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# The Great Narrative Game: China's Multi-Channel Approach to Shaping Global Perceptions<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*This study aims to contribute to the research of China's discourse power by constructing a comprehensive outline of the communication channels that the PRC relies on to disseminate its messages globally. In terms of theoretical background, we rely on the concept of strategic narratives, which singles out the process of ideas' projection and stresses the importance of communication infrastructure used to transmit messages. In the empirical part, we discuss four types of communication channels used by the PRC, which include mass media, social media, international forums and organizations, and think tanks. We examine and compare these channels by looking at the breadth and type of target audience, type of content they produce, and their connection to CCP. We show that China invests significant resources and applies a multi-pronged approach using both existing platforms and creating its own ones to overcome constraints and be able to play by its own rules. Such a multi-channel approach also reflects China's attempts to reach different groups within a very fragmented audience. We also make a conclusion about the function each channel fulfills in China's communication strategy and demonstrate that using various types of channels serves different purposes. For example, in the case of international organizations and forums, the strategic aim is to influence political elites that would support China both at the global and domestic level, while narratives spread through mass and social media are directed at the general public and are aimed at creating a favorable environment for pro-China policies and challenging hegemonic discourse about "China threat". Overall, the existing global media and institutional environments have influenced China's attempts to project its narratives.*

**Keywords:** China, discourse power, strategic narratives, mass media, social media, international organizations, think tanks

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Under Xi Jinping's leadership, the PRC started to utilize discourse power not only to enhance its image globally but also to alter the international system, reform global governance and influence the behavior of other international actors [Zhao, 2016]. The concept of strategic narratives is commonly employed to analyze how countries, including China, engage in discursive competition on the global stage [e.g. Hagstrom, 2021]. Within this framework, international relations are seen as a battle of narratives, where each actor seeks to advance its preferred version of reality and shape the actions of other actors [Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, Roselle, 2013].

While the body of literature that discusses the PRC's strategic narratives has grown dramatically over the last few years, scholars tend to focus primarily on their content [Lams, 2018; Liao, 2018; Yang, 2020; Song, 2022]. However, the strategic narrative approach encompasses more than just the examination of the narrative's content and its variations, it also involves analyzing the process of narrative creation, projection, reception and feedback [Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, Roselle, 2013]. For instance, official statements of the PRC leadership that often contain strategic narratives need to be made at some platform, published online or in the press. The communication channel significantly impacts the size and type of audience that this message can potentially reach. As put by Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle [2013, p.1], "our communication environment fundamentally affects how narratives are communicated and flow, and with what effects". They also add that "[t]he "space" of communication is not neutral: it offers affordances that guide us to communicate in certain ways and it is laced with monitoring software so our communications can be analyzed as proxy guidance for our thoughts and likely actions – as citizens, consumers, parents, or the numerous other roles we inhabit" [Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, Roselle, 2013, p. 218]. Due to the high importance of communication infrastructure, actors try to shape the existing one so that their voices are heard and even create new platforms to construct their own spaces for discussion. As a result, there is not only a battle of narratives, but also a competition between different communication channels and control over them. The complex system of infrastructure used to project strategic narratives encompasses channels of both traditional and public diplomacy and includes mass media, social media, international forums and organizations, and think tanks.

In China, it is recognized that apart from producing its own ideas and narratives, Beijing faces the challenge of making its message reach different international audiences in communication environments still dominated by the West. The importance of having advanced "communication methods" (*chuanbo shouduan*), strong "communication capabilities" (*chuanbo nengli*) and "a strategic communication system with distinctive Chinese characteristics" (*juyou xianming zhongguo tese de zhanlue chuanboti*) has been stressed by President Xi Jinping, Chinese media and scholars [People's Daily, 2014, Xinhuanet, 2021; Wang, 2022]. Therefore, in order to comprehend how China's strategic narratives create meaning, it is crucial to grasp the complex system of communication channels employed for their dissemination.

In this paper we aim to fill the gap in the existing scholarship and answer the following research question: What communication channels does China use to disseminate its narratives to diverse audiences and what are their special features? The goal of this paper is to construct a comprehensive outline of communication channels that China relies on, categorize them into distinct groups, and assess it according to specific criteria: audience that they target, type of content that they transmit and degree of control exerted by the CCP over them. We believe that examining how China engages various channels in its discursive work can help gain insights into its attempts to exert influence over different audiences, and provide a better understanding of China's strategic communication goals and tactics.

## Mass Media

Mass media plays a major role in the projection of China's strategic narratives. Among different types of mass media outlets used by China, the first group includes Chinese big mass media companies, such as state-owned China Radio International (CRI), China Global Television Network (CGTN) and

Xinhua, and CCP-owned *People's Daily* and *China Daily*, which get most of the attention in discussions of China's media going out strategy [e.g. Marsh, 2017; Hartig, 2017; Karásková, 2023]. Second, there are niche outlets of different types that are party- and state-owned, but focus on smaller and specific audiences. Examples include nationalistic *Global Times*, society-oriented *Sixth Tone*, and country-focused *Khmer*. There are also outlets that specifically target Chinese diaspora, e.g. *The China Press (Qiaobao)* newspaper in the US. Finally, Chinese narratives are also transmitted via proxies or to quote Kurlantzick [2023, p. 191] "by borrowing the boat to go out to the sea" (*jiechuan chuhai*). The CCP uses foreign media outlets which are outside of its direct control to spread its messages via publications of paid advertorial articles, content sharing agreements and coordinating messages with pro-Beijing media owners.

Strategies of the above-mentioned mass media vary widely in terms of the audience that they target. Chinese big state-owned media companies generally produce high quality and thematically diverse content, which shows their desire to get as many readers as possible. Geographically, these companies have been expanding their coverage and international engagement not only to fulfill CCP's aim to increase China's discourse power, but also out of commercial interests and desire to access new markets. Varrall [2020] suggests that non-Western markets might be the top priority of the big media companies as they are less crowded and controlled and therefore easier to break into. However, despite state support, Chinese media content struggles to gain popularity both in developing and developed countries abroad due to a lack of critical reporting [Kurlantzick, 2023, p. 174; Marsh, 2017]. Niche outlets target specific audiences by adapting content and overall marketing strategy. For example, *the Sixth Tone* run by Shanghai United Media group is promoted as "Fresh voices from today's China" that is likely to appeal to liberal audiences. There are also media outlets which have a particular geographical focus, such as mentioned-earlier *Khmer* magazine published in Cambodia. China's "borrowing the boat" strategy helps reach such audiences who may not actively seek out Chinese content. For instance, *China Daily* pays prestigious outlets to publish inserts called *China Watch*. This collaboration is practiced with major newspapers in over 20 countries, such as *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and many others [China Daily, n.d.]. Alberro, Young, and Pérez-Cheng [2022] also add that at least in Spain, China's strategy of maintaining long-standing ties with local mainstream counterparts is also complemented by cultivating relationships with new media.

Contentwise, mass media channels also vary significantly. As put by Wang, Sparks and Huang [2018, p. 127], "[o]fficial' Party publications, like PD [*People's Daily*], are primarily concerned with interpreting the world from the point of view of the CCP: they remain dedicated to the classic propaganda functions of the press." According to Hartig [2017, p. 125], *China Daily* generally reproduces news selection and framing of the *People's Daily* in a slightly more liberal form. Commercialized mass media outlets like CGTN are more creative in projection of strategic narratives, so that they could better resonate with the audience. The dissemination of particular storylines is done via selection of topics and framing rather than direct projection of the ideas. The content in niche outlets is tailored to particular audiences and aims. For instance, according to Kurlantzick [2023, p. 159-160], *Global Times*, which focuses on international news, stands out as a "provocative, argumentative, and conspiracy-minded" outlet that mixes "nationalism with efforts to mock the United States and other countries". He also adds that such content allows Beijing to collect response and opinion of foreign officials and opinion leaders on important, yet provocative issues. As part of "borrowing the boat", foreign outlets often publish advertorial articles, e.g. stories about the launches of new projects by the Chinese government, as well as interviews and op-eds from China's senior leaders and ambassadors. For instance, in 2022 Russian media outlets have published 33 articles that were either authored by the Chinese ambassador or were his interviews [Soboleva, Krivokhizh, 2024].

As for China's control over different mass media channels, big media companies as well as niche outlets are either owned by the CCP or by the state. On the one hand, this means that these media companies could be directly used to disseminate information that the CCP wants and political agenda takes priority over business interests or journalistic standards of editorial independence. On the other hand, Chinese media outlets vary in terms of the degree of this commercialization, which influences their editorial practices [Stockmann, 2010]. Moreover, the party and state control over media outlets has been the source of constraints, especially in Western liberal democracies. In other countries, the

broadcasting of Chinese official media has not met with pushback and cooperation between Chinese and local media has been supported, for instance in Russia [Soboleva, 2023]. It seems that the Chinese side understands the problem of credibility, because the CCTV News and CCTV International were rebranded as CGTN in 2017 to distance it from the CCP [Fan, Pan, Sheng, 2024, p. 14]. Apart from state- or party-owned media outlets, there are also foreign private media companies that are “controlled by owners and editors with strong pro-Beijing leanings” and thus serve the narratives’ projection by coordinating messages with Chinese state media [Kurlantzik, 2023, p. 162-163]. For instance, in St. Petersburg, Russia there is a radio station called Metro.Fm that does not state a connection to the Chinese state in its name or description. It has been sponsored by Chinese investors, including Chen Zhigan the CEO of China-Russia business park in St. Petersburg [Afonina, 2019], and its broadcasting and social media accounts devote significant attention to China, which is portrayed almost exclusively in positive light.

## Social Media

As foreign audiences have moved to social media, so have Chinese state media outlets and diplomats. Chinese state media joined X (also known as Twitter<sup>1</sup>) more than a decade ago: *China Daily* and *Global Times* in 2009, *People’s Daily* in 2011, *Xinhua* in 2012 and *CGTN* in 2013 [Trynø, Nielbo, 2024, p. 54]. As of 2021, Schliebs et al [2021, p. 36] have identified 82 state-backed media accounts on X and 95 on Facebook, among them are flagman media companies and their subsidiaries (e.g. CGTN Africa), as well as smaller outlets. As for diplomats, on January 13 2020 China’s MFA announced that Chinese diplomats would also use X to conduct public diplomacy [Trynø, Nielbo, 2024, p. 244], which led to a quick and significant rise in Chinese diplomats presence there. Overall, between 2009 and 2021 at least 189 user accounts that are attributed to PRC embassies, ambassadors, consuls, and other embassy staff were created on X and 84 similar accounts were registered on Facebook [Schliebs et al, 2021]. As for Tiktok, it has also been used by China’s major media outlets to influence international audiences by broadcasting content not only through running accounts [Baker-White, Martin, 2022], but also through advertising [Martin, Baker-White, 2023]. It is important to note that apart from official accounts of media companies and diplomats, the CCP also engages bloggers and influencers to promote important narratives, norms and values on new media platforms both inside China [Zhuravleva, 2022] and abroad [Bandurski, 2021]. Notwithstanding bans in a few countries, X, Facebook, Youtube (used mostly by the CGTN and individual bloggers) and Tiktok have a global reach. Moreover, Chinese diplomats, media outlets and influencers are also active on different national social media (e.g. VK in Russia). Finally, Chinese WeChat is used to reach Chinese speaking diaspora communities, as work with diaspora is one of the pillars of China’s communication strategy [China Daily, 2023].

When it comes to content of social media accounts, Fan, Pan and Sheng [2024, p. 16] have revealed that *People’s Daily*, *China Daily* and *Xinhua* devote 40-43% proportion of their tweets to explicit projection of China’s identity narratives, while the number for the *CGTN* is twice smaller (23%). It confirms our earlier observation that despite seeming similarity these flagman outlets play different roles in projection of strategic narratives to foreign audiences. For instance, *People’s Daily* and *China Daily* act as China’s official mouthpieces and do not invest significant resources in professional reporting. Their messages are likely to reach the audience that does not have any concerns regarding the origins or independence of these accounts.

The publications of Chinese diplomats on social platforms often remind those of *China Daily* and *People’s Daily*. They are positive in tone, aim to promote a favorable image of China as a responsible international power and successful development example [Atkitson, 2022]. However, social media, in particular X, has also become a platform for occasional outbursts of hawkish rhetoric, labeled ‘wolf warrior diplomacy’ by some scholars [e.g. Martin, 2023]. Despite the fact that the major part of published content uses traditional diplomatic language, such relatively rare cases of more belligerent tweets have attracted a lot of scrutiny and, as demonstrated by the research on France, have

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<sup>1</sup> blocked in Russia

led to deterioration of China's image in this country [Atkinson, 2022; Tran, 2024]. From the point of strategic narratives projection, such behavior might undermine some of identity narratives.

When it comes to individual bloggers that do not have formal affiliation with the Chinese state, their participation in online discussions varies. For instance, there are so-called "political influencers", who play important roles in originating and sharing political information about political events, especially during the times of crisis [Liang, Lu, 2022]. Another group that has attracted attention of researchers are so-called "state endorsers", which are foreign residents in China that explicitly support China's official narratives [Brockling, Hu, Fu, 2023].

As for CCP's control over publications in social media, there are several important points. First, the affiliation of Chinese big mass media and diplomats to the Chinese state is rather straightforward. Nevertheless, researchers still debate whether all of the online behavior, including hawkish comments of some diplomats, is sanctioned by Beijing and reflects China's international communications strategy [Duan, 2022]. Second, understanding the limited attractiveness of following diplomats on social media, China increasingly relies on proxies, such as foreign bloggers and celebrities to spread its ideas [Liang, Lu, 2022; Bandurski, 2021].

## International Organizations and Forums

Another important group of platforms that China uses to disseminate its narratives are global and regional institutions and forums. Scholars point out that over the last three decades China has turned into one of the most connected countries in terms of international organizations membership [Frick, 2021]. Within international organizations, the primary audience consists of politicians and diplomatic representatives from various countries. Membership at global organizations such as the UN and its agencies provides China with global outreach, while regional institutions are utilized to spread Chinese ideas in more localized settings. At some organizations, China originally plays a key role as a founder and thus has more opportunities to spread its ideas. Stephen [2021] estimates that over the last two decades China has been involved in the creation of at least twenty new multilateral initiatives, ranging from loose informal forums to formal IGOs, and involving countries from every world region. Some China-led institutions are tailored to target audiences in particular regions. For example, FOCAC is aimed at Africa and there China promotes "a world ordered by hierarchy in which China sees itself as an older brother: a guide, an assistant, and a role model" [Delgado, 2015]. Some institutions aim to deliver particular narratives on certain topics to a global audience. For example, South-South Human Rights Forum - on human rights, emphasizing the "right to development" as the primary human right and the primacy of national sovereignty over human rights [Alden, Alves, 2016].

Participation in international organizations and forums allows China to project its strategic narratives to international political elites via official speeches, in particular those of Xi Jinping. For example, one study demonstrated that Xi Jinping projects the Chinese narrative about development in his speeches at the UN [Embassy of the PRC in the Kingdom of Lesotho, 2015]. In speeches at BRICS summits and Belt and Road Forums, Chinese officials promote an idea of China's contribution to international cooperation [Lian, 2018]. Another less obvious, but maybe even more important format used to disseminate China's strategic narratives are official documents produced by international organizations. For example, in 2017 the Chinese government managed to include the idea of the "community of shared future for mankind" in the UN resolution during the 55th UN Commission for Social Development. Later it was adopted by the UN Security Council, the Human Rights Council, and the First Committee of the UN General Assembly [Zhao, 2022, p. 240]. Moreover, international organizations adopt resolutions or statements supporting China's view on various issues, such as human rights, sovereignty or cyber sovereignty. China's first two UNHRC resolutions were adopted in 2017 and 2018 and both treated human rights as primarily the rights of states and did not have any balancing reference to the rights of individuals, the role of civil society groups or the mandate of UNHRC to monitor abuses [Zhao, 2021]. Since then China managed to form a coalition consisting of authoritarian governments in the UNHRC, which often leaves Western democracies in the voting minority. As for China-led institutions, a prominent example is the introduction of the "three evils"

concept in the documents of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization that contributed to the international legitimization of Beijing's narrative on Uyghurs [Leksyutina, You, 2023, p.375].

The Chinese government not only uses membership in international organizations for public argumentation of its position but also seeks to control the platforms, promoting Chinese citizens or foreigners that support China's narratives to leadership positions [Zhao, 2021, p.44]. For example, at present, Chinese officials are in charge of 4 out of 15 UN specialized agencies [Fung, Lam, 2020]. Leading these structures not only helps China to advance its economic influence by developing global technology standards, but also helps to promote China's narrative on issues like sovereignty, human rights and security. For example, the ICAO has used China's narrative on the Taiwan issue to deny Taiwan's participation as an observer since China's Liu Fang became secretary-general in 2015. Scholars note that to the majority of the governments, China's vision on many issues appear commonplace and familiar as democracies comprise a small coalition of states at the United Nations relative to authoritarian states and developing countries [Hulvey, 2023].

Institutions that were established by China are widely discussed in mass media [Seiwert, 2020] and narratives produced by them are generally associated with the Chinese government. At the same time, in the case of global institutions such as the UN, sometimes it is hard to establish who stands behind the promotion of the narratives. Given the growing trust of the general public to information disseminated through global IOs [Greenhill, 2020], the ability to influence what kind of information is promoted directly impacts the international public opinion, and at the same time these ideas may not be directly associated with the Chinese government.

## Think Tanks

Under Xi Jinping China started to accelerate its presence in the field of knowledge production [SCIO, 2024]. For example, in the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan (2016-2020), China declared the creation of 50-100 high-level think tanks [Piatachkova, 2023; Grachikov, 2021]. For a long time Western knowledge was associated with scientifically valid knowledge [Noda, 2020], however Chinese scholars observe a cultural and geographical migration of knowledge production in the field of international relations [Yuan, Gu, 2024]. To make China's voice authoritative in the sphere of knowledge production Beijing uses various approaches: creates foreign branches of Chinese think tanks, utilizes local organizations in other countries, and develops think tank networks.

In the case of think tanks, strategic narratives are incorporated in the analytics and policy papers they produce. Think tanks also organize international seminars together with representatives of foreign research centers, shape the agenda of these meetings and use them as platforms for interpersonal communication. For example, the Center for China and Globalization (CCG), an independent think tank based in Beijing, has been granted special consultative status by the United Nations Economic and Social Council and has established a global research network comprising prominent experts from China and other countries. The audience of these think tanks is global due to China's collaborative approach. For example, in 2015 the Chinese government established a global network of affiliated think tanks known as the Silk Road Think Tank Network, with a focus on advancing the Belt and Road Initiative. This network includes prestigious think tanks and research institutes from all over the Globe, including prominent western think tanks such as Chatham House in the UK, the Elcano Royal Institute in Madrid, and the German Development Institute. Furthermore, China has been cultivating partnerships with think tanks from various regions. For example, the High-Level Think Tanks Forum for High-Quality Development of China-CEEC Local Cooperation, held in 2021 in Ningbo, explored opportunities for enhancing local cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries in areas such as economy, trade, environmental conservation, and technological innovation [China Daily, 2021].

In most cases the connection of the think tank to the Chinese government is quite obvious. According to Li [2022], China has approximately 2,000 think tanks, 90 percent of which are run by the state. Many heads of top think tanks serve as members of the CCP's Central Committee. For example Gao Xiang, the president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences is currently a member of the 20th

Central Committee of the CCP. According to Zhang [2016], Chinese scholars working in think tanks are usually expected to support (*beishu*) government policies rather than analyze them critically. When it comes to content produced by foreigners, it is harder to detect the influence of Chinese narratives on their texts. Still some research shows that phrases like “win win cooperation” that are central in the Chinese policy discourse are sometimes appropriated by scholars from Central and Eastern Europe in their research [Vangeli, 2019]. So in this case Chinese narratives are sometimes unconsciously spread by the foreign researchers.

## Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that the communication channels China employs to disseminate its strategic narratives to the international audience present a complex system. The channels not only vary depending on the target audience, content type, and level of control China exerts on each of them, but also seem to fulfill different functions within China’s communication strategy.

As for mass media, China utilizes a multi-pronged approach, employing state-owned media giants, niche companies and foreign media outlets to reach various audiences. Chinese media outlets are controlled by the CCP, which ensures message consistency but raises concerns about editorial independence. However, even among the media flagships, there are more commercialized ones like CGTN, which have to incorporate narratives in professional reporting, and the official ones like *China Daily* that serve as mouthpieces of the CCP. Niche outlets like *Sixth Tone* or *Global Times* cater to specific interests, often project tactical agenda or fulfill more specific goals.

Chinese diplomats, as well as state and party media have actively adopted social media platforms like X and Facebook to project China’s narratives to international audiences. This presence offers significant reach, but Chinese diplomats and media outlets rarely use the most important feature of social media - direct engagement with audiences, limiting its strategic potential. Occasional hawkish outbursts on X by Chinese diplomats become viral but compromise China’s image as a responsible power. Although aggressive rhetoric used by diplomats may seem to be based on personal decisions rather than strategic choices, the absence of disciplinary actions or demotions implies that it is a deliberate strategy that serves some goals.

The existing global media environment has influenced China’s attempts to project its narratives. Chinese media has had to deal with “the political or ideological skepticism of its relationship with the Chinese state, the consolidated regional markets that exclude newcomers, such as North America and even some African countries, and also the huge gaps in professional competence” [Hu, Ji and Gong, 2017, p. 68]. On the one hand, this situation is changing, as the rise of non-Western media markets and the decline of traditional Western dominance creates opportunities for China’s media to gain a foothold. On the other hand, Chinese attempts to project their narratives are met with pushback due to concerns about state control and potential propaganda, especially in liberal democracies. China tries to overcome lack of credibility and trust among foreign audiences by using media outlets and influencers which are not formally affiliated with the Chinese state.

China also leverages global and regional institutions and forums to disseminate its strategic narratives worldwide. This approach involves active participation in shaping international documents and resolutions, aligning with like-minded nations, and establishing institutions through which China conveys its narratives. These initiatives, ranging from regional to global in scope, hold significance as the general public tends to trust information produced by international organizations, making them a crucial channel for influencing global audiences.

Finally, China, under Xi Jinping’s leadership, has recognized the importance of knowledge production and has actively expanded its presence in the field by establishing high-level think tanks and engaging in international collaborations. The strategic use of think tanks is aimed at amplifying China’s voice and influence in knowledge production and incorporating Chinese ideas in scientific debates on various issues.

To conclude, it seems that the projected messages are an outcome of China's strategic interests, audience fragmentation and special features of channels that privilege certain kinds of interactions. However, further comparative research is needed to confirm this hypothesis. An additional avenue for future research may involve assessing the efficacy of communication channels utilized by China.

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