SPECIAL REPORT

The world according to China

Capturing and analysing the global media influence strategies of a superpower

Abstract: This project captured and analysed Chinese strategies seeking to influence global media in its coverage of China. While there is ample literature defining some of these strategies, there is a lack of empirical data tracking the strategies in practice. The project addressed this by surveying officials from journalism unions in 87 countries on their perceptions of Chinese influence on the media in their country. The surveys were complemented by focus groups with senior journalists and editors in six countries. The findings illustrated how China's global media outreach policies have grown increasingly sophisticated and how the country utilises a multi-pronged approach to influence global media.

Keywords: authoritarianism, case study, China, global media, influence, journalism, Pacific, public sphere

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Introduction

MONTHS before Xi Jinping became the leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), a communique, referred to as Document Number 9, was circulated by the CCP General Office (ChinaFile, 2013). The document outlined a harsher political, free speech and media environment President Xi intended for China. It advised party leaders and officials to be on guard against several political 'perils': constitutionalism, civil society, historical mistakes by the Communist party, universal values—understood here to be those

enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—and, most importantly for this research article, Western-style press freedom (Ranade, 2013; Ho, 2015, ChinaFile, 2013). The document signalled a significantly harsher climate for freedom of expression as well as the imminent demise of watchdog journalism, to strengthen the Marxist function of journalism as a tool to guide and channel the masses (Bandurski, 2018).

> We need to strengthen education on the Marxist perspective of media to ensure that the media leadership is always firmly controlled by someone who maintains an identical ideology with the Party's Central Committee, under General Secretary Xi Jinping's leadership. (ChinaFile, 2013, p. 8)

Chinese officials never denied the authenticity of Document Number 9, and a court later sentenced veteran journalist Gao Yu to seven years in jail for her role in allegedly leaking the document (Ho, 2015; Veg, 2015).

Since coming to power, President Xi has changed the constitution to make way for an unprecedented third term as party leader (Phillips, 2018) and cracked down on online and offline political dissent (ChinaFile, 2013). He has also instituted a system of political indoctrination camps to re-educate as many as one million of China's mainly Muslim minority in the far northwestern region of Xinjiang (Sudworth, 2019). Furthermore, the Xi government has effectively ended the One Country Two Systems status of Hong Kong by imposing draconian National Security Legislation on the territory, and globally spruiked its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Bradsher, 2020). His propaganda mission, as well as tightening control over the media (ChinaFile, 2013), has been to 'tell a good China story' or 'tell China's story well' (Huang, 2019; Jacob, 2020).

It should be acknowledged *all* countries want their story told well, and China is neither the first, nor the last powerhouse trying to influence how the rest of the world perceives them. The US has projected its power around the globe since the end of World War II via media outlets such as the Voice of America. Russia set up international news channel Russia Today to tell its story well globally. Several countries have media with global reaches, such as BBC's World Service or the French news channel France24, though they operate under different funding models and editorial oversight to Russia Today. However, China's efforts are exemplified by their scale, coherence and resources invested, as well as their truly global ambition.

Unlike the (ideal) role of journalism in liberal democratic countries, the media in China is not independent but controlled by the CCP, and its most important role is to serve as the CCP's information disseminator to maintain stability and social coherence in the country. All other possible roles for Chinese media are secondary (Dukalskis, 2017). As Lim and Bergin state: 'For China, the media has become both the battlefield on which this "global information war" is being

waged, and the weapon of attack' (2018).

It is inaccurate to assume authoritarian regimes do not need to legitimise their existence. Using Dukalskis' authoritarian public sphere (APS) framework (2017), we argue China's global media outreach strategy can be understood as an intervention into the global public sphere, attempting to influence and control global public discourse on what China stands for, the legitimacy of its policies and regime, and its future global role. Dukalskis describes APS as antithetical to the traditional Habermasian (1989) liberal democratic public sphere. A system dominated by an APS lacks free speech, freedom of assembly, and free flow of information, properties crucial for a traditional public sphere. Instead, an APS is populated with what Dukalskis terms 'legitimising messages'. In China, these are created and published by the CCP to justify the party's existence, rule, and effectiveness. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine is a timely reminder of the importance of such messages justifying the Chinese government's refusal to explicitly condemn the Russian invasion and join international sanctions against Russia (Kirby, 2022).

The principal research question for this project was: What are the strategies used by China to influence foreign media's reporting of China in the countries of study? To address the question, this article analysed two global surveys conducted in 2019 and 2020/2021 of journalism unions affiliated with the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). Union officials in 58 countries were surveyed in 2019, with 30 senior journalists and editors from three countries participating in follow-up focus group interviews. A second round of 50 union officials from 50 countries were surveyed at the end of 2020 and another group of 30 senior journalists and editors from three other countries participated in focus groups in early 2021. In total, participants from 87 different countries took part in the two studies. It should be noted the data collected in the surveys are the observations of union officials and cannot be representative of all journalists. However, as they are union officials and thus engaged with media policy issues, it is likely they possess a sound level of knowledge regarding the issue of Chinese media influence.

The 2019 study found China uses several tools to influence international media. The most influential were funding trips for foreign journalists to visit China; providing Chinese-produced media content for free; buying shares in foreign media companies; expanding China's state-run media presence overseas; and negotiating and signing memoranda of understanding (MOU) with foreign media companies and government agencies. The 2020/2021 study found China's decade-long effort to lay its global media groundwork shifted into overdrive trying to influence waves of media coverage generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. These efforts appeared to be somewhat successful. Many of the participating countries reported China was perceived more positively at the end of 2020 than before the pandemic.

The article is organised as follows: a background and literature review section will be followed by the methodology, a findings section and finally the discussion and conclusion sections.

Background and literature review

For more than a decade, there has been significant scholarship regarding China's efforts to influence international media and public discourse regarding the perception of China (Jacob, 2020; Thussu, 2017; Wasserman, 2013; Xin, 2009). Given the post-pandemic global environment and China's ongoing efforts to influence the discourse on its role in the world, this topic deserves ongoing attention. Literature spanning from 2008 to the present has traced China's growing reach and utilisation of specific strategies to influence international media. However, the literature still requires a global and up-to-date empirical dataset identifying the strategies in practice and assessing the impact of these strategies. The studies described in this article aimed to contribute to such a global dataset. This section will provide both a general overview and highlight seminal scholarship.

'Going out' strategy

The 2008 Beijing Olympics was a watershed moment for China's global outreach strategy. CCP leadership expressed frustration with the critical coverage of Chinese human rights issues and regarding the situation in Tibet (Lim & Bergin 2018). In a 2008 speech, then President Hu Jintao noted international opinion on China had continued to maintain a 'West is strong, we are weak' pattern, calling on its journalists to be vigilant in meeting this 'challenge' (Congressional-Executive Commission on China, 2008).

In 2009, Hu Jintao committed US$9.3 billion on a global media expansion project (Mantesso, 2019) to grow the overseas presence of the state-run media outlets CCTV (renamed CGTN in 2016, then merging with Radio International and China National Radio to become Voice of China in 2018), Xinhua news agency and the *People's Daily* newspaper. This served as the media prong of China's 'going out' strategy, with the aim of promoting China's views and vision to the wider world and rebuffing negative portrayals (Thussu 2017, p. 2).

Previous scholarship on Chinese state-sponsored media organisations examined narrative patterns (Zhou & Wu, 2017), analysed localised bureaus and their messaging and discourse (Marsh, 2016; Marsh, 2017; Xiang, 2020; Xin, 2009), provided possible models for their international expansion (Mi, 2017), their use in public diplomacy (Hartig, 2017), and their history in lockstep with state strategies of 'going out' (Huang, 2017).

China in the Global South

Much has been written about China in the global south, including relations with

Africa (Finlay, 2013; Madrid-Morales, 2018; Wasserman, 2013; Xiang, 2020), Latin America (Morales, 2018; 2021, Ospina Estupinan 2017, Ye and Albornoz 2018), relations across Southeast Asia where China first tested its 'soft power' strategy (Kurlantzick 2007)—and the Pacific Islands (Zhang 2021; Zhang & Watson 2020).

From 2000-2015, trade between Africa and China increased from $10 billion to $280 billion (Thussu, 2017). Under President Hu Jintao, China's media also sought a foothold in Africa, with CCTV launching African headquarters in Kenya in 2012. China's pursuits in Africa have been the subject of several studies describing the strategies used (Finlay, 2013; Madrid-Morales, 2018; Wasserman, 2013; Xiang, 2020; Xin, 2009) and analysis into how specific audiences interpret these strategies (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales, 2018; Xiang 2018). China's interest in African countries can be perceived as a long-term strategy, making African countries more economically dependent on China and as an extension loyal to the Chinese worldview (Madrid-Morales, 2018). This is a notion borne out by the findings in this study, as we demonstrate below.

Like Africa, China's trade and media relations with Latin America expanded in the previous decade, peaking in 2013 at $278 billion in bilateral trade (Ye and Albornoz 2018). Again, in similar fashion, China has a media presence in Latin America via CCTV/CGTN-Español. Ye (2017) identified stories relating to China accounted for over 50 percent of airtime, and grounded international stories from a Chinese perspective using Chinese experts and officials. Moreover, non-news programmes such as documentaries were still grounded in the Chinese perspective, such as history, tourism destinations and food (ibid).

Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu have access to English language CCTV/CGTV and China maintains ground stations in these countries (Crocombe, 2010). In 2010, Xinhua established a branch in Fiji's capital Suva, the first in the Pacific. China has repeatedly arranged trips to the mainland for Pacific journalists (Zhang, 2021), and funded construction of media facilities (Zhang & Watson 2020), while on occasions barring local journalists from questioning visiting Chinese dignitaries (Zhang, 2021; Lyons, 2022; Ahearn, 2022). Media organisations in the Pacific are seen as 'vulnerable' to offers of financial assistance by China (Ahearn, 2022a, 2022b). Chinese foreign aid to the Pacific has been previously discussed (Crocombe, 2010), including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Zhang, 2021). The use of international trips, financial aid, and other media investment can be seen as a recurring technique used to influence media coverage and public perception of China, as demonstrated in our results below.

China in the Global North
China's global media efforts are not isolated to the Global South but found also in the Global North. As many as 30 foreign newspapers, including *The New*

York Times, *The Washington Post,* and *The Wall Street Journal*, were paid to carry supplements called 'China Watch' in their pages (Lim & Bergin, 2018). In 2016, Fairfax Australia (now known as Nine Newspapers) began publishing pull-out propaganda supplements titled '*China Daily'* (Mediawatch, 2016), like those carried by *The Washington Post*. *The Daily Mail Australia* also had a partnership with the *People's Daily* of China which provided content which could be 'swapped' (Greenslade, 2016). While content was often saccharine or non-political, these partnerships served to provide legitimacy to the propaganda wing of the CCP.

Scholarship on China's behaviour in the wake of COVID-19 identified a further refinement of global media influence strategies, building on the ones identified above. Jacob documented how China promotes its contributions to the COVID-19 effort, deflects the blame for the outbreak and draws attention to other countries' struggles with their outbreaks as evidence of struggling political systems (2020).

The authoritarian public sphere

It has been argued that historically, during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, civil societies resembling Habermasian public spheres did develop in China (Rankin, 1993). Scholarly discourse on the development of a modern Chinese public sphere emerged in force after the Tiananmen square massacre in 1989. Gu's (1993) useful overview concluded there was close to unanimous agreement in the early 1990s that civil society, and to a certain extent a Chinese version of the public sphere, was (re)emerging after a long period of being mostly dormant. However, he concluded the public sphere conceptual framework was of limited use in analysing the relationship between Chinese citizens and the state.

> It seems that by proceeding in this way, we indeed run the risk of getting involved in an ideological or teleological exercise in which the Western model of development is merely projected onto China, without increasing our understanding of the real dynamics of change in Chinese society past and present. (p. 52)

Another important moment in the research and discourse on China and the public sphere was with the quick growth of the internet during the first decade of this century. Here Svensson's work on the role of investigative journalism and its connection to the internet and to the civil society/public sphere is important (2012). After initial positive signs of Web 2.0 strengthening civil society in China, the CCP successfully turned the Chinese internet into a tool to control its citizens and to tame some entrepreneurs that became too independent as Svensson shows in one of her latest studies (2021). She also concluded during Xi's time as President, the public sphere, in the Western meaning, has withered in China.

This is why Dukalskis' work on the authoritarian public sphere provides a highly useful framework for the conceptualisation of this study (2017) and analysis of the findings. Dukalskis argues authoritarian regimes use the media and its role in the APS to keep citizens out of politics as politically neutral and passive actors so the ruling elite can stay in power. Dukalskis has created a taxonomy of the techniques used by autocracies to populate and dominate the APS. He has labelled 'the six elements of legitimising messages' (2017, pp. 55-56). Concealment elements aim to suppress and, when possible, erase, events and facts undermining the legitimacy of the regime. Framing elements focus on stories that are positive for and confirm the state. Inevitability elements portray the regime as unified and strong and prepared to rule in perpetuity. Blaming elements push responsibility away from the regime, blaming failures on other actors and stakeholders. Mythologised origin elements seek to connect the ruling regime with historical events and figures to justify its existence based on history. Finally, promised land elements are forward-looking and describe a better and brighter future if the current leaders are allowed to rule in perpetuity. Our study found the Chinese global media outreach strategy uses all but one of these messaging elements to influence the perception of China in the global public sphere.

Some work has been done on capturing the nature and effects of the APS inside authoritarian countries (Dukalskis, 2017), but largely missing so far is the capture and assessment of the impact when a superpower like China attempts to expand its APS outside its borders. This study contributes to new knowledge to this part of the APS framework.

Methodology

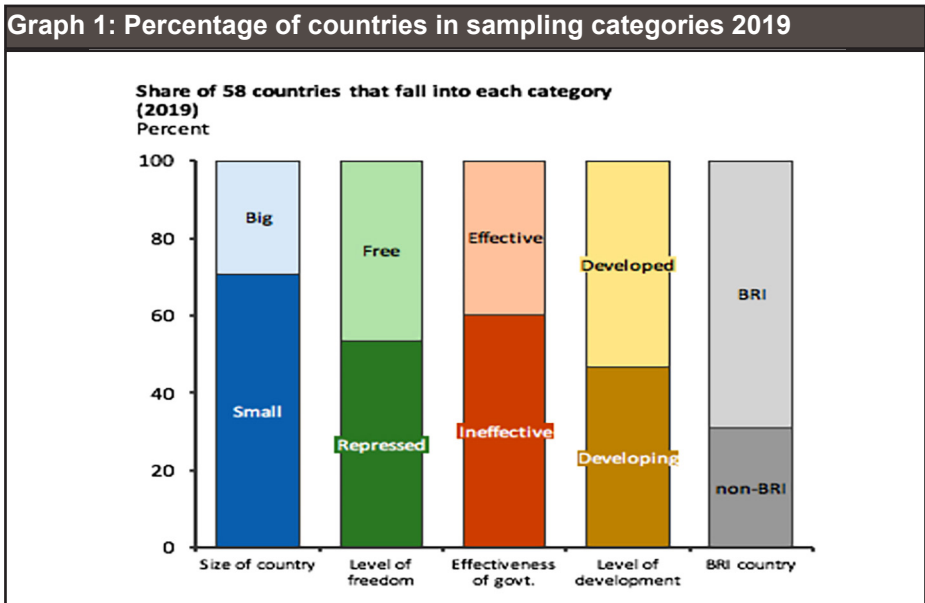The project's research questions were:
- What are the strategies used by China to influence foreign media's reporting of China in the countries of study?
- What is the impact of China's global media outreach policy in the countries of study?
- How has COVID-19 influenced the coverage of China in the countries of study?

To access and engage with a large number of people in the journalism industry, the research team collaborated with the IFJ. This turned out to be crucial for the research design as IFJ's distribution of the online surveys and facilitation of the focus groups led to high survey response rates and high-quality focus group. The translation of the online surveys into four languages was, most likely, helpful in generating the high participation rate. The core of the research design was a mixed methods approach combining the quantitative data generated by the surveys and the qualitative findings captured in the focus groups. According to Neuman, a mixed methods approach is particularly useful as the research questions

are addressed by two different data sets and these sets can be used to verify each other (2013).

The sampling method was to send invitations to IFJ journalism union affiliates in the 146 countries that are members of the IFJ. In the first 2019 study 58 journalism union officials in 58 countries affiliated with the IFJ participated in the survey using the Qualtrics online survey tool. The unions were based in six regions: Asia-Pacific, Africa, Europe, Latin America, North America and the MENA region (the Middle East and North Africa). Of the participating countries 31 were in the Global North, 27 were in the Global South. A full list of participating countries is available in Appendix 1. The participating countries were divided into the following categories to ensure a valid socio-economic spread in the sample: country size, level of freedom, effectiveness of government, global north/south and signatory of BRI.

The survey study was followed up with focus groups with 30 senior journalists and editors in Kenya, Philippines and Myanmar, ten in each country. The sampling method for the focus group was purposive sampling (Neuman, 2013) based on IFJ led workshops regarding China's media influence in the three countries. The World Bank's Government Effectiveness Index and Voice and Accountability Index were used to measure the participating countries' governance performance and level of freedoms. The UN Human Development Index was used to place a country in the global north or the global south. Country size was based on World Bank data and a large country was defined as having a population of more than 40 million people (Worldbank, 2020b; Worldbank, 2020c; Worldbank, 2020a; United Nations, 2020)

Graph 1: Percentage of countries in sampling categories 2019

Share of 58 countries that fall into each category (2019) Percent

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Graph 1 provides an overview of the sample categories and the proportion of the participating countries in each category.

The second study, conducted December 2020 to January 2021, addressed the same research questions as above with the addition of a number of survey and focus group questions surrounding COVID-19 and its influence on China coverage in the countries of study.

In the second survey, 54 national journalism unions from 50 countries participated. The participating countries in both studies are listed in Appendix 1. They came from the same regions as in the first study, but the number of participating countries in the MENA region was increased to firm up the generalisability of the findings. The focus groups in this study were conducted with 30 senior journalists and editors in Serbia, Italy and Tunisia.

In total 87 national journalism unions were surveyed, and 60 senior journalists and editors participated in the focus groups in the two studies. Given the extensive reach of the surveys complemented by the focus group data and the geographical and socioeconomic mix in the sample, there can be a reasonable level of confidence in the global generalisability of the findings (Neuman, 2013). The amount and high quality of the data captured in the project empirically tracking and visualising the impact of the Chinese global media strategy is the study's main contribution to the field of journalism studies. This is the first study surveying such a geographically diverse population of journalism union officials about Chinese media influence.

Findings 2019 and 2020/2021

The detailed findings have been published in two reports produced for the IFJ (Lim & Bergin 2020; Lim, Bergin & Lidberg 2021). Below is a summary of the principal findings based on these reports. Where not attributed to the reports, the data is published for the first time in this article. What was not included in the IFJ reports were the APS framework and the discussion and analysis based on

Graph 2: Percentage of countries with China media presence
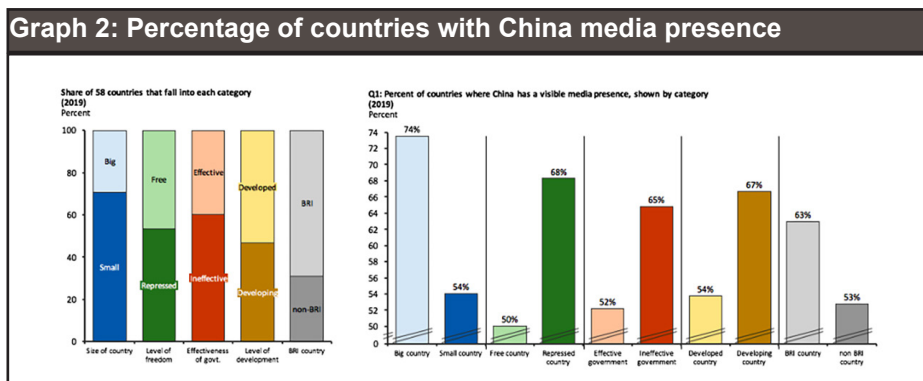
Source: Lim & Bergin (2020).

the APS. The total sample population for the two surveys was the 146-member countries in the IFJ who all were invited to participate in the survey. After the two surveys IFJ affiliate journalism unions in 87 countries had replied to the surveys giving a 60 percent response rate. This is a healthy participation rate, meaning the data reliability is high and the margin of error small (Neuman, 2013).

The baseline finding in the 2019 study is illustrated in Graph 2. What stands out in Graph 2 is China is most active in countries with developing economic and political systems, countries that have signed up to the BRI, and in large countries. The survey responses also indicated China's media outreach policy is sophisticatedly tailored to individual countries. An example of this is the African country Guinea-Bissau, population 1.8 million, received significant amounts of media production equipment from China via the national journalism union. China also funds large parts of the media in the country and pays for the education of journalists in Guinea-Bissau.

The survey found three principal strategies used by China to influence foreign media on their own turf: Chinese funded journalistic exchanges and reportage trips to China; journalism union cooperation and content sharing agreements.

Journalistic exchanges

Overall, half the survey respondents indicated they had been on reporting trips, exchanges, and training funded by the Chinese government. Trips varied in length from a few weeks to up to ten months. Majority of the respondents (75 percent) said union members found the trips very useful from a reporting perspective.

Excursions were often connected to a theme such as technological advances, the strong Chinese economy, and the building of modernised cities. These initiatives were not only targeted at the global south, but also the global north, such as Australia. One example was a collaboration between the University of Technology Sydney and the All China Journalist Association that between 2016-2019 organised China reporting trips for 28 senior Australian journalists and editors (Lim & Bergin, 2020).

Graph 3: Countries with journalists on Chinese-funded training
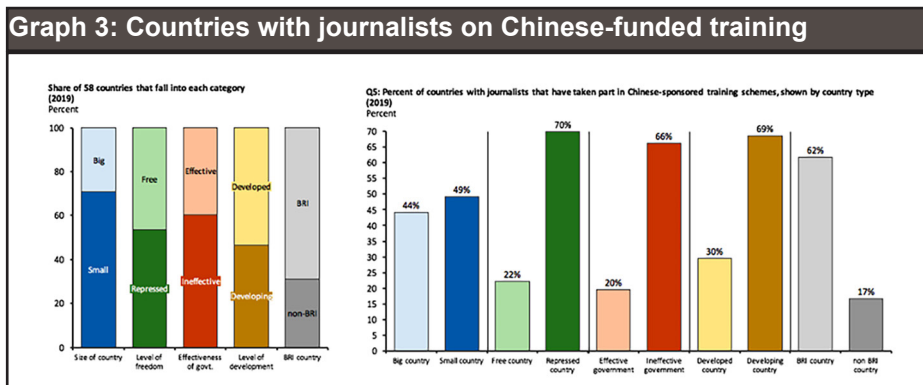
Union corporation

Signing memorandums of understanding (MOU) is an influence tool frequently used by the Chinese government via the state controlled All China Journalists Association (ACJA) (Svensson, 2012). Survey data showed 36 percent of the respondents had been offered to sign a MOU, with 14 percent signing. It is clear China's global media outreach policy has a strong focus on the Global South. However, the countries that entered MOUs were geographically and economically more diverse than expected. Two were in the Asia-Pacific, three in Africa and three in Europe (Lim & Bergin, 2020).

The United Front is China's most important tool for advancing China's interests and image domestically and abroad. Firmly controlled by the party, it coordinates many other agencies and party run organisations. Using MOUs is classic United Front strategy—if you cannot outmanoeuvre or neutralise a non-friendly entity, then co-opt them (Suzuki, 2019).

Unfortunately, most MOUs include a non-disclosure clause, so we have very limited knowledge of precise content. Some information regarding the MOUs has been shared with the IFJ, indicating most appear to centre on journalistic exchanges, financed reporting trips, training programs and cooperation between journalism schools. In some cases, the signatories agree to take part in seminars about the BRI (Lim & Bergin, 2020).

Chinese content abroad

Of the respondents 34 percent said their country had content sharing agreements with Chinese media. The most far-reaching example was provided by the Afghani union where Xinhua News Agency had signed content sharing agreements with between 25 and 30 media outlets including Afghanistan TV, *Kabul Times*, Rasad News Agency, Saba TV and Aftab TV. The respondents pointed out most of the Chinese media content provided a positive picture of China as culturally diverse, technologically advanced, and economically successful. (Lim & Bergin, 2020).

Positive framing of BRI

The Belt and Road Initiative, connecting east with west (China, Europe and Africa) partly along the old silk trading routes, building roads, harbours, and train lines, is the CCP's and Xi Jinping's principal vehicle to restore China to its former position as the global dominant trading and economic power. BRI is one of the major reasons for the global media strategy that is, in part, aimed at preparing opinion for this undertaking. China has been very successful in signing BRI MOUs with countries, illustrated by the fact that nearly 70 percent of the study's respondents came from signatory countries. There are perks to being a signatory. Journalists from these countries can apply for a ten-month training programme

at elite Chinese institutions. This is of course an opportunity to present the BRI in a positive light to foreign journalists (ibid).

Media ownership and presence

Buying foreign media companies outright or in-part is a United Front strategy known as 'borrowing a boat to reach the ocean' (Lim, 2019). The survey showed this is a rapidly expanding strategy. Nearly two thirds of the responses said there was a 'visible' media presence by China in their countries. Part of this presence is through media ownership. The responses also reported this presence varied from country to country, indicating a sophisticated tailoring per country. Like the union cooperation described above, there was great geographic spread as to where respondents reported Chinese entities had either bought whole media companies or set up joint media company ventures: four countries in Europe, two in the Asia-Pacific, two in Africa and one in the MENA region.

The focus groups

Focus groups with senior journalists and editors were conducted in Myanmar, the Philippines and Kenya. The groups were designed to capture qualitative data to complement and enhance the survey findings.

A common theme occurring in all focus groups was the prevalence of Chinese funded journalistic exchanges, training, and travel to China. Almost all participants in the Myanmar group had been on such trips, with one visiting nine times. A Filipino journalist [informant 20] described the tours as just the start of engagement with local reporters, 'The Chinese embassy here organised several media tours: in several batches, to many cities and provinces in China. And since then, I've never stopped receiving press releases and invitations to events from the Chinese embassy.' The informant described China's engagement as the most intense and consistent of all embassies.

A Kenyan participant [informant 7], who had been on one of these trips, said, 'The main focus is usually to try to make Kenyan journalists . . . get to see the other side of China because the Chinese during these trips usually insist that the Western media give the wrong impression about China.' But the journalists criticised the strict controls on their movements while in China.

On the efficacy of such trips, one Kenyan journalist [informant 2] commented:

> Their strategy is two-pronged. They target journalists who cover news, so that they would want to brainwash you to think the way they think. It may not have worked to a greater impact, but it was a work in progress. On another front, some of those who benefit from these trips are key actors in the newsroom, especially at the editorial level. In that way, you can say they are trying to embed themselves in the newsrooms.

Content sharing and media company ownership were also common themes, with some of participants labelling the Chinese content published in their country as propaganda aimed at glorifying Chinese policies, local investments, and infrastructure projects funded by Chinese companies. One Kenyan [Kenyan informant 1] said, 'The presence of the Chinese media in Africa is basically to propagate Chinese policy with regard to Africa.'

Journalists from the Philippines focus group described how some of the reporting trips to China targeted Muslim journalists. These trips went to the Xinjiang autonomous region, aiming to counter reports about Beijing's political indoctrination camps, imprisoning as many as one million members of the Muslim Uyghur minority according to a United Nations committee (Levy, 2018 One focus group participant [informant 24] said they personally knew of three journalists who had been to Xinjiang on Chinese tours, then written positive stories about it: 'They all wrote about how beautiful [it is], also some stories praising China for cracking down on terrorists.'

Some Kenyan journalists thought the Chinese focus on inspiring and positive news about Kenya and other African countries was refreshing, but expressed concern about the Chinese influence on the transition from analogue to digital broadcasting, via its ownership of the Kenyan-based StarTimes Pay TV network. The network has 25 million subscribers in 30 African countries, giving it major reach into both metropolitan and rural areas, and offering a way to broadcast Chinese media content 'that tells China's story well' (Lim & Bergin, 2018). In both the Philippines and Kenya, participants were suspicious about the long-term goals of the Chinese presence in their country, with some expressing concerns their own government would adopt a CCP-style media policy clamping down on watchdog journalism. One Kenyan journalist [informant 1] said,

> The danger here is that these Kenyan party leaders may adopt the position taken by the Communist party of China to clamp down on journalists who do not dance to the tune of the government that is in power. We see that as a potential challenge.

These fears were echoed by a Filipino journalist [informant 28], who expressed worry about the impact of Chinese influence on young journalists and officials, 'I'm afraid that they are learning the wrong way. Instead of getting insights on journalism from free countries like the US, UK, Western Europe and even Japan, they are learning state-control.'

Findings 2020-2021 study
The aims of the second study remained the same as in the 2019 data collection with the addition of what impact, if any, COVID-19 had had on China's media presence and strategies in the countries of study. The principal takeaways from

the 2020 study were: COVID increased China's media presence abroad, COVID diplomacy, China's strengthened standing in the global south and the use of mis- and disinformation (Lim, Bergin & Lidberg, 2021).

China's increased media presence

When the pandemic hit in 2020, China's global media influence infrastructure went into overdrive. The survey showed 56 percent of the participants said their perception was China's image in their country had become more positive since the start of the pandemic. Twenty percent said the image of China was unchanged and 24 percent had the belief China's image had become more negative since the start of 2020 (Lim, Bergin & Lidberg, 2021). Another key finding from the survey was 76 percent of the respondents reported a visible Chinese presence in their country's media system, be it coverage, content sharing, MOUs or media company ownership. This was up from 64 percent in the 2019 survey (Lim, Bergin & Lidberg, 2021).

COVID diplomacy

China donated medical aid to 47 of the 50 countries that undertook this survey. The aid came in various forms, from personal protection equipment to Chinese made COVID vaccines, and in Tunisia, the construction of a hospital. Of the countries of study, 42 percent received Chinese vaccines. This had a profound impact on how China was perceived in the different countries, as illustrated by Graph 4.

Furthermore, the survey data showed 57 percent of respondents from vaccine recipient countries had observed efforts by Chinese actors to shape and influence
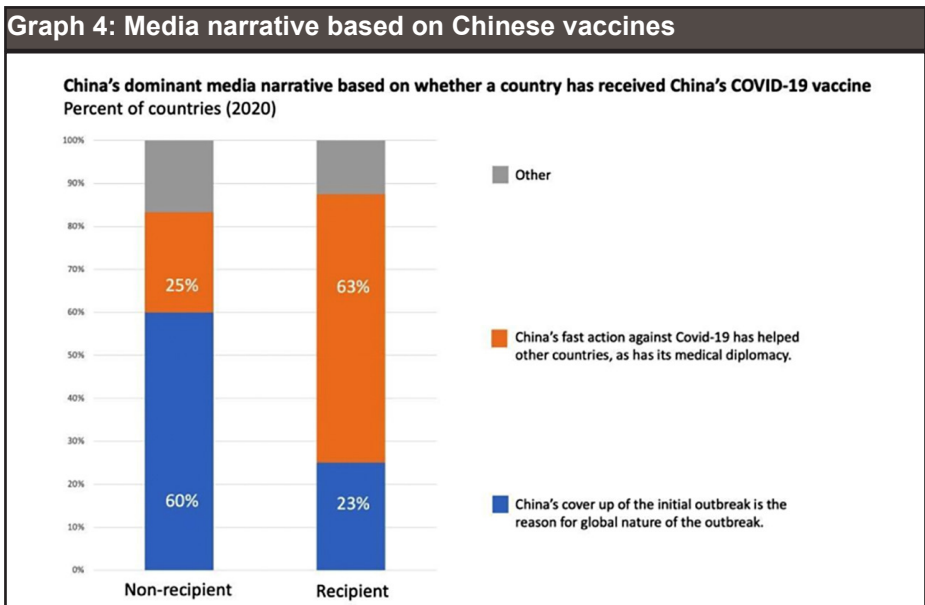

Graph 4: Media narrative based on Chinese vaccines

China's dominant media narrative based on whether a country has received China's COVID-19 vaccine
Percent of countries (2020)

Other

China's fast action against Covid-19 has helped other countries, as has its medical diplomacy.

China's cover up of the initial outbreak is the reason for global nature of the outbreak.

Figure 1: 'Thank you brother Xi'.

media coverage. This compares to 34 percent in the non-vaccine recipient countries (Lim, Bergin & Lidberg, 2021).

The focus groups

Serbia was a major recipient of Chinese COVID aid during 2020. In the centre of Belgrade, the effects were plain to see. The large billboard depicted in Figure 1 carries text beside an image of Xi Jinping: 'thank you brother Xi.' This is a clear illustration of the visibility and impact of China's COVID diplomacy and messaging.

A theme in the Serbian focus group was how close the Serbian government had grown to China during the pandemic. Much of China's strategy is seen to be self-serving, as described by Serbian informant 2, 'When it comes to media strategy by China, it primarily relates to inter-governmental relations. Reporting by Serbian media on China primarily focused on wealth development and thriving international relations between Serbia and China'.

One journalist working in a mainstream paper [Serbian informant 8] described the relation between the two countries' leaders as taking centre stage in coverage. 'This is how media are reporting in Serbian cooperation between Serbia and China. Everything is based on the presidents, the friendship between our two presidents, which is a bit laughable.' During 2020 China invested heavily in Serbian data centres, smart surveillance and the cooperation with the Chinese telco giant Huawei deepened (Lim, Bergin & Lidberg, 2021). One journalist [Serbian informant 4] described his fears that Serbia would be a 'testing ground' for China.

> We are aware that China has ambitions regarding technological standards
> and that there are plans until 2035, 2040 to flood the European market

with certain technological standards. I guess it's Serbia that may serve as a testing ground for a number of those digital standards in the exchange of goods and services which then can be rolled out Europe-wide.

The Italian focus group centred on how China vigorously courted Italian authorities after the country was hit by the first COVID wave. One example was Chinese media outlets offered content for free, translated into Italian, illustrating the increased country tailoring of Chinese media content. One journalist [Italian informant 6] described another example:

> They asked us to give more space to the New Year speech of President Xi Jinping. They gave it to us for free directly translated into Italian and we broadcast it, in of course not the best times, but still, these were the first steps.

A second example discussed in the focus group was the content deal between the Italian state-run news agency ANSA and Xinhua. This led to the launch of the Xinhua Italian service. A consequence of the deal was ANSA ran, on average, about 50 Xinhua produced stories per day. According to one participant, the arrangement had been non-controversial so far.

In sum, the Italian focus group participants recognised China was trying to influence Italian media content with particular focus on how China was covered. But the consensus was Italy, as a democratic country, had enough 'antibodies' to resist mis- and disinformation. The ANSA-Xinhua content deal was subsequently cancelled in 2022 (Harth 2022), only for a more minor outlet, The Nova Agency, to helm the deal.

Discussion

The findings make it clear China's global media presence has grown significantly since the 'going out' policy was instigated in 2009. Our studies have shown this in both quantitative and qualitative terms. From the focus group data, we can conclude that the participating countries situated in the global south, and particularly those which host Chinese investment and infrastructure projects, appear to have been more heavily impacted by China's media strategy. The global north countries displayed more scepticism toward China's influence campaign, but during the 2020 year of COVID, China's influence in countries like Italy and Serbia appear significant. How significant needs to be further investigated.

Our findings correlate with most of the principal findings in a Freedom House Report (Cook et al, 2022). The study covered 30 countries from all global regions. It found China has significantly expanded its global media footprint between 2019-2021. The CCP and its proxies have become increasingly sophisticated in shaping the global Chinese media narrative and suppressing critical reporting.

Disturbingly, the study pointed to an alarming unevenness in how democratic countries withstand and counter Chinese media influence (ibid).

Though initially perceived as crude propaganda techniques, China's strategies to influence foreign media reporting have grown more sophisticated since 2009. This is illustrated by the country-specific tailoring of strategies, such as offering Chinese-produced media content for free, already translated into target languages. Such influence campaigns are coupled with COVID diplomacy, with donations of vaccines, protective equipment, and the financing and construction of medical facilities.

The billboards in Belgrade displaying 'Thank you, Brother Xi' are a prominent example of direct impact of China's COVID diplomacy. Such findings clearly show how China used COVID to further its global media presence and influence. China has patiently and purposefully built its global media influence infrastructure since 2009, so when COVID struck, this infrastructure could be deployed with great precision. The pandemic saw increased global Chinese media influence and a more positive perception of China in some parts of the world. However, this does not necessarily map onto an increased usage of news content provided by the Chinese media. One example of this is Madrid-Morales' study analysing a corpus of 500,000 news stories in 30 African countries (2021). The principal finding was African publishers were far less likely to use content provided by Chinese media on COVID-19 compared to content from non-Chinese sources.

Legitimacy messaging and the spread of the Chinese authoritarian public sphere

The strategies used by China to increase its global media presence and influence can be viewed through the lens of the APS and Dukalskis' legitimising message taxonomy. The Chinese funded exchanges and reporting trips are examples of concealment elements. This is particularly true regarding reporting trips that took journalists from Muslim countries to the Xinjiang autonomous region. The aim of these trips was to conceal the true nature of the political indoctrination camps where members of the Muslim Uyghur minority are detained, showcasing them instead as vocational education centres.

Fully funded reporting trips targeting senior journalists in various countries to frame the Belt and Road Initiative in a positive light could be seen as framing elements as exemplified by the positive stories journalists filed after such trips, as shown by the Philippine example in the findings section.

The production of stories showing China's economic success and unique creation of state capitalism fits into the inevitability elements category, sending the message China will inevitably become the dominant global power. The overall framing paints it as a state that is strong, unified, and prepared to rule in perpetuity.

The 2020 study found clear evidence of the use of disinformation attempting to

shift the blame for the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic onto US soldiers visiting the city of Wuhan. Such stories epitomise blaming elements which aim to shift blame away from China and onto other actors.

The final category identified was *promised* land elements. Most Chinese produced media content about the BRI falls into this group, as do Chinese-led seminars on the origin and the future of BRI. The message here is the future is bright for all countries who sign up to the BRI.

The only legitimising message element that was not clearly identified in the findings in this project was mythologised origin elements. A possible explanation for this is this element is primarily used domestically.

Taken together, the above analysis points to a well-planned and consistently executed global strategy to influence the image of China abroad. What marks China out from similar global media influence efforts is the centralised coordination and the global ambition of its strategy, which targets countries with a range of political systems and economic structures. Another important difference with liberal democratic countries lies in China's authoritarian political system and its party-led judicial system, which lacks domestic checks and balances. In liberal democratic countries, based on the separation of power doctrine, independent courts test new laws and policies against the constitution, but this mechanism does not exist in China, given the CCP's tight rein.

The insertion of China's APS was most evident in the African countries that participated in the studies. China's message here, based on the findings, appears to preference its state-led capitalism over liberal democratic alternatives. That message was strengthened by China's COVID diplomacy, as confirmed by the African surveys and focus group.

Conclusion

This article has empirically captured the strategies used by China to increase its global media presence on a large scale. Given the number of countries that participated in the survey study (87), the findings are globally generalisable. It should, however, be noted the number of focus groups, conducted in six countries, are too low for generalisability. The focus groups should be seen instead as a qualitative complement to the survey data.

Principal findings show China's long-term commitment to its strategy of disseminating messages into the global public sphere that legitimise CCP rule, as well as outlining the type of tools used to achieve that goal. These include fully funded journalistic exchanges and reporting trips, MOUs with both media unions and media companies regarding content sharing and free, translated Chinese produced media content, buying shares in foreign media companies, offering media infrastructure support, pushing the BRI, and engaging in COVID pandemic diplomacy.

This article has argued that, taken together, the above strategies can be seen as an effort to offer an alternative to the traditional public sphere—the authoritarian public sphere, where the void created by the lack of free expression, free assembly and free flow of information is filled by messages legitimising the rule of the Chinese Communist Party in perpetuity.

As China's rise continues, it is crucial empirical study of its media influence strategies continues. This should not be done with the sole aim of providing counterbalance to propaganda, but to also further understand the mechanisms and strategies used to drive its global rise. In the age when mis- and disinformation spreads at warp speed, the thoughtful and long-term capture of data can serve to counter such information and the threat it poses to liberal democratic systems by undermining the confidence in its institutions.

The principal question raised by this project is the extent to which Chinese strategies have succeeded in individual countries. The notion raised by journalists and editors in the Italian focus group, that the Italian media and political systems have enough 'antibodies' to withstand the Chinese media influence deserves further attention. Future studies could focus on journalistic publication practices and media content in countries where China's media influence has been particularly active to determine the success of such strategies.

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Appendix1: Countries involved in the two IFJ gobal surveys	
2019	**2020/21**
Afghanistan, Australia, Brasil, Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroun, Canada, Chile, Costa Rica, Côte d'Ivoire, Cyprus, Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Finland, France, Gambia, Ghana, Guatemala, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Honduras, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Iraq, Kenya, Liberia, Macedonia, Malaysia, Mali, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Palestine, Panama, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Russia, Somalia, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, United States of America, Uruguay.	Afghanistan, Australia, **Belarus**, **Bhutan, Bosnia and Herzegovina**, Brasil, Cambodia, Cameroun, Canada, **Colombia**, Costa Rica, Côte d'Ivoire, **Cyprus**, **France**, Honduras, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, **Italy**, **Jordan**, **Korea (Republic of)**, **Macau SAR China**, Malaysia, Mali, **México**, **Mongolia**, Myanmar, **Namibia**, Nepal, **New Zealand**, Pakistan, Palestine, Panamá, Peru, Philippines, **Serbia**, **South Sudan**, Sri Lanka, **Sudan**, **Syria**, **Taiwan**, **Tanzania**, **Thailand**, **Timor-Leste**, **Tunisia**, Uganda, **Vanuatu**, Uruguay, United states of America, **Yemen**.

Note: Countries listed in bold were not surveyed in 2019.