotiators for this agreement on the Thai side. According to the TCCEA website, “the Chinese People's Liberation Army Chief of Staff advised the Thai side to establish a private-sector organization that would serve as the shortest bridge to connect and strengthen the relationship between the two armies and the two countries.”⁷¹

General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh is the founder of the New Aspiration Party, which is backed by the influential Chaeroen Pokphand Group, a Thai conglomerate with a heavy presence in the PRC. Chavalit Yongchaiyudh was the first chief of the New Aspiration Party and briefly served as prime minister between 1996-1997. The current party chief is Bhokin Bhalakula, a former deputy prime minister and former minister of the interior. The TCCEA also claims to have pushed the Thai government to set up a national committee for cooperation in trade, investment, and tourism with the PRC, to have facilitated the establishment of sister cities and sister provinces, to have negotiated free scholarships for Thai officials to study at Huaqiao University in Xiamen (see the universities section below), and to have brought two pandas to Thailand.⁷²

For foreign elites who are deemed to have responded mostly positively to CCP inducements, the PRC hands out official “friendship medals” for their “outstanding contributions” to the promotion of bilateral friendship. These can include prominent individuals who are well-respected and have significant leverage in shaping public discussion on PRC affairs in their home country. This includes people such as Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn of Thailand.⁷³ At their most successful, CCP influence efforts can lead political leaders who are genuinely liked by their people to disseminate pro-CCP narratives and thereby further secure discourse power in the country. Princess Sirindhorn, who is genuinely popular with many Thai people, has been a key figure in shaping a PRC-friendly discourse in Thailand. She first visited

People's Republic of China in Nepal, 5 August 2020, http://np.china-embassy.gov.cn/chn/xwdt/202008/t20200805_1514097.htm. “President of Indonesia-China Friendship Association: China's strong development will help Indonesia to develop strong [印尼中国友好协会总主席：中国的发展强大有助于印尼发展强大]” *China News Service* (中新社), 18 November 2018, https://www.sohu.com/a/276239632_115239. “Ambassador Han Zhiqiang Meets with Thai-Chinese Friendship Association President Gong Thaparanci via Video [韩志强大使视频会见泰中友好协会会长功·塔帕朗西]” *Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Thailand* [中华人民共和国驻泰国大使馆], 10 September 2021, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/ceth/chn/sgxw/t1906114.htm>. “Ambassador Chai Wenrui meets with President of the Mongolia-China Friendship Association Batsokh [柴文睿大使会见蒙中友好协会主席巴特苏赫]” *Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Mongolia*, 18 February 2020, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cemn/chn/sghd/t1746375.htm>. “Mongolia counts on China to help and waits for copper mine investment to inject energy into economy [蒙古仰赖中国协助 并等待铜矿投资为经济注入活水]” *Reuters*, 21 May 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/mong-cn-copper-idCNKBS0060C020150521>.

⁶⁷ “Solomon Islands China Friendship Association.” <https://www.pacificchina.org/solomon-islands-china-friendship-association/>

⁶⁸ Ulutah, Gina. “West eyes link with China province.” *Solomon Star*, 4 September 2019, <https://www.solomonstarnews.com/west-eyes-link-with-china-province/>. “China woos Solomon Islands to switch ties away from Taiwan.” *Kyodo News*, 30 July 2019, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2019/07/2f793a2da80e-china-woos-solomon-islands-to-switch-ties-away-from-taiwan.html>.

⁶⁹ “Palau China Friendship Society.” <https://www.pacificchina.org/palau-china-friendship-society/>.

⁷⁰ “About Association [关于协会]” *Thai-Chinese Culture and Economy Association*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200930070929/https://thaizhong.org/zh/about-us/history.html>.

⁷¹ “About Association [关于协会]” *Thai-Chinese Culture and Economy Association*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200930070929/https://thaizhong.org/zh/about-us/history.html>. Although the website is set up bilingually in Chinese and Thai, this information is only available in Thai.

⁷² “About Association [关于协会]” *Thai-Chinese Culture and Economy Association*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200930070929/https://thaizhong.org/zh/about-us/history.html>.

⁷³ “China gives Princess top award.” *The Bangkok Post*, 30 September 2019, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1761249/china-gives-princess-top-award>.

China in 1981 and again in February 1990, while the PRC remained largely isolated internationally due to the Tiananmen Massacre. With every visit, she wrote a memoir about her encounters in the PRC. She has also visited Tibet and repeated the official PRC line on the region occupied by China. While attending the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, the Princess met with then-PRC foreign minister Wang Yi and, according to the PRC read-out of the meeting, announced that she was currently writing a book on the CCP and its achievements.⁷⁴

Various other “smaller” friendship awards exist, including the Silk Road Friendship Award. This award has been given to Kalyan Raj Sharma, the chair of the Nepal China Friendship Forum, who has organized conferences to promote the BRI in Nepal.⁷⁵ Another awardee is Gulnar Shaimergenova, who founded the Kazakhstan Center for Chinese Studies.⁷⁶ In some countries, the PRC has also introduced country-specific awards, such as the Award for Promoting Philippines-China Understanding first awarded in 2021.⁷⁷ The award has been given to former Philippine first lady Imelda Romualdez Marcos, former ambassador to China Francis Chua, now Chairman of the Philippine Silkroad International Chamber of Commerce and Honorary President of the Federation of Filipino Chinese Chambers of Commerce in the Philippines, as well as to the President of the Philippine Association for Chinese Studies, Rommel C. Banlaoi.⁷⁸

Business Elites

In the Indo-Pacific and Kazakhstan, business communities often have the means to influence decisions by political leaders as they are major actors in public life. They are therefore considered as a special target group for the CCP. In some cases, business leaders have close ties to the political leadership, and extensive commercial cooperation with business communities allows the CCP to tie a country’s economic development and/or its leadership’s personal economic interest to its will. Some local business elites have used PRC investments as a shortcut to climb the economic ladder. This creates incentives for the adoption of CCP narratives and can make anyone who deviates from these narratives an economic hostage. In the Philippines, self-interested businesspeople who have developed a dependency relationship with the PRC have launched a number of think tanks and centers dedicated to promoting friendly views of the PRC, such as the Integrated Development Studies Institute and the Philippines-China Friendship Club and the Philippine – BRICS Strategic Studies.

In Thailand, Thai business mogul Dhanin Chearavanont has used his conglomerate Charoen Pokphand Group (CP Group) to sponsor friendship events and cooperation with PRC entities in Thailand, including the embassy and state media.⁷⁹ As a politically influential figure in Thailand, he is a critical voice disseminating friendly views of the PRC to the public and Thai political elites. Building on close ties and access to officials, he has reaped economic benefits, becoming owner of the first multinational conglomerate registered in Shenzhen, with a 0001 registration number.⁸⁰ The CP Group also sponsors China-focused content at Thai universities. For example, it teamed up with Thammasat University to encourage Thai students to do internships in the PRC.⁸¹ (It has also made a US\$10 million donation to Georgetown University for the Initiative for U.S.-China Dialogue on Global Issues.⁸²)

⁷⁴ “Wang Yi Meets with Thai Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn.” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People’s Republic of China*, 4 February 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjw_663304/wjw_663308/activities_663312/202202/t20220204_10638938.html.

⁷⁵ “Kalyan Raj Sharma: contributor to China-Nepal friendship.” *Fudan University*, 15 April 2021, <https://www.fudan.edu.cn/en/2021/0415/c344a108517/page.htm>.

⁷⁶ Ji, Peijuan, and Wu, Jianying. “Winners of 2nd Silk Road Friendship Award share heartwarming stories and benefits brought by BRI.” *Global Times*, 1 June 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202206/1267154.shtml>.

⁷⁷ “10 Filipinos awarded for promoting China-Philippines mutual understanding.” *Xinhua*, 10 September 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/asiapacific/2021-09/10/c_1310180476.htm.

⁷⁸ “APCU Fora with APPCU 2021 Laureates.” *The Association for Philippines-China Understanding*, <https://apcu.org.ph/programs-projects/award-for-promoting-philippines-china-understanding-appcu/appcu-2021-laureates/>.

⁷⁹ “PRC Embassy in Thailand and the Thai Chia Tai Group held a sports networking event [中国驻泰使馆与泰国正大集团举办体育联谊活动].” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China*, 5 December, 2006, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/pds/qhdq/gj/yz/1206_30/1206x2/t440837.htm.

“Nie Chenxi met with the executive vice chairman of Thailand CP Group [聂辰席会见泰国正大集团执行副董事长].” *National Radio and Television Administration* [国家广播电视总局], 30 August 2016, http://www.nrta.gov.cn/art/2016/8/30/art_112_31547.html.

⁸⁰ “Dhanin Chearavanont (18): Company 0001, the first foreign company in Shenzhen.” *Nikkei Asia*, 18 September 2016, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/My-Personal-History/Dhanin-Chearavanont/Dhanin-Chearavanont-18-Company-0001-the-first-foreign-company-in-Shenzhen2>.

⁸¹ “Thammasat University unites with CP group encouraging student internship in China.” *Global Education News*, 9 September 2019, <https://qs-gen.com/thammasat-university-unites-with-cp-group-encouraging-student-internship-in-china/>.

⁸² This came under fire at the time due to the CP Groups known problems with slavery in its seafood chain. “Report on China Donor Prompts Concern.” *The Hoya*, 2 February 2016, <https://thehoya.com/report-on-china-donor-prompts-concern/>.

In other cases, having local business elites repeat CCP narratives is a critical precondition for establishing economic cooperation with the PRC. Economic incentives can include cheap loans and critical infrastructure projects, joint business groups, facilitating export opportunities to the PRC, increasing exchanges, dialogue, and so on. These economic ties and/or reliance on the PRC significantly influences a country's relation with the PRC. At times, it erodes a country's ability to make independent foreign policy decisions. In some cases, commercial ties are weaponized to coerce countries into changing their positions on issues of concern to the PRC, demonstrating the interconnectedness of economic power and discourse power.

All countries studied in this project have growing economic ties with and/or reliance on the PRC and are exposed to the potential weaponization of commercial ties by the CCP. In the context of the South China Sea dispute, for example, the PRC banned imports of bananas from the Philippines, leaving 200,000 local farmers at risk of losing their livelihood.⁸³ In 2016, when the Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama visited Mongolia, a landlocked country, the PRC retaliated by imposing heavier transit fees for products crossing the two countries' shared border.⁸⁴ In such cases (and many others) the PRC tries to use its economic leverage to compel a policy course-correction while using the information space to exacerbate pressure on decisionmakers, often by depicting them as the source of unnecessary tensions with the PRC.

Local elites can also compound the PRC's coercive efforts by underscoring the fact that economic ties and the threat of coercion leaves a country no choice but to stay on the good side of the PRC or face economic sanctions. For example, Paisal Puechmongkol, the Vice President and Secretary-General of the aforementioned TCCEA, is very active on his Facebook page, where he regularly complains about the U.S. and its alliances in the Indo-Pacific – including its treaty alliance with Thailand – under the hashtag #NATO2. Among other things, he has claimed that Thailand's treaty alliance with the U.S. has already led to economic sanctions by the PRC. If Thailand does not align itself with China and against a supposed fledgling "Asian NATO," Thai durians and mangoes will — to paraphrase — keep rotting at China's borders, and Thailand will have to find a way to sell durians to NATO.⁸⁵ (PRC officials have blocked Thai durians on claims that traces of Covid-19 were discovered on them, although it was not clear at the time whether to block was implemented with punitive intent.)

Dozens of joint chambers of commerce and business councils with ties to the PRC are active in the region and play a role in promoting the PRC's discourse on a variety of issues. These include, to name a few, the Thailand-China Business Council, the Nepal-China Business Association, the Malaysia-China Chamber of Commerce, and the Association of Indonesia China Economic, Social, and Cultural Cooperation. During the protests over the Hong Kong National Security Law, in Malaysia, the Southeast Asian country with the largest population of ethnic Chinese and a country that has extensive ties with Hong Kong, there was much public interest in the crisis. Consequently, in May 2020, the Malaysia-China Chamber of Commerce issued a public statement spelling out narratives in support of Beijing's crackdown on the peaceful protesters.⁸⁶ Four months later, Malaysia closed its migration program, popular among Hong Kong youths, "Malaysia My Second Home," and reopened it in 2021, only this time individuals under the age of 35 were barred from applying.⁸⁷

83 "Banana crisis blamed on Philippines-China dispute." *ABC*, 29 June 2012, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-06-29/an-banana-exporters-caught-in-philippines-china-dispute/4100422>.

84 "China says hopes Mongolia learned lesson after Dalai Lama visit." *Reuters*, 24 January 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-mongolia-dalailama-idUSKBN158197>.

85 See for example the entries from March 17, 2022, and from April 26, 2022. "Durian" Facebook, 17 March 17 2022 – 26 April 2022. <https://www.facebook.com/page/206264556138891/search/?q=%E0%B8%97%E0%B8%B8%E0%B9%80%E0%B8%A3%E0%B8%B5%E0%B8%A2%E0%B8%99>.

86 "Hong Kong passes the "National Security Law" Malaysia-China Chamber of Commerce: the advantages outweigh the disadvantages [香港通过《国安法》马中总商会：利多于弊]." *Kwong Wah Daily* [光华日报], 30 May 2020, <https://www.kwongwah.com.my/20200530/香港通过《国安法》马中总商会：利多于弊/>.

87 "Amid protests, Hong Kong residents eye Malaysia's second-home program." *CNBC*, 20 August 2019, <https://www.cnbcc.com/2019/08/21/hong-kong-protests-hk-residents-eye-malysias-second-home-program.html>. Yeo, Rachel. and Sukumaran, Tashny. "Migrating Hongkongers lose an exit as Malaysia My Second Home scheme suspended." *South China Morning Post*, 14 September 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3101250/migrating-hongkongers-one-less-exit-malaysia-my-second-home>. " (Moving to Malaysia) Second Home Program "4 Times Spicy" to Restart This Month [移居馬來西亞]第二家園計劃「加辣4倍」今月重啟 原文網址: [移居馬來西亞]第二家園計劃「加辣4倍」今月重啟." *Oriental Daily News* [東網], 3 October 2021, https://hk.on.cc/hk/bkn/entertainment/20211003/bkn-20211003130553637-1003_00862_001.html.

Religious Elites

As part of its effort to work with as many influential individuals as possible, the CCP also targets religious leaders. All the major religions and their leaders in the Indo-Pacific and Kazakhstan have engaged with PRC entities.

In the Solomon Islands, where Christian churches wield significant influence, the PRC, ruled by the officially atheist CCP, has reached out through Christmas donations and by rebuilding church infrastructure.⁸⁸ In 2021, the PRC ambassador met with 14 church leaders to talk about Christians in China, cooperation, and China's contributions to the Solomon Islands.⁸⁹ In Papua New Guinea, the China PNG Friendship Association gave Christmas donations to an organization that provides care to homeless children.⁹⁰

In Mongolia, engagement with religious elites is highly political due to the country's ties to Tibetan Buddhism, the Dalai Lama, and the politics of reincarnation. United Front Work has targeted Buddhist elites in Mongolia, often through regular exchanges with select monasteries in the country. Although matters related to Tibetan Buddhism remain contentious, some local voices have agreed to channel official PRC positions. For example, one Mongolian abbot in Ulaanbaatar expressed regret in 2017 that Mongolia had allowed the Dalai Lama to visit without Beijing's permission.⁹¹

PRC embassies and specific PRC-based religious organizations are cooperating to bring religious leaders on visits to the PRC, with the explicit aim of directing narrative dissemination. For example, the PRC embassy in Kazakhstan arranged for groups of Kazakh religious leaders from the Muslim, Orthodox, and Christian communities to visit the PRC in 2015.⁹² The Chinese Islamic Association has brought Islamic groups to China, including ministers of religion, heads of mosques, heads of Islamic schools, young Islamic student leaders, and others. In 2017, the Chinese Islamic Association brought three groups to China from Indonesia, including the Indonesian Islamic Education Foundation, leading Islamic scholars, and the Indonesian Defense Academy.⁹³

Using these exchanges and perks extended to influential religious leaders across the region, the CCP seeks to exploit their voices, upon their return to their communities, to channel or amplify pro-PRC narratives while reducing, or silencing outright, criticism of the CCP's repressive measures against religious groups at home.

Targeting Media

For the CCP, the media sector is a key measurement of discourse power. The CCP regards the media space as a contested, competitive sphere of power controlled by the U.S. and its allies. In the Indo-Pacific and Kazakhstan, the CCP's main strategy toward the media is to attempt to establish itself as the authority over sources of information about the PRC, therefore denying legitimacy to any other independent sources. This crowding out of other potential sources of information on China can blunt a failure to win hearts and minds outright and facilitate the creation of pro-PRC narrative echo chambers.

⁸⁸ China PNG Friendship Association. "The year 2021 begins for us, our President Billy Lin and Madam Sandra Lau with The China PNG Friendship Association Rabaul chapter giving a helping hand to rebuild the BAI United Methodist Church in ENB contribution of K300,000." *Facebook*, 7 January 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/CHINAPNG/photos/a.1944694718905240/5284007864973892/>.

⁸⁹ Kadamana, Charles. "Church Meets Dragon." *The Island Sun*, 28 July 2021, <https://theislandsun.com.sb/church-meets-dragon/>.

⁹⁰ China PNG Friendship Association. "It's the year that we always want to share the love and blessings with Life PNG Care children." *Facebook*, 15 December 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=4842514152490583>.

⁹¹ Lulu, Jichang. "State-managed Buddhism and Chinese-Mongolian relations." *Asia Research Institute*, 23 June 2017, <https://theasiadialogue.com/2017/06/23/state-managed-buddhism-and-chinese-mongolian-relations/>.

⁹² "The PRC Embassy in Kazakhstan Holds Hari Raya Friendship Activities for Kazakh religious circles and Muslim overseas Chinese [驻哈萨克斯坦使馆为哈宗教界和穆斯林侨胞举办开斋节联谊活动]." *Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Kazakhstan*, 24 July 2015, http://kz.china-embassy.gov.cn/dszc/dshd/201507/t20150724_1336863.htm.

⁹³ "Indonesian Islamic Education Foundation visiting delegation to visit China Islamic Association [印尼伊斯兰教育基金会 访华团拜会中国伊协]." *Islamic Association of China* [中国伊协], 29 November 2017, <http://w.chinaislam.net.cn/cms/news/xhwx/201711/29-11513.html>. "Delegation of Indonesian Islamic Religious Leaders Visits Chinese Islamic Association [印尼伊斯兰宗教领袖代表团拜访中国伊协]." *Islamic Association of China* [中国伊协], 23 March 2017, <http://www.chinaislam.net.cn/cms/news/xhwx/201703/23-10883.html>. "Jin Rubin, Vice President of the Chinese Islamic Association, meets the visiting delegation of the Indonesian National Defense Academy [中国伊协副会长金汝彬 会见来访的印尼国防学院代表团]." *Islamic Association of China* [中国伊协], 22 August 2017, <http://www.chinaislam.net.cn/cms/yhfw/yhfw/201708/22-11271.html>.

These attempts to crowd out take many forms. The PRC targets both journalists and the media organizations that employ them, primarily by creating dependence on the PRC as a source of revenue (a dynamic explained in greater detail below). In addition, the PRC uses guided media tours, establishes free reprint and/or paid-for insert agreements with local media, sets up local media, and co-opts local journalists. These activities have consistently expanded in scale and scope over time. The PRC has also intensified its efforts to tailor narratives to local tastes while increasing its presence on social media. In the Indo-Pacific and Kazakhstan, the PRC's engagement with local media differs from that in other regions in that its narratives place great emphasis on historical friendship and geographical proximity.

Guided tours constitute a large part of CCP efforts to establish itself as the premier source of information about the PRC. These orchestrated experiences in the PRC encourage selected journalists to return home with a positive view of the CCP, while attempting to dismiss or discredit negative views expressed by commentators who have never been to the PRC. As early as the 1930s, the CCP began the systematic use of foreign voices and testimonials to create a positive international image by inviting foreign elites to tour China.⁹⁴

The scale of these guided tours for foreigners increased rapidly as China's economy grew, and primarily targets media in the Indo-Pacific that focus country-specific issues. In Kazakhstan, journalists and a variety of elites have toured Xinjiang to witness the alleged successes of the PRC government in managing ethnic tensions through economic development.⁹⁵ Likewise, Nepali journalists and elites have embarked on similar tours to Tibet over the years.⁹⁶ Where the trips failed to produce positive content, the CCP can resort to harassment. In Indonesia, a local journalist who, after a trip to Xinjiang, wrote an article critical of the PRC's treatment of Muslims received disapproving messages from the PRC embassy in Jakarta. Soon after, the local media outlet that published the article was the target of cyberattacks.⁹⁷

Building a distribution network overseas is another important strategy to make CCP narratives the authoritative source of information about the PRC. Starting in the 1940s and 1950s, CCP state media began to translate desired narratives into foreign languages. These early efforts were shaped into a media strategy that heavily draws on foreign platforms to distribute PRC messages (referred to as "borrowing boats to sail into the ocean") and delivering messages through foreign voices (known as "borrowing mouths to speak"). Today, translated versions of speeches and op-eds by PRC leaders and ambassadors are regularly published by PRC state media and PRC local media partners in the Indo-Pacific and Kazakhstan. The expanding distribution of this type of information works through content-sharing agreements that offer free content and/or paid-for inserts.

In Thailand, at least 15 local media outlets have content-sharing agreements with the Xinhua News Agency.⁹⁸ Thai media were first contacted by the PRC embassy and later by Xinhua with an offer for free content, which suggests a coordinated effort between PRC governmental entities and PRC state media overseas. PRC media have also created a WhatsApp group which Thai journalists can join to receive direct news updates.⁹⁹ In Myanmar, content-sharing agreements are being made at the national, provincial, and local level.¹⁰⁰ Unfiltered, free tailored messages can create

⁹⁴ "Yan'an Communication Office in the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression: The reception object is very complicated [抗日战争中的延安交际处：接待对象十分复杂]" *Kwong Wah Daily* [光华日报], 14 December 2011, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/cul/2011/12-14/3531993.shtml>.

⁹⁵ "Representatives of students from the seminar for media leaders of countries related to the Silk Road Economic Belt inspected Xinjiang [丝绸之路经济带相关国家媒体负责人研修班学员代表在新疆考察]" *China National Radio* [央视网], 27 July 2018, http://news.cnr.cn/native/city/20180727/t20180727_524314113.shtml. "The development speed of Xinjiang is admirable—Xinjiang in the eyes of Kazakhs [新疆发展速度令人赞叹——哈萨克斯坦人眼中的新疆]" *Xinhua* [新华社], 29 September 2015, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-09/29/c_1116710908.htm. "Kazakhstan Economic and Trade Mission inspects agricultural projects in Xinjiang Corps [哈萨克斯坦经贸团在新疆兵团考察农业项目]" *Ta Kung Pao* [大公报], 7 June 2017, http://news.takungpao.com/mainland/topnews/2017-06/3458597_print.htm.

⁹⁶ "Nepalese media delegation visits Tibet: Tibet's development achievements are worth learning [尼泊尔媒体考察团访藏：西藏发展成就值得学习]" *State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China* [国务院新闻办公室], 28 August 2012, <http://www.scio.gov.cn/zhzc/8/1/Document/1208782/1208782.htm>. "Wu Yingjie meets with delegation of mainstream media cadres in Nepal [吴英杰会见尼泊尔主流媒体干部考察团]" *People's Government of the Autonomous Region of Tibet* [西藏自治区人民政府], 15 August 2014, http://www.xizang.gov.cn/zwgk/lidz/lidhd/201901/t20190117_59275.html.

⁹⁷ Emont, Jon. "How China Persuaded One Muslim Nation to Keep Silent on Xinjiang Camps." *Wall Street Journal*, 11 December 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-china-persuaded-one-muslim-nation-to-keep-silent-on-xinjiang-camps-11576090976>.

⁹⁸ Charuvastra, Teeranai. "China, As Told by China: Beijing's Influences Reach Thai Media and Beyond." *Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Southeast Asia*, 28 December 2019, <https://th.boell.org/en/2019/12/28/china-told-china-beijings-influences-reach-thai-media-and-beyond>.

⁹⁹ Interview, April 2022.

¹⁰⁰ Lim, Louisa. and Bergin, Julia. "Telling China's Story: Reshaping the World's Media." *International Federation of Journalists*, 2020, https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user_upload/IFJ_Report_2020_-_The_China_Story.pdf.

local divides on key topics relevant to the PRC. For example, in the Philippines, a local media organization re-published a Xinhua op-ed criticizing the Permanent Court of Arbitration's decision in July 2016 siding with the Philippines against China over contested areas of the South China Sea.¹⁰¹

The PRC also attempts to co-opt local journalists and encourage them to deliver friendly narratives via training and visits, awards from PRC embassies for friendly reporting, and by setting up organizations that sustain close ties. In Thailand, a Thai-Chinese Journalist Association (TCJA) was set up in 2013, with a seven-member Executive Committee of PRC nationals who are senior managers at PRC state media in Thailand.¹⁰² The TCJA was created to “promote understanding and good relations” between Thai and PRC-based journalists.¹⁰³ The association also regularly hosts talks and seminars on the PRC's achievements and developments, and provides briefings on key CCP meetings.¹⁰⁴ It also has close ties with the CP Group, the largest Thai corporation owned and run by Chinese diaspora members.¹⁰⁵

In addition, the Thai Journalist Association (not to be confused with the TCJA) organizes an annual training series for Thai journalists titled “Looking at the New Era of China: Challenges that Thai Media Should Know”.¹⁰⁶ The training program, which is funded by the PRC embassy in Bangkok, together with several Thai companies, held its fourth round in 2022. Before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the program included a visit to the PRC. In 2022, when travel to the PRC was not possible due to restrictions, Thai journalists visited a BRI project in Laos instead.¹⁰⁷

Such efforts have not always been successful, however, and in some cases have resulted in pushback from local media associations. When then-foreign minister Wang Yi announced, during a visit to the Solomon Islands, that he would only allow one question during his press conference, the Media Association of Solomon Islands called on its members to boycott the conference.¹⁰⁸

A growing number of social media influencers, both PRC nationals and foreigners, are now producing positive content about or refuting narratives critical of China. One example is Atiqah Henderson, a Malaysian student in Beijing who has made clips about her trips to Xinjiang.¹⁰⁹ PRC nationals are employed as journalists by PRC state media to deliver social media content in Russian, Sinhala, and Tamil, operating and placing advertisements in Kazakhstan and Sri Lanka.

Targeting Education

To establish itself as the authoritative voice on PRC affairs, the CCP has consistently used and engaged with the education sector at home and abroad to influence foreign scholars on PRC affairs and education institutions. In the words of Wu Xu, the current director of the External Expansion bureau of the Central Propaganda Department, the role of universities and think tanks is to provide “intellectual support” for efforts to “create a favorable external environment” for reform, development, and stability in China.¹¹⁰ PRC sources have repeatedly noted that international scholars of China who express friendly views on the PRC are an effective strategy for promoting the party-state's

101 Lim, Louisa. and Bergin, Julia. “Telling China's Story: Reshaping the World's Media.” *International Federation of Journalists*, 2020, https://www.ifi.org/fileadmin/user_upload/IFJ_Report_2020_-_The_China_Story.pdf.

102 “Association Board.” *Thai-Chinese Journalists Association*, <http://www.tcjapress.com/>.

103 “About the Association.” *Thai-Chinese Journalists Association*, <http://www.tcjapress.com/tcja-about-us/>.

104 “Thai Press Seminar : Results of the 6th Plenary Meeting of the 19th Communist Party of China Central Committee.” *Thai-Chinese Journalists Association*, 17 November 2021., <http://www.tcjapress.com/2021/11/17/sixth-plenary-session-of-the-19th-cpc/>.

105 “CP All joins the welcome party President of the Thai-Chinese Journalists Association and Member of the Association” *Thai-Chinese Journalists Association*, 10 December 2020, <http://www.tcjapress.com/2020/12/10/tcja-cpall/>.

106 “The forum looks at the ‘65 year, the attitude of ‘China-US’ important agenda affecting the international community. Recommends Thailand to invite ASEAN as intermediaries to reduce temperature tensions.” *Thai-Chinese Journalists Association*, 21 March 2022, <https://tja.or.th/view/news/1339843>. “Speech by Ambassador Han Zhiqiang at the opening ceremony of the training course “Looking at the new era of China Challenges that Thai media should know about” No. 4 *Thai-Chinese Journalists Association*, 24 March 2022, <https://tja.or.th/view/activities/media-movements/1340040>.

107 Interview, April 2022.

108 Seslja, Edwina. and Boscaini, Joshua. “China's visit to Pacific highlights growing threat to journalism in the region.” *ABC*, 2 June 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-06-02/china-visit-to-pacific-highlights-growing-threat-to-journalism/101113124>.

109 Nur, Atiqah. “Uyghur Language and International Grand Bazaar Urumqi | Xinjiang, China” *Youtube*, 28 April 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CqiW1Grm-MjQ>.

110 为我国改革发展稳定营造有利外部舆论环境提供智力支持 “Dean Xu Bu attended the symposium on “Chinese Culture Going Global under the New Global Situation” [徐步院长出席 “新形势下中华文化走出去工作” 专题座谈会] *China Institute of International Studies*, 4 March 2022, <https://archive.ph/vnBLJ>.

preferred narratives, especially during critical events. The party-state also tries to co-opt academic study both of China and the Chinese language (although this is slowly changing, with Taiwan opening language centers worldwide), establishing close ties with leading universities and using PRC-based universities to give legitimacy to local leaders who are friendly to the PRC.

At the highest level, universities themselves can be useful tools for cementing inter-elite ties and consolidating relationships that reinforce pro-PRC discourse. In Kazakhstan, Thailand, and Malaysia, dozens of leading universities have signed on as formal members of various PRC-led education networks under Belt and Road narratives, with dozens more participating informally.¹¹¹ PRC-based universities are also used to strengthen the legitimacy of PRC-friendly foreign leaders, often by conferring honorary professorship titles. For example, Kazakhstan's First President Nazarbayev was granted honorary professorship at Peking University in 2002; Thailand's Princess Sirindhorn at Beijing Language and Cultural University in 2005; Nepal's former Prime Minister Sharma Oli at Sichuan University in 2013; Indonesia's Chairman of the Nasdem Party Surya Paloh at Beijing Foreign Studies University in 2014, and many others.¹¹²

Below the university level, foreign scholars who specialize in China are among the first groups targeted by the PRC in any given country, because of their roles as knowledge gatekeepers and sources of expert opinion. Many local think tanks in the Indo-Pacific and Kazakhstan, whether or not they specialize in Chinese or Asian studies (but certainly so if they specialize in Chinese studies) maintain close ties and communication with the PRC through regular participation at events in China, research collaboration, visiting programs, and other forms of exchanges.¹¹³ These activities help the PRC manage the credibility of foreign scholars on PRC affairs who are friendly to its policies. Some of these collaborations have played a significant role in asserting PRC-friendly opinions in the local country, as most of these sinologists enjoy positive reputations, and are thus able to feed selected ideas to the media and policy makers. In the Indo-Pacific and Kazakhstan, these narratives generally center around economic success stories and China's role as a contributor to the local economies.

When controversies crop up, these same local experts voice support for the PRC and its narratives. For example, a Nepali scholar argued in favor of the PRC's National Security Law in Hong Kong in 2020, citing concerns for the safety of 30,000 Nepali nationals living in the city.¹¹⁴ Amid one of the most violent PRC crackdowns on the Uyghur community in Urumqi in the summer of 2009, a leading scholar on Chinese affairs in Kazakhstan held a press conference in support of the PRC government. This came despite local protests in Kazakhstan condemning violence against Uyghurs in Urumqi.¹¹⁵ This scholar claimed there was no ethnic-based oppression against the Uyghurs, and has consistently promoted this narrative since 2009.¹¹⁶ In 2019, this scholar was convicted for spying for the PRC and is currently serving a 10-year prison sentence.¹¹⁷

111 "Members." *University Alliance of the Silk Road*, http://uasr.xjtu.edu.cn/About_UASR/Members.htm. "Members." *University Consortium of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road*, <http://www.ucmsr.com/route>. "Institution." *Belt and Road Studies Network*, http://www.brsn.net/list/zhikujiugou_en/index.html

112 "List of Honorary Doctors Awarded by Peking University [北京大学历年授予名誉博士名单]." *Peking University*, <https://grs.pku.edu.cn/docs/2019-03/20190314091333667299.doc>. "Surya Barrow, Chairman of the Indonesian National Democratic Party, was hired as an honorary professor of our school [印度尼西亚国民党主席苏里亚·巴罗受聘为我校荣誉教授]." *Beijing Foreign Language University* [北京外国语大学], 10 September 2014, <https://news.bfsu.edu.cn/article/6600/cate/2>. "Prime Minister Oli of Nepal visited Sichuan University and delivered a speech [尼泊尔总理奥利访问四川大学并发表演讲]." *Sichuan University* [四川大学], 27 March 2016, <https://global.scu.edu.cn/?channel/63/117/1454>. "Beijing Language and Culture University awarded the title of Emeritus Professor of Princess Sirindhorn of Thailand [北京语言大学授予泰国诗琳通公主名誉教授的称号]." *China News Service* [中新社], 24 February 2005, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/news/2005/2005-02-24/26/543356.shtml>.

113 "Dean Xu Bu attended the symposium on 'Chinese Culture Going Out to Work under the New Situation' [徐步院长出席“新形势下中华文化走出去工作”专题座谈会]." *China Institute of International Studies* [中国国际问题研究所], 4 March 2022, <http://www.ed.ecnu.edu.cn/?p=387>. "MU visits to 4 Universities in Southern China Region." *Mahidol University*, 6 June 2018, <https://mahidol.ac.th/2018/mu-china/>. "Kazakh-Chinese Center of Science and Education." *Kazakh Agro Technical University*, <http://old.kazatu.edu.kz/en/about-the-university/international-cooperation-and-multilingual-education-development-center/kazakh-chinese-center-of-science-and-education/>. "Ambassador Yu Hong visits Nepal China Research Center [于红大使参观尼泊尔中国研究中心]." *Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Nepal*, 2 March 2017, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cenp/chn/xwdt/t1442610.htm>. "Expert representatives from the media and think tanks of China and Myanmar made suggestions on enhancing exchanges-gathering strength for cooperation and development [中缅两国媒体、智库专家代表就增进交流建议——凝聚力量 合作发展]." *China (Kunming) Institute of South Asia and Southeast Asia* [中国（昆明）南亚东南亚研究院], 6 January 2022, <http://www.skvy.gov.cn/dtxx/sksc/06419128826902049375>. "China-Sri Lanka Cooperation Research Center established in Colombo [中国—斯里兰卡合作研究中心在科伦坡成立]." *Xinhua* [新华社], 24 October 2015, http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-10/24/c_1116927306.htm.

114 "Nepalese think tank and media voice support for China's Hong Kong SAR to safeguard national security legislation [尼泊尔智库、媒体发声支持中国香港特区维护国家安全立法]." *Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Nepal*, 20 June 2020, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cenp/chn/xwdt/t1790746.htm>.

115 "A rally in support of the Uighurs of Urumqi will be held in Almaty." *Azattyq*, 17 July 2009, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/1778870.html>. "Kaharman Kozhamberdiev, leader of Kazakhstan's Uighurs, criticizes Beijing's violence." *Azattyq*, 8 July 2009, https://rus.azattyq.org/a/Kakharman_Kozhamberdiev/1771444.html.

116 "Kazakh expert says violent crime is not tolerated by rule of law country [哈萨克斯坦专家称暴力犯罪事件为法治国家所不容]." *China News Service* [中新社], 12 July 2009, <http://www.chinanews.com.cn/gj/news/2009/07-12/1771320.shtml>.

117 "Konstantin Syroyezhkin, convicted of treason, was deprived of citizenship of Kazakhstan." *KAZ Inform*, 15 October 2019, <https://lenta.inform.kz/kz/osuzh->

In addition to working closely with foreign academics, we noted efforts by the PRC to monopolize Chinese language study and PRC affairs in the Indo-Pacific. Independent private schools offering Chinese language classes in the Indo-Pacific and Kazakhstan are squeezed by the expanding presence of Confucius Institutes, local universities' partnerships with China-based counterparts, and the use of governmental subsidies that offer free Chinese language classes. Besides the fact that Confucius Institutes offer a curriculum designed in the PRC, agreements with universities contain broad language on cooperation that often reduces the role of local partners to simply providing the physical facilities, thus permitting the PRC to provide materials which often promote tailored messages.

In Thailand, with a population of 70 million, there are at least 23 Confucius Institutes and Classrooms, with the PRC paying the salaries of local staff and volunteer teachers.¹¹⁸ During a visit to Thailand, Xi visited the Confucius Institute at Chulalongkorn University, a leading local university.¹¹⁹ While countries in the West have started closing Confucius Institutes, new ones are opening in the Indo-Pacific and Kazakhstan. For instance, the first in Papua New Guinea (PNG) was launched in 2021.¹²⁰ That same year, the China-built Butuka Academy in Port Moresby launched a Confucius Classroom.¹²¹

Through these efforts, the PRC constrains the environment for those with critical views of China. Aside from imposing the first barrier between Chinese language students and their access to information on PRC affairs, the Confucius Institutes also build PRC soft power by financing local cultural events that promote Chinese holidays and other cultural products. Some of these promotions have been effective. In Mongolia, one expert reports that some locals have started the Chinese practice of giving cash in red envelopes as gifts during lunar New Year parties.¹²²

Party-state efforts to bring foreign students to the PRC have also been increasing. In Malaysia, the PRC is competing with Taiwan to attract Malaysian Chinese students through a number of cooperation agreements with prestigious local Chinese high schools. Intensifying competition with Taiwanese universities, which were traditionally the higher education establishments of choice for Mandarin-speaking Chinese students in Malaysia, Xiamen University opened its first overseas campus in Kuala Lumpur in 2016. PRC-based companies have also increased their efforts to provide scholarships, either by bringing foreign students to the PRC or by supporting local higher education with the expectation that talented students will work for PRC-based companies in the local country. For example, the China National Petroleum Corporation in Kazakhstan started a US\$1 million education fund in 2000; by 2009, as many as 400 local workers and 120 Kazakh students have undergone training and studies in the PRC.¹²³

Most recently, as a vocational counterpart to Confucius Institutes, these industrial education initiatives have been centralized as Luban Workshops. This network of vocational colleges, which currently operate in 18 countries — several of them located in the Indo-Pacific — provides training to students on PRC-developed technology and standards, with the goal of tightening economic links between China and these local countries.¹²⁴ While they began as an initiative to facilitate local employment among PRC-based companies to increase competitiveness and brand image, they are now emerging as one of the PRC's strongest soft power instruments in the region, one that goes hand in hand with its global geo-economics policy and one that, just as importantly, countries in the region find attractive.

[dennogo-za-gosizmenu-konstantina-syroezhkina-lishili-grazhdanstva-kazahstana_a3575483?nomodal=1](https://www.dennogo-za-gosizmenu-konstantina-syroezhkina-lishili-grazhdanstva-kazahstana_a3575483?nomodal=1).

118 Naprathansuk, Non. "Confucius Institutes in Thailand: Why Thailand Embraces China's Soft Power Initiatives" *Maejo University*, 2016. https://www.academia.edu/27918602/Confucius_Institutes_in_Thailand_Why_Thailand_Embraces_Chinas_Soft_Power_Initiatives. Naprathansuk, Non. "The Embrace of China's Soft Power: A Case study of Confucius Institute, Chiang Mai University, Thailand" *Lecture*, 28 August 2016. http://www.vijachina.com/sites/default/files/The%20Embrace%20of%20China's%20Soft%20Power%20A%20Case%20study%20of%20Confucius%20Institute%2C%20Chiang%20Mai%20University%2C%20Thailand_Non%20Naprathansuk_19%20August%202016.pdf.

119 "Xi Jinping visits the Confucius Institute at Chulalongkorn University in Thailand [习近平参观泰国朱拉隆功大学孔子学院]." *Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Thailand*, 26 December 2011, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/ceth/chn/sgxw/t890532.htm>.

120 "PNG's first Confucius Institute inaugurated in second largest city." *Xinhua*, 20 February 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/asiapacific/2021-02/20/c_139755234.htm.

121 "PNG's Butuka Academy initiates Confucius classroom." *Xinhua*, 8 October 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/asiapacific/2021-10/08/c_1310232239.htm.

122 Interview, May 2022

123 "CNPC in Kazakhstan [中国石油在哈萨克斯坦]." *CNPC*, https://www.cnpc.com.cn/cnpc/Kazakhstan/country_index.shtml.

"Create an overseas oil and gas cooperation demonstration zone in Central Asia [在中亚创建海外油气合作示范区]." *CNPC Business*, 18 December 2009, http://www.wzwb-cnpc.com/news_info.asp?xiaolei=%CA%D0%B3%A1%D0%C5%CF%A2&id=13664.

124 Yau, Niva. and Van der Kley, Dirk. "China's Global Network of Vocational Colleges to Train the World." *The Diplomat*, 11 November 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/11/chinas-global-network-of-vocational-colleges-to-train-the-world/>.

Of course, students who study in China often return home with PRC-friendly narratives as they are fed one-sided views while in the PRC. In the Solomon Islands, a student who studied in the PRC returned home to and spread positive messages about the PRC in the local media.¹²⁵ In Kazakhstan, the majority of Kazakh students who took advantage of PRC government scholarships returned as local “experts” on China, creating still more PRC-friendly voices arguing for bilateral cooperation. These voices are critical when bilateral issues arise, as they introduce PRC-friendly narratives in the public discourse.

IV. Diaspora

The size and diversity of the Chinese diaspora poses a serious challenge to the CCP’s efforts to establish itself as the authoritative voice on PRC affairs. Members of the Chinese diaspora have dual importance for the PRC. On the one hand, the diaspora’s exposure to overseas norms, values, and systems of governance means that it historically has been a source of potential challenges to CCP authority. On the other hand, the party-state also views the diaspora’s connections to the outside world as a potential opportunity, if handled correctly. The CCP describes the diaspora as a source of expertise, capital, and business acumen, and also a path through which the Party can influence other countries’ politics and discourse on China.

The CCP thus carries out dedicated influence operations targeting the Chinese diaspora, both Han Chinese and ethnic minorities, who are perceived by the party as critical to its legitimacy. For the countries that are the subject of this study, the size of the Chinese diaspora (including minorities) varies. From available data, those of Chinese descent and/or ancestry are approximately:

- 500,000 in Kazakhstan, 2.6% of total population¹²⁶
- 6,712,000 in Malaysia, 22.2% of total population (official statistics)¹²⁷
- 28,000,000 in Thailand, 40% of total population¹²⁸
- 24,000,000 in the Philippines, 22% of total population¹²⁹
- 2,800,000 in Indonesia, 1.2% of total population (official statistics)¹³⁰
- 2,500,000 in Myanmar, 4.6% of total population¹³¹
- 20,000 in Nepal, 0.06% of total population¹³²

These Chinese diaspora and cross-border ethnic communities differ in their unique migration patterns, which are based largely on ethnicity, the host country’s openness, and their history of conflict. For example, people who migrated to Kazakhstan from what is today PRC territory are ethnic Kazakhs, Uyghur, and Dungan. They enjoyed ethnic-based repatriation programs, took advantage of cross-border trade, fled Qing persecution, and joined the Soviet Union. In Nepal, the Chinese diaspora are Tibetans who fled oppression in Tibet. The Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia, on the other hand, emerged as far back as the 17th century and was primarily economic-driven; per capita, on average, the migrants economically better-off than those in China up until the 1980s. Lack of information about the size of the Chinese diaspora in the Maldives, the Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, and Mongolia is likely due to the small numbers involved, as most are new migrants looking for business opportunities abroad.

125 Interview, May 2022

126 Sadovskaya, Yelena. “Ethnically diverse diasporas and migrations from China to Central Asia in the twenty-first century”, in *China’s Rise and the Chinese Overseas* (ed. Wong, Bernard. and Tan, Chee-Beng), <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315231952-10/ethnically-diverse-diasporas-migrations-china-central-asia-twenty-first-century-yelena-sadovskaya>.

127 “Population Size and Annual Population Growth Rate.” *Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal*, 15 July 2021, https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemeByCat&cat=155&bul_id=ZjJ0SnpJR21sQWVUcUp6ODRudm5Jz09&menu_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWV5ZklWdzQ4ThUUT09.

128 Lee, Hock Guan and Leo Suryadinata. *Language, Nation and Development in Southeast Asia. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies*, 2008. https://books.google.kg/books?id=ImjVqAVxO74C&pg=PA191&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false.

129 “Senate declares Chinese New Year as special working holiday.” *Senate of the Philippines, 19th Congress*, 21 January 2013, http://legacy.senate.gov.ph/press_release/2013/0121_prib1.asp.

130 “Nationality, Ethnicity, Religion, and Language Sheari-Hari Indonesian Population [Kewarganegaraan, Suku Bangsa, Agama, Dan Bahasa Sheari-Hari Penduduk Indonesia].” *Central Bureau of Statistics [Badan Pusat Statistik]*, 2010, <https://media.neliti.com/media/publications/49956-ID-kewarganegaraan-suku-bangsa-agama-dan-bahasa-sehari-hari-penduduk-indonesia.pdf>.

131 “Establishing Contemporary Chinese Life in Myanmar.” *Trends in South East Asia, ISEAS*, 2015, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/TRS15_15.pdf.

132 “Under China’s Shadow Mistreatment of Tibetans in Nepal.” *Human Rights Watch*, 1 April 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/04/01/under-chinas-shadow-mistreatment-tibetans-nepal>.

All factions of the Chinese diaspora have been targets of CCP outreach since the party's earliest years. While the strategies used are not drastically different than those applied to foreigners, PRC efforts targeting the diaspora uses narratives that invoke Chinese ancestry and historical memory, framing the diaspora as "an important part of the Chinese nation, an important force for safeguarding national sovereignty, security, development interests and promoting Sino-foreign friendship, and an irreplaceable important resource for China."¹³³

Key platforms of narrative dissemination include in-China visiting programs, monopolizing and sustaining desired knowledge of PRC through diaspora media cooperation, youth engagement through the promotion of early Chinese education and cultural products; maintaining direct access to leaders of the local diaspora community through the establishment of specific United Front groups and holding regular events, often with embassy involvement; cultivating close ties and integrating interests through the creation of joint organizations and commercial activities.

Most recently, new initiatives have been deployed to strengthen, and in some cases create, a Chinese diaspora identity. In Thailand and Malaysia, for example, this is meant to foster a sense of connection with the PRC, invoking Chinese ancestry and historical ties to Chinese empires, thus justifying extensive engagement and the treatment of the diaspora as an extension of the Chinese civilization-state.

CCP influence work in Chinese diaspora communities targets Chinese-language diaspora media outlets. For example, in 2001 China News Service, the PRC's principal United Front news agency, established the biannual Overseas Chinese Media Forum to bring members of diaspora media outlets to the PRC. The forum has grown rapidly since then. In 2019, the tenth Media Forum saw 427 attendees. Twelve came from Indonesia, seven from Malaysia, nine from Thailand, 13 from the Philippines and one from Kazakhstan.¹³⁴ In 2015, the People's Daily established another forum known as the Overseas Chinese New Media Summit Forum.¹³⁵

Through these fora, the PRC built connections ranging from training programs to reprint agreements. Since 2006, journalists and editors have started to attend in-China training programs hosted by the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office.¹³⁶ With the exception of a few independent voices in the form of online personalities, media outlets catering to the Chinese diaspora in all 13 of the countries included in this research have shown clear evidence of cooperation, either through publicly documented signing of cooperation agreements, and/or friendly coverage when reporting on the PRC. Since diaspora media are important distributors of information, capturing this sector plays a key role in making the CCP the authoritative voice.

Beyond the media, the PRC engages extensively with youths in the Chinese diaspora community who are often called "ambassadors for bilateral friendly relations."¹³⁷ Activities are aimed at promoting early Chinese education and culture. These range from working with diaspora Chinese-language schools through the provision of volunteer teachers, textbook materials, and in-China teacher training programs, various in-China summer school programs for diaspora youths (now reaching 130,000 young people annually), various in-China extracurricular activities, and annual competitions such as basketball, traditional dance, and music.¹³⁸ PRC volunteer teachers are present in diaspora

133 中华民族的重要组成部分，是维护国家主权、安全、发展利益及促进中外友好的重要依靠力量，是我国不可替代的重要资源

"Report of the State Council on the Protection of Overseas Chinese Rights and Interests [国务院关于华侨权益保护工作情况的报告]." *The National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China* [全国人民代表大会], 25 April 2018, <http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/c30834/201804/a9434ebec8804602ab619da74d-f35cb8.shtml>.

134 "List of overseas guests of the 10th World Chinese Media Forum [第十届世界华文传媒论坛境外嘉宾人员名单]." *China News Service* [中新社], 10 October 2019, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/hr/2019/10-10/8975035.shtml>.

135 "My father told me that the People's Daily is the most authoritative" —Blessings from overseas Chinese media["父亲告诉我，人民日报最权威"——来自海外华文媒体的祝福]" *People's Daily* [人民日报], 15 June 2018, <http://media.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0615/c14677-30060261.html>.

136 "Liu Zepeng's message to overseas Chinese media to continue to work hard to spread Chinese culture [刘泽彭寄语海外华文媒体为传播中华文化继续努力]." *Voice of the Diaspora* [华声报], 14 January 2006, <http://www.chinagw.com/news/2006/0114/68/13048.shtml>. "Overseas Chinese Media Advanced Seminar of Overseas Chinese Affairs Office Opens [国侨办海外华文媒体高级研修班开班]." *Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in Sao Paulo*, 22 November 2006, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cgsp/chn/xwdt/t281192.htm>. These training programs are still being held during COVID.

137 两国友好关系的使者

138 "Report of the State Council on the Protection of Overseas Chinese Rights and Interests [国务院关于华侨权益保护工作情况的报告]." *The National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China* [全国人民代表大会], 25 April 2018, <http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/c30834/201804/a9434ebec8804602ab619da74d-f35cb8.shtml>. "Water Cube Cup" platform for Chinese youth to understand Chinese culture ["水立方杯"华裔青年了解中国文化平台]." *Overseas Chinese Affairs Study* [侨务工作研究], 2014, <http://qwgyj.gqb.gov.cn/hwjy/179/2517.shtml>.

Chinese schools across Southeast Asia, including the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand.¹³⁹

The extensive promotion of culture is also part of a well-rounded effort to cultivate Chinese identity among the diaspora population. The PRC organizes dozens of events targeting diaspora youth around the world aimed at popularizing Chinese martial arts, folk music, and dance, calligraphy and painting, traditional medicine, food, and so on. Alongside those efforts, the PRC establishes state-led organizations to formalize cooperation with local diaspora communities that engage in cultural events, expanding and deepening ties. Overseas Chinese Affairs Offices, down to the provincial government level, have also implemented these activities.¹⁴⁰ In 2009, for example, the Henan provincial office hosted an event on Shaolin martial arts in Mongolia, and the Shandong province government hosted an event on traditional dough sculptures in Malaysia.¹⁴¹ In 2021, during the pandemic, more than 400 Chinese diaspora students from Indonesia and the Philippines attended an 11-day online course which taught traditional handicrafts and provided an introduction to Chinese traditional musical instruments, folk dance, calligraphy and many more topics.¹⁴²

Higher education also serves as another attraction in PRC influence efforts with the diaspora. In recent years, higher education in the PRC has become attractive for the diaspora due to “bring back talent” policies and attractive career paths as a result of the PRC’s economic growth. These programs, in the form of scholarships specifically tailored for the Chinese diaspora, make relocation affordable. In Malaysia, where state universities do not accept diplomas from local private Chinese-language high schools, graduates from such schools have begun applying for universities in the Chinese-speaking world outside Malaysia, with the PRC as an increasingly attractive destination.¹⁴³ One of Malaysia’s best Chinese-language high schools saw competition emerge from universities in China and Taiwan for its best Malaysian Chinese students in the 2010s. Due to better scholarships and career opportunities provided by the PRC, the best Malaysian Chinese high school students (whose native language is Chinese, not English) have in recent years opted for higher education in the PRC rather than Taiwan.

The leading implementor of the above activities is Huaqiao University based in Fujian. It is a flagship project and educational institution run by the United Front Work Department. Most notably, by offering higher education to the Chinese diaspora community since its establishment in 1960, its youth engagement has incubated an alumni network of individuals who now occupy influential positions across Southeast Asia. In Thailand, the aforementioned TCCEA cooperates with Huaqiao University on scholarships for Thai government officials, military personnel, police officers, and others.¹⁴⁴ Huaqiao University’s alumni network in Thailand hosts regular events that strengthen ties between individuals in the Thai government, military, police force, and so on.¹⁴⁵

In addition to the media and education sectors, which are key sectors providing foundational understanding of the PRC and Chinese identity, the UFWD also targets the diaspora community’s business elite. In 2001, the United Front *xitong* began hosting the World Forum for Overseas Chinese Community, an annual occasion for local diaspora leaders to meet leaders in Beijing, designed partially to increase their access to commercial opportunities in the PRC.¹⁴⁶ In 2019, the ninth forum saw 450 attendees from over 90 countries, including heads of the Associated Chinese

139 “Sweaty Chinese School, Love Chinese Education —— Summary of the work of sending Chinese teachers abroad in Hubei Province [汗洒华校 情系华教 ——湖北省外派华文教师工作综述]” *Overseas Chinese Affairs Study* [侨务工作研究], 2014, <http://qwgzyj.gqb.gov.cn/hwjy/176/2428.shtml>.

“How to Inherit and Promote Chinese Traditional Culture in Chinese Teaching [谈华文教学中如何传承和弘扬中华传统文化]” *Overseas Chinese Affairs Study* [侨务工作研究], 2014, <http://qwgzyj.gqb.gov.cn/hwjy/178/2487.shtml>.

140 “The Overseas Chinese Affairs Office was disbanded and absorbed into the United Front Work Department in a March 2018 bureaucratic reorganization.”

141 “Sowing the Seeds of Chinese Culture - Documentary of the 2012 “Chinese Culture Paradise” Overseas Camp [播撒中华文化的种子——2012年“中华文化大乐园”海外办营纪实]” *Overseas Chinese Affairs Study* [侨务工作研究], 2009, <http://qwgzyj.gqb.gov.cn/hwjy/147/2249.shtml>.

142 “2021 Online “Chinese Culture Park” opens, nearly 500 Chinese teenagers “cloud” tour in Sichuan [2021线上“中华文化大乐园”开园 近500名华裔青少年“云”游四川]” *Qiao Wen* [侨网], 11 June 2021, <http://www.chinaqw.com/hwjy/2021/06-11/298653.shtml>.

143 Interview, June 2020.

144 “About Association.” *Thai-Chinese Culture and Economy Association*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200930070929/https://thaizhong.org/zh/about-us/history.html>.

145 “The Thai Alumni Association of Huaqiao University held the 2014 “Love Never Changes” Alumni Gathering” [华侨大学泰国校友会举办2014“爱永不变”校友联欢会]” *Huaqiao University* [华侨大学], 10 September 2014, <https://www.hqu.edu.cn/info/1212/71434.htm>. “Unity Dominates Diversified Integration Harmony and Difference —— Huaqiao University builds a campus culture with unique characteristics of overseas Chinese schools [一元主导 多元融合 和而不同 ——华侨大学构建独具侨校特色的校园文化]” *Overseas Chinese Affairs Study* [侨务工作研究], 2014, <http://qwgzyj.gqb.gov.cn/hwjy/181/2566.shtml>.

146 “The 9th World Association of Overseas Chinese Associations [第九届世界华侨华人社团联谊大会]” *Qiao Wen* [侨网], <http://www.chinaqw.com/z/2019/djjs-jhqhrstlydh/index.html>.

Chambers of Commerce and Industry of Malaysia, the China-Papua New Guinea Friendship Federation, the Northern Myanmar Chinese Chamber of Commerce, the Philippine-Chinese Chamber of Commerce, and more.¹⁴⁷

Often, these leaders in the local diaspora community also operate Chinese diaspora media and language schools. For example, Thailand's Sangchai Sotthavarakul, who attended the ninth forum, is Chairman of the Thailand Teochew Association, the newspaper Thailand Asia Daily and the Western Thailand Chinese School Association.¹⁴⁸ Another example, Chen Bingwen, who attended the 2019 Overseas Chinese Media Forum, is Deputy Chairman of the Papua New Guinea Chinese Association and founder of the PNG-China media.¹⁴⁹ Apart from their control of these key information distribution channels, these Chinese diaspora leaders' political ties are critically useful. For example, Li Jichang, who attended the ninth forum as Vice President of Northern Myanmar Chinese Chamber of Commerce, helped facilitate a PRC propaganda trip for the highest-ranked Burmese Buddhist leaders.¹⁵⁰

Apart from formal occasions in Beijing, diaspora business elites maintain close contact with PRC embassies, most of which maintain a special office for this purpose. This office maintains channels of communication and engages with leaders in the diaspora community on a regular basis through events celebrating local and Chinese holidays. These events are usually co-hosted with local branches of United Front organizations and diaspora organizations friendly to the PRC. For example, local branches of the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification are present and co-host events with the PRC embassies in the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Mongolia, and Nepal, and so on.¹⁵¹

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

The PRC's United Front approach to information spaces shows that finding key groups and people willing to promote the PRC's policies while ensuring that critical voices are silenced plays a central role in its overall strategy. While the party-state has to work under different conditions than at home, it still pursues the same goals as in United Front work at home: expand the circle of friendly voices while isolating hostile voices. This is key to understanding the PRC's information operations in the region.

The success of these operations depends on a number of factors. In some countries, the PRC and its policies may enjoy genuine support from large parts of the population. In other countries, public perceptions are mixed, or even negative. However, even when this is the case, the PRC may find a sufficient number of influential individuals willing to speak up on its behalf, thereby creating an impression of widespread support and pro-PRC consensus in the public sphere. Across the Indo-Pacific and Kazakhstan, the PRC has largely achieved this basic objective, while often silencing opposition. In the longer term, and where success thus far has been uneven, PRC influence work aims to change hearts and minds within the region, but with a more immediate short and midterm goal of flooding information spaces with pro-PRC voices and ensuring control over what can be said in public. Despite facing some opposition, in some countries more than in others, the PRC has been arguably quite successful on both accounts.

147 "The 9th World Association of Overseas Chinese Associations was held in Beijing [第九届世界华侨华人社团联谊大会在京举行]." *Xinhua* [新华社], 29 May 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2019-05/29/c_1124557130.htm. "Overseas Chinese went to Shanghai and other four places to visit and exchange, and praised the speed of China's development [海外侨胞分赴上海等四地参观交流 点赞中国发展速度]." *Qiao Wen* [侨网], 10 June 2019, <http://www.chinaqw.com/hqhr/2019/06-10/224424.shtml>. "Representatives of overseas Chinese hotly discuss the image of overseas Chinese in the new era [侨胞代表热议新时代大国侨民形象: 点滴做起 争做表率]." *Qiao Wen* [侨网], 3 June 2019, <http://www.chinaqw.com/hqhr/2019/06-03/223987.shtml>. "Representatives of overseas Chinese leaders visit Shanghai: learn more about Shanghai and find a good space for cooperation [侨领代表访沪: 更进一步了解上海 寻好的合作空间]." *Qiao Wen* [侨网], 1 June 2019, <http://www.chinaqw.com/ggqj/2019/06-01/223915.shtml>.

148 "The well-known overseas Chinese leader of Thailand, Huang Yuguang, visited Guangxi and met with the director of the Guangxi Overseas Chinese Affairs Office [泰国知名侨领黄迨光访桂 广西侨办主任会见]." *Qiao Wen* [侨网], 11 May 2019, <http://www.chinaqw.com/ggqj/2019/05-11/222470.shtml>.

149 "Chen Bingwen: From Boss to Brother, the changes in China that PNG people see [陈炳文: 从Boss到Brother, 巴新人看到的中国改变]." *Qiao Wen* [侨网], 27 October 2018, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/2018/10-27/8661287.shtml>. "Overseas Chinese in Papua New Guinea eagerly look forward to President Xi Jinping's visit [巴新华人华侨热切期盼习近平主席到访]." *Qiao Wen* [侨网], 16 November 2018, <http://www.chinaql.org/n1/2018/1116/c419650-30404837.html>.

150 "The delegation of the 2019 World Overseas Chinese Association Visits Guizhou [2019世界华侨华人社团联谊大会代表团参访贵州]." *Qiao Wen* [侨网], 31 May 2019, <http://www.chinaqw.com/ggqj/2019/05-31/223901.shtml>. "The Burmese monk and king led a delegation to visit China successfully [缅甸僧王率团成功访华, 中缅民心相通进一步加强]." *Qiao Wen* [侨网], 28 September 2019, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cgmandalay/chn/xwdt/t1676642.htm>.

151 "The Asian Union for the Promotion of Unity held the "Anti-Violence, Anti-Racism" Peace Forum [亚洲统促总会举行“反暴力 反种族歧视”和平论坛]." *All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese* [中华全国归国华侨联合会], 13 May 2021, <http://www.chinaql.org/n1/2021/0513/c419650-32102061.html>.

Combatting the PRC's success requires mobilization of a broad range of actors from countries in and outside the region. The PRC enjoys an important asymmetric advantage in that it is – for obvious reasons – focused primarily on shaping perceptions related to China and can mobilize resources toward that end. In contrast, would-be opposition coalitions are often disparate, fractious, and poorly resourced in comparison to the PRC's well-oiled machine.

Providing recommendations for action for such a disparate group of countries is a daunting task. Of necessity, our recommendations are therefore broad, and in some cases focus not on the countries that are the subject of study but on wealthier democracies, where greater will and resources could build greater resilience to PRC information-shaping.

Our research, as well as the on-the-ground efforts of our partners at the International Republican Institute, suggest several broad areas where governments and societies hoping to boost resilience to PRC information-shaping should focus:

- ***Institution Building***

One consistent finding of this and other IRI-sponsored research is that the basic institutions of liberal democracy, such as an independent press, competitive elections, and accountable and transparent government institutions, are the strongest bulwark against PRC efforts to dominate the conversation. In the Indo-Pacific and in other countries, we have consistently found that the ability of the press, civil society, and concerned government officials to mobilize around information related to the deleterious impact of China's on-the-ground impact can outweigh the efforts of the PRC and its proxies to control the conversation and shape perceptions.

The fight against the PRC's information-shaping efforts is therefore intimately tied up with the need to build democratic institutions across the region. While institutions such as the National Endowment for Democracy, as well as organizations such as Germany's *stiftungen* work to bolster democratic institutions throughout the Indo-Pacific, their resources pale against the challenge, and they have relatively few counterparts in either developing or developed countries. A much broader, better resourced, better coordinated effort is required across the region to help bolster the fragile democratic institutions of many Indo-Pacific countries. In this respect Japan could play a particularly important role, since it has the resources to make a significant difference, and its work in development lending has won it access and respect throughout the region.

- ***Knowledge Building***

One consistent theme of our research is a lack of understanding among key stakeholders about the role of PRC party-state actors whose job it is to shape external perceptions. Solving this issue is not the domain of one government or one country but should be a collective effort. Middle- and low-income countries in the Indo-Pacific often turn to organizations with party-state ties as resources for the study of China because of a simple lack of alternatives. Wealthy democracies should invest heavily to ensure that would-be China specialists in these countries have other options.

G7 governments should work together with other industrialized democracies to aggressively subsidize the study of China in the academic and think tank spaces, with the goal of creating a cohort of people with the necessary knowledge and skills to advise governments and train future generations of China specialists. The academic opportunities that come out of this effort should be made broadly available to students and scholars from global south countries, including those in the Indo-Pacific, with the express goal of crowding out resources for the study of China tied either directly or indirectly to the CCP.

- ***Network Building***

Intimate knowledge of the PRC party-state contributes to resilience against PRC information-shaping efforts, but it is not the only factor. Journalists, civil society, and concerned government officials in the Indo-Pacific do not necessarily have to be experts on China to identify and call out the ways that the PRC tries to shape perceptions in their region. Often they are the best positioned to question the validity of pro-China narratives propagated by elites with business or political entanglements with the PRC.

But often these actors are isolated, or are made to feel so by PRC-aligned actors in their country or region. Greater, and more strategic efforts need to be made to bring together actors concerned about the PRC's impact on the regional information environment. This is vital to leverage the virtuous cycles around resources, knowledge, and advocacy generation inherent to the creation of such networks, and also to foster the psychological and safety benefits that come with reducing the isolation often inherent to advocacy that runs counter to the interests of powerful actors.

- ***Independence Building***

Concerned governments and members of civil society should seek to problematize the impact of growing trade ties with China by pointing out that trade often comes with important tradeoffs in a country's ability to act independently of the PRC. Our research demonstrates that actors that benefit from trade with China are often those most active in attempting to propagate pro-PRC narratives in societies around the Indo-Pacific, a dynamic that Beijing recognizes and seeks to cultivate. This can contribute to a self-fulfilling narrative cycle, where those benefiting the most from doing business with China use their power to deepen economic and political ties, while at the same time shutting down efforts to question the wisdom of a deepened relationship. In its most extreme form, this kind of capture can lead to situations such as that seen in Cambodia, where a state thoroughly captured by the PRC has cracked down harshly on any criticism of the relationship.

Governments across the region should therefore seek to diversify their trade partners, intensifying inter-regional trade that bypasses China while deepening ties with partners outside the region. Civil society activists and concerned officials in the region should also seek to contrast China's use of trade to shape informational spaces with the behavior of developed democracies, which rarely seek to condition growing trade ties with adherence to a rigid political line. This makes the point that attempts to grow prosperity need not come at the cost of political independence. Likewise, government officials throughout the global south should recognize that a failure to invest in and cultivate important institutions of democracy, like universities and independent media, leaves them vulnerable to capture by well-resourced authoritarian states such as China.

Many of these recommendations have one word in common: more. Although much has already been done around the world to raise obstacles to PRC efforts to manipulate the information environment in countries around the Indo-Pacific, these efforts arguably still compare unfavorably to the asymmetric advantage that the PRC wields as it attempts to shape China-related discussions in the region. Beijing has the luxury of focus and, compared to actors such as the United States and Europe, home field advantage on its side. Efforts to change this situation will require sustained focus and cooperation from a variety of actors, both in and outside the region.



THAILAND CASE STUDY /

PRC Influence in Thailand's Information Ecosphere

INTRODUCTION

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) uses extensive influence apparatus that spans traditional and online platforms to advance its domestic monopoly on power and its claims to global leadership.¹ The phrase “tell China stories well” has been a focal point of China’s diplomatic efforts under PRC supreme leader Xi Jinping. In June 2021, in remarks made at a group study session of the Political Bureau of the CCP Central Committee, Xi called for quicker steps to form “a system of Chinese discourse and Chinese narrative” and “employing Chinese practices to elevate Chinese theories”.²

Thai audiences, with an estimated 7.1 million people in the country who identify as members of the global Chinese diaspora, has been a high-priority target of CCP information shaping efforts.³ Thai-Chinese are one of the largest overseas Chinese communities, with a population of approximately 10 million people, accounting for 11–14 percent of the total population of Thailand.⁴ While descendants of older Chinese migrants in Thailand consider themselves Thai, new Chinese migrants tend to struggle with assimilating and thus might be receptive to CCP propaganda and disinformation.⁵ A 2014 poll by the Pew Research Center asking Thai respondents for their views of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), 72 percent had favorable perceptions of China.⁶

Much of the PRC’s information manipulation efforts in Thailand and the region aim to undermine the reputation and appeal of its top strategic competitor, the United States, while promoting the PRC’s interests such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In Thailand, the PRC seized the opportunity created by the U.S.’ decision to suspend military aid following the 2014 coup. The coup that put Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha in power; China seized the chance to try to cement its relationship with the new regime. Key to this was its offer of a US\$5 billion investment in two high-speed railways linking Thailand to the PRC.⁷ The Thai government was, in turn, eager to make this relationship work. Prayut invoked Article 44, a security order that gave him the power to push through the rail project with the PRC, a move that drew harsh criticism.⁸ But by the time construction began in 2017, Thailand had drastically changed the plans for the project.⁹ Thai policymakers, even under military governments, have pushed back against various BRI-related projects. However, analysts say Bangkok is still in Beijing’s good books – as a recent US\$400 million submarine deal shows.¹⁰ In July 2022, Thailand set a 2028 target to finish the high-speed rail and talks on a “Thailand-Laos-China Connectivity Development Corridor” have been held.¹¹

This report uses extensive interviews with key stakeholders, journalists, local scholars, and researchers to explore PRC media influence in Thailand. It assesses potential goals and areas of CCP influence and, more broadly, ideal outcomes for the PRC in terms of information-shaping efforts in Thailand. It then seeks to answer the question: Has the PRC party-state actively sought to influence Thailand’s information environment for its own ends, and if so, how is it accomplishing this and to what extent is it succeeding? This single question contains many facets, touching upon the nature of influence, changes within the information environment, and the interests of states.

1 DiResta, Renee, et al. *Telling China’s Story: The Chinese Communist Party’s Campaign to Shape Global Narratives*. 2020, <https://fsi.stanford.edu/publication/telling-chinas-story>.

2 Wen-Fang, Chang. “Improve Intl Communication, Xi Says.” *XinHua.Net*, 2 June 2021, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202106/02/WS60b6bcd0a31024ad-0bac2e76.html>.

3 Siriphon, Aranya. “New Chinese Migrants to Thailand Hit with Negative Stereotypes, Language Barrier Form ‘Parallel Communities.’” *South China Morning Post*, 31 Mar. 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3172408/new-chinese-migrants-thailand-hit-negative-stereotypes-language>.

4 McKeown, Adam. “Chinese Diaspora.” *Encyclopedia of Diasporas*, Springer US, 2005, pp. 65–76.

5 Siriphon, Aranya, et al. “New Chinese Migrants in Chiang Mai: Parallel Paths for Social Interaction and Cultural Adjustment.” *FULCRUM*. 2022, <https://fulcrum.sg/new-chinese-migrants-in-chiang-mai-parallel-paths-for-social-interaction-and-cultural-adjustment/>.

6 “Chapter 2: China’s Image.” *Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project*, 14 July 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2014/07/14/chapter-2-chinas-image/>.

7 Hodal, Kate. “Thailand’s Ruling Junta Approves China Rail Links Worth \$23bn.” *The Guardian*, 1 Aug. 2014, <https://amp.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/01/thailand-junta-approve-china-rail-link-23bn>.

8 “Thai Junta to Invoke Executive Order to Kick-Start \$5 Billion Rail Project with China.” *Reuters*, 13 June 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-thailand-china-railway-idUKKBN19425S>.

9 Takahashi, Toru. “China’s Pan-Asian Railway Sputters to a Halt in Thailand.” *Nikkei Asia*, 16 Jan. 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/China-s-pan-Asian-railway-sputters-to-a-halt-in-Thailand>.

10 Thongnoi, Jitsiree. “As Delays Hit China-Thailand High Speed Railway, Bangkok Counts the Cost of Paying Its Own Way.” *South China Morning Post*, 14 Feb. 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/economics/article/3166748/delays-hit-china-thailand-high-speed-railway-bangkok-counts>.

11 Peter, Zsombor. “Thailand Sets 2028 Target to Finish High-Speed Rail Link with China.” *Voice of America*, 17 July 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/thailand-sets-2028-target-to-finish-high-speed-rail-link-with-china/6662154.html>.

Three additional questions are at the heart of this report, namely:

- 1) What factors drive CCP information manipulation tactics in the region and in high-priority countries like Thailand?
- 2) Which parts of the PRC party-state are most active and important in driving information-shaping efforts in Thailand?
- 3) To what extent has the CCP sought to influence or co-opt media that targets or is owned by the Chinese diaspora?

This report then uses process tracing, either working forward from the commencement of influence-oriented digital activity to displays of potential CCP-aligned behaviors, or backward from CCP-aligned behaviors to original influence operation activity. By doing so, it seeks to establish clear patterns and methods of how the PRC conducts influence campaigns in Thailand's information space. The report then concludes with policy recommendations.

Part 1 analyzes the perceptions of individuals and entities in Thailand that feel encircled by PRC information operations. It takes a deeper look at the information space the PRC is using in its attempts to influence Thailand and assesses the political preferences of targeted audiences — whether they are aligned with, opposed to, or neutral with regards to PRC interests. Part 2 provides two case studies of Thai media/business elites, associations or enterprises that have demonstrable connections to the CCP or PRC state-affiliated entities. While this is not an exhaustive analysis of every interaction between the Thai and PRC figures of significance in the media realm, the two case studies offer a different prism through which to regard PRC interests and how the country may be attempting to influence its southern neighbor. Building upon the key findings in the case studies, Part 3 assesses what, if any, effect PRC influence has had on Thailand's information space and whether this has a tangible impact on the country. It takes a broad view of the aggregate influence activities uncovered by our research and discusses the implications of PRC influence for the future.

1. OVERVIEW OF PRC INFLUENCE IN THAILAND'S INFORMATION SPACE

This section outlines PRC influence activity in Thailand's information space and larger PRC areas of interest to develop a clearer understanding of which tactics have been employed in this pursuit and provides a framework through which to analyze the case studies in the next chapter.

1.1 Thailand as a part of the PRC's global efforts

The PRC has long sought to reshape the global information environment with massive infusions of money and a diverse set of influence tools.¹² Thailand, along with most of its neighbors, is therefore a prime target for PRC propaganda and disinformation.¹³ Research for this project has uncovered three widely circulated narratives that recur both in the PRC's global information campaign as well as in Thailand.

Narrative A: Criticism of the Sinovac vaccine twists facts and undermines friendly relations between Thailand and the PRC.

In Thailand, where more than 60 percent of Covid-19 vaccine doses received so far have been made by either Sinovac or Sinopharm, the PRC has sought to shape and manipulate the narratives surrounding the Sinovac vaccine as well as the origins of the Covid outbreak. The PRC heavily promoted its Sinovac vaccine at a time when Thailand was in line to procure U.S.-made vaccines. Public Health Minister Anutin Charnvirakul has defended the effectiveness of the Sinovac vaccine.¹⁴

According to the PRC embassy in Thailand, Prime Minister Prayut has stated that receipt of the first batch of PRC-made vaccines was a "historic moment" and thanked the PRC for its valuable support.¹⁵ On its Facebook page, the PRC embassy publicized additional deliveries of medical supplies and personal protective equipment to Thailand in May and June 2020.¹⁶

One broadly circulated instance of disinformation in Thai language on Facebook used the headline "Dr. Arthit posted: the U.S. admitted the best vaccine was China's."¹⁷ That false claim continued to be shared on Facebook and went beyond Thailand to reach Hong Kong, Taiwan, the Philippines, Russia, Malaysia, and Indonesia. According to Rappler, it was first found in the Thai language on Facebook on May 7, 2021, in a fan page called 'เสียงชาวบ้าน วิชาการของชาวบ้าน เพื่อชาวบ้าน' (Voices of the Grassroots, Knowledge of the Grassroots for the Grassroots). The claim was last noticed on September 23, 2021, with a total of 231 posts, excluding those in various public groups.¹⁸ Another example was the Facebook page Thailand Headlines reporting "People are welcoming Sinovac at the Suvarnabhumi Airport" in Chinese, a message that was adopted and amplified by some Thai-Chinese groups.¹⁹

¹² Lim, Louisa, and Julia Bergin. "Inside China's Audacious Global Propaganda Campaign." *The Guardian*, 7 December 2018, <https://amp.theguardian.com/news/2018/dec/07/china-plan-for-global-media-dominance-propaganda-xi-jinping>.

¹³ Cook, Sarah. Beijing's Global Megaphone. *Freedom House*, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2020/beijings-global-megaphone>

¹⁴ "Anutin Puts His Faith in Chinese Vaccines." *Bangkokpost.com*, 14 Apr. 2021, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2099383/anutin-puts-his-faith-in-chinese-vaccines>.

¹⁵ "First Batch of China's Sinovac COVID-19 Vaccines Arrives in Thailand." *Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Thailand*, 25 Feb. 2021, http://th.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/gdxw/202102/t20210225_10148727.htm.

¹⁶ "The second round of medical supplies handover ceremony donated by the Chinese government to Thailand was held in Thailand" *Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Thailand*, 29 June 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/ChineseEmbassyinBangkok/posts/3131048890275228>.

¹⁷ Amarinthewa, Wongpun. "Information Operations in Thailand: Exploiting COVID-19 to Suppress Dissent." *Rappler*, 28 Apr. 2022, <https://www.rappler.com/news-break/investigative/thailand-information-operations-exploiting-covid-19-suppress-dissent/>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ "People are welcoming Sinovac at the Suvarnabhumi Airport." *Thailand Headlines*, 23 Feb. 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/ThailandHeadlines/posts/pfbid02UzJUVVMGra8pk4Kg32BoSwYFJ674aRxUNDzBXc81rLDBaW4UhhRmsBvrgAmJhH9Wul>.

Narrative B: U.S. laboratories such as Fort Detrick and the University of North Carolina developed the coronavirus as a bioweapon.

Besides promoting content that casts the PRC in a favorable light, the PRC has also weaponized social media to undermine its opponents. As the Covid-19 pandemic began to engulf China and the world, the CCP's global political warfare apparatus aggressively attempted to deflect blame for the pandemic. In a statement on its Facebook page, the PRC embassy in Bangkok stated that "some political forces have been fixated on political manipulation and (the) blame game" and repeated calls for investigations into "highly suspicious laboratories such as Fort Detrick" in Maryland "and the University of North Carolina," where China has alleged — without evidence — that the U.S. was developing the coronavirus as a bioweapon.²⁰ As the pandemic escalated, PRC netizens attacked Thai celebrities for sharing posts about the potential origin of Covid-19 in a laboratory in China or hinting at Hong Kong and Taiwanese independence.²¹ One individual interviewed for this project commented that some distorted "anti-America" and "hate Americans" videos have become common in Thailand, especially in Facebook groups and on Line, a popular messaging app in a number of Asian countries.²² Other interviewees said the PRC uses large numbers of fake social media accounts to push its messages, which PRC diplomats amplify with spin and outright disinformation.²³

At the same time, the Thai Minister of Digital Economy and Society ordered internet service providers to close eight Facebook accounts²⁴ accused of posting pandemic-related fake news on social media, all of them run by pro-democracy activists or political commentators. One interviewee noted that since Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha has come to power, the government has maintained tight control over Thailand's information environment. After seizing power, Prayut's government orchestrated a significant crackdown on dissent and implemented measures to limit public discussions about democracy and criticism of the government, including increases in internet and media censorship.²⁵ The Thai government also may have taken action against political dissidents in an attempt to cover up the Sinovac vaccine's shortcomings.²⁶

Narrative C: Non-Chinese journalists are "brainwashed" by "Western values of journalism," which are depicted as irresponsible and disruptive to society.²⁷

China has long maintained a presence in Thai media. Xinhua News Agency and China Radio International both run Thai language content accessible to Thai audiences.²⁸ According to one interviewee, the PRC embassy has solicited Thai news agencies to publish their statements in the form of op-eds, and PRC government entities have sponsored numerous media trips to give Thai journalists the opportunity to interview high-ranking officials.²⁹ Such activities are usually supervised by the Thai-Chinese Journalists Association.³⁰

²⁰ "The Official Facebook Page of the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok implied the U.S. laboratories Fort Detrick developed the coronavirus as a bioweapon." *Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Thailand*, <https://www.facebook.com/ChineseEmbassyinBangkok/photos/pb.100064440681953.-2207520000./4317999801580125/?type=3>.

²¹ Wong, Audrye. "COVID-19 and China's Information Diplomacy in Southeast Asia." *Brookings*, 3 Sept. 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/09/03/covid-19-and-chinas-information-diplomacy-in-southeast-asia/>.

²² Tang, Jane. "China's Information Warfare and Media Influence Spawn Confusion in Thailand." *Radio Free Asia*, 13 May 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/thailand-infowars-05132021072939.html>.

²³ Kinetz, Erika. "Army of Fake Fans Boosts China's Messaging on Twitter." *Associated Press*, 11 May 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/asia-pacific-china-europe-middle-east-government-and-politics-62b13895aa6665ae4d887dcc8d196dfc>.

²⁴ Tortermvasana, Komsan. "Court Orders ISPs to Shut down 8 Internet Political Commentators." *Bangkok Post*, 2 June 2021, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2125675/court-orders-isps-to-shut-down-8-internet-political-commentators>.

²⁵ Quartz. "The Thai Junta's Latest Crackdown on Dissent Is a Bogus Facebook Login Button." *Quartz*, 26 June 2014, <https://qz.com/226673/the-thai-juntas-latest-crackdown-on-dissent-is-a-bogus-facebook-login-button/>.

²⁶ Lee, Karen and Natalegawa, Andreyka. "Fake News Crackdowns Do Damage Across Southeast Asia During Pandemic." *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 11 June 2021, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/fake-news-crackdowns-do-damage-across-southeast-asia-during-pandemic>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Charuvastra, Teeranai. "China, as Told by China: Beijing's Influences Reach Thai Media and beyond." *Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung*, 28 December 2019, <https://th.boell.org/en/2019/12/28/china-told-china-beijings-influences-reach-thai-media-and-beyond>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ "Ambassador Lyu Jian Met with the Thai-Chinese Journalists Association." *Embassy of The People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Thailand*, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/ceth/eng/sqxwt1545775.htm>.

PRC state-owned news agencies also seek to influence Thai media content, and through various agreements, some Thai newspapers carry news content that is an exact replica of that provided by Xinhua.³¹ For example, Manager Online, one of the major news outlets in Thailand, has close relationships with PRC media and officials in both Thailand and the PRC.³² Xinhua has signed a Memorandum Of Understanding with an obscure news site called OPT News and, according to one of our interviewees, with 12 other Thai media organizations (see Table 1 below).³³ Acquisitions of media outlets have also shaped the Thai media ecosphere.³⁴ “This increases the PRC influence and decreases the English media options,” one Thai journalist interviewed for this report has observed.

PRC media in Thailand	Media outlets signed content-sharing agreements with Xinhua	Chinese-language media in Thailand
China Global Television Network (CGTN), China Radio International (CRI) Thailand, People’s Daily, Xinhua News Agency, China News Service, China Daily, and Global Times.	MONO 29, TNN 24, Business Today, Smart SME, MThai Voice Online, Manager Online, Sanook, Independent News Network (INN), Thailand Today, Bangkok Wealth & Biz, State broadcasters NBT and MCOT, Matichon, Khaosod.	Sirinakorn, The Sing Sian Yer Pao Daily News, The New Chinese Daily News Tong Hua Daily News, and Asia News Times.

Table 1: China-related media in Thailand (Source: CNA)

1.2 Targeting Thailand

Thailand has the largest overseas Chinese community in the world outside China. Between 11 and 14 percent of Thailand’s population are considered ethnic Chinese. Thai linguist Theraphan Luangthongkum claims that the share of those having at least partial Chinese ancestry is about 40 percent of the Thai population.³⁵ The CCP therefore regards the diaspora as a powerful vector of influence, and it has established at least five umbrella groups, including the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (ACFROC), the Chinese International Media Association (CIMA), the Global Chinese Media Cooperation Union (GCMCU), the International Chinese Media Union (ICMU), and the Overseas Chinese Media Cooperation Organization (OCMCO). These umbrella groups are believed to be either affiliated with, or working closely with United Front Work Department entities, and act as intermediaries that indoctrinate foreign media outlets and foster their connections with the CCP.³⁶

CCP organs work closely with the United Chinese Clans Association in Thailand, another such umbrella group.³⁷ With his numerous and rich diaspora connections, Dhanin Chearavanont, a business tycoon and Thailand’s richest man, provides a good example of how some wealthy members of the Chinese diaspora in Thailand feel compelled to toe the CCP line on issues of interest to Beijing. Chearavanont is a member of Shantou United Front and controls China’s biggest insurer — Ping An Insurance Group Co — as well as the True Telecom Group in Thailand.³⁸ His involvement in the Chinese diaspora community dovetails with the CCP’s goals in the country. Chearavanont has condemned the Hong Kong protests and called for peace and order in Hong Kong and an end to the violence.³⁹ Three Chinese-language newspapers in Hong Kong, the Oriental Daily, Sing Tao Daily, and Ming Pao, reproduced his comments on the crisis in the

³¹ Roney, Tyler. “Chinese Propaganda Finds a Thai Audience.” *Foreign Policy*, 28 Aug. 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/28/chinese-propaganda-finds-a-thai-audience/>

³² Online, M. G. R. *MGR Online*, 20 June 2005, <https://mgronline.com/china/detail/9480000078477>.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ “Khaosod Signs Partnership with China’s Xinhua.” *Khaosod English*, 25 July 2019. <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/news/2019/07/25/khaosod-signs-partnership-with-chinas-xinhua/>

³⁵ Guan, L. H., and L. Suryadinata. *Language, Nation and Development in Southeast Asia*. Edited by Lee Hock Guan and Leo Suryadinata, *Institute of Southeast Asian Studies*, 2007.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ “THE UNITED CHINESE CLANS ASSOCIATION OF THAILAND - 7th Honorary List.” *ZonglianThai.com*, https://www.zonglianThai.com/index.php?langtype=en&page-id=en_1.

³⁸ Bloomberg News. “CP’s Dhanin Goes on Ad Blitz Calling for End to Hong Kong Unrest.” *Bangkokpost.com*, 27 Aug. 2019, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/business/1737679/cps-dhanin-goes-on-ad-blitz-calling-for-end-to-hong-kong-unrest>.

³⁹ Yiu, Enoch. “Thailand’s Richest Man Calls for Peace and Order in Hong Kong, Adding His Voice to the Chorus of Condemnation against Violence.” *South China*

former British enclave.⁴⁰ Moreover, Chearavanont used his Chinese name, Chia Kok Min, when he issued his message.

Huawei, meanwhile, has invested in Thailand's 5G market through the CP-backed True Corp. The investment has created an Internet-of-Things lab with Huawei and has used Huawei equipment to become Thailand's first 4G provider.⁴¹ Some of Huawei's investment runs through the CP Group, which as one of Thailand's leading telecommunications firm was invited to participate in Huawei's 5G⁴² test networks in the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC).⁴³ State-owned China Mobile Ltd has since acquired an 18 percent stake in True Corp for \$881 million.⁴⁴

Since the warming of relations between the two countries, China and Thailand have established a ministerial-level dialogue for the Digital Silk Road. Through the Digital Silk Road, the BRI Space Information Corridor, the provision of information and communications technology and access to networks, the PRC has sought to enhance digital connectivity in Thailand. General Thanadthang, the current director of the Thailand-China Research Center of the Belt and Road Initiative, has said that the Thai government is considering connecting the BRI with "Thailand 4.0", its own signature technological development strategy.⁴⁵ And during the "Opportunity Thailand" conference hosted by the Board of Investment, the president of the CP Group praised the PRC and Thai governments for the "Thailand 4.0" initiative in cooperating with Huawei.⁴⁶ "The richest family in Thailand got richer by helping China," one of our interviewees noted.

In December 2012, Huawei Thailand signed an agreement with the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology (MICT), now the Ministry of Digital Economy and Society, to jointly train professionals for the Thai information and communications technology industry. The Thai government also signed a MOU with Huawei to establish the Huawei ASEAN academy in the Eastern Economic Corridor with the goal of boosting the ICT industry's development in 2021.⁴⁷ This occurs as the U.S. urges its allies to bar the PRC telecoms giant from building next-generation mobile networks worldwide.⁴⁸ "For Thailand, security concerns over Huawei's equipment come second to its competitive pricing versus that by U.S. firms," one interviewee pointed out. "There are always surveillance concerns when it comes to China.... But Thailand doesn't really have anything exciting that might be of interest to Beijing," said Pranontha Titavunno, Chairman of the Information Technology Industry Club of the Federation of Thai Industries.⁴⁹

Morning Post, 27 Aug. 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/business/companies/article/3024499/thailands-richest-man-calls-peace-and-order-hong-kong-adding-his>.

40 Porterfield, Carlie. "Thai Billionaire Dhanin Chearavanont Calls for End to Hong Kong Protests." *Forbes*, 27 Aug. 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carlieporterfield/2019/08/27/thai-billionaire-dhanin-chearavanont-calls-for-end-to-hong-kong-protests/?sh=56662a1c3eb5>.

41 "How Richest Family in Thailand Got Richer by Helping China." *BusinessWorld Online*, 24 Apr. 2019, <https://www.bworldonline.com/corporate/2019/04/25/227185/how-richest-family-in-thailand-got-richer-by-helping-china/>.

42 Simon Lin, President of Huawei Asia Pacific, praised the newest 5G collaboration on June 16, 2022. Retrieved from Huawei Thailand Facebook. (Left) Dhanin Chearavanont with Jack Ma, during Ant Financial Services' press conference in Hong Kong in November 2016. Photo: SCMP/Xiaomei Chen. (Right)



43 Guest Blogger for Asia Unbound. "Of Questionable Connectivity: China's BRI and Thai Civil Society." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 7 June 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/questionable-connectivity-chinas-bri-and-thai-civil-society>.

44 Jittapong, Khettiya. "China Mobile to Buy \$881mln Stake in Thai Billionaire's True Corp." *Reuters*, 9 June 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-true-corporation-chinamobile-idUSKBN0EK0QA20140609>.

45 Pan Mengqi. "Belt, Road Enhances Regional Benefit of Beijing-Bangkok Ties." *China Daily*, 23 June 2018, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201806/23/WS5b2d9d83a3103349141de5c9.html>.

46 "Industry 4.0' Thailand's Path to Prosperity, Seminar Hears." *Nationthailand*, 15 Feb. 2017, <https://www.nationthailand.com/business/30306450>.

47 "News Release." *The Eastern Economic Corridor Office of Thailand*, 19 March 2021, <https://www.eeco.or.th/en/news-release-pr/EECO-and-Huawei-Sign-MoU-for-Digital-Talent-Collaboration-in-Conjunction-with-Huawei-ASEAN-Academy-Thailand-EEC-Branch-Opening-with-the-Target-to-Produce-30-000-Digital-Workers-within-the-Next-3-Years>.

48 Tanakasempipat, Patpicha. "Thailand Launches Huawei 5G Test Bed, Even as U.S. Urges Allies to Bar Chinese Gear." *Reuters*, 8 Feb. 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-huawei-thailand-idUSKCN1PXODY>.

49 Reuters. "Thailand Launches Huawei 5G Test Bed, Even as US Urges Allies to Bar Chinese Gear." *CNBC*, 8 Feb. 2019, <https://www.cnbcm.com/2019/02/08/thailand-launches-huawei-5g-test-as-us-urges-allies-to-bar-china-gear.html>.

Under China's 2017 National Intelligence Law, Huawei, like all companies and entities based in the PRC, is legally required to conduct intelligence work on behalf of the PRC government.⁵⁰ As one interviewee commented, "China's enterprises are winning the 5G race in Thailand." Thai interviewees also say there is considerable overlap in patterns of elite influence in the Thai case studies and in patterns of behavior exhibited by potential purveyors and targets of influence in Thailand's ICT infrastructure. "There are also worries that the company might bow to the PRC government demands and disable networks to exert coercive pressure on Thailand," numerous interviewees warned.⁵¹

2. CASE STUDIES OF PRC INFLUENCE OF MEDIA/BUSINESS ELITES IN THAILAND

The following case studies represent the most prominent examples of efforts by the PRC to shape Thailand's information ecosystem. Each case shows how Thailand's relationship with the PRC was affected by actions undertaken by entities from, or directly related to, the PRC government and how this influence is providing geopolitical benefits to the CCP. This section assesses the degree of influence activities that have been undertaken by the Thai-Chinese Journalists Association and members of the Chinese diaspora in Thailand with regard to the Thai information space, as well as the observable and potential impact of this influence. The case studies were selected based upon availability of information and evidence, as well as for their value in demonstrating the PRC's various approaches to influencing the Thai information space.

2.1 Thai-Chinese Journalists Association

The Thai-Chinese Journalists Association is arguably one of the clearest examples of how CCP-affiliated entities use inducements and training programs/cultural trips to China to influence Thai journalists. This section looks at the activities of the PRC and Thai Executive Committee of the Thai-Chinese Journalists Association. It first identifies which segments of the PRC party-state are most active in driving information-shaping efforts in Thailand, and then analyzes individual Thais who have been linked to or have been involved in behavior that aligns with PRC interests. Finally, it looks for evidence of Thai media elites who have espoused pro-PRC views or have behaved in ways that dovetail with the CCP's interests, working backwards to see if they may have been subject to any kind of coercion, inducement, or persuasion.

Figure 1 shows the members of the Thai executive committee of the Thai-Chinese Journalists Association. Figure 2 shows persons of interest using photos taken at press conferences or official events.⁵² Figure 3 shows the PRC counterparts to the Thai members of the Thai-Chinese Journalists Association, along with their clear connections to the PRC-party state media apparatus, shown in Figure 4.

⁵⁰ Sacks, David. "China's Huawei Is Winning the 5G Race. Here's What the United States Should Do to Respond." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 29 Mar. 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/china-huawei-5g>.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² (Phuwanart Na Songkhla elected as the President of the Thai-Chinese Journalists Association)." *MGR Online*, 22 Aug. 2020, <https://mgronline.com/news1/detail/9630000086112>.

Thai Executive Committee of the Thai-Chinese Journalists Association	
Committee Member	Affiliation
Phuwanart Na Songkhla	Bangkok Wealth & Biz
Chaiwat Wanichwatana	Former President of Thai-Chinese Journalists Association
Kobkit Praditphonpanich	Dean of Faculty of Communication Arts, Dhurakij Pundit University
Phiphat Nawasawat	Treasurer, Corehoon Online
Thitapha Songphao	General Secretary, Thai Rath News
Kriengkrai Buasri	Vice president, Daily News
Prakongchit Chaichana	Chief editor, NEWS1
Jackie Saechen	Vice president, Bangkok International Times

Figure 1 (above): Thai-Chinese Journalists Association – Thai Executive Committee members

เลือก "ภูวนารถ ณ สงขลา" เป็นนายกสมาคมผู้สื่อข่าวไทย-จีน คนใหม่
 เผยแพร่: 22 ส.ค. 2563 12:32 โดย ผู้จัดการออนไลน์



Phuwanart Na Songkhla
Bangkok Wealth & Biz



Chaiwat Wanichwatana
Ex-president of Thai-Chinese Journalists Association



Phiphat Nawasawat
Treasurer, Corehoon Online



Kobkit Praditphonpanich
Dean of Faculty of Communication Arts, Dhurakij Pundit University

Figure 2 (above): Phuwanart Na Songkhla was elected president of the Thai-Chinese Journalists Association, along with committee members on August 22, 2020. (Photo: MGR Online News)

PRC Executive Committee of the Thai-Chinese Journalists Association		
Committee Member	Affiliation w/Thailand	Affiliation w/CCP apparatus
Wang, Guo An	Chief of China News Service Thailand Bureau	UFWD
Liao, Li	Director of Foreign Cooperation, China Media Group Asia Pacific	Publicity Department
Fu, Zhi Gang	Chief Correspondent of Guangming Daily Bangkok Bureau	Publicity Department
Shi, Guang	Chief of China Report ASEAN (Bangkok Office)	Publicity Department
Sun, Guang Yong	Chief Correspondent of People's Daily Thailand Bureau	Politiburo
Ming, Da Jun	Chief of Xinhua News Agency Bangkok Bureau	State Council
Su, Wen Tao	CEO of China International Broadcasting Network Thailand Co., Ltd	State Council

Figure 3 (above): Thai-Chinese Journalists Association – PRC Executive Committee Members



Thai-Chinese Journalists Association
Chinese Executive Committee (2020-2022)

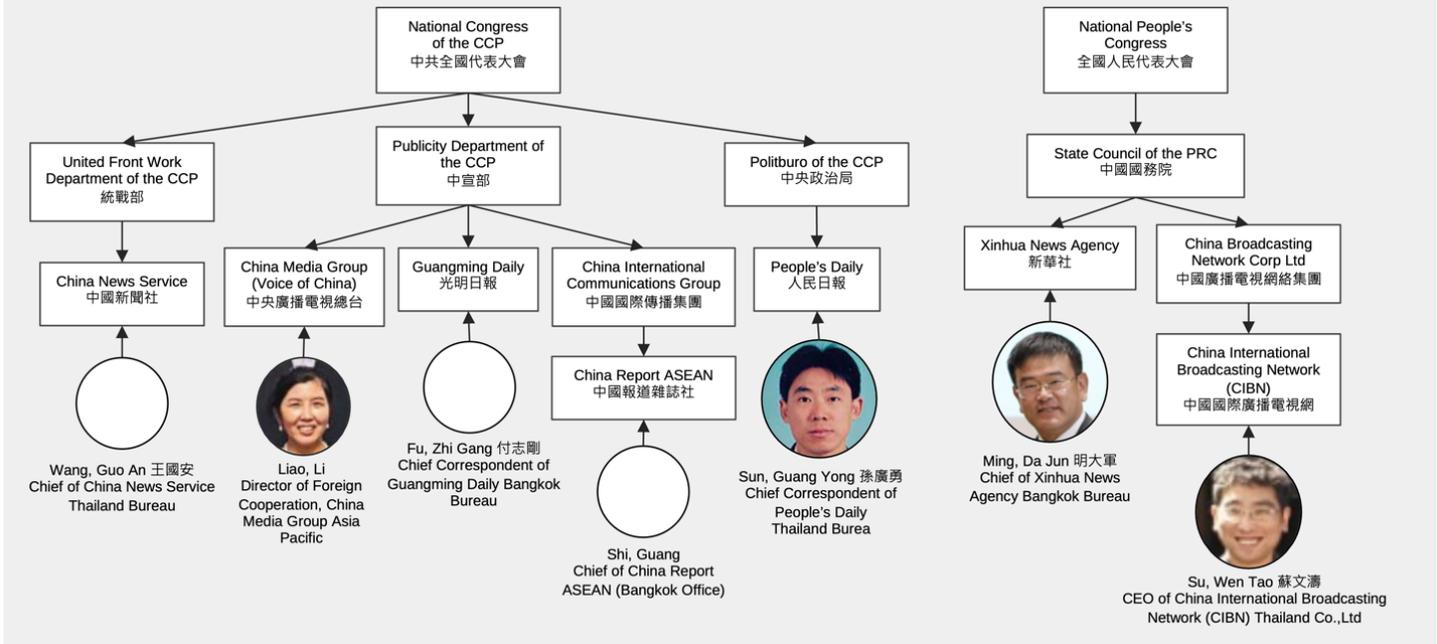


Figure 4 (above): PRC Executive Committee Members – Connection with PRC-Party State Media Apparatus

Of particular interest here is how the association has interacted with or echoed views and opinions from PRC media. According to public records from the embassy of the PRC in Thailand, representatives from the association have met with PRC government representatives on several occasions. The following is a brief list of such contacts, along with direct quotations from the association’s official statements:

- On March 22, 2018, Chaiwat Wanichwatana, president of the Thai-Chinese Journalists Association, met with Ambassador Lyu Jian to discuss and exchange views on issues pertaining to media cooperation between the two countries.⁵³
- On October 23, 2018, a new media delegation composed of 18 members from the Thailand-China Journalist Association visited the ASEAN-China Centre (ACC). The delegation was visiting China at the invitation of the China International Publishing Group and China Report Press and recommendation by the PRC embassy in Thailand.⁵⁴
- On October 28, 2019, the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (Thai) Public Company Limited and the Thai-Chinese Journalists Association held a “Thailand and China Cooperation” seminar.⁵⁵
- On November 15, 2019, Xinhua Bangkok Bureau Chief Ming Dajun said he had often been asked by his agency to build closer ties with Thai news organizations. Ming said the aim was to promote more understanding about China among the Thai public.⁵⁶
- On November 20, 2019, Chaiwat Wanichwattana said that, “Thai media [will] receive news directly from

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ “A New Media Delegation of Thailand-China Journalist Association Visited ACC.” *ASEAN-China Centre Newsletter*, 2018, http://www.asean-china-center.org/download/NewsletterNo28_0221.pdf

⁵⁵ “Attended Seminar of the Thai-Chinese Journalists Association.” *Industrial and Commercial Bank Of China (Thai)*, https://www.icbcthai.com/icbc/%E6%B5%B7%E5%A4%96%E5%88%86%E8%A1%8C/%E5%B7%A5%E9%93%B6%E6%B3%B0%E5%9B%BD%E7%BD%91%E7%AB%99/cn/%E5%85%B3%E4%BA%8E%E6%88%91%E8%A1%8C/%E7%89%B9%E5%88%AB%E5%85%B3%E6%B3%A8/JournalistsAssociation_20191108CN.html

⁵⁶ “5 More Thai Media Agencies Sign Partnership with Xinhua.” *Khaosodenglish.com*, 20 Nov. 2019, <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/news/2019/11/20/5-more-thai-media-sites-sign-partnership-with-xinhua/>.

a Chinese news agency, instead of a second-hand information from Western media only... This kind of cooperation is most welcome.”⁵⁷ He made the remarks during a discussion timed to coincide with the signing of agreements between the two sides.

- On December 1, 2020, a PRC media delegation visited Thai media Daily News to exchange views and discuss the state of the media in Thailand.⁵⁸
- On June 30, 2021, the president of the Thai-Chinese Reporters Association said, “The Communist Party of China has made many miracles,” on Central China Radio and Television (CMG) broadcast news.⁵⁹
- On July 9, 2021, Shen Haixiong, deputy minister of the Publicity Department of the CCP and head of the China Media Group, sent an official congratulatory letter to Chaiwat Wanichwatana upon his election to president of the Thai-Chinese Journalists Association.⁶⁰

All the messages above were posted on the embassy of PRC in Thailand website, which explains the effusive praise of the bilateral relationship. Amid events surrounding the CCP’s 100th anniversary, the tightly knit relationship between party organs and the association were in full display in the congratulation letter.⁶¹

2.2 5G Infrastructure, Business Elite, and UFWD

The following section offers insights into how political/business elites and the Chinese diaspora in Thailand have interacted with PRC actors to shape the information environment in Thailand. It does this through process tracing forward from clear signs of collaboration, or by tracing backward from noted examples of behavior exhibited by Thai actors that ostensibly benefit PRC interests. There is a clear connecting line between the CCP’s influence operations on Thai media tycoons and business elites and the kinds of activities the CCP engages in through the use of its United Front Work Department (UFWD) — a department of the CCP whose tasks include attempting to co-opt the global Chinese diaspora for Party policy goals, using both inductive and coercive means.

Of particular note here is the emphasis on the use of overseas Chinese and PRC-affiliated groups. A majority of PRC-affiliated organizations, such as business groups, cultural institutions, and so on, have either been established with the express purpose of driving influence or have themselves been co-opted for the purposes of the CCP and echoed the CCP’s narrative.

Perhaps the most consequential case study is that of Dhanin Chearavanont, and the links between his Charoen Pokphand Group (CP Group) and various facets of the CCP apparatus. In his role as senior chairman of CP, Chearavanont has become a vocal advocate of the BRI, as well as the representative of the UFWD in Thailand. Chearavanont is also the president of the China Overseas Chinese Entrepreneurs Association (COCEA),⁶² whose official website lists direct

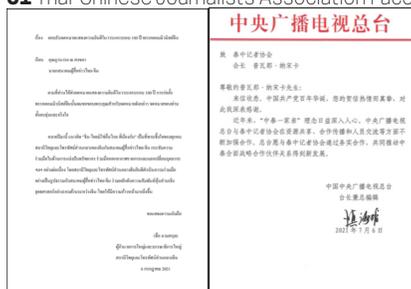
57 Kurlantzick, Joshua. “Thailand’s Press Warms to Chinese State Media.” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 8 Jan. 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/thailands-press-warms-chinese-state-media>.

58 (Chinese media group visits the Daily News to talk about the current media situation).” *Dailynews*, 1 Dec. 2020, <https://d.dailynews.co.th/women/810222/>.

59 (President of the Thai-Chinese Reporters Association: The Communist Party of China has made many miracles).” *Lmcchina.org*, 30 June 2021, https://www.lmcchina.org/tha/2021-06/30/content_41607373.html.

60 “Congratulatory Letter.” *Thai-Chinese Journalists Association Facebook*. 9 July 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/tcjapress/posts/4090242044358612>.

61 Thai-Chinese Journalists Association Facebook page congratulations on the 100th Anniversary of CCP.



62 “CGCC World Chinese Entrepreneurs Summit.” *Cgcc-wcesummit.org*, <https://cgcc-wcesummit.org/2018/en/guests07.php>.

connections with as many as 16 diaspora associations in Thailand.⁶³

Dhanin has deep connections with the UFWD. Figure 5 below provides a macro view of the situation, looking at the levels of diaspora from the UFWD to the United Chinese Clans Association in Thailand. The CP Group has several direct connections to more than 190 companies registered in the PRC. Their portfolio spans a wide variety of sectors, including agriculture, wholesale, retail, finance and banking, automotive, telecom, television, real estate, e-commerce, and pharmaceutical.⁶⁴

A closer look at the CP Group's investments shows they are mainly directed toward the politically connected. Often, Chinese diaspora firms/associations and Chinese Clans Association enter partnerships with companies run by these well-connected individuals. Given the nature of political patronage in Thailand, it is not inconceivable that the CCP is gaining its influence by co-opting Dhanin Chearavanont, with obvious ramifications for the information space.

⁶³ Thai Chinese Chamber of Commerce, Thai Culture and Education Foundation, Thailand Yantai ASEAN Culture and Commerce Promotion Association, Nakhon Si Nakhon Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Southern Thailand, Thai Cultural and Economic Exchange Association, Thai Chaozhou Guild Hall, Thailand Shishi Association and Thailand Shishi Chamber of Commerce, Thai Chinese Youth Chamber of Commerce, Federation of Thai-Chinese Clan Associations, Thai Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Thai-Chinese Chamber of Commerce for Import and Export, Chiang Mai Chinese Chamber of Commerce, Thai Young Entrepreneurs Association, Thai Chinese Business Association, Thailand Guangdong International Chamber of Commerce, and Hatyai Puning Association.

⁶⁴ Serichon. "Opinion: Exploring the Close Ties between Thailand's CP Group and the Chinese Communist Party - Thai Enquirer Market Watch Main." *Thai Enquirer*, 27 July 2021, <https://www.thaienquirer.com/30426/opinion-exploring-the-close-ties-between-thailands-cp-group-and-the-chinese-communist-party/>.

STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS

Dhanin Chearavanont and Charoen Pokphand Group

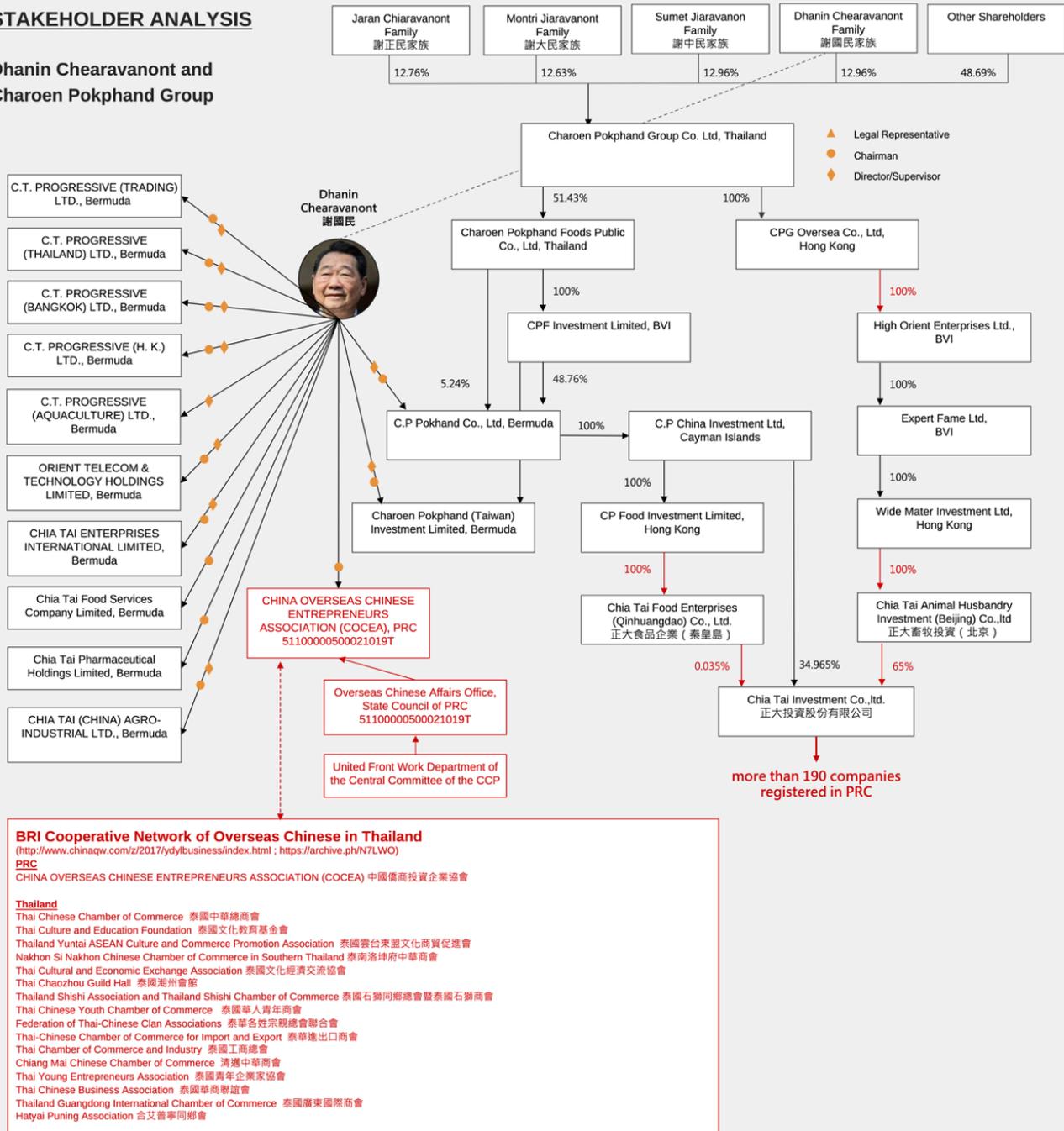


Figure 5 (above): Stakeholder Analysis — Dhanin Chearavanont and Charoen Pokphand Group

The size of the CP Group and Dhanin’s close relationship with the CCP raises concerns about Thailand’s ability to maintain its sovereignty if large segments of its economy are controlled by powerful individuals who rely heavily on trade with another country.⁶⁵ The CP Group’s monopoly is not just a matter of its overall presence in the country, but also a matter of national security, especially since the CCP is well-versed in the use of economic coercion.

65 Ibid.

3. ASSESSMENT OF THE NATURE OF PRC INFLUENCE IN THAILAND'S INFORMATION SPACE

The PRC is seeking to export the attractive elements of its culture around the world, or to use state-sponsored media to “tell China’s story.” There is, however, limited evidence of its effectiveness, especially when compared with the soft power influence of a cultural juggernaut like the U.S.⁶⁶ Subject-matter experts in Thailand are essential to assess the depth, breadth, and effectiveness of PRC information manipulation tactics in the country.

The information space has the potential to dramatically enhance the effectiveness of the PRC’s overall strategies. The PRC has had success in consolidating its political influence and interference in every aspect of Thai society, and it has made wide use of information manipulation campaigns. One interviewee remarked that, “PRC official media and diplomats use Twitter, Facebook, Line, and WeChat to spread PRC views and combat critics.”⁶⁷ Those views include “core interests” of the PRC such as the “one China” principle, Taiwanese independence, and critics of the Tiananmen Square massacre. One prominent example is that of Sa-nguan Kumrunroj, who was banned from China after criticizing the PRC for the Tiananmen Square massacre.⁶⁸ The PRC embassy in Bangkok issued a statement on April 14, 2020, criticizing Thais who question the “one China” principle, which is Beijing’s contention that there is only one China and that Taiwan is one of its provinces.⁶⁹ The statement was sufficient to drive a kind of self-censorship in the country.

Several interviewees have stated that PRC efforts to cultivate support in and control diaspora communities have aggravated political and social polarization.⁷⁰ Besides the aforementioned Dhanin Chearavanont, Amorn Apithanakoon are two explicit examples of Thai-Chinese businessmen and pro-Beijing political operatives in Bangkok.⁷¹ Apithanakoon, the CEO of one of Thailand’s largest entertainment companies, has written articles in local papers stressing that Taiwan needed to “return” to China.⁷² Intimidation of the entertainment industry features as a major component of PRC influence efforts not only in Thailand, but also in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and elsewhere in the region. One expert describes the groups and corporations that are led by Thai Chinese businesspeople serving as “a proxy weapon for Beijing.”⁷³

In addition to making deep inroads into the Thai Chinese diaspora, the PRC has also expanded its influence in the military, academia, technology, and, of course, the political economy in Thailand. As one interviewee commented, “military-backed elites in Bangkok are interested in closer ties with China, whom [they see] as a more reliable defense partner and committed to perpetuating their autocratic rule.”⁷⁴ One of the most explicit examples is the Thai army-owned TV Channel 5, which has an information-sharing project with China, Russia, and Iran.⁷⁵ Another interviewee observed that “the Chinese business groups are interested in the Thai university industry.” Alibaba cooperated with Burapha University, the Thai Department of Industry Promotion, and the Thai Department of International Trade Promotion in establishing the Global E-commerce Talent program.⁷⁶ Steady demand for admission at Thai universities from students

⁶⁶ Blaxland, James. “Chinese Co-opting of Vietnamese Elites - An Analysis in the Exercise of Influence to Achieve Geopolitical Ends.” 2022, <https://doi.org/10.6814/NCCU202200293>.

⁶⁷ Kinetz, Erika. “Army of Fake Fans Boosts China’s Messaging on Twitter.” *Associated Press*, 11 May 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/asia-pacific-china-europe-middle-east-government-and-politics-62b13895aa6665ae4d887d0c8d196dfc>.

⁶⁸ “Sa-nguan Kumrunroj was banned from PRC after criticizing China in the Tian An Men tragedy” *ANI*, 22 Jan. 2017, <https://www.matichon.co.th/prachachuen/news/436166>.

⁶⁹ “Statement by the Spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy in Thailand Concerning Recent Online Statements Related to China.” *Chinese Embassy Bangkok on Facebook*. <https://www.facebook.com/ChineseEmbassyinBangkok/posts/2942654555781330>.

⁷⁰ Heath, Timothy. “Beijing’s Influence Operations Target Chinese Diaspora.” *War on the Rocks*, 1 Mar. 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/03/beijings-influence-operations-target-chinese-diaspora/>.

⁷¹ Eades, Mark. “Beijing’s Man in Bangkok: Wang Zhimin and the Thai-Chinese Soft Power Machine.” *Foreign Policy*, 20 April. 2016, <https://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2016/04/20/beijings-man-bangkok-wang-zhimin-thai-chinese-soft-power-machine/>.

⁷² Pei, Minxin. *China’s Trapped Transition: The Limits of Developmental Autocracy*. Harvard University Press, 2008.

⁷³ Kurlantzick, Joshua. *Charm Offensive: How China’s Soft Power Is Transforming the World*. Yale University Press, 2007.

⁷⁴ Mason, Shane. “America Should Be Realistic about Its Alliance with Thailand.” *War on the Rocks*, Jan. 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/01/america-should-be-realistic-about-its-alliance-with-thailand/>.

⁷⁵ “Royal Thai Army 5 meets with the Russian Embassy Create data collaborations for a comprehensive news presentation.” *Prachatai*, Aug. 2022, <https://prachatai.com/journal/2022/03/97794>.

⁷⁶ “Alibaba Expands Global E-Commerce Talent Network to Empower the Young.” *Aliresearch.com*, <http://www.aliresearch.com/en/News/Newsdetails?article-Code=21841>.

in China has prompted private PRC investors to take large stakes in Thailand's education sector.⁷⁷

By looking at how CCP influence tactics are used in the Thai information ecosphere, we gain insights into the extent to which PRC is looking to influence the information space of its southern neighbor, as well as the extent to which it has been successful in using these techniques in the Thai context.

However, Beijing's promotion of its own information narratives on Covid-19 were too heavy-handed and provoked a local backlash. Since April 2020, Thai netizens were one of the key groups responsible for launching the "Milk Tea Alliance", the largest online pro-democracy network across East and Southeast Asia to date. Some Thai protesters see not only a shared goal of democracy but a shared enemy in Beijing. This includes Thachaporn Supparatanapinyo, who describes the alliance as a "perfect example" of a regional movement.⁷⁸ social media has also made it much easier for like-minded protesters to band together and find strength in numbers. The hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance appeared 11 million times on Twitter across Asia between July 13-19, 2021.⁷⁹ Even though the PRC embassy in Bangkok referred to this squabbling as "online noise," there is no doubt that diffused, organized, and tech-savvy networks are a challenge to Beijing's efforts to set the narrative.⁸⁰

Another PRC disinformation campaign that overreached was the Chinese nationalism narrative. On October 11, 2021, China Press, a Malaysian Chinese-language newspaper, reported that Dhanin Chearavanont had renounced his Thai nationality and become a naturalized Chinese citizen.⁸¹ This was swiftly picked up by Qi Qi News, a Chinese-language content farm website, and echoed with effusive praise for Chinese nationalism.⁸² The disinformation was debunked by the CP Group, which said in a press release that its chairman and founder holds only Thai nationality and had not become a citizen of the PRC.⁸³ The company threatened legal action against the spread of disinformation.⁸⁴ China Press took down the disinformation and shared the CP Group's statement.⁸⁵

Ascribing motives and aims is always difficult. On the one hand, China Press may simply see a narrative of Chinese nationalism as clickbait, and there is always the possibility that the erroneous claim about Dhanin Chearavanont was a mistake. Nevertheless, this incident highlights the fact that the PRC's promotion of Chinese nationalism often relies on the spread of disinformation abroad. For domestic consumption, the CCP also finds it useful to highlight and reproduce statements of support by foreign leaders, such as remarks by Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, who said during the 24th ASEAN-China Summit in 2021 that Thailand supports China's development as a "responsible great power" and expects China to continue its leading role.⁸⁶ In the Thai context, information

77 "Chinese Students in Thailand: Cash Cow, at a Cost." *FULCRUM*, 11 Feb. 2022, <https://fulcrum.sg/chinese-students-in-thailand-cash-cow-at-a-cost/>
78 "We Share the Ideals of Democracy: How the Milk Tea Alliance Is Brewing Solidarity among Activists in Asia and Beyond." *Time*, Oct. 2020, <https://time.com/5904114/milk-tea-alliance/>
79 Wang, Austin. "#MilkTeaAlliance No More?" *Wilson Center*, 5 Aug. 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/milkteaalliance-no-more>
80 "Will the 'Milk Tea War' Have a Lasting Impact on China-Thailand Relations?" *The Diplomat*, 02 May 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/will-the-milk-tea-war-have-a-lasting-impact-on-china-thailand-relations/>
81 "Thailand's richest man has become naturalized Chinese citizen." Oct. 2022. *Tencent Platform*. <https://page.om.qq.com/page/OwPOuykl8SjIWlCkqpcORw0>
82 "Chia Kok Min, the richest man in Thailand with a fortune of 129.5 billion, turns Chinese nationality." *QiQi News*, 11 October 2021, <https://qiqi.net/ar-chives/57571?amp>
83 Onthaworn, Panithan. "CP Group Says Dhanin Is a Thai National, Not Chinese; Threatens Lawsuits." *Thai Enquirer*, 15 Oct. 2021, <https://www.thaienquirer.com/33973/cp-group-says-dhanin-is-a-thai-national-not-chinese-threatens-lawsuits/>
84 Dhanin Chearavanont holds Chinese nationality (Left) was soon debunked by CP Group (Right).



85 "Chia Kok Min neutralized as Chinese nationality? CP Group debunked the disinformation." *China Press*, 15 Oct. 2021, <https://www.chinapress.com.my/20211015/%E8%B0%A2%E5%9B%BD%E6%B0%91%E5%85%A5%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E7%B1%8D%E7%BC%9F-%E6%AD%A3%E5%A4%A7%E9%9B%86%E5%9B%A2%E6%96%87%E5%91%8A%E6%BE%84%E6%B8%85/>
86 "Thai PM calls for closer ASEAN-China collaboration to address challenges" *Xinhuanet.com*, https://www.xinhuanet.com/english/asiapacific/2021-10/26/c_1310270520.htm

manipulation campaigns are a “dual-use” tool for the PRC: to promote Chinese nationalism, advance its domestic monopoly on power by sharing overseas disinformation, and to consolidate its relations with the junta.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Thailand’s experience with the PRC has earned it the unflattering sobriquet of *tai guo sheng*, or “Thailand province of China.”⁸⁷ A few lessons can be drawn from this experience. First, there are clear patterns and methods by which the PRC co-opts Thai elites and seeks to gain influence in the information space. PRC state-owned enterprises and its media apparatus contribute to information-shaping efforts on China-friendly, anti-U.S. narratives. Second, PRC efforts to cultivate support in and control diaspora communities have aggravated problems of political and social polarization in Thailand. The ongoing PRC influence on the Chinese diaspora in Thailand could have substantial ramifications for Thailand’s political stability in future. Third, Thai government agencies and media elites are closely aligned with the PRC in order to gain economic or political benefits.⁸⁸ These elites will not criticize the PRC, nor will they use “interference from foreign powers” to describe what the PRC is doing in their country.

Given the nature of the Thai military-backed government and its closely knit relationship with the CCP, it will be difficult for legislators to pass laws to counter PRC interference. Consequently, other measures are necessary to mitigate the detrimental effects of that influence in the Thai information ecosystem. The following are actionable recommendations for policymakers and implementers to build resilience to CCP information-shaping efforts, focusing on empowering Thai civil society organizations and the general public.

- Support local independent media institutes in Thailand. Digital media, journalism education, and funding can help create a vital network of independent media and make PRC funding less attractive.
- Develop media literacy toolkits for the general public. It is vital to equip the public with the knowledge and skills to become discerning news consumers, fit to defend themselves against disinformation. Online applications that flag disinformation, track its spread, and counter it with reliable facts should also be available.
- Empower Thai civil society organizations to resist any implicit or explicit attempts to shape the information environment by providing an overview of global norms and standards, consistent with human rights, which have been developed to counter CCP information manipulation. Assistance should be provided to journalists, activists, or scholars who were sued, threatened, or fired in retaliation for investigating malicious PRC influence in Thailand.

⁸⁷ Elborzi, Aki. “泰国省 (Thailand Province of China) and the Milk Tea Alliance.” *SOAS China Institute*, 31 Mar. 2022, <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/china-institute/2022/03/31/thailand-province-of-china-and-the-milk-tea-alliance/>.

⁸⁸ Pike, John. “Thailand-China Relations.” *Globalsecurity.org*, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/thailand/forrel-prc.htm>.



PHILIPPINES CASE STUDY

The PRC's Impact on The Philippines' Information Space

INTRODUCTION

PRC information-shaping in the Philippines undermines U.S. efforts to promote regional peace and democracy. Widespread disinformation aimed at Filipinos can bolster the perception, promoted by Beijing, that U.S. engagement in the region is imperialist nature, and thus make it more difficult for mutually beneficial arrangements between the U.S. and the Philippines to continue. The most important PRC information-shaping efforts in the Philippines operate indirectly, by strengthening pro-China political elites through economic incentives and encouraging other elites to avail themselves of similar benefits. In other words, PRC information-shaping efforts are largely inseparable from broader PRC efforts to change how Filipino political elites acquire and consolidate power, by giving them an incentive to promote China's policies and propaganda.

However, the transactional nature of this strategy makes it risky for the PRC. If Filipino elites were to lose their reliance on these mechanisms, China would lose much of its influence in the Philippines. And despite some successes, China's strategy has largely failed to generate genuine, long-lasting support among the Filipino public at large.

This report highlights the activities and influence of key PRC-allied entities in the Philippines and their impact on the information space. It examines (1) disinformation, defined as dissemination of fabricated facts about specific issues to uplift or undermine the reputation of political or social actors, and mobilize for or against certain policies; and (2) propaganda, which is about the selective presentation of facts about the PRC to bolster its image. In this context, it looks at (1) United Front-affiliate groups, key individuals in the Philippines, and their tools of dissemination; and (2) how these organizations undermine reporting about China in the Philippines. It concludes with recommendations, based in part on consultations with local journalists, on how to best mitigate the effects of PRC information-shaping in the Philippines.¹

THE PRC AND PHILIPPINE MEDIA UNDER DUTERTE: WIN-WIN COOPERATION

Philippine Television, Radio, Newspapers, and pro-Duterte "influencers"

Under the Duterte presidency, which ended in 2022, the PRC made significant strides in its cooperation with Philippine state media. Under Duterte, the state-run Philippine News Agency (PNA) was granted significant latitude to improve its ability to deliver news. The Duterte government and other Philippine political elites became cognizant of the need to shape public opinion, and saw PNA as a tool for doing so. PNA signed a series of MOUs (Memoranda of Understanding) on training, exchanges, and partnerships with PRC state media. In 2019, the Presidential Communications Operations Office (PCOO), the entity that controls Philippine state media, and the China Media Group (CMG), a state media conglomerate comprised of China Central Television, China National Radio, and China Radio International, agreed to enhance their relationship. Existing agreements between the PCOO and the CMG, beginning in 2016, pledged to work together "covering commitments to pursue personnel exchanges, workshops, seminars, information exchanges, rebroadcasts, joint production, and mutual visits."² In 2020, PNA also signed a MOU with RT, a Russian state-controlled media.

These agreements have resulted in mutual visits and exchanges. In 2018, PNA as well as non-PNA media personnel visited China on a two-week exchange. Philippine media visited various cities, learning about new media development and "socialist journalism with Chinese characteristics."³ There were clear-cut incentives to go. A producer for PNA said,

¹ For this report, the author conducted interviews with Philippine journalists, editors, and producers (20 journalists, five editors, and three government officials), and with three journalists working in Chinese-language media. The author also conducted reviews of the websites and publications of significant pro-PRC organizations, the social media accounts of the top 20 pro-Duterte influencers, the five largest Facebook groups for Chinese Filipinos (Fei-Hua zheng nengliang chuanbo qun 菲華正能量傳播群), Chinoy Online Community, Philippines-China Friendship Club, Filipino-Chinese Taoke Group, and Chinoy Community), and selected content from Philippine state media and the country's three largest Chinese-language newspapers.

² "PCOO: China to train PH gov't media." *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 13 April 2018. <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/165672/pcoo-china-train-ph-govt-media>.

³ Dela Cruz, R. & Carcamo, D. "PH journos take part in China's seminar for media practitioners." *Philippine News Agency*. 18 May 2019. <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1070144>.

“one of my editors offered me an opportunity to do media training in China. The program will pay me PHP (Philippine pesos) 20,000 more than my pay, and it was a two-week course. There were also promises of promotion. I did not participate because I was moving to my new job.”⁴ A Davao Sunstar editor describes his experience:

We stayed in a five-star hotel and met with various state media experts from China and other countries. A lot of the principles that I learned during the visit, such as assisting the government by shaping news so it is less prone to criticism, or reporting positive economic developments, are contrary to what I learned from my journalism school at [the University of the Philippines]. There are some principles that are different as well, such as the thinking that media and government belong to one team and have the intention of bringing development to the country. Apart from the media principles, we learned about China, what is ‘true democracy’ and what is ‘scientific development.’ We also made friends with Chinese media officials.⁵

Philippine state media’s turn toward China seems to be less about accepting the PRC’s ideological foundations and more about increasing the capacity of political elites to shape public opinion by decreasing the cost of building state media capacity, as PNA’s ability to pay journalists and upgrade equipment has been limited by cuts in state budgets.⁶ To subsidize this cost, the Duterte government relied on the PRC, freeing up budget space that it could allocate elsewhere. In the words of a former PCOO official, working with China “is not about accepting communist principles, but more about saving costs so they can allocate budget to themselves and their police operations.”⁷

In another initiative, state-run radio Radyo Pilipinas runs a radio channel called Wow China in conjunction with the PRC’s China Radio International, the result of a 2017 MOU between the two.⁸ Other content includes Mandarin-language programs and segments on Filipino and PRC friendship through history. More controversial, the PRC embassy produced a song called *Ilang-Dagat*, which aired on Wow China. *Ilang-Dagat*’s lyrics speak of a “shared sea” between Filipinos and the PRC, which both depoliticizes and downplays PRC activities in the disputed South China Sea. The song, produced by the PRC-friendly local production company Horizon of the Sun Communications, sparked public outrage. The reaction was so strong that ANC, one of the country’s most established news channels, was forced to swiftly cancel pro-PRC content produced under a partnership with Horizon only three days after it began broadcasting.⁹ The Wow China show remains on the air, partly due to an MOU signed by the Duterte government and China.

PRC-friendly actors in the Philippines and at the PRC Embassy also buy advertisements in major newspapers such as *The Philippine Star*, *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, and *The Manila Bulletin*. PRC affiliates often buy entire or half page ads that show China’s “positive” activities in the Philippines, such as donations in provinces or infrastructure projects.¹⁰ With these, the PRC hopes to divert criticism of China. An editor at one of the major newspapers said, “we often get a lot of interest from the [PRC] embassy, or one of those business associations, more than from comparable foreign organizations in the country. At times, we noticed a pattern. They become very keen to buy when there are issues, such as the South China Sea disputes or delays in infrastructure projects.”¹¹

Marginalizing independent media, the role of the PRC embassy, and pro-Duterte “influencers”

Under the Duterte government, the PRC’s desire to marginalize media critical of China’s foreign policy found a ready collaborator. Rappler, an independent media outlet, was often critical of the Duterte government. Before Duterte became president, the PRC Embassy treated Rappler like any other Philippine newspaper, ignoring it or offering boilerplate replies. After Duterte took office, Rappler became one of his fiercest critics, investigating police-related

⁴ Interview, PNA journalist, 2 April 2022.

⁵ Interview, Sunstar editor, 3 May 2022.

⁶ Interview, PNA journalist, 2 April 2022.

⁷ Interview, PCOO official, 13 March 2022.

⁸ Tomacruz, S. “What is ‘Wow China,’ the radio show sparking outrage on social media?” *Rappler*. 11 May 2020. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/260603-things-to-know-wow-china-radio-show/>.

⁹ Elemia, C. “ANC cancels partnership with Chinatown News TV.” *Rappler*. 16 April 2021, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/anc-cancels-partnership-with-chinatown-news-tv/>.

¹⁰ “EDITORIAL - Friendly neighbors.” *The Philippine Star*. 21 November 2018 <https://www.philstar.com/opinion/2018/11/21/1870304/editorial-friendly-neighbors>.

¹¹ Interview, Editor of a major Philippine newspaper, 15 April 2022.

deaths, Duterte-linked business elites, and his China policy.¹² In response, Duterte's supporters called Rappler a source of fake news and an arm of Western influence intended to topple a legitimately elected government. Duterte-allied elites filed a series of dubious lawsuits designed to harass Rappler.¹³ At the same time, local actors close to the PRC Embassy sought to vilify Rappler as anti-China, pro-West, and racist, appearing to take their cues from local elites in attacking and marginalizing local independent media.

This growing cooperation, whether through coincidence or by PRC signaling, is in part the result of the embassy's growing sophistication in dealing with local media. As the official source of information on the PRC in the Philippines, the embassy has shifted its approach toward Philippine media over the past two decades. During the Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2001-2010) and Benigno Aquino III (2010-2016) administrations, the embassy never responded to journalists directly. At most, it issued "no comments" or cursory statements on certain topics. A veteran journalist of Philippine-China affairs said, "China never answered our calls before, always saying they don't have an official comment or never answering at all." A veteran journalist observed that when Duterte came to power, the embassy changed its approach. Afterwards, "China assigned a media officer who placed all the possible media personnel in a Viber group. Then he started messaging statements to everyone."¹⁴ (Viber is a messaging app similar to Whatsapp or Facebook Messenger.)

The PRC Embassy appears to have learned other embassies' best practices in managing the media. An embassy's media officer releases official statements to journalists, accepts, or rejects, interview invitations, and organizes events for media personnel. This officer's job is to build relationships with Philippine journalists.¹⁵ Favors are traded in implicit ways. The media officer gets the media personnel statements or responses when some major issue comes up. The media officer can also provide interviews to key personnel and invitations to PRC embassy events. The officer and members of the media have also met for informal chats through coffee or lunches in restaurants, creating personal ties.¹⁶ In exchange, the media personnel report what the embassy officer tells them. This can generate tensions among reporters because of a concept called *utang na loob*, a Filipino take on reciprocity and personal debt.

The embassy has also become more sophisticated at cultivating friendly journalists and freezing out unfriendly ones. A journalist who has covered China and the Philippines since Duterte's electoral victory said, "whenever I release a story about Duterte and the South China Sea, I always ask the embassy for a quote. Since 2016 I have sent them an inquiry about six times now, but I never got a response from them."¹⁷ Another journalist remarked, "after sending the message, [they are always left on read]. This has probably happened 16 times between 2016 and 2018."¹⁸ This non-response on the PRC embassy's part seems to be a far more common. In fact, nine out of 10 journalists interviewed for this report got the same non-response from the embassy.

The same journalists report that their experiences with other embassies, particularly Japan, the United States, and Singapore, have been similar. Exclusion and control seem to be common in foreign embassies. For instance, one of the journalists argues, "the [PRC] embassy never does press conferences in any way or form. Usually, we get announcements from them, or some of the people they like get an interview or some sort of scoop. At the U.S. Embassy, they actually like having press conferences, but we don't really get to ask questions."¹⁹ Another journalist says, "they only allot three questions to the press, and they already have an idea of who they want to talk to."²⁰ However, as the journalist argues, "while there are constraints at the U.S. Embassy, at least we get to follow up with the U.S. Embassy officials elsewhere."

Finally, through its ability to allow or constrain travel, the PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs gets to select *who* gets

12 Gutierrez, J. & Stevenson, A. "Maria Ressa, Crusading Journalist, Is Convicted in Philippines Libel Case." *The New York Times*. 14 June 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/14/business/maria-ressa-verdict-philippines-rappler.html>.

13 Buan, L. "After review, SEC upholds revocation of Rappler's registration." *Rappler*, 22 November 2022. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/after-review-sec-upholds-revocation-of-rappler-registration/>.

14 Interview, veteran journalist in a major newspaper, 23 February 2022.

15 Interview, Philippine journalist who works for a foreign newspaper, 2 March 2022.

16 Interview, journalist who has covered China since 2013, 7 March 2022.

17 Interview, journalist, 25 February 2022.

18 Interview, Philippine journalist who works for a foreign newspaper, 2 March 2022.

19 Interview, journalist who has covered China since 2013, 7 March 2022.

20 Interview, Philippine journalist who works for a foreign newspaper, 2 March 2022.

information from within China, rewarding parties that reproduce PRC-preferred points of view. The MFA has some say about which journalists are allowed to visit China. One of the journalists interviewed for this report applied for a visa to cover Duterte’s visit to China in 2016. The journalists submitted all the necessary documents – passports, authorization papers, main office approval – but the [PRC] embassy denied the visa application, stating in writing that the “the media company already has an office in Beijing. This would make the application unnecessary.”²¹

Pro-Duterte Influencers

One final major way pro-PRC narratives spread was through pro-Duterte social media influencers. Though the overwhelming majority of influencers’ comments concerned Duterte or his government, sometimes they commented on PRC activities, often to the benefit of the PRC’s soft power in the Philippines. RJ Nieto, also known as the “Thinking Pinoy,” Sass Rogando Sasot, and Jan Albert Suing are among the pro-Duterte influencers who took an interest in Philippine-China affairs. Nieto and Sasot are two of the most influential, if not the most influential, pro-Duterte influencers on social media, with follower counts in the millions.⁵⁰

Nieto has shared content such as a South China Morning Post on “economic destruction” brought about by the pro-independence movement in Hong Kong, promoting the message that a minority of pro-democracy citizens are being used by the West to sow discord in China. Sasot shared messages hinting that those opposed to Duterte were CIA agents (see figure 1). Suing compared the U.S. and China and argued that the former is only interested in promoting human rights while the PRC is genuinely interested in the Philippines.

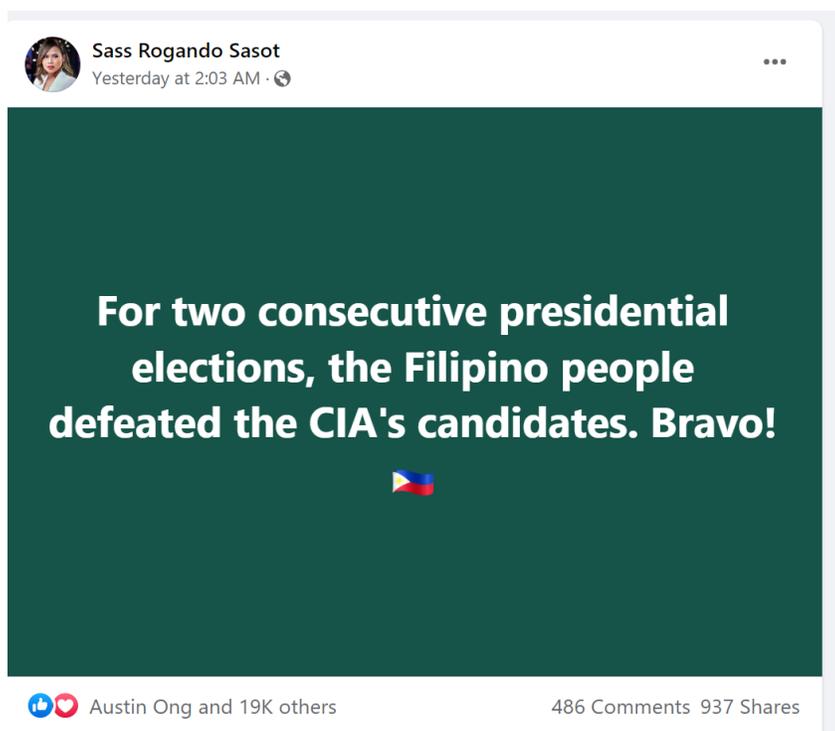


Figure 1 (above): Sasot’s post / Source: <https://www.facebook.com/forthemotherlandph/>

This study did not uncover evidence that these influencers were intentionally cooperating with or acting at the direction of the PRC. This may make them more effective conduits for pro-PRC messaging, given that they only occasionally reference China, and do so as a part of a broader pro-Duterte stance. Disagreements among influencers can also heighten the authenticity of their messaging; some end up disagreeing with the PRC government, some ignore the disagreement, while others blame officials within the Duterte administration. Influencers’ power is limited by strong

²¹ Ibid.

anti-China sentiments among some of their followers.²² In 2019, during a controversy over large PRC-tied investments in online gambling, at a time when online gambling investment was at an all-time high in the Philippines, many of the influencers' social media followers expressed anti-China sentiments. Some of the influencers' tried to calm them down but could not, because of their resentment of China. Some of the influencers had to adapt to their followers.⁵²

MAPPING SOURCES OF PRO-PRC NARRATIVES IN THE FILIPINO CHINESE COMMUNITY

The interaction of the Chinese diaspora in the Philippines with the PRC party-state is complex, with views ranging from pride at China's economic and political rise to disgust at the CCP's authoritarian behavior. This section maps the activities of several particularly vocal pro-PRC actors within this diaspora, whose political mobilization on behalf of PRC interests in the Philippines is readily apparent. Many have economic interests tying them to China, and frequently cooperate to amplify each other's messages in both traditional and social media spaces. Two entities of concern, the Integrated Development Studies Institute and the Philippine-BRICS Strategic Studies, as well as their respective leadership, are discussed below in greater detail as case studies.

Integrated Development Studies Institute (IDSI)

Launched in 2016, the IDSI claims it relies on a "global network of institutions to study and to promote integrated frameworks based on a balance of economic theory, historical realities," and seeks to "ground success in real business and communities, and attempt for common good, culture, and spirituality."²³ The IDSI claims that news networks have been captured by a cabal of oligarchs. During IDSI's early years, the organization did not appear to be well funded. It relied on a free WordPress account to host its website and the administrators used a free Gmail account to send out notices. Moreover, the institute requires journalists, local leaders, and civil society organizations to pay a fee to attend its events.²⁴ The fees can be up to PHP 1000 (US\$20); a significant amount for the average Filipino. IDSI calls itself a center that conducts and publishes research, a strategy of credentialing that signals objectivity and rigorous standards.²⁵ However, the IDSI website features little to no research, and instead provides a plethora of op-eds.

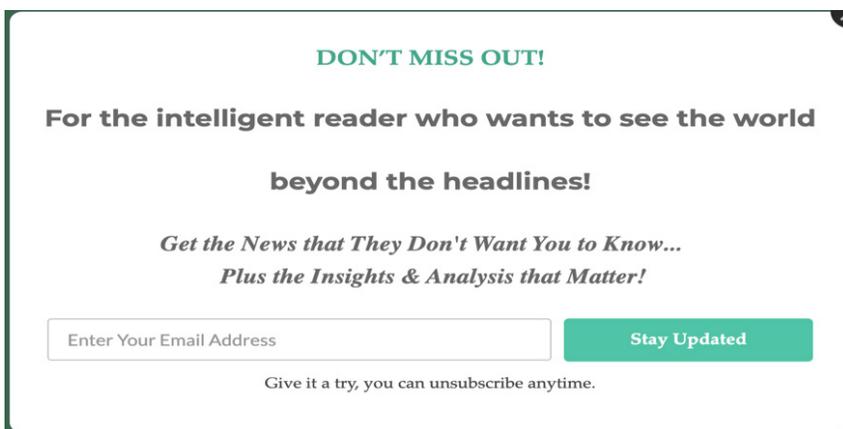


Figure 2 (above): IDSI subscription | Source: <https://idsicenter.com>

²² Author looked at influencers' interaction with followers during 2019 online gambling controversy and the Julian Felipe Reef disputes in 2020.

²³ *Integrated Development Studies Institute*. <https://idsicenter.com/contributors-nook/>.

²⁴ Fieldwork observation and interaction with IDSI members from 2017 to 2019.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

The IDSI draws content from Filipino, Filipino Chinese, and foreign thinkers with backgrounds in business, government, non-profit, and academic.²⁶ Contributors to IDSI have significant influence through their media appearances, social media accounts, and/or op-ed writings. The IDSI website hosts 60 articles published by its thought leaders, analyzing the Russia-Ukraine War, the “real origins” of Covid-19, and U.S. operations in the South China Sea. The IDSI has a Facebook account, which at this writing has 67,000 followers and 37,001 likes; a Twitter account, which has 470 followers,²⁷ and a YouTube account, which has 4,650 subscribers and 111 videos.²⁸ All of these accounts mix propaganda and disinformation with more legitimate content. The YouTube channel features ANC (the ABS-CBN News Channel) interviews with IDSI thinkers and Duterte government officials. The Twitter account posts news by the New York Times, and the IDSI website has links to CNN and other legitimate mainstream networks.

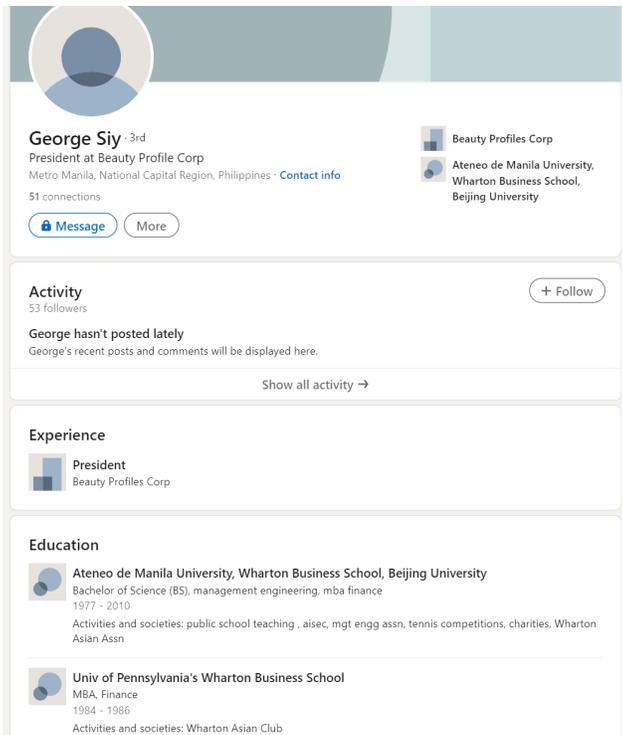


Figure 3 (above: LinkedIn account of George Siy | Source: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/george-siy-b0aa3a18/?originalSubdomain=ph>

The IDSI is led by George Siy, a Filipino Chinese businessman. Siy graduated from Ateneo de Manila University before obtaining degrees from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania and Beijing University (see figure 1).²⁹ Siy is the president of Marie France Philippines, the largest cosmetic and plastic surgery company in the country. He is also one of the major shareholders in Convergence Reality & Development Corporation, a real estate developer that specializes in low-cost housing.³⁰ Siy is also one of the founders of the Anvil Business Club, formerly the Association of Young Filipino Chinese Entrepreneurs, which was founded in 1991 and has grown into a notable Filipino Chinese business organization. Anvil provides services to Filipino Chinese entrepreneurs who are just getting started.³¹ Siy’s business interests are intertwined with the PRC. Marie France Philippines major shareholders include two firms, New Hold Corporation and Tandem Asia Ltd. New Hold Corporation, that themselves have significant PRC shareholding.³²

26 IDSI lists the following thinkers: George Siy, Dr. Henry Chan, Dr. Mario Ferdinand Pasion, Austin Ong, Jan Albert Suing, Dr. Dan Steinbock, Sass Rogando Sasot, and Dr Mark J. Valencia. See *Integrated Development Studies Institute*. <https://idsicenter.com/contributors-nook/>.

27 *Integrated Development Studies Institute*@idsicenter. Url: <https://twitter.com/idsicenter>.

28 *Integrated Development Studies Institute*@IDSI Center. Url: <https://www.youtube.com/c/IDSIcenter/videos>.

29 “George Siy.” *LinkedIn*. <https://www.linkedin.com/in/george-siy-b0aa3a18/?originalSubdomain=ph>.

30 Interview, Construction Firm CEO, 15 March 2022.

31 Interview, Filipino Chinese member, Advil, 2 May 2022.

32 Marie France, General Information Sheet, *Security Exchange Commission Registration System*. 2017.



Modern Tao Ke - George Siy

Figure 4 (above): Filipino Chinese Video | Source: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=146474946890105>

“
Mas may leverage tayo kapag tayo ay independent.
I'm not saying we should break ties (with the US). Our policy should be for an **independent foreign policy.**
”

George Siy
Head, Integrated Development Studies Institute (IDSI)
February 17, 2020 | Pandesal Forum, Quezon City

PHILIPPINE NEWS AGENCY
WWW.PNA.GOV.PH /PNAGOVPH @PNAGOVPH

Figure 5 (above): George Siy in the state-run Philippine News agency Advert | Source: <https://twitter.com/pnagovph/status/1229805724663828483>

IDSi's successful foray into the Philippine information space can be partly explained by Siy's ability to brand himself. Siy styles himself as a "global thinker," "development expert," and "out of box thinker."³³ On local Filipino Chinese TV, he describes himself as a modern tao ke, a slang term in a major Chinese dialect for boss and out-of-the-box thinker (see figure 4). In print media and on TV shows, Siy's stature amplifies his messages. Siy has consistently argued, at least implicitly, in favor of the Duterte administration's policies, such as an "independent foreign policy" or the "the need to think in global terms in the 21st century" (see figure 5).³⁴ Siy's successful self-promotion helps conceal the pro-PRC biases of his messaging. He has also appeared in several major PRC-based newspapers, such as the China Daily and Global Times.³⁵

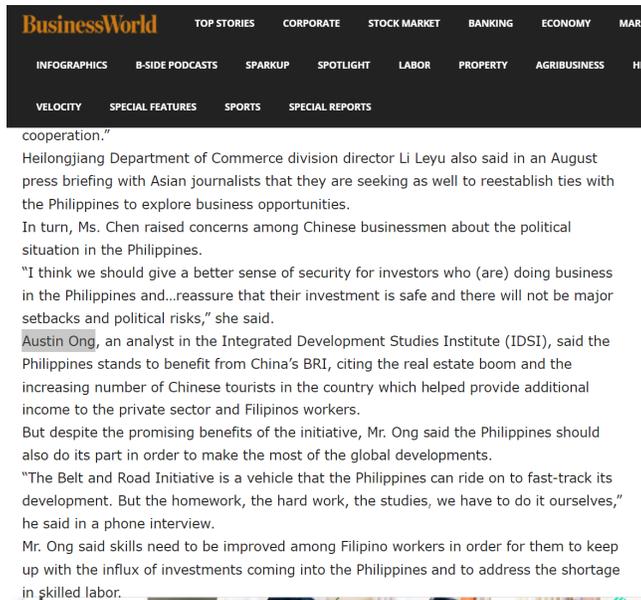


Figure 6 (above): Austin Ong in a BusinessWorld article | Source: <https://www.bworldonline.com/editors-picks/2019/01/20/209826/what-lies-ahead-for-the-philippines-on-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative/>

Austin Ong, IDSi's Filipino Chinese executive director of IDSi, appears to manage IDSi's social media accounts and has styled himself as the "Chinese voice" in the Philippines. He has done this through appearances at public events, using Twitter and Facebook to forward PRC propaganda, and has publicly embraced pro-China messaging. Pro-Duterte social media influencers frequently cite IDSi on China, using its pro-China messaging to attack academics who are critical of the PRC. Businessworld, a reputable business newspaper in the Philippines, has quoted IDSi on numerous occasions (see figure 6).

Under Ong and Siy's leadership, IDSi has also made significant inroads in traditional media, including the Manila Times, the Philippines' oldest newspaper, which is run by an ally of former President Duterte. IDSi runs a weekly column in the Times under the title "New World" (see figure 7).³⁶ Some of IDSi's listed contributors, particularly Jan Albert Suing, Mario Ferdinand Pasion, and Henry Chan, have published articles in it.³⁷

³³ Personal interaction with George Siy, 2017-2018.

³⁴ "George Siy: On rising inflation and interest rates." *ANC*, 3 January 2019. <https://www.facebook.com/ANCClearlyedition/videos/979580978905014/>

³⁵ Sarmiento, P. "Philippines urged to scrap military pacts with US." *China Daily*, 8 August 2022. <https://www.chinadailyhk.com/article/284755>; Jun, X. & Ge, H. "Chinese-Filipino ties still on track." *Global Times*, August 2016. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/201608/1001368>. "Spotlight: Xi's speech on China-ASEAN ties injects vitality into future cooperation." *People's Daily*, 28 November 2020. <http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/1128/c90000-9793567.html>.

³⁶ "Author Dante Klink." *Manila Times*. <https://www.manilatimes.net/author/dante-klink-ang-2nd-president-and-ceo>.

³⁷ *Integrated Development Studies Institute*. <https://idsicenter.com/contributors-nook/>.

TAGS > NEW-WORLDS-THE-IDSI-CORNER

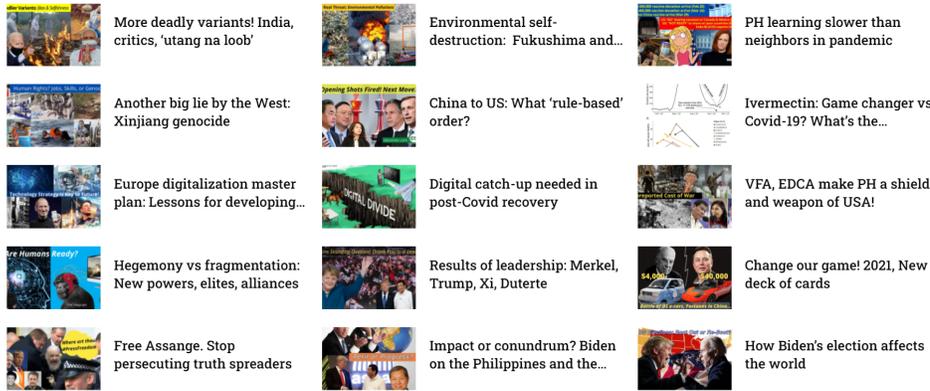


Figure 7 (above): IDSI articles in the Manila Times | Source: <https://www.manilatimes.net/tag/IDSI/>

Philippine-BRICS Strategic Studies (PBSS)



Figure 8 (above): Laurel's radio show in Radyo Pilipinas | Source: <https://twitter.com/hermantiulaurel>

Under Herman Tiu Laurel's leadership (see figure 8), the Philippine-BRICS Strategic Studies is ostensibly "a registered non-profit organization dedicated to promoting global multi-polarity and Philippine leader [sic]." Laurel, a Filipino Chinese who went to Xavier High School, one of the country's elite private schools, was part of the Philippine government during the Corazon Aquino administration. One of Laurel's classmates during their secondary school days said "Herman has always had sympathies for communism, which was illustrated through his role as a mediator with the Communist Party of the Philippines."³⁸ Laurel is regularly quoted by PRC-based newspapers on the enduring friendship between the

38 Zoom interview, Filipino-Chinese doctor, 18 August 2022.

Philippines and China.³⁹ He bought a Goto King restaurant franchise (Goto King is a Philippine fast-food chain), which failed, and was charged with falsifying his citizenship documents⁴⁰ as part of an attempt to run for public office. Laurel has visited China on several occasions. One of those trips was hosted by the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs. From his visits, Laurel argues that he was “able to see personally that China is the real democracy. We [other Filipino and Filipino Chinese delegates, saw] how the [CCP] consults all the political parties, which represent the different Chinese peoples. This is such a stark contrast from the alleged democracy of the Americans, which empowers lobby groups and oligarchs to take charge.”⁴¹

A survey of 11 of his articles published on the PBSS website shows similar themes: U.S. imperialism in Asia and its grand strategy to stop China’s rise, China’s vaccine diplomacy, and Vietnamese imperialism in the South China Sea. PBSS also reprints articles by the PRC state propaganda newspaper Global Times, and in 2021, together with IDSI, repeatedly amplified Global Times’ discredited claims that the Covid-19 pandemic was the result of a conspiracy hatched at a research lab at Fort Detrick, Maryland.⁴² Laurel also hosts a program called GTNR (Global Talk News Radio) on state-owned Radyo Pilipinas, tackling topics similar to those on the PBSS website, but with more focus on Philippine news. GTNR’s Facebook account has 30,000 subscribers, and its YouTube account has 56,000 and its content has been viewed 9 million times. GTNR started in 2014, hosting different speakers on topics related to U.S. freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea and other geopolitical issues.

PRC NARRATIVES IN THE BROADER FILIPINO CHINESE COMMUNITY: COMPLICATIONS AND CHALLENGE

Filipino Chinese groups comprise hundreds of organizations across the country, including business federations, local associations, and community groups. Given the complexity of PRC-Philippines relations, views on the PRC within the community are, unsurprisingly, diverse. Many Filipino Chinese organizations are divided as to how to position themselves in relation to the PRC’s claims regarding a shared ethnic heritage, making self-identification as ethnic Chinese a poor proxy for identifying pro-PRC actors. While key individuals in IDSI and PBSS do seem to meet that definition due to their sustained efforts to disseminate pro-PRC propaganda and move local politics in that direction, this section highlights organizations that reflect this ambiguity and diversity in how Filipino Chinese actors do or do not serve as conduits for pro-PRC views in the Philippines.

Philippine Association for Chinese Studies (PACS). An academic association of teachers and students interested in studying China, it regularly hosts events about the PRC and invites PRC-based professors to take part in lectures and other activities.⁴³ It has also hosted China experts who have expressed concerns about the PRC. The outgoing president of PACS has said, “our organization has always been viewed as pro-China, but many members of PACS do not want to clearly associate with the PRC and PRC-related organizations.”⁴⁴ The organization does not to be caught in the political crossfire and tries to position PACS as pro-Filipino. Austin Ong of IDSI has spent a significant amount of time in PACS, working with members of the organization on several projects.

³⁹ “BRICS cooperation injects vitality into global development, wins worldwide applause.” *People’s Daily* (2022). 27 June 2022. <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/0627/c90000-10115128.html>; “US, Philippine Amboys launch inforwar against good Philippine-China relations: Philippine scholar.” *Global Times*. 29 November 2021. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202111/1240188.shtml>.

⁴⁰ G. R. No. 131778 - January 28, 2000, HERMAN TIU LAUREL, Petitioner, v. THE HONORABLE PRESIDING JUDGE, REGIONAL TRIAL COURT OF MANILA, BRANCH 10, and the COMMISSION ON ELECTIONS.

⁴¹ Personal Communication, 2017-2018.

⁴² Samonte, M. “Now the world cries: Investigate Fort Detrick.” *The Manila Times*. 8 August 2021. <https://www.manilatimes.net/2021/08/08/opinion/columns-now-the-world-cries-investigate-fort-detrick/1810095>; New Worlds. “US biolabs: Detrick vs Wuhan, intel or scientists?” *The Manila Times*. 5 September 2021. <https://www.manilatimes.net/2021/09/05/opinion/columns/us-biolabs-detrick-vs-wuhan-intel-or-scientists/1813552>; Samonte, M. “Fort Detrick mystery resurrects.” *The Manila Times*. 18 July 2021. <https://www.manilatimes.net/2021/07/18/opinion/columns/fort-detrick-mystery-resurrects/1807423>.

⁴³ *Philippine Association for Chinese Studies*, <https://www.pacs.ph/>.

⁴⁴ Interview, Former President, PACS, 26 March 2022.

Kaisa para sa Kaunlaran (KAISA).⁴⁵ This organization aims to integrate Filipino Chinese in Philippine society. KAISA is led by Teresita Ang See, one of the most prominent members of the Filipino Chinese community.⁴⁶ Ang See led KAISA's efforts to mobilize against the China Friendship Bridge in Binondo which, it was feared, would affect the shops and homes of the local Filipino Chinese. This pitted KAISA against the Federation of Filipino Chinese Chambers of Commerce & Industry, Inc, the largest Filipino Chinese business group in the country (discussed below). KAISA convinced the Philippine government and the FFCCCII to move the bridge, saving the homes and shops of the Filipino Chinese families in Binondo.⁴⁷

Federation of Filipino Chinese Chamber of Commerce Inc (FFCCCII). FFCCCII illustrates the complexities of Filipino Chinese elites' ties with China. Comprised of more than 60 Filipino Chinese business groups, it counts among its members a number of prominent Filipino Chinese business oligarchs. These oligarchs' numerous, diversified business interests can sometimes place them at odds with the business and political goals of large PRC-based firms seeking construction contracts and foreign direct investment opportunities in the Philippines. During the administration of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, in the early 2000s, these business elites became the competitors and political opponents of PRC investments.⁴⁸ The behavior of FFCCCII members illustrates that business or ethnic ties alone may be insufficient to induce members of the Filipino Chinese community to act as obvious, public intermediaries for pro-PRC narratives.

Duterte ally Dennis Uy, an upstart businessman from former President Duterte's home island of Mindanao, provides a clear example in this respect. Uy was a Filipino partner in several major deals with PRC-based companies, including one where he partnered with the state-owned enterprise China Telecommunications Company and a Mindanao-based regional telecommunications company named Mislatel. This deal would establish the Philippines' third nationwide mobile carrier, intended to compete against firms controlled by major Philippine oligarchs. The new company, Dito Telecommunity, received loans from PRC-based, as Uy himself did not seem to have sufficient capital to break the existing duopoly.⁴⁹ However, his ties with Duterte gave him the connections to work with China Telecom, and thereby a major opportunity to ascend the Philippine economic ladder.

Limits on the PRC's Outreach

Despite the reach and sophistication of direct and indirect PRC messaging in The Philippines, its impact on public perception remains limited. In 2016, following a ruling by an international court in favor of the Philippines in a dispute with China over maritime boundaries, a survey by Social Weather Stations (SWS) a prominent Philippine research organization, found that only 22 percent of Filipinos had "much trust" in China.⁵⁰ Intense PRC efforts to win over Filipino public opinion during the Duterte presidency appeared to close the gap somewhat in the 2019 edition of the survey, but mistrust of China in the Philippines returned to its previous levels after the arrival of Covid-19 the next year.⁵¹

The PRC faces two important headwinds. First, Filipinos are bombarded by news about the South China Sea – where the Philippines has a long-running territorial dispute with China – and in particular news about the abuses faced by Filipino fishing crews at the hands of PRC-based fishing fleets. Philippine maritime forces have also been threatened and harassed by the PRC navy.

⁴⁵ Ang See, Teresita. "Kaisa, a 30-year old legacy of bridge-building." *Tulay*, 5 September 2017. <https://tulay.ph/2017/09/05/kaisa-a-30-year-legacy-of-bridge-building>.

⁴⁶ She was key in convincing Philippine political elites to crack down on the widespread Filipino Chinese kidnapping in the 1990s. Rogue members of the police force were involved in the kidnapping.

⁴⁷ Robles, Raissa. "We need it like we need a hole in our head': Chinese friendship bridge in Manila not so popular with the locals." *South China Morning Post*. 18 January 2018. <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/2129448/we-need-it-we-need-hole-our-head-chinese-friendship-bridge>.

⁴⁸ Camba, A. "Inter-state relations and state capacity: the rise and fall of Chinese foreign direct investment in the Philippines." Palgrave Communications, 2017, 3(1), 1-19; Camba, A. "Sinews of politics: State grid corporation, investment coalitions, and embeddedness in the Philippines." *Energy Strategy Reviews*, 2021, 35, 100640.

⁴⁹ Camba, A. & Jiang, R. "Beyond Infrastructure: Chinese Capital in the Philippines Under Duterte." *The Diplomat*. 8 April 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/beyond-infrastructure-chinese-capital-in-the-philippines-under-duterte/>

⁵⁰ "Filipinos trust United States much more than China: survey." *Reuters*. 17 October 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-china-poll/filipinos-trust-united-states-much-more-than-china-survey-idUSKCN12IOCM>

⁵¹ Tomacruz, S. "Filipinos' trust in China falls to 'bad' as US keeps 'good' rating." *Rappler*. 21 July 2020. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/filipinos-trust-ratings-china-us-sws-survey-july-2020/>

Second, following a 2016 decision to legalize online gambling in the Philippines, Filipinos have seen the arrival of hundreds of thousands of PRC citizens in major Philippine cities, such as Metro Manila, Cebu City, Subic, Baguio, and Roxas City. The new arrivals come to the Philippines to invest or work for newly founded companies catering to the PRC gambling market, since gambling is illegal in China. The Philippines' decision to permit the gambling represents a potentially lucrative opportunity. Tensions and negative publicity around the online casinos and their workers have frequently featured in headlines, with issues like drunk driving accidents, exploited workers from China committing suicide, and a rise in kidnapping cases.⁵⁵

Nonetheless, surveys also indicate the limits of existing survey methods, since they may not have controlled for certain factors in order to tease out the actual impact of PRC activities. Interviews with journalists indicated that they are familiar with pro-China actors such as Austin Ong, and do not typically seek them out for comment on China due to perceptions of bias.⁵⁶ While messaging by obvious proxies may be ineffective, some journalists interviewed suggested that the growing presence of indirect propaganda in the form of TikTok videos showcasing PRC cities or Chinese culture may be making more headway. As a journalist from Rappler said, "those TikTok videos are effective because it makes you think – they did a great job uplifting poverty and actually getting their population to experience a better life. Yet the problem is, they have this aggressive government that has become a problem to the Philippines."⁵⁷

RECOMMENDATIONS

Improving technical, linguistic, conceptual, and evidential capacity

Several journalists remarked that a key problem is their limited capacity to understand China. This can be summed up in technical, linguistic, conceptual, and evidential terms.

"Technical" refers to understanding development finance, international business, and political economy. Limited technical capacity makes it difficult to understand concepts such as loans, concessionary and non-concessionary loans, equity, securities, LIBOR rates, and others. Knowledge of these concepts helps journalists assess PRC and Western financing's impact on development. For instance, PRC-linked projects in the Philippines are often referred to as investments whether they are, in fact, investments, foreign aid, or development finance.

"Linguistic," i.e., fluency in Chinese, is not common among Philippine journalists. The PRC releases information first in Chinese. Journalists often opt for brief stints at language schools or use Google Translate. This lack of fluency hinders their ability to better understand the PRC. "Conceptual" refers to the PRC's own history, institutional models, and modes of governance. There are major debates on the PRC's own practices and capacity that require further training. Training in the PRC's political economy, history, or domestic politics will help journalists understand the PRC's inner workings. And finally, "evidential" pertains to journalists' ability to assess the information and analysis about China.

If journalists themselves do not have training, they end up relying on academics who may or may not have the necessary expertise to properly explain the technicalities, elaborate on concepts, translate Chinese, or assess the evidence. Journalists themselves may also have trouble discerning which academics are credible enough to assess a specific issue. The practice has often been to interview academics in their network, or those who are willing to give their time to the media, or by inviting people to write opinion columns. Journalists also interview government officials who, in theory, have the expertise to explain the technicalities, such as those in the Department of Finance, Central Bank of the Philippines, and Department of Trade and Industry. However, state officials are constrained by bureaucratic procedures or by their departments from fully speaking out.

Continuing education is a key part of any career, and offering courses that focus on technical, conceptual, and evidential capacities is never a bad idea. These workshops can be funded by IRI or other institutions; (2) create grants that give Philippine journalists the time and opportunity to learn Chinese; and (3) form

working groups with key Philippine and foreign-based academics who journalists can tap into when necessary.

Open more opportunities to work together.

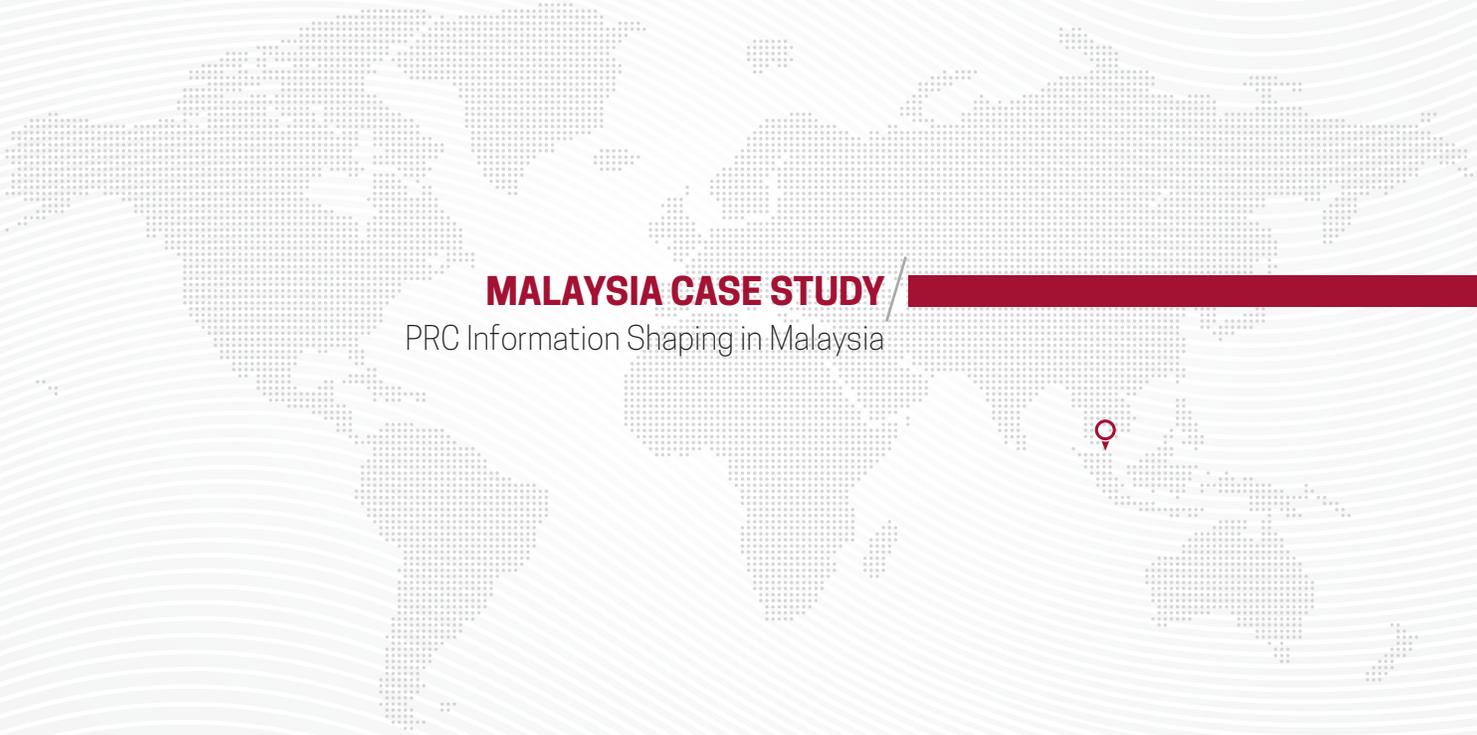
Several journalists remarked that combating disinformation by the PRC requires all the legitimate networks to work together. However, competition among journalists limits cooperation. Before the Covid pandemic, journalists in the Philippines competed for online views by not sharing the news of other media companies. When content farms create disinformation, media companies use a lot of their bandwidth to fact check these stories.

In response, Filipino editors and journalists have started to work together sharing or tweeting each other's responses or stories about disinformation. Prior to the 2022 elections, such collective action rarely occurred. By magnifying the stories of their competitors, journalists can collectively protect the media as an institution. A journalist remarked that working together "has preserved each other's energies to focus on working on new stories. It takes a good amount of time and energy to 'fact check' specific false news and helping each other limits the redundancy."⁵²

Invest in a translation service

One of the biggest gripes of Philippine media personnel is the inability to directly translate Chinese into English. Several of the people interviewed for this report brought up the idea that a translation service, which can be funded by the U.S. government or an international organization, will be an invaluable resource. This would allow journalists to better identify PRC propaganda.

⁵² Interview, Filipino journalist working for a foreign newspaper, 26 February 2022.



MALAYSIA CASE STUDY

PRC Information Shaping in Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

This report provides an overview of information operations by the People's Republic of China (PRC) in Malaysia, focusing on Malaysia both as a target of such activity but also as an amplifier of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) information shaping efforts. The Chinese diaspora's unique position in Malaysian society gives it greater agency than any other diaspora in the world. This paper explores the various ways by which the CCP seeks to build ties with Malaysia through Chinese diaspora networks and the more subtle use of soft power engagement. China's strategic choice to downplay its role in these relationships allows for the two countries' cooperation in spite of the PRC's growing influence in geopolitics that affect Malaysia (such as the South China Sea territorial dispute, Xinjiang, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Belt and Road Initiative).

This report has four main sections:

- The Malaysian context
- Manipulation efforts
- Disruptive factors and caveats
- Contentious issues between the PRC and Malaysia

PRC attempts to influence and manipulate information in Malaysia rely heavily on the country's large and influential Chinese diaspora. On the whole, CCP organs and the PRC embassy have been loathe to be seen directly interfering in the information sphere, choosing instead an indirect, more long-term approach that taps into the dependencies created by business ties, relationships, and exchange opportunities. As in many other countries, the CCP has leveraged advertising revenue — offers thereof and the potential for denial — to push private Chinese-language media into avoiding certain controversial topics while towing Beijing's line on core issues.

While the segment of the Malaysian elite that received tertiary education in Taiwan tends to be more skeptical of Beijing's intentions, a new strategy that encouraging young Malaysians to study in the PRC, as well as latent skepticism toward the West stemming from Malaysia's colonial experience, may shift Malaysian Chinese community perceptions in more pro-PRC directions.

The CCP has also attempted to distance the central PRC state from recent controversial projects in Malaysia linked to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), protecting China's overall reputation in Malaysia by shifting the blame to poor implementation by provincial-level or corporate actors within China.

Methodology

The data in this report was collected from a combination of media monitoring in Malaysia and interviews with three key experts on PRC activity in the country. Media monitoring involved the collection of news coverage on the PRC and PRC-related issues for the past four years, with the goal of mapping out and analyzing how local media outlets covered the PRC. The monitoring focused on English-, Malay- and Chinese-language media that focused on controversial issues around the PRC.

Locating experts who were willing to discuss China's interface efforts with Malaysia was challenging, as many declined to be interviewed. This may bias some of the information collected but may also speak to the success the PRC has already enjoyed in shaping discussion. The three experts who agreed to be interviewed for this report did so on condition of anonymity. They are:

- A Chinese studies scholar (hereinafter referred to as "Chinese studies scholar") who works very closely with PRC academics and other state-linked entities.¹

¹ The interview with this scholar started well but became stiff once more sensitive questions were raised about controversial issues featuring China. At this

- A veteran journalist (“Chinese-language journalist”) with more than 20 years’ experience with Chinese-language media.
- A researcher (“think tank researcher”) with a local think tank. The think tank works on monitoring public opinion regarding political issues including China.

The findings are derived from these two data sources. Much of the data presented in this report is built upon word of mouth and non-public information available to the individuals interviewed. Where there is a degree of uncertainty around a conclusion, the degree and reason for the uncertainty is noted.

The Malaysian context

This section provides context on Malaysia, more specifically its unique Chinese diaspora demographic, which has enabled unique interactions with China. This section looks at the position of Malaysians of Chinese descent (hereinafter referred to as Chinese Malaysians) in Malaysian society, their influence in politics, on the economy, and in information dissemination. It then takes a closer look at the Chinese-language media footprint in the country, both local and CCP-linked.

The Chinese diaspora in Malaysia

Malaysia has the world’s largest Chinese diaspora by percentage of population, at 22.8 percent.² This gives the community significant political value and self-determination outside of mainstream political spaces. The Chinese demographic in Malaysia, while a minority, is large enough to influence local politics and economics. As such, the PRC’s engagement with them is very different from that with Chinese diasporas in other countries.

The Chinese community in Malaysia is large enough to make possible a degree of insularity, with some members of the community obtaining their education fully in Chinese (and some even unable to speak Bahasa Melayu, the national language). This pluralistic society is the result of Malaysia’s National Economic Policy (NEP) first put in place in 1971.³ The goal of the NEP was to reduce social inequalities that stemmed from pre-colonial segregation, which left the majority Malay population with limited economic opportunities. The NEP used an aggressive affirmative action model that provided preferential treatment to the Malay population at the expense of the economically-dominant Chinese.

In response, Chinese Malaysian communities turned inward, focused on advancing with minimal government assistance (or through limited means, via the Malaysian Chinese Association [MCA], a party in the ruling coalition charged with the welfare of the Chinese community). One focal point was Chinese-centered education systems. Initially this took place through government-run Chinese language schools, over time shifting to independent Chinese schools, as pathways into local tertiary education became more limited for Chinese Malaysian students. As a result, some students obtained their formal education almost exclusively in Chinese, living in their strong Chinese-speaking communities and having little or poor understanding of Malay and English. These students would often complete their studies in Taiwan or the PRC, which left them with strong affinities towards one or the other. The implications of this are explored later in this report.

The suppression of the Malaysian Chinese community may have influenced the way the PRC state interacts with them. Though they are in the minority, these communities enjoy significant economic privilege and are almost self-sufficient. Up to the present day, some Malay ethno-nationalists blame the Chinese Malaysian community for the lack of economic opportunities for Malays, often employing the common slur of *pendatang* (immigrant) followed up with calls to go home. Any direct engagement between the PRC and local Chinese communities would draw public backlash,

point, the scholar took a non-committal objective view of these issues and seemed to be dismissive of Western narratives, while presenting a skeptical approach to PRC narratives. As such, some of the comments from this scholar will feature qualifiers to highlight this.

² “Current Population Estimates, Malaysia, 2022.” *Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022* https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemeByCat&cat=155&bul_id=dTZXanV6UUdyJEQ0SHNW0VhpSXNMUT09&menu_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWV5ZklWdzQ4TihUUT09.

³ Koon, Heng Pek. “The New Economic Policy and the Chinese Community in Peninsular Malaysia.” *The Developing Economies*, 1997, 35 (3): 262–92. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-1049.1997.tb00848.x>.

invite scrutiny, and bring unwanted attention to both sides.

All interviewees for this report were quick to indicate that there is no divided loyalty among Malaysian Chinese and that their devotion to Malaysia was never in question. This came up when the issue of Malaysian sovereignty was raised, especially in the context of the South China Sea. This may be a protective response developed in the context of widespread racism, suspicion, and even violence towards the community by the Malay majority. It is also a valid point in the sense that – as interviewees pointed out – there is no love lost between Beijing and large swathes of the Malaysian Chinese community.

According to the Chinese studies scholar, Malaysian Chinese who have gone through Chinese language education are more likely to be more sympathetic to the PRC and its narratives. This is largely because of the cultural affinity created by greater exposure to PRC culture and media, whose presentation of historical and political questions is carefully curated by the PRC state apparatus. Those who receive education in other languages, most notably English, tend to be more open to alternative perspectives.

Many Chinese Malaysians have pursued college education in Taiwan, making them the largest foreign study group in Taiwan, growing yearly from the 1980s until the 2010s.⁴ More recently, many Chinese Malaysians have instead chosen to attend college in the PRC because the number of scholarships offered there has increased. This has created a generational divide within the Chinese Malaysian population: Millennials and Gen-Xers who bore witness to the Tiananmen Square massacre and other issues, giving them a more skeptical perspective on the PRC, against Baby Boomers and post-millennials, who tend to be more pro-PRC (the former having romantic views about the country from the colonial era, and the latter having greater cultural affinity due to media consumption). During an interview, the think tank researcher indicated that generational differences are the primary factor in predicting differences in pro-PRC beliefs among Malaysian Chinese.

There is also geographical diversity within the views of Malaysian Chinese toward the PRC. There are three distinct sub-communities, the largest from Peninsular Malaysia, with two separate communities from the Bornean states of Sabah and Sarawak. The latter two are known for their strong communal solidarity and what some interviewees characterized as less hostility toward the PRC.

Both geographical and generational differences have a fundamental effect on how individuals in the Chinese Malaysian community consume news related to the PRC. Older generations tend to be less skeptical and media literate. Despite strong intra-communal relations within the Chinese community in Malaysia, it is far from monolithic or homogenous, differences that are reflected in the messaging and opinion-shaping strategies employed by the PRC (especially on the issues of Taiwan and Hong Kong).

Chinese-language media in Malaysia

Chinese-language media in Malaysia comes in two general forms: local Chinese-language media (either private or state operated) and PRC state-linked media. The state-linked outlets have a handful of bureaus in Malaysia, mainly Phoenix TV and Xinhua News Agency. These bureaus focus on issues of interest to the PRC or PRC nationals living in Malaysia.

As for why Chinese state media makes no attempt to target on Malaysian audiences, the Chinese studies scholar indicated that Malaysians do not trust state-backed media, be it international or domestic. Malaysia used to have a strong government media presence and a heavily restricted private media environment. This has made Malaysians wary of state media.

Local Chinese-language media produce a number of news programs on Malaysian state radio and television networks, but these are often small and function as part of larger newsrooms. Privately-owned Chinese-language media outlets,

⁴ Yeoh, E. K.-K., Lee, C., & Yemo, Z. "Malaysia-Taiwan Relations and Taiwan's New Southbound Policy." *MJIR | Malaysian Journal of International Relations*, 2018. 6(1), Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.22452/mjir.vol6no1.3>

on the other hand, are a large industry with significant influence in the Chinese Malaysian community. Seventy percent of Chinese-language media outlets are owned by the Tiong family, headed by Tiong Hiew King (张晓卿), a timber magnate from the Bornean state of Sarawak.⁵ Through his holding company, Media Chinese International Limited (MCIL), the family's holdings include popular newspapers such as Sin Chew Daily, Nanyang Siang Pau, China Press and Guang Ming Daily. The media outlets owned by MCIL have a pro-PRC slant; the Tiong family has a strong business relationship with China and China-linked businesses, and coverage in their media properties often avoid controversial issues related to the PRC, or primarily present pro-PRC viewpoints.⁶

Other Chinese-language media, such as the Oriental Daily, offer more balanced reporting on the PRC. However, even these outlets do not stray far from the dominant MCIL narratives that form the mainstream of opinion within the Malaysian Chinese community. Another influential media outlet is the English-language daily The Star. It is owned by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), a Malaysian political party, and has a strong readership among English-speaking Chinese Malaysians in urban areas. The MCA has strong ties to the CCP (explored later in this report) and often runs pro-PRC tourism campaigns in its online and print editions.

According to the Chinese-language journalist consulted for this report, local Chinese-language media has a limited influence on the Chinese Malaysian community on controversial issues related to China. The Chinese-language journalist argues that local Chinese-language media do not emphasize issues such as Xinjiang because they are not important to readers. Contentious issues such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the South China Sea do draw coverage, though most of this is reprinted stories from newswire services such as Reuters and AFP instead of original reporting. This might be because of resource constraints, but it could also be interpreted as a way to shield the media outlet from backlash from the PRC embassy.

Manipulation efforts

This section looks at the many ways in which the PRC state (or its proxies) has sought to influence the information environment in Malaysia via the Chinese Malaysian community. The first part addresses China's direct efforts and the second explores its more indirect methods to expand its discourse power in Malaysia.

Direct efforts

Direct efforts refer to the actions of so-called "cybertroopers", a term used in Malaysia to refer to clandestine political agents who infiltrate and distort public discourse in digital spaces, and troll farms, organized cybertrooper cells targeting specific communities. These types of activity often take place on social media (Facebook and Twitter) and online forums, often focused around news articles on contentious issues.

Malaysia is no stranger to cybertrooper influence; they impact digital political spaces and are widely reported on.⁷ Cybertroopers are used by a wide range of actors in Malaysia political landscape on many issues having nothing to do with China or Sino-Malaysian ties. However, media monitoring conducted for this report reveals that these activities do appear to shape the discourse around issues related to the PRC, which suggests the use of similar tactics by actors employed or influenced by the PRC.

Monitoring suggests that cybertroopers mainly seek to influence or manipulate the comment sections on social media posts featuring news articles on the PRC, trying to show strong support for pro-PRC narratives or attack anything perceived as anti-PRC. Xinjiang appears to be the main battleground, where cybertroopers regularly posted points refuting Western claims (e.g., genocide) and providing counterpoint evidence of their own. From discussions

⁵ Liew, Jia Teng. "Cover Story: Sarawak's Long-Standing Business Rivalry." *The Edge Markets*. 4 May 2017. <http://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/cover-story-sarawaks-long-standing-business-rivalry>.

⁶ Han, BC, and Benjamin Loh. "Malaysia: Beijing's Global Media Influence 2022 Country Report." *Freedom House*, 2022. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/malaysia/beijings-global-media-influence/2022>.

⁷ Hopkins, Julian. "Cybertroopers and Tea Parties: Government Use of the Internet in Malaysia." *Asian Journal of Communication*, 2022, 24 (1): 5–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2013.851721>. See also Bradshaw, Samantha, Hannah Bailey, and Philip N Howard. "Industrialized Disinformation: 2020 Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation." *Oxford Internet Institute*, 2021. <https://demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2021/02/CyberTroop-Report20-Draft9.pdf>.

with journalists and from media monitoring, it seems that Malaysians and local media outlets often ignore these cybertroopers and bots.

The Chinese-studies scholar and the think tank researcher interviewed for this report provided insight on the cybertroopers, the troll farms in Malaysia that employ them, and their links to the PRC state. According to them, the farms are managed by Malaysian political parties, partially funded or supported by the PRC, and employ mainly Chinese Malaysian or PRC national students studying in Malaysia, who are paid per post and work on a part-time basis. The farms focus their attacks primarily on Taiwan and Hong Kong, and periodically attempt to influence Malaysian political spaces. It should be noted that the journalist's and researcher's assessments are based entirely on word of mouth, though this is considered common knowledge among the political elite in Malaysia.

The interviewees think these direct attempts at manipulation have a limited impact on Malaysian discourse, as they are often easily identified and dismissed. Though PRC attempts at manipulating the discourse in this fashion should be seen as a failure, it is likely because the party-state has focused its efforts elsewhere with more success.

Influencing discourse through proxies

Other studies of PRC influence have noted that the party-state has sought to expand its influence globally by building ties with, and in some cases, co-opting, ethnic Chinese organizations through its United Front Work Department (UFWD). Chinese associations in Malaysia also seek to build ties with individuals and organizations inside the PRC, but the experts consulted for this report said these relationships are often established without the PRC party-state's direct involvement. Moreover, the experts characterized such ties as non-political in nature. In contrast to existing work on the UFWD⁸ that highlights its main goal of exporting China's politics to other countries, the UFWD's role in Malaysian association discourse is seemingly absent.⁹

Indirect engagement

The PRC's main approach to influencing the information space in Malaysia is through indirect engagement with local stakeholders. This is done through proxy entities such as state-linked media, PRC-based companies, and provincial governments and associations, to represent the CCP (the goal being to avoid implicating the CCP apparatus). These entities engage with the Malaysian government, politicians, businesses, political elites in closed door meetings, informal communication arrangements (e.g., WhatsApp groups with embassy staff) and non-official channels of discussion (e.g., closed-door luncheons, which will be addressed later in this paper).

Concerns shared between Malaysia and the PRC are often brought up during these interactions. This includes shared history and culture, civilization, and more. This is seen as a better way to subtly influence Malaysians into being more sympathetic toward the PRC.

Additionally, PRC-based firms operating in Malaysia that hire Malaysians are used as a soft extension of state power, as these employees are often exposed to pro-PRC views and narratives. PRC-based firms are also careful in selecting local partners to work with, often conducting deep background checks to find out if anyone in the organization has ever said anything negative about the PRC. This also serves to gauge employees' receptivity to pro-PRC narratives.

According to the think tank researcher, before the 2018 election, the MCA party often held events with Chinese-speaking representatives of NGOs and think tanks in which the MCA invited representatives from the PRC embassy. These events gave embassy officials insight into tensions on the ground and a better understanding of political

⁸ Schrader, Matt. "Chinese Assistance Centers' Grow United Front Work Department Global Presence." *China Brief*, 19 January 2019. <https://jamestown.org/program/chinese-assistance-centers-grow-united-front-work-department-global-presence/>; Bowe, Alexander. "China's Overseas United Front Work: Background and Implications for the United States." Staff Research Report. US-China *Economic and Security Review Commission*, 2018. https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China%27s%20Overseas%20United%20Front%20Work%20-%20Background%20and%20Implications%20for%20US%20final_0.pdf.

⁹ Editor's note: Despite this conclusion by the author and experts consulted, many of the bilateral relationships described in the remainder of this section appear to have hallmarks of UFWD-mediated ties between the party-state and Chinese diaspora communities elsewhere in the world.

discourse in Malaysia. After the 2018 election, the embassy expanded its approach to include more political parties and a wider range of CSOs and think tanks.

After significant upheaval in Malaysian politics in 2020, PRC embassy personnel became more focused on making sure they had links to each political party. In the wake of the incident, Malaysia was in a state of political flux. Political coalitions and alignments were fluid, unstable, and unpredictable. In this environment, the embassy has broadened its contacts, seeking to build ties with any and all parties that might potentially form a government.

The PRC Embassy also invites journalists and other stakeholders on public issues (NGO, business representatives, politicians, etc.) to closed door luncheons at the compound. These are held regularly, especially with editors from the Chinese-language press, in order to share information, exchange views, and get the lay of the land. This is a way for the embassy to keep abreast of current issues in the Chinese Malaysian community. Despite the fact that these luncheons are closed-door events and journalists are in attendance, the latter do not dare to leak anything from these meetings for fear of not being invited to future luncheons and compromising their relationship with the embassy.

A common tactic that has been employed in other countries is to invite persons of interest to the PRC. According to the experts, politicians from the coalition government were invited to the PRC before the Covid-19 lockdowns began. Trips to Xinjiang were also organized for local media, Muslim NGOs, and political leaders, with Malaysian journalists reporting on the trips often adopting the PRC's preferred narratives. Two local media that were invited included Sinar Harian and Sin Chew Daily.

Finally, in instances where the embassy felt the PRC was not well presented, officials would reach out to local media or NGOs to discuss their concerns. In more egregious cases, the embassy threatened to pull advertising for broadcast media to force them to change their editorial stance. The Chinese-language journalist noted that Astro Awani, a local cable news channel, often broadcasts pro-PRC news using content provided by the embassy. This is due to the outlet's heavy reliance on advertising from companies with strong business ties to China.

Even without a direct threat to advertising, many local media outlets are reluctant to publish negative news about the PRC. Extreme PRC responses to negative media reporting in other countries have not gone unnoticed inside Malaysia, and local outlets may be reluctant to place their business or bilateral trading ties at risk for the sake of a story.

Information manipulation techniques and tactics

All the experts interviewed believe that the CCP characterizes its efforts in the information space to be "information sharing, correction or dissemination" rather than manipulation, and emphasize that the CCP believes it is the only one able to provide the "right" information to correct "misconceptions" by outsiders.

The PRC embassy's main strategy in shaping information on controversial issues to Malaysians is information rectification through indirect means. It uses this approach with government and political institutions as well as with the Malaysian grassroots. For the former, for example, the embassy holds closed-door meetings with Muslim NGOs who have been especially vocal about their views on Xinjiang to provide "clarification" on the situation, to varying degrees of success. Despite the Western narratives about Xinjiang, some Malaysian Muslim NGOs have proven open to talks with PRC officials, as they are often skeptical of Western perspectives. (Although others, such as the prominent Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia have been criticized by the PRC embassy for trying to raise awareness of China's persecution of its Muslim minorities.) The think tank scholar adds that the PRC has stepped up its efforts to engage with the Muslim world through Malaysian academic and economic spaces.

The PRC embassy regularly sends out "correction information" to local media in the hopes that they will publish or broadcast it for Chinese Malaysians. The embassy also often deflects stories about graft and corruption in BRI projects, especially under the administration of former prime minister Najib Razak, who is serving a jail sentence for misuse of

billions of dollars' worth of state funds.¹⁰ The embassy has portrayed these stories as isolated incidents driven by unscrupulous private PRC-based business entities and beyond the CCP's ability to control. In essence, the rhetoric draws a distinction between private enterprises and provincial state enterprises (which are seen as separate from the central government) as a way to shield the CCP from such criticism.

PRC ambassadors typically take the lead in directly engaging the Malaysian public and have been especially vocal in recent years. Ambassadors often publish opinion pieces on issues of concern between China and Malaysia that are picked up by local news media or social media posts. Different ambassadors bring certain personality traits and styles; Bai Tian was very much focused on public engagement through op-eds with local media and focused mainly on BRI while the current ambassador, Ouyang Yujing, is more focused on the South China Sea.

While ambassadors have been the public-facing aspect of PRC information manipulation in Malaysia, they are arguably less successful than the CCP's main vector of influence, so-called "*guanxi*" networks within the Malaysian Chinese diaspora.

Guanxi networks

China engages with Chinese-speaking Malaysians through the concept of "*guanxi*", a Chinese word that describes a strong reciprocal relationship with someone, strong enough that it can involve moral obligations and favors. *Guanxi* is often used to describe relationships of a mutually beneficial business or political nature.

Guanxi networks here refers primarily to business ties between the Chinese diaspora in Malaysia and the PRC mediated through perceptions of common ethnic kinhood. The mutually reciprocal nature of *guanxi* may foster a sense of detachment from Chinese Malaysians, who view their relationships as "just business", allowing them to overlook other potential areas of friction in Malaysia's ties with China.

These *guanxi* relationships have been in place for decades and operate through two main pathways: Chinese associations and Chambers of Commerce.

Chinese associations

There are generally three kinds of Chinese associations in Malaysia:

- Geographic associations based on place of birth (of ancestors in China before migration)
- Surname associations based on family name (e.g., Khoo clan, Wong clan, etc.)
- Economic associations based on profession (e.g., Selangor & Kuala Lumpur Chinese Coffee & Tea Shopkeepers' Association, The Selangor and Federal Territory Chinese Printing Presses Association, etc.)

These associations are often linked to a host association back in China. For Malaysian Chinese in associations linked to geography, descendants can be given honorary titles for being "friendly" or by building important economic links between their ancestral province and Malaysia. Business owners often have high positions in associations in Malaysia as well as in their host associations in China. These ties are important to people in Chinese-speaking communities and not much known outside of them.

According to the Chinese studies scholar and think tank researcher, these associations are useful to the PRC, and used to spread "correct" information from China. PRC state media like Xinhua, Phoenix TV, or the embassy often have connections with leaders of these associations. The PRC state often encourages these leaders to share information with their followers and association members. Association leaders may cultivate this relationship in the spirit of *guanxi* to foster future potential business relationships with China, and the associations serve as a medium for information dissemination with the potential for economic gains. If someone from the association wishes to do business with China, they can reach out to the embassy/host associations via these connections.

¹⁰ Latiff, Rozanna. "Jailed former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak loses final bid to review graft conviction", *Reuters*, 21 March 2023. <https://www.cnb.com/2023/03/31/jailed-former-malaysian-prime-minister-najib-razak-loses-final-bid-to-review-graft-conviction.html>

China engages with Malaysia through these associations by providing aid or supporting publicly. During the Covid pandemic, China donated large quantities of face masks through these associations. The PRC state also invited dignitaries from China to interact with the associations, strengthening bonds and giving the association more legitimacy as key partners.

The associations are careful not to anger China. In one incident, the think tank researcher said, the youth wing of one of the Malaysian Chinese associations organized an event to discuss the Hong Kong democracy protests. Its parent association was pressured by the PRC embassy to shut the event down.

Chambers of Commerce

Malaysia has two major chambers of commerce affiliated with its ethnic Chinese minority, the Associated Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry of Malaysia (ACCCIM) and the Malaysia-China Chamber of Commerce (MCCC). These serve as the primary negotiators for Malaysia with the PRC embassy. They compete with each other: MCCC has stronger ties to the Malaysian government and is seen as more diverse, with non-Chinese representation, while ACCCIM's leaders and membership are all drawn from Malaysia's Chinese minority.

The PRC embassy relies on the ACCCIM if it wishes to utilize only relationships in the Malaysian Chinese diaspora, and the MCCC if it wants to work with Malays who are sympathetic to China. The embassy is satisfied with this setup, as the two organizations are constantly fighting for the PRC's favor and are seen as primary gatekeepers for Malaysia's lucrative business and economic sectors.

According to the Chinese-language journalist and think tank researcher, these Chambers of Commerce are important links in the procurement and negotiation of large projects in Malaysia with involvement from PRC-based companies and institutions, where they often negotiate contracts on behalf of the Malaysian government. Some examples of these projects include projects to expand Kuala Lumpur's Mass Rapid Transit lines, the Tun Razak Exchange international finance center project, Forest City, and many other infrastructure developments such as housing and highway projects.

For both associations and Chambers of Commerce, annual dinners are an important tool used to gather major political figures and other influential individuals. It is also used to reinforce ties with external parties, particularly the PRC embassy and Malaysian politicians and officials. The dinners often receive generous coverage in local media.

These *guanxi* networks appear to be the main locus for information manipulation in Malaysia. China does not appear particularly interested in engaging with non-Chinese speaking Malaysians as the large Chinese Malaysian community has significant political and economic clout. While this could lead on to conclude that China has undue influence on the Chinese diaspora in Malaysia, this diaspora is not a homogenous group, and has characteristics that may provide resilience against some of these efforts.

Factors disrupting PRC influence in the Malaysian diaspora

This section provides contextual information necessary to understand the limitations of PRC efforts to indirectly manipulate Malaysia's information environment through the Malaysian Chinese community. Two important factors limiting this ability are, 1) the lingering influence of Taiwan among Chinese Malaysians, and 2) geopolitical tension between Malaysia and China, particularly with regards to boundary disputes in the South China Sea.

Taiwan's influence

During the 1970s and the 1990s given the relatively few available slots at local universities, many Chinese Malaysian parents sent their children to study in Taiwan. Many of these young Malaysians built strong affinities with the democratic island-nation.

At present, many of these Taiwanese university graduates (the think tank researcher estimates their number to be about 100,000) are in positions of influence in Malaysia, especially in the media. They have maintained strong ties with Taiwan and are generally not on friendly terms with the PRC embassy. Many of them are university lecturers or successful businesspeople and can shape opinion in the Malaysian Chinese community. Graduates of Taiwanese universities also tend to have an affinity for Western values. Therefore, one of the PRC embassy's main goals is to work with these groups to counter their narratives.

The local Chinese-language media in particular employs many graduates from Taiwanese universities. When Han Kuo-yu, a China-friendly Taiwanese mayor (and future presidential candidate) visited Malaysia in 2019, local Chinese-language media focused on his wife, a prominent journalist with strong ties to Malaysian Chinese media, rather than the candidate. The PRC embassy expressed discontent about this apparent decision to snub Han in favor of his wife. Although pro-Taiwan Malaysians constitute a minority among the Chinese Malaysian community, experts interviewed indicated that many are in positions where they have significant influence on the rest of the Malaysian Chinese diaspora. According to the Chinese studies scholar, most Chinese Malaysians are pro-PRC; only those who have lived in Taiwan or Hong Kong tend to be sympathetic to their struggles.

Recently, more Chinese Malaysians have been sending their children to schools in the PRC instead of Taiwan. As China has started offering more scholarships and educational opportunities younger Chinese Malaysians are growing up with more exposure to PRC narratives and culture. As the Chinese-language journalist put it, China expects Chinese Malaysians to shift toward the PRC in the next decade or so, as the graduates from Taiwanese universities retire and leave their influential positions. Like other forms of indirect engagement, this long tail approach to shifting attitudes towards China could pay dividends in the coming years.

Shifting the blame to provincial and private entities

One noteworthy shift appears to be attempts to distance, or dissociate, the central PRC leadership from controversial projects in Malaysia, shifting the blame onto PRC provincial government and companies tied to the PRC state. BRI-linked projects¹¹ including a high-speed rail (HSR) link between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, and a rail line linking Malaysia's east coast with the capital have proven controversial. Both projects were initiated under former Prime Minister Najib Razak's administration, and were perceived to be the prime minister signing Malaysia up for expensive projects with China in return for bailouts of disastrous debts incurred by Razak's administration in the 1MDB corruption scandal. The HSR was subsequently canceled by a new Malaysian government, while the east coast rail link broke ground in May 2023 under significantly renegotiated financial terms.

The PRC state has attempted to distance itself from the PRC-based companies involved in these scandal-plagued projects, in an attempt to keep the public conversation focused on the need for strong bilateral ties while highlighting the need to improve on-the-ground project implementation. Experts interviewed for this project offer contradictory views on this shifting PRC strategy, saying on the one hand that the PRC has no ambitions to export its politics and values, and instead is focused on developing relationships for mutual economic benefit. This contradicts the same experts highlighting that China is playing the long game and using more soft approaches to shift public opinion in their favor by normalizing PRC-centric values through exposure. The complexities of these expressed views themselves highlight the contentious state of play in the PRC's efforts to shape the information environment in Malaysia.

¹¹ Zainuddin, Alifah. "What Happened To China's BRI Projects in Malaysia?" *The Diplomat*, 5 October 2021. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/what-happened-to-chinas-bri-projects-in-malaysia/>.

Contentious issues between the PRC and Malaysia

The Chinese Malaysian experts interviewed for this project, no matter how sympathetic they are to the PRC on other issues, were adamant about their loyalty to Malaysia on issues of national sovereignty like the South China Sea. This can result in complex beliefs that verge on self-contradiction: the Chinese studies scholar, for example, stated that they did not consider the PRC's behavior in the South China Sea – where it has attempted to assert its territorial claims against Malaysia and other states by force – a violation of China's traditionally stated policy of non-interference in the affairs of foreign countries. Rather, the scholar believes, the PRC's behavior is a re-articulation of its sovereignty, based on the history of what China believes to be its own national territory.

While respectful, Malaysia's engagement with the PRC on the South China Sea is not without controversies: "Abominable", a US-produced animated movie about a yeti's journey from Shanghai to his family's home in the Himalayan Mountains, was banned from theaters in Malaysia for featuring a map that endorsed China's territorial claims in the South China Sea over Malaysia's.¹² Additionally, Chinese-language media and PRC state media have not engaged with the Malaysian public often, except for former PRC ambassador Bai Tian, who wrote several op-eds attempting to justify the PRC's desire to increase its influence in the South China Sea.

Malaysia is not immune to ethnic nationalism. Many among the dominant Malay Muslim majority feel they are "tolerating" the presence of non-Malay ethnic groups like Chinese and Indian Malaysians. During British rule, each of these ethnic groups was segregated based on economic function (Malays were kept in low-wage positions as farmers and fishermen, Chinese Malaysians were primarily business owners, and Indian Malaysians were divided into plantation workers or professionals). After Malaysia gained independence from the UK in 1957, these ethnic divides were not properly addressed, and the Malay community continued to deal with high poverty rates, leading to deadly race riots in 1969. Since then, Malaysia has implemented a wide range of affirmative action policies that provide significant economic advantages to the Malay community.

Fifty years later, the Malay community still struggles with poverty, while ethnic divides have persisted. Some political parties have played into this using divisive racial rhetoric. Some from the Malay community describe non-Malays as "pendatang," or immigrants, who should "return home" to their ancestors' countries (even though many such Malaysians are descended from people who arrived in Malaysia several centuries ago). Suspicions of dual loyalty to the PRC by the Chinese Malaysian community are common among the dominant Malay majority.

Due to these sensitivities, Chinese Malaysians and local Chinese Malaysian associations are very careful to provide a clear stance on the South China Sea: unwavering support for Malaysia, and no words of support for the PRC, regardless of how that influences their relationship with China.

On other controversies and disputes, the situation is more complicated. Chinese-language media outlets in Malaysia devote very little coverage to Xinjiang – a territory in western China where the PRC state is persecuting Muslim minority peoples in ways that international tribunals have ruled to be genocidal.¹³ The Chinese-language journalist attributes this to a lack of interest among Chinese Malaysians about Xinjiang (most Chinese Malaysians are not Muslim). The PRC's policies towards Hong Kong and Taiwan are of greater concern for Malaysian Chinese. The community is divided in its views of the PRC's efforts to snuff out democracy in both territories, making this issue an important point for CCP engagement as it tries to influence Malaysian discourse.

¹² Kiefer, Halle. "Malaysia the Latest Country to Ban Abominable Over Controversial Map." *Vulture*. 20 October 2019. <https://www.vulture.com/2019/10/malaysia-bans-abominable-over-chinas-nine-dash-line-map.html>.

¹³ Kanat, Omer. "December 9 Is Uyghur Genocide Recognition Day". *The Diplomat*. 8 December 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/12/december-9-is-uyghur-genocide-recognition-day/>.

Conclusion

Direct, obvious interference in Malaysia's information environment is precluded by distrust on the part of many Malays both of Malaysian state media and of China's intentions. The PRC therefore tends to avoid direct, obvious interference in Malaysia's information environment, instead using subtle and informal means of gathering information, getting clarification behind closed doors, and negotiating discreetly. Malaysia's status as a postcolonial state can create skepticism of the United States and other Western countries that open the door to these more indirect approaches.

PRC manipulation of Malaysia's information environment is distinguished from other countries by the role of Malaysia's uniquely large Malaysian Chinese minority population. Despite being a minority, this community is large enough to wield considerable economic and political clout, making it a target for PRC manipulation. The PRC state seeks to engage leaders of Malaysian Chinese associations and chambers of commerce through so-called "*guanxi*" networks, to take advantage of these individuals gatekeeper role between PRC and Malaysian interests. However, due to persistent tensions between Chinese Malaysians and the majority Malay population, the PRC has been careful in its engagement, instead focusing on indirect forms of engagement.

Support for the PRC is not unanimous in the Chinese Malaysian community, partly because many opinion leaders were educated in Taiwan and are sympathetic to its cause. The PRC is trying to change that by offering more opportunities for Malaysians in China. Overall, the Chinese Malaysian community has strong ties to the PRC, especially with those who speak Mandarin. While some actors resist CCP narratives, the current momentum suggests that the equilibrium may slowly shifting toward the PRC.



KAZAKHSTAN CASE STUDY /



INTRODUCTION

Kazakhstan, the largest country west of the People's Republic of China, is a Central Asian country of significant strategic importance to Beijing. Historically, the rise and fall of many Chinese dynasties was often connected to their success in managing relations with empires and tribes to the far west of their empire, on the Central Asian land mass. Several Chinese dynasties were driven to bankruptcy by never-ending wars with region's nomadic groups. The PRC views Central Asia as part of its geographic periphery, placing it second in importance only to domestic interests. These factors make it crucial for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to exert the greatest degree of control possible in a land mass which has historically been connected to the sustainability of regime leadership.

In the modern day, this notion of regime security is intimately connected with control of the PRC Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region's (historically known as East Turkestan) 3,320 kilometer-long border with Central Asian states. The party-state is committed to suppressing any regional elements who would support or sympathize with any challenge to the PRC's control over Xinjiang, which it has carried out through brutal suppression of the region's ethnic Turkic people, most particularly the Uyghur ethnic group. About half a million of Kazakhstan's 19 million residents are ethnic Turkic people (Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and others) who moved from Xinjiang to Kazakhstan.¹ Early in Kazakhstan's post-USSR independent existence, the PRC secured a bilateral border treaty wherein Kazakhstan acknowledged the legitimacy of its rule over Xinjiang, while also securing working agreements that Kazakhstan would surveil and deport Uyghur activists in the name of so-called "anti-terrorism." These agreements were later formalized in 2001 at the founding of the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization, of which Kazakhstan is a member.

As part of this effort to secure its far western flanks, the PRC relied on an elite-centric approach to building influence in Kazakhstan during the early stages of bilateral relations, efforts which met with a great deal of success on the Kazakh side. When Kazakhstan broke away from the Soviet Union, the PRC was perceived as a useful foreign partner to facilitate its transition to an independent country. This was a strong preference among nationalistic conservative Kazakhs, who rejected Russia's colonial legacy while fearing a Western liberalism they saw as incompatible with Kazakh cultural values.

The PRC put perception-shaping at the heart of this outreach to elites, attempting to provide the Kazakhstan with a new national identity as a key link in a revived Silk Road linking Asia with Europe. Selected images and stories of the ancient Silk Road were meant not only to paint a harmonious picture of bilateral relations, but to also empower Kazakhstan. A new Silk Road, as framed by the PRC, would return Kazakhstan to its glorious days as center of the world. This belief resonates strongly with Kazakh elites who believe strongly in expanding bilateral relations with the PRC and has played an important role in facilitating deeper economic cooperation.

This belief has had important real-world consequences. Pro-PRC members of the Kazakh elite point to the purported success of economic cooperation with the PRC as evidence of their good judgement. The Kazakh leadership has developed the PRC's role as an alternative buyer of the country's abundant natural resources, to lessen Russia's traditional leverage in that sphere. This has reduced the Kazakhstan's freedom to maneuver in its dealings with the PRC, particularly its ability to advocate for the approximately 1.5 million ethnic Kazakhs who live in the PRC. In recent years the Kazakh leadership has been constrained in its ability to welcome those fleeing repression in Xinjiang and to voice its concerns about their poor treatment there.

Of course, there are some Kazakh elites whose favorable views of China are founded on independent assessments and their own decisions. But at the same time, the PRC is working to promote its preferred narratives and positions in Kazakhstan. China's tactics center around building as many channels as possible for pro-PRC narratives, and its success in this respect has reduced Kazakh elites' autonomy vis a vis the PRC. Kazakhstan is an excellent example of how the PRC builds holistic influence in a country across economic, political, media, and education

¹ "On the demographic situation for January-December 2022" *Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, 9 February 2023, <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/stat/press/news/details/503041?lang=ru>; Sadovskaya, Yelena. "Ethnically diverse diasporas and migrations from China to Central Asia in the twenty-first century" in "China's Rise and the Chinese Overseas", *Routledge*, 2017. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315231952-10/ethnically-diverse-diasporas-migrations-china-central-asia-twenty-first-century-yelena-sadovskaya>.

spheres, using its success in each sphere to reinforce narratives that then create further opportunities.

Political Influence

At the onset of diplomatic relations between Kazakhstan and the PRC, many of China's senior leaders, including then-President Jiang Zemin, were Russian-speaking graduates of Soviet universities. This familiarity may have contributed to the deftness of their handling of bilateral ties with Kazakhstan; Jiang crafted a bilateral narrative which is still in use today. With minimal official contacts between the Central Asian republics and the PRC during the Soviet Union (especially during the Sino-Soviet split), the PRC decided to emphasize the Silk Road as a narrative foundation for bilateral relations, rather than the region's shared experience with Leninist regimes. The Silk Road narrative, it turned out, was welcomed by the Kazakh side.

When then-PRC Premier Li Peng toured Central Asia in April 1994, he briefed Central Asian leaders of his vision for a revival of the Silk Road, bringing with him hundreds of heads of PRC state-owned enterprises, or SOEs.² Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, the country's first post-independence president, supported talk of a new Silk Road. In 2001 he laid out his vision for Kazakhstan in a book titled "Epicenter of the World" and in 2005, in "The Heart of Eurasia", he linked modern Kazakhstan to its glory days during the Silk Road era.³ In 2015 he named the Kazakh national economic development strategy "Bright Road" in a nod to the Silk Road.⁴

Working with the PRC was a convenient way for Kazakhstan to transition to independence. It also reinforced the new leadership's legitimacy. Between 1992 and 2014, Nazarbayev visited the PRC at least 14 times, each time signing more bilateral agreements regarding economics, security, transport, energy, railway, and culture.⁵ The gradual process of absorbing the Silk Road narrative into Kazakh political discourse came alongside the country's expanding cooperation with the PRC. High-level talks between Nazarbayev and PRC heads of state have cemented the bilateral political narrative and resulted in important treaties and agreements.

In 2000, the two countries signed a border treaty which provided Kazakhstan's formal recognition of PRC sovereignty over Xinjiang (East Turkestan).⁶ In 2005, the China and Kazakhstan signed their first strategic partnership, outlining areas of future cooperation.⁷ In 2022, the two countries agreed on a permanent comprehensive strategic partnership, advancing bilateral cooperation and expanding the scope of joint projects.⁸ The 2022 agreement expanded security cooperation to high-level foreign policy decision-making, with Kazakhstan offering assurances that it will not join any alliances, organizations, or sign any international treaties which could harm the sovereignty and security of the PRC.

These treaties and agreements also commit the Kazakh government to deeper cooperation with the PRC on Uyghur-related affairs, verbal support for the PRC on Taiwan in the global arena, and to arrest activists opposed to China's expanding economic influence in Kazakhstan.⁹ Kazakhstan and the PRC have also formed joint government-to-

² Yau, Niva. "China's Pursuit of Power in Central Asia" *OSCE Academy*, December 2020. https://osce-academy.net/upload/file/Niva_brief.pdf. "Sun Zhuangzhi: Comments on China's Central Asia Diplomacy in 2013 [孙壮志：点评2013年中国的中亚外交]" *Xinhua*, 25 December 2023, http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2013-12/25/c_125910905_2.htm.

³ Nazarbayev, Nursultan. *Epicenter of Peace*. 2001. <https://elbasy.kz/sites/default/files/pagefiles/2019-06/26b1b2e5da1fbc98711b6bbf70063711.pdf>. Nazarbayev, Nursultan. *Heart of Eurasia*. 2005. <https://elbasy.kz/sites/default/files/pagefiles/2019-06/55580a981f8f90e5430cff4d846d7361.pdf>.

⁴ "«Nurly Zhol - The Path to the Future» - Kazakhstan will successfully pass through global trials" *Zakon*, 20 April 2015, https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=39542707&pos=4;-45#pos=4;-45.

⁵ "Kazakhstanis are showing increasing interest in China" *China Internet Information Center*, 2 September 2014, http://russian.china.org.cn/exclusive/txt/2014-09/02/content_33396702.htm.

⁶ "Joint Communiqué of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Kazakhstan on the Comprehensive Settlement of the Border Question between the Two Countries [中华人民共和国和哈萨克斯坦共和国关于两国边界问题获得全面解决的联合公报]" *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, 7 November 2000, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/yz_676205/1206_676500/1207_676512/2000011/t20001107_9291992.shtml.

⁷ "China-Kazakhstan Joint Statement on Establishing and Developing Strategic Partnership (full text) [中哈关于建立和发展战略伙伴关系的联合声明（全文）]" *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, 4 July 2005, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/yz_676205/1206_676500/1207_676512/200507/t20050704_9292000.shtml.

⁸ "Joint Statement on the 30th Anniversary of the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Kazakhstan [中华人民共和国和哈萨克斯坦共和国建交30周年联合声明]" *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, 15 September 2022, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/yz_676205/1206_676500/xgxw_676506/202209/t20220915_10766226.shtml.

⁹ "Kazakhstan Firmly Committed to 'One China' Policy on Taiwan, Says Foreign Ministry's Spokesperson" *The Astana Times*, 4 August 2022, <https://astanatimes.com/2022/08/kazakhstan-supports-one-china-policy-on-taiwan-says-foreign-ministrys-spokesperson/>; "Kazakh police detain dozens of people at anti-Chinese rallies" *Reuters*, 21 September 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/orup-kazakhstan-china-protests-detentio-idRUKBN1W60A3-ORUTP>; "«Against the power of Nazarbayev» and «against the expansion of China.» Rally day" *Azattyk*, 27 March 2021, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-opposition-rally-almaty-regions/31172593.html>.

government cooperation committees overseeing 13 areas of bilateral cooperation, far more than any other Central Asian country (the next closest, Uzbekistan, has five).¹⁰

Apart from working closely with the leadership in Astana, the PRC also operates through Kazakhstan's political parties. The ruling party, Amanat (known as Nur Otan prior to April 2022), has held power since 1999 and has had an official partnership with the CCP since 2009.^{11 12} This cooperation at the party level is a channel for the PRC to assert its views and influence as a priority foreign partner for Kazakhstan.¹³ Government exchanges and visits to the PRC, particularly those of the cooperation committees, focus on project implementation. Those involving members of the Kazakh Amanat party are geared toward influencing Kazakhstan's policy choices and exporting PRC norms and practices. For example, as part of a September 2015 party-to-party cooperation visit, Amanat members visiting Beijing were taken on a tour of ChinaSo, a state-run search engine, to learn about how to use the internet to "combat corruption."¹⁴ (Corruption crackdowns in China are often used as tools to ensure party members' rigorous compliance with CCP orthodoxy.)

The PRC also maintains close relations with non-ruling parties. The People's Party of Kazakhstan is a later iteration of the Soviet Kazakh Communist Party.¹⁵ Despite being a non-ruling party, vastly unpopular with voters, and a political target of the ruling party, delegations from the People's Party of Kazakhstan have spent time with high-level CCP members.¹⁶ Leaders of the People's Party of Kazakhstan have praised CCP economic successes and policies, especially in the party's official media arm. (see media section below)

However, human rights violations toward ethnic Kazakhs, along with other Turkic ethnic groups in Xinjiang, have created widespread unease among Kazakh political elites. In addition, the Kazakh public is increasingly suspicious of PRC-fueled corruption in the Kazakh ruling elite and upset over the arrival of workers from China. These sentiments sparked a wave of nationwide protests between 2016 and 2019, opposing the expansion of PRC-linked economic projects and the sale of Kazakh land to foreigners, because locals fear the buyers will be from China.¹⁷ Like its neighbor Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan faces a divide between its elites and the public because of the latter's perception of PRC-fueled corruption

10 Niva Yau (2020), "Operational Reality of the Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia" in *China's Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia: Ambitions, Risks, and Realities*, OSCE Academy.

11 "NDP «Nur Otan» and the Communist Party of China signed a Memorandum of Cooperation" *Zakon*, 22 June 2009, https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=30432520&pos=5:-48#pos=5:-48; "The CCP delegation attended the 12th National Congress of the Kazakhstan «Light of the Motherland» People's Democratic Party [中共代表团出席哈萨克斯坦“祖国之光”人民民主党第12次全国代表大会]" *Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Republic of Kazakhstan*, 16 May 2009, http://kz.china-embassy.gov.cn/zhgx/zxdt/200905/t20090516_1348560.htm.

12 Amanat still acts as Kazakhstan's ruling party despite the fact that Kazakhstan's current president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, resigned from the party to become an independent in April 2022.

13 "Jia Qinglin Meets with Kazakhstan «Light of the Motherland» People's Democratic Party Delegation [贾庆林会见哈萨克斯坦«祖国之光»人民民主党代表团]" *The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China*, 25 May 2011, http://www.gov.cn/jhdh/2011-05/25/content_1870938.htm; "The friendly delegation of the Communist Party of China introduced the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee to the political parties of Kazakhstan [中共友好代表团向哈萨克斯坦政党介绍十八届三中全会情况]" *CPC News*, 19 December 2013, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2013/1219/c368480-23888780.html>; "Xi Jinping meets with guests from Kazakhstan [习近平会见哈萨克斯坦客人]" *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, 23 June 2009, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/yz_676205/t1206_676500/xqxw_676506/200906/t20090623_9291642.shtml; "Zhao Leji met with the Director of the General Office of the President of Kazakhstan and the First Vice Chairman of the People's Democratic Party of the «Light of the Motherland» [赵乐际会见哈萨克斯坦总统办公厅主任和“祖国之光”人民民主党第一副主席]" *Communist Party Member Network*, 3 July 2013, <https://news.12371.cn/2013/07/03/ARTI1372865477993241.shtml>; "Liu Yunshan met with the delegation of the People's Democratic Party of Kazakhstan's «Light of the Motherland» [刘云山会见哈萨克斯坦«祖国之光»人民民主党代表团]" *CCTV*, 29 November 2011, <http://news.cntv.cn/china/20111129/113235.shtml>.

14 "Kazakhstan's «Light of the Motherland» party delegation visits China to search [哈萨克斯坦“祖国之光”党代表团访问中国搜索]" *Quancha*, 21 September 2015, https://www.guancha.cn/TMT/2015_09_21_335040.shtml.

15 "The Communist Party of Kazakhstan was liquidated by a court decision" *Nur.KZ*, 4 September 2015, <https://www.nur.kz/politics/kazakhstan/878575-kommunisticheskuyu-partiyu-kazakhstan/>.

16 "Le Zheng, Deputy Secretary-General of the Municipal Party Committee, met with Ahmettkov, Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, and his entourage [市委副秘书长乐正会见哈萨克斯坦共产党中央书记阿赫梅特科夫一行]" *Municipal Foreign Affairs Office Information Provision*, 16 June 2015, http://fao.sz.gov.cn/ydmh/xxgk/tpxw/content/post_77062.html; "Kazakhstan Communist People's Party Cadres Delegation Visits Hunan, Caring for Grassroots Party Building [哈萨克斯坦共产党干部考察团访湘 关心基层党建]" *Office of Foreign Affairs Commission of CPC Hunan Provincial Committee*, 15 June 2015, http://wqb.hunan.gov.cn/wqb/xxgk/gzdt/zwdt/ws/201506/t20150615_3396199.html; "A delegation of cadres from the Communist Party of Kazakhstan visited the college for exchange [哈萨克斯坦共产党干部考察团到学院访问交流]" *China Executive Leadership Academy*, 9 January 2020, https://www.celaj.gov.cn/collegejournalism/info_itemid_81997.html; "Akhmetekov, Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, visited our school [哈萨克斯坦共产党中央书记阿赫梅特科夫访问我校]" *Beijing Foreign Studies University*, 9 April 2017, <https://news.bfsu.edu.cn/archives/260861>; "Communists of Kazakhstan and China held a meeting in the Majilis" *KazInform*, 10 June 2016, https://www.inform.kz/ru/kommunisty-kazahstana-i-kitaya-proveli-vstrechu-v-mazhilise_a2913250; "Head of the KNPC V. Kosarev met with the leadership of the CPC Central Committee" *KazInform*, 1 April 2013, https://www.inform.kz/ru/glava-knpk-v-kosarev-vstretilsya-s-rukovodstvom-ck-kpk_a2546863.

17 Putz, Catherine. "Kazakhstan Bans Sale of Agricultural Lands to Foreigners" *The Diplomat*, 18 May 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/kazakhstan-bans-sale-of-agricultural-lands-to-foreigners/>; "Dozens protest against Chinese influence in Kazakhstan" *Reuters*, 4 September 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kazakhstan-china-protests-idUSKCN1VP1B0>.

among the former.¹⁸

The Kazakh government has also found itself caught between growing Kazakh-centric nationalism, one which values ethnic Kazakh people, their culture and language, and its inability to advocate on behalf of the Kazakh diaspora in China, as well as a recent wave of ethnically Kazakh arrivals from the PRC, driven over the border by the PRC's mistreatment of Turkic ethnic minorities. Even the elites are frustrated by the leadership's inability to voice its concerns to the PRC. Recognizing this, in 2019 the Kazakh government sentenced Kazakh sinologist Konstantin Syroezhkin to 10 years in prison for spying for the PRC, in a move meant to communicate official displeasure with those who lobby for the PRC.¹⁹ Syroezhkin played a vital role in pushing for Kazakh silence on Xinjiang-related issues. Syroezhkin was also charged with giving confidential documents to PRC intelligence and lobbying for China on border issues while he worked for Tokayev, who was then the prime minister.²⁰

PRC Messaging Strategies Targeting Elites and the Public

As the relationship between the two countries have changed, so have the tactics the PRC uses to pursue narrative influence in Kazakhstan. Wide acceptance of the Silk Road narrative in Kazakh political discourse has created room for the PRC to use public pressure against recalcitrant Kazakh elites. PRC ambassadors in Kazakhstan now play a more active role in public messaging. In 2016, at a press conference, then-Ambassador Zhang Hanhui criticized what he saw as the Kazakh government's inability to provide PRC citizens with visas in a timely fashion. Zhang asked the Kazakh government, "do you have any idea who you are dealing with?" He then listed PRC "contributions" to the bilateral relationship, which went viral in Kazakhstan. The PRC appeared to believe that its goodwill merited favors in the form of a special visa regime for PRC nationals, and that public pressure could push the Kazakh government to agree.

In 2018, Zhang Hanhui's successor, Zhang Xiao, arrived in Astana and took steps to make sure his remarks would be well covered by Kazakh media. Zhang opened the embassy's first social media accounts, which have since amassed 552 followers on Facebook, 3,031 followers on Twitter, and 2,125 followers on Instagram.²¹ Zhang also runs a personal Facebook page with 3,062 followers.²² The content on these platforms changes and can be separated into two phases: 2019 to 2020, and 2021 to the present.

In the first phase, content focused extensively on anti-American ideology, dismissing anti-China sentiments in Kazakhstan as foreign provocation, and propaganda about PRC successes, all written in an aggressive manner. Zhang's anti-American posts include accusations that the United States fabricates human rights violations in Xinjiang, that American democracy is broken, states that former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Kazakhstan to try to harm Kazakhstan-PRC relations, and more.²³ During critical events, such as a 2019 wave of nation-wide anti-China protests in Kazakhstan, he held press conferences denouncing the protests as influenced by "foreign forces."²⁴ Local media reacted negatively to Zhang's public statements, with one outlet writing that "from the first day of his appointment in Kazakhstan, Zhang Xiao reacts aggressively to any criticism about

¹⁸ Yau, Niva. "How corruption in Kyrgyzstan put Chinese investments at risk" *South China Morning Post*, 17 October 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3105669/how-corruption-kyrgyzstan-put-chinese-investments-risk>.

¹⁹ "Konstantin Syroezhkin, convicted of treason, was deprived of Kazakhstan's citizenship" *KazInform*, 15 October 2019, https://www.inform.kz/ru/osuzhdennogo-za-gosizmenu-konstantina-syroezhkina-lishili-grazhdanstva-kazahstana_a3575483.

²⁰ «The trump card is in the hands of Elbasy.» Experts - about Syroezhkin's sentence" *Azattyq*, 11 October 2019, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-syroezhkin-sentence-charges-of-treason/30210306.html>.

²¹ Facebook profile of Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Kazakhstan: <https://www.facebook.com/ChinaEmbKazakhstan/>; Twitter profile of Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Kazakhstan: <https://twitter.com/ChinaEmbKazakh>; Instagram profile of Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Kazakhstan: <https://www.instagram.com/chinaembkazakh/?hl=en>.

²² Facebook profile of Ambassador of the People's Republic of China in Kazakhstan: <https://www.facebook.com/ChinaEmbKazakhstan/>

²³ Zhang Xiao, "Summit for Democracy or Summit for Divide?" *Facebook*, 12 December 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/ChinaAmbassadorKazakh/posts/pfbid0SjSVky3WH6xuZqNhL9cmALrkYkoUphC62Rr1BLvMsZ4wCuQVco124nHLiD9MFrdTl>; Zhang Xiao, "U.S. State Department Accusation of China Genocide Based on Misuse of Data and Baseless Allegations by Far-Right Ideologist" *Facebook*, 28 February 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/ChinaAmbassadorKazakh/posts/pfbid0Q3F4WldUD4jyYAVMGY461EJX63XU4LcRb6J7h7rnsPwYjTil45bhKHUJcJGj2kZGXl>; Zhang Xiao, "Yesterday Beijing imposed sanctions against Mike Pompeo", *Facebook*, 21 January 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/ChinaAmbassadorKazakh/posts/pfbid02xqHkjmiooUQAffCixZT3xE7LVpD8Mdy372RWDVGZglXamRitR5cZU6C5mWKhAyKNI>.

²⁴ "The Chinese Ambassador to Kazakhstan commented on rallies against Chinese expansion" *Vlast*, 4 September 2019, <https://vlast.kz/novosti/35104-posol-knr-v-kazahstane-prokomentiroval-mitingi-protiv-kitajskoj-ekspansii.html>.

China.”²⁵ Another wrote that “emotional posts are often published in the official social media accounts of the PRC Embassy in Kazakhstan by Zhang,” adding that the accounts block users who leave critical comments.²⁶

Zhang’s active social media presence has made him a recognizable name in Kazakhstan, unlike previous PRC ambassadors, and increased local journalists’ appetite for news about the PRC, sometimes with unintended consequences. In spring 2020, for example, Zhang was summoned by the Kazakh Foreign Ministry after a local journalist did a story about articles appearing on websites in China claiming that “modern-day Kazakhstan is historically part of the PRC.”²⁷

Since the Kazakh Foreign Ministry communicated its wishes to not have PRC issues spotlighted in Kazakh public discourse, Zhang’s tone has clearly softened, with provocative statements replaced primarily with posts describing successes of the PRC and of bilateral relations.²⁸ Only in a few particularly high-profile cases has the ambassador commented on global issues - for example, former U.S. Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan in 2022. A new PRC consul general who arrived in Almaty in 2021 has continued this positive, calm tone on social media.

25 “About Chinese diplomacy in Kazakhstan”, *CAA Network*, 15 April 2020, <https://www.caa-network.org/archives/19565>.

26 “«Criticizes others, but blocks those who criticize him” *Azattyq*, 24 March 2020, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-china-twitter/30505678.html>.

27 «Trivial episode.» The reaction of the Chinese ambassador to Nur-Sultan’s note” *Azattyq*, 18 April 2020, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/press-review-kazakhstan-china-diplomatic-note-reaction/30562518.html>.

28 Zhang Xiao, “Continue the tradition of Sino-Kazakh relations and discover new possibilities” *Facebook*, 13 September 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/ChinaAmbassadorKazakh/posts/pfbid0WYQ6LZ6F1CaTeb1tUunELFsMxPnTc3Lze5RjNuGScGeMh6LjiUs8bN8LDiooiWR3I>; Zhang Xiao, “On Tuesday, Member of the State Council, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi held a press conference here together with Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan Mukhtar Tleuberdi. *Facebook*, 8 June 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/ChinaAmbassadorKazakh/posts/pfbid0up1SNIghCarHKkw48WPcBPLgl6zNo8CQHSTsr1Swk96W7jS21TsivGmT4MA6Phf9I>; Zhang Xiao, “China is taking real action to create a community with a common destiny for mankind - Kazakh expert A. Chukin” *Facebook*, 15 September 2022, “<https://www.facebook.com/ChinaAmbassadorKazakh/posts/pfbid02wVK8z4qjwkCHukPyEk6Q3MwEYfsCLuU62gGn58G3CfTSUvXfuEK5EvpjGsv7p2NEI>.”

Zhang Xiao, “The other day, in an exclusive interview with Xinhua, Deputy Director of the State Institution «Library of the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan - Elbasy» Timur Shaimergerenov said that China was one of the first countries in the world to recognize the state sovereignty of the Republic of Kazakhstan.” *Facebook*, 4 January 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/ChinaAmbassadorKazakh/posts/pfbid0372a8GnKz4pbNBFesjTDRsCooAuaRxorGkwgnvEir1DDptWTnJGbrigKV5rKcWNYZl>.

Economic Influence on the Information Space

Tying Perceptions to the Bottom Line

The PRC has been flexible and responsive to Kazakh requests on economic issues. The PRC is clearly conscious that continued growth in the bilateral economic relationship is the foundation of its influence in Astana. From 1992 to 2013, bilateral trade between China and Kazakhstan grew steadily, from \$US368 million in 1992 to \$3.3 billion in 2003 and \$28.5 billion in 2013.²⁹ Kazakhstan imports a variety of consumer products from the PRC, but between 50 percent to 80 percent of its total exports to the PRC are low-grade, unprocessed crude oil.³⁰ The importance of crude oil, a product sensitive to economic changes, made bilateral trade relations unsustainable from Kazakhstan's point of view.

In 2014, China's slowest economic growth in 24 years drastically reduced the amount of oil the PRC imported from Kazakhstan. Oil exports from Kazakhstan to the PRC, which rose steadily from 45,000 tons in 1997 to 11.98 million tons in 2013, fell sharply to 5.68 million tons in 2014 followed by 3.23 million tons in 2016.³¹ By 2016, bilateral trade across all categories of goods reached a rock bottom of \$13 billion, with imports from the PRC worth double Kazakhstan's exports to the PRC.³²

As a reaction to this, in 2014 Kazakhstan suggested 79 economic projects where investment from the PRC side could diversify trade between the two countries, to make it less reliant on the ups and downs of the market for crude.³³ All of the projects would require the PRC to transfer advanced industrial technology to Kazakhstan. In 2019, as bilateral trade grew back to a pre-crisis level of \$21 billion, the PRC approved 56 of the proposed projects, only 11 of which were in the oil and gas sector.³⁴ Those projects that did pertain to oil and gas were aimed at modernizing processing capacity in Kazakhstan. Examples range from a polypropylene powder production unit in Pavlodar, to a recycling center in Turkestan, to an oil refinery in Shymkent. Two others, a polypropylene factory in Atyrau and an industrial explosives plant in Karaganda, will produce products Kazakhstan currently has to import from the PRC.

In almost all of these new economic projects, the bilateral model is BOT, or Build-Operate-Transfer. This means that PRC-based companies do not own and often do not even have a claim on long-term profits from the factories.³⁵ PRC-based companies build a factory (complete with the advanced technology that Kazakhstan does not possess), train Kazakh workers, then transfer the production. One exception was a uranium deal Kazakhstan closed with the PRC after 15 years of negotiation. In 2021, Kazakhstan sold 49 percent of two of its largest uranium deposits to the PRC, with a condition that the PRC must build a high tech nuclear rod factory in east Kazakhstan.³⁶ Unlike pure BOT transactions, the deal included a condition that the factory must sell 200 tons per year of Kazakh-produced rods to the PRC for 20 years.

The above suggests that the PRC is willing to meet economic needs from allied countries, in this case Kazakhstan, in order to maintain good relations. It suggests that, in light of other interests, the PRC is willing to forgo maximum profits,

²⁹ Yau, Niva. "Tracing the Chinese Footprints in Kazakhstan's Oil and Gas Industry" *The Diplomat*, 12 December 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/12/tracing-the-chinese-footprints-in-kazakhstans-oil-and-gas-industry/>.

³⁰ "December 2014 Import Commodity Seal Amount Table from Some Countries (Regions) (US Dollar Value) [2014年12月自部分国家(地区)进口商品类章金额表(美元值)]" *General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China*, 21 January 2015, <http://www.customs.gov.cn/customs/302249/zfxgk/2799825/302274/302277/302276/310294/index.html>; "December 2022 Import Commodity Seal Amount Table from Some Countries (Regions) (US Dollar Value) [2022年12月自部分国家(地区)进口商品类章金额表(美元值)]" *General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China*, 18 January 2023, <http://www.customs.gov.cn/customs/302249/zfxgk/2799825/302274/302277/302276/4808313/index.html>.

³¹ Yau, Niva. "Tracing the Chinese Footprints in Kazakhstan's Oil and Gas Industry" *The Diplomat*, 12 December 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/12/tracing-the-chinese-footprints-in-kazakhstans-oil-and-gas-industry/>.

³² "December 2016 Import Commodity Seal Amount Table from Some Countries (Regions) (US Dollar Value) [2016年12月自部分国家(地区)进口商品类章金额表(美元值)]" *General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China*, 23 January 2017, <http://www.customs.gov.cn/customs/302249/zfxgk/2799825/302274/302277/302276/631993/index.html>.

³³ "China-Kazakhstan cooperation upgrades 79 projects to help China transfer excess capacity [中哈合作升级 79个项目助我国过剩产能转移]" *NBD*, 28 December 2014, <http://www.nbd.com.cn/articles/2014-12-28/886844.html>.

³⁴ "Construction of Kazakh-Chinese investment projects will be carried out in accordance with the legislation of Kazakhstan" *Kazakh Invest*, 10 September 2019, <https://invest.gov.kz/ru/media-center/press-releases/stroitelstvo-kazakhstansko-kitayskikh-invest-proektov-budet-vestis-v-sootvetstvii-s-zakonodatelstvom/>.

³⁵ Van der Kley, Dirk, and Niva Yau, "How Central Asians Pushed Chinese Firms to Localize" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 15 October 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/10/15/how-central-asians-pushed-chinese-firms-to-localize-pub-85561>.

³⁶ "China will receive shares in two Kazatomprom uranium fields in Turkestan region" *Kursiv*, 30 December 2020, <https://kz.kursiv.media/2020-12-30/kitay-poluchit-doli-v-dvukh-uranovykh-mestorozhdeniyakh-kazatompromu-v/>.

which in the nuclear rods case would involve importing raw materials from Kazakhstan to process in China for later sale at a higher price.

These economic projects and trade relations underscore the two countries' strong bilateral relations. They also give Kazakh elites the opportunity to extract financial gain from these projects. For example, rumors of ill-gotten gains from PRC projects have long dogged the family of former President Nazarbayev. In 2020, the British newspaper the Financial Times named Nazarbayev's son-in-law, Timur Kulibayev, in an investigation that found he allegedly redirected millions of dollars into his bank account during the construction of a Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline.³⁷ After this investigation, and Nazarbayev's fall, Kulibayev "willingly" donated his 49 percent share in the Kazakh company that controls the pipeline to the Kazakh state.³⁸

These projects are complemented by extensive media coverage, some of which exaggerates the PRC's contribution to the Kazakh economy. In reality, the PRC is competing with the EU and the U.S., who are both major players. From 2013-2022, for example, Kazakhstan attracted a total of \$125 billion in foreign direct investment from the Netherlands, followed by \$69 billion from the U.S. and only \$27 billion from the PRC.³⁹

Media Influence

The PRC seeks to establish influence in Kazakhstan's media network to spread narratives of a revived Silk Road and create support for strong bilateral ties. And, even though the situation is more nuanced, China wants to create the impression of a deep economic relationship. To tell its story, the PRC relies on its state media bureaus in Kazakhstan, such as People's Daily, China Radio International, and Xinhua. However, the most successful conduit for distribution of pro-PRC narratives are Kazakh media outlets that have signed cooperation partnerships with their China-based counterparts.

Silk Road Today is one such outlet. It specializes in China-related news and its leadership maintains close ties with the PRC. It is headed by Husey Daurov (安胡塞), a well-respected member of the Dungan Chinese diaspora community in Kazakhstan. The Dungan are a predominantly Muslim population of mixed Han, Arab, and Central Asian heritage. Daurov is the great-grandson of Bai Yanhu (白彦虎), known among the Dungan people for leading a revolt against the Qing empire in the 1860s.⁴⁰ Bai led a migration of Dungan first to the territory that would become Xinjiang and then into Central Asia. Daurov has devoted his life to improving the lot of Dungans in Kazakhstan, including sponsoring an initiative for young Dungans to learn their language in Han characters instead of Cyrillic letters.

Daurov has run Silk Road Today since 2016, while heading the Dungan Association of Kazakhstan and the International Dungan Association.⁴¹ The roughly 70,000 Dungan people in Kazakhstan live primarily in isolated, monoethnic villages, and increasingly face discrimination and ethnic violence from other Kazakh citizens because of their perceived ties to the PRC.⁴² Despite this, in 2017 Daurov received Wan Lijun, a full member of the CCP's elite Central Committee, at Silk Road Today's offices in Almaty, where he briefed Wan on the paper's future plans.⁴³ (Wan is a senior official in the United Front Work Department, a division of the CCP charged with consolidating party control over PRC society and

³⁷ "The secret scheme to skim millions off central Asia's pipeline megaproject" *Financial Times*, 3 December 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/80f25f82-5f21-4a56-b2bb-7a48e61dd9c6>.

³⁸ "Kazakh tycoon gives up stake in major oil trader" *Reuters*, 28 June 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/kazakh-tycoon-gives-up-stake-major-oil-trader-2022-06-28/>.

³⁹ "Kazakhstan took 53rd place out of 193 countries in terms of GDP" *Liter*, 30 December 2022, <https://liter.kz/kazakhstan-zanial-53-mesto-iz-193-stran-po-obemu-vvp-1672378385/>.

⁴⁰ "The story of «Shaanxi Village» in Central Asia [中亚“陕西村”的故事]" *Overseas Chinese Affairs Study*, 2004, <http://qwgzjy.gqb.gov.cn/hwzh/119/519.shtml>.

⁴¹ Dungan Association in Kazakhstan: <http://dungane.kz>

⁴² "An Envoy of China and Central Asia: Husey Daurov [中国与中亚的交流使者：安胡塞]" *Zheng He Forum*, 26 October 2016, <http://zhengheforum.org/2016/10/26/e4-b8-ad-e5-9b-bd-e4-b8-8e-e4-b8-ad-e4-ba-9a-e7-9a-84-e4-ba-a4-e6-b5-81-e4-bd-bf-e8-80-85-ef-bc-9a-e5-ae-89-e8-83-a1-e5-a1-9e/>; "The Korday Pogrom: The Dungan People of Kazakhstan Seek Justice" *Anti-Discrimination Center*, 19 May 2020, <https://adcmemorial.org/en/articles/korday-pogrom/>; "An ethnically motivated attack alarms multi-ethnic Kazakhstan" *The Economist*, 13 February 2020, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2020/02/13/an-ethnically-motivated-attack-alarms-multi-ethnic-kazakhstan>.

⁴³ "Chairman Wan Lijun visited the «Silk Road Today» newspaper and encouraged employees to continue to contribute to the friendship between China and Kazakhstan for generations [万立骏主席考察《今日丝路》报社，勉励员工为中哈世代友好继续出力]" *Silk Road Today*, 26 August 2017, <http://cn.silk-road-today.kz/news/135.html>.

members of the Chinese diaspora.) Wan expressed the sentiment that “media work” such as Daurov’s is an effective way to reverse anti-China sentiments and inculcate “friendly mutual understanding” in Kazakhstan.⁴⁴

Silk Road Today mainly reprints content in Russian and Chinese from PRC state media about Kazakhstan-PRC relations.⁴⁵ Starting in 2021, its website frequently featured videos from a YouTube channel titled “Roza Aidirova,” which reposted dozens of videos from PRC state media whitewashing concerns about forced labor in Xinjiang cotton production.⁴⁶ Silk Road Today is active on social media, especially on Instagram; it is the second most-used social media platform in Kazakhstan after Pinterest.⁴⁷ Since creating its Instagram account in 2018, Silk Road Today has accumulated more than 111,000 followers.⁴⁸ Unlike its website, which exclusively posts on PRC-related topics, its Instagram covers a variety of stories, including Kazakh domestic news, international news, and even news on the PRC’s activities in other Central Asian countries.

Two other significant media outlets in Kazakhstan enjoy partnerships with the PRC: Silk Road Daily and Delovoy Kazakhstan. Silk Road Daily (not to be confused with Silk Road Today) is operated by KazTag, a major independent Kazakh news agency. Silk Road Daily is headed by Kemar Mashanlo, an ethnic Dungan journalist who has authored countless articles about the PRC for KazTag.⁴⁹ Silk Road Daily posts content that emphasizes cooperation with China and other Central Asia countries along the Silk Road on the KazTag website. Silk Road Daily does not have its own social media presence (though its articles are posted on KazTag’s main social media accounts) but runs a dedicated Telegram channel with 1,000 subscribers.

Founded in 2010, Delovoy Kazakhstan focuses on business news (its name translates directly to “Business Kazakhstan”). It is seen as a credible and influential new source in the Kazakh business sector and is widely read by local businesspeople. It has a strong social media presence, with 108,000 followers on Instagram and 17,000 subscribers on Telegram.⁵⁰ Its only foreign partnerships are with PRC state media, including CGTN, CCTV, People’s Daily, Xinhua, and China Radio International. Its website has a large section called “Window to China” and special tabs called “Silk Road” and “Xinhua” where business news about China and stories of PRC-Kazakh friendship are reprinted.⁵¹ Serik Korzhumbayev, the organization’s founder and chief editor, is frequently featured by PRC media as a Kazakh voice praising successes in bilateral relations and supporting PRC governance. In 2020, Delovoy Kazakhstan released a self-made video promoting the glorious success of the PRC fighting against Japan during the Second World War.⁵²

Until 2022, Timur Kulibayev, former President Nazarbayev’s son-in-law, owned a media platform called Atameken that promoted bilateral cooperation. One of Kazakhstan’s most popular media outlets, Atameken does not reprint PRC state media articles like Delovoy Kazakhstan does, but it co-produced a video series “Salem Kazakhstan” (Hello Kazakhstan) with Xinhua on its YouTube channel in 2020 and 2021. With 800,000 subscribers, Atameken’s YouTube channel is ranked in the top 100 most subscribed channels in Kazakhstan.⁵³ The “Salem Kazakhstan” series recounts the personal stories workers from China and Kazakhstan who work for Kazakh companies in the PRC, and vice versa. While the content is unique, well-made, and reached a wide audience, remarks left by commenters are usually critical. In one video with 17,000 views, the top comments include criticism of Atameken such as “you’re another traitor,” “this is just Chinese soft power,” “will you say something about real genocide in China?”⁵⁴ As Kulibayev’s power waned in summer 2021, Atameken discontinued the series.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Silk Road Today website: <http://silk-road-today.kz>.

⁴⁶ YouTube Channel Roza Aidirova: <https://www.youtube.com/@rozaaidirova6892/videos>.

⁴⁷ “POPULAR MOBILE SOCIAL NETWORKS IN KAZAKHSTAN. FEBRUARY 2022” <https://ranking.kz/reviews/other/populyarnye-mobilnye-socseti-v-kazahstane-fevral-2022.html> *Ranking.kz*, 25 March 2022, <https://ranking.kz/reviews/other/populyarnye-mobilnye-socseti-v-kazahstane-fevral-2022.html>.

⁴⁸ Instagram Profile of Silk Road Today: https://www.instagram.com/silkroad_today/.

⁴⁹ Silk Road News website: <https://silkroadnews.org/ru/>.

⁵⁰ Instagram Profile of Delovoy Kazakhstan: <https://www.instagram.com/dknews.kz/>; Telegram Channel of Delovoy Kazakhstan: <https://t.me/dknews.kz>

⁵¹ Delovoy Kazakhstan website: <https://dknews.kz/ru/search?param=>

⁵² “Kazakhstan media produced a documentary to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the victory of the Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japan [哈萨克斯坦媒体制作纪录片纪念中国人民抗日战争胜利75周年]” *Xinhua*, 4 September 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2020-09/04/c_1126452970.htm.

⁵³ “TOP 100 YOUTUBERS IN KAZAKHSTAN SORTED BY SUBSCRIBERS” *Social Blade*, <https://socialblade.com/youtube/top/country/kz/mostsubscribed>.

⁵⁴ Atameken Business News, “Will the famous TV presenter manage to make an important deal in China? / SALEM Kazakhstan” *YouTube*, 8 May 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b7xQG9nl_vQ.

The series is part of a new narrative trend. The PRC is producing focusing on creating local, and what looks to be organic, PRC-positive messages. Many of these success stories highlight bilateral relations at a human level. Stories include a famous singer from China reflecting on his people's love for Kazakh talents and a music student from the PRC in Soviet-era Almaty finding acceptance and mentorship at the home of a Kazakh composer. PRC President Xi Jinping, at a meeting with Central Asian countries in January 2022, mentioned the story of a Kazakh citizen who stayed in China during the pandemic as a medical volunteer.⁵⁵

Kazakhstan's Resonant News also works with the PRC, though its cooperation is indirect. Assol Mirmanova, a leading member of the People's Party in Kazakhstan, heads Resonant.⁵⁶ While the company does not have a clear partnership agreement with PRC media, it frequently writes with admiration of successes of China's development model. For example, it ran a story outlining "why China will win the war of civilization against the West."⁵⁷ Resonant is an example of how PRC communist economic success is used by a local political party to promote similar ideologies.

The Kazakh public does not appear to perceive these media outlets as conduits for paid pro-PRC messaging. This is mainly because pro-PRC ideas and images have become normalized in domestic discourse. Given Astana's friendly commitment toward the PRC over the past 30 years, pro-China stories hardly stand out and do not trigger public suspicion. Even those local media without direct partnerships with the PRC generally maintain a positive tone when writing about China and/or bilateral relations. Incidences of public concern about media outlets' views on, and relationships with, the PRC are rare.

Kazakh Sinologists and Think Tanks

Given the role of local sinologists in their influence on policy makers in Astana, the PRC has succeeded in connecting with Kazakh intellectual circles. In general, Kazakh scholars of China studies maintain friendly positions on bilateral relations, and support the new Silk Road. Sinologists such as Syroezhkin play a vital role in lobbying for PRC interests, especially when crisis situations erupt. A few China-focused think tanks in Kazakhstan maintain close ties to the PRC.

The China Studies Center, based in Astana, has a close relationship with both Kazakh and PRC leaders. It is closely associated with a number of government agencies, in particular with the Library of the First President, a key intellectual circle comprised of loyal allies of the First President Narzabayev. The group's China Studies Center director, Gulnar Shaimergernova, also co-directs the Center for Kazakhstan Studies at the Northwestern University in Xi'an. Northwestern University cooperates with the China National Petroleum Company, which has the largest footprint in Kazakhstan of any PRC-based company, by training Kazakh engineers. In 2021, Shaimergernova headed a joint conference between the China Studies Center and the CNPC in Kazakhstan.⁵⁸ This is an example that showcases how those who work with the PRC can gain access to various other actors in the PRC.

The China Studies Center maintains little public presence, its main activities are publishing reports and books about the PRC and bilateral relations. Its main audience is officials from government agencies and think tanks. It positions itself as the source of information about the PRC and it channels research grants to Kazakh sinologists. The center's official partners are the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Kazakhstan, the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, the Embassy of Kazakhstan in China, the Shanghai University of Foreign Studies, the Silk Road Institute at Northwestern University, the SCO Secretariat, the Kazakhstan Academy of Social Sciences, the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ "«An alien, but not a stranger» - this is how Xi Jinping said about this Kazakh guy" *Xinhua*, 29 January 2022, http://russian.news.cn/2022-01/29/c_1310446820.htm.

⁵⁶ "Assol Mirmanova", *Rezonans*, <https://rezonans.asia/author/assole/>; "Assol Mirmanova" Member, *European Association of Political Consultants*, <https://www.eapc.eu/become-a-member/current-members/kazakhstan/assol-mirmanova/>.

⁵⁷ "China may become the world's largest economy in 2036" *Rezonans*, 27 December 2022, <https://rezonans.asia/kitaj-mozhet-stat-krupnejshej-ekonomikoj-mira-v-2036-godu/>; "CHINA AND THE TRANSITION TO A NEW ERA OF SOCIALISM WITH CHINESE SPECIFICS" *Rezonans*, 13 November 2021, <https://rezonans.asia/shestoj-plenum-ck-kpk-19-go-sozyva-ili-perekhod-k-novoj-epohe-socializma-s-kitajskoj-specifikoj/>; "Why China will win the war of civilizations against the West. Part 1" *Rezonans*, 12 August 2020, <https://rezonans.asia/pochemu-kitay-vyigraet-u-zapada-voinu-civilizacij/>.

⁵⁸ "The «Energy Silk Road» International Academic Conference was held in Kazakhstan [“能源丝路”国际学术会议在哈国召开]" *CNPC*, 12 October 2021, <http://news.cnpc.com.cn/system/2021/10/12/030046475.shtml>.

⁵⁹ "Partners" *Kazakhstan China Studies Center*, <https://chinastudies.kz/ru/about-us/partners/>.

In January 2023, Shaimergernova and her husband – who was at the time the deputy director of the Library of the First President, an expert on the PRC, and former Vice Minister of Defense – were both detained by the Kazakh law enforcement.⁶⁰ As in Syroezhkin’s case, more and more pro-PRC experts are being targeted by the Tokayev leadership, as it distances itself from former president Nazarbayev.

There is also an informal think tank, called the “One Belt One Road” Expert Club, based in Almaty. Unlike the China Studies Center, the Expert Club is home to Kazakhstan’s independent experts, those who work on a freelance basis and in private universities. As a result, their published work is perceived as more objective and less subject to pressure to repeat official governmental views. Bulat Sultanov leads the Expert Club, which was established in 2017. Sultanov also while leads another research center on international and regional cooperation at the Kazakh-German University in Almaty.⁶¹ The Expert Club publishes exclusively positive views about the PRC and bilateral relations, and serve as an important conduit for these views to to Kazakh scholars who do not work on PRC affairs. With no background in PRC studies, Sultanov was appointed an honorary professor at the Shanghai University of International Studies in 2013, then an international consultant at the Shanghai Institute for International Studies in 2017.⁶²

The PRC also helps young Kazakhs pursue higher education in China. Before the pandemic hit, the PRC began offering scholarships to Kazakh students. Out of Kazakhstan’s total population of 19 million people, in 2010, 7874 students studied in China. In 2012, that number rose to 9565, 11764 in 2014, 13996 in 2016, to 14224 in 2018. Approximately one out of 1,200 Kazakhs study in the PRC, as compared to one out of 8,000 Russians.⁶³ This is a high number, especially considering the population of Russia is eight times that of Kazakhstan.

PRC scholarships offered to Kazakh students can be divided into three types: they come directly from the government, channeled through Confucius Institutes and the embassy; they are offered indirectly from the PRC government, channeled through PRC-based universities working with Kazakh universities; and scholarships provided by companies from China operating in Kazakhstan. These opportunities attract not only those who favor the PRC, but also those who may be skeptical of the PRC are willing to be pragmatic.

Some of these students work in the Kazakh government, focusing on PRC issues, for example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Some of them also work in senior positions in other agencies, such as in the office of the Director of International Cooperation Department of the Ministry of Education. Many senior members of the Kazakh government were either educated in the PRC or specialize in its study. For example, both the current president and former Minister of Defense Nurlan Yermekbayev are fluent in Mandarin.

⁶⁰ “Nazarbayev’s associate - deputy head of the Elbasy library was detained (video)” *Kaztag*, 17 January 2023, <https://kaztag.kz/ru/news/zaderzhan-soratnik-nazarbaeva-zamglavy-biblioteki-elbasy-video>.

⁶¹ “Sultanov Bulat Klychbaevich. Deutsch Kasachische Universitat, <https://dku.kz/ru/content/view/?slug=niimirs&tab=1>.

⁶² “Sultanov Bulat Klychbaevich. Deutsch Kasachische Universitat, <https://dku.kz/ru/content/view/?slug=niimirs&tab=1>; “Blat Kraczbayevich Sultanov [布拉特雷奇巴耶维奇苏丹诺夫] International Consultant, Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, <https://www.siis.org.cn/gjgw/4586.html>.

⁶³ “Migration in Chinese. How many people of China are there in Kazakhstan. *Exclusive.kz*, 10 August 2016, <https://exclusive.kz/expertiza/obshhestvo/13475/>; Tien Ye, “Relations between the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of Kazakhstan on the example of cooperation in the field of education People’s Friendship University of Russia, 2018, https://nbpublish.com/library_read_article.php?id=27722; “TOP 14 countries by number of students in China Studyinchina, <https://studyinchinas.com/ru/>.

Assessment and Conclusion

While the PRC built strong inroads in Kazakhstan under Nazarbayev's leadership, Tokayev's assumption of power has thrown much of this work into question. Many of the Kazakh elites who promoted China are Narzabayev loyalists, and have been stripped of power in the past few years. However, for the time being, there is no sign that the Tokayev leadership is moving away from the Silk Road narrative. This means that, while Tokayev is replacing Narzabayev loyalists, it is not clear whether this signals a shift away from pro-PRC ideology. Adding to the uncertainty, when Xi visited Astana in September 2022, unlike in previous visits, the PRC and Kazakhstan did not sign any new cooperation agreements.⁶⁴ Instead, Xi received a friendship medal from Tokayev, and two weeks later Kazakhstan went on to vote with China on a resolution concerning Xinjiang at the UN Human Rights Council.⁶⁵

These tensions combined with Kazakhstan's embrace of China's Silk Road narrative means that Kazakh elites must find new ways to interpret their relationship with the PRC. This reinterpretation will happen in the context of shifting regional geopolitics caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and strong outreach by the European Union to Kazakhstan and the rest of Central Asia. Even prior to this outreach, Europe was already a larger investor in Kazakhstan than the PRC; the PRC's success in embedding narratives of economic cooperation, however, means that even among Kazakh elites, China is widely believed to be the country's largest and most important economic partner.

In recent years, China has sought to maintain this narrative advantage by adapting to Kazakh demands for evolutions in the bilateral economic relationship – including by supplying Kazakhstan with critical advanced technology – and by experimenting with new ways of delivering its messages, including working with local media and stronger tailoring of narratives to local interests. Ultimately, however, the success of these efforts will still be determined primarily by the direction chosen by Kazakhstan's new leadership, which will itself be heavily influenced by PRC policy choices in Xinjiang.

In seeking a political narrative to set himself apart from Narzabayev, Tokayev will be under heavy pressure to react to the growing number of complaints about abuse of ethnic Kazakhs in Xinjiang. To downplay the issue would be seen as a continuation of unpopular Nazarbayev policies. As evidence of abuses in Xinjiang continues to mount, and continues to receive wide publicity in Kazakhstan, Tokayev may find himself with little choice but to adopt a more confrontational stance, to the detriment of the PRC's many years of investment in Kazakhstan's informational space.

⁶⁴ "Xi Jinping's state visit to the Republic of Kazakhstan" *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China*, 15 September 2022, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/yz_676205/1206_676500/xgxw_676506/202209/t20220915_10766185.shtml.

⁶⁵ "Xi Jinping accepted the «Golden Eagle» Medal from President Tokayev of Kazakhstan" *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China*, 14 September 2022, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/yz_676205/1206_676500/xgxw_676506/202209/t20220914_10766178.shtml.; "Vote on Draft Resolution A/HRC/51/L.6 - «Debate on the situation of human rights in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China» *United Nations Human Rights Council*, 6 October 2022, <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1w/k1w9tube8v>.



1225 Eye Street NW, Suite 800 | Washington, DC 20005 | info@iri.org