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14. ABSTRACT
China is using its Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy to undermine the political and strategic relationship between the USA and European countries. Chinese leadership, disregarding attempts from other countries to encourage China to liberalize and improve domestic freedom, is planning to reach a strategic national objective: to become the new global cultural and economic center. One piece of this strategy is to divide Western Europe and penetrate it economically. To be effective, this strategy leverages a "soft power" campaign that encompasses Chinese Public Diplomacy and a complete set of communications techniques developed and coordinated through very different media channels.

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The Chinese Influence in Europe

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Executive Summary

Title: The Chinese Influence in Europe.

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Thesis: China is using its Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy to undermine the political and strategic relationship between the USA and European countries. Chinese leadership, disregarding attempts from other countries to encourage China to liberalize and improve domestic freedom, is planning to reach a strategic national objective: to become the new global cultural and economic center. One piece of this strategy is to divide Western Europe and penetrate it economically. To be effective, this strategy leverages a “soft power” campaign that encompasses Chinese Public Diplomacy and a complete set of communications techniques developed and coordinated through very different media channels.

Discussion: China is developing its strategy in Europe, exploring different approaches but firmly proposing an alternative model for world order to the one established by the United States after the Second World War. Its main instrument of leverage is represented by the Belt and Road Initiative, an extensive commercial network aimed to connect the Euroasian continent. China’s ambition is to be connected with the rest of the world, and particularly with Europe, and overcoming US primacy. To support this political effort, China has developed and adapted policies and media communications skills in order to control the narrative about China and its policies, as well as relevant messages to orient the European leadership and public opinion toward positive feeling on its initiatives.

Conclusion: China has demonstrated the ability to control and coordinates message campaigns with the public diplomacy objectives using different and pervasive media channels. The final result of these activities in Europe, however, may not necessarily be in line with Beijing’s

expectations, even if it constitutes a real threat to the stability and the interests of the United States in the region.

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Preface

In the last ten years of my military carrier I have served as a staff officer at the operational level in international organizations in Italy and abroad. My primary experience at the international level was in the NATO Rapid Deployable Corps Italy as a planner. During this appointment I was deployed in Pakistan as a UN military observer and in Afghanistan in the ISAF Joint Command during the sensitive planning phase for the transition from “International Security Assistance Force” (ISAF) to the operation “Resolute Support Mission” (RSM), 2014-2015. During both these experiences I had the remarkable opportunity to participate in several planning activities across the entire spectrum of warfare. From this experience, I have concluded that the importance of Media Communications tools was not only useful to provide an overview of purpose, instruments and actions, but also very powerful in driving the priming of influential messages and narratives to shape the perceptions of the target audiences. In less than five years, I have also seen a progressive replacement of human operators with automated, computer-based systems for influence. In the political arena, for instance, the need for quick and precise data on potential arguments has brought even more sophisticated influence platforms into the game, redirecting leaders and key influencer agendas. After observing the immediate outcomes in using the media communication tools, some operators in the market have started to exploit the capability to gather and compose personal data and to sell them to different actors like public companies or even governments. We need better understanding of how “safe havens” like our entertainment media could be exploited and used to shape our perceptions, and more broadly the political and strategic arena.

For the development of this paper, I am grateful to USMC Maj. Gerard Vanderwaal and Doctor Craig Hayden. Both of them have believed in my idea and encouraged me to keep writing. Dr. Hayden, in particular, helped me to be tenacious and his advice provided critical points for reflection, without him I would not have completed this project. My last thanks go to my wife Barbara, for her support, and to Sara and Anna our daughters that were always able to make us smile.

Introduction

This paper analyzes the Chinese effort to influence Western European public opinion, and, to obtain support for its effort to be the “new crossroads” of the global system. China has developed methods and strategies to shape the narrative in Western Europe, targeting the perception of different key-players and audiences. These initiatives reflect China’s strategic view that influencing public opinion and media messaging is crucial to achieve its political strategic objectives. Utilizing a range of both primary and secondary sources, this paper seeks to outline the strategies and methods of Chinese soft power, delineating the tailored use of “old” and “new” media platforms.

The first section of the paper explores China’s policy objectives and strategic interests in Europe, as evident in the most recent initiatives of People’s Republic's Belt and Road Initiative as well as attempts to disrupt the internal cohesion of Western Europe, and its relationship with the United States. The second section depicts how the “soft power” concept and related capabilities to influence were developed in China and ultimately adapted to the leadership of Xi Jin Ping. In the third section, the paper examines how Chinese officials are applying, through different channels, the mainland messages, re-orienting shortcutting, misleading any critical voice while trying to create a “favorable” public opinion and influencing the intellectual elites. The fourth and fifth sections, respectively, demonstrate Chinese attempts to control the narrative and priming through different channels, such as traditional print newspaper or weekly publications as well as new ones like social media and other forms of entertainment media. The paper concludes with some considerations on the effectiveness of the Chinese attempt to dictate its vision without a clear understanding of the European cultural context. China’s leadership is trying to shape a European perspective to its advantage, while attempting to widen

the gulf of opinion between Europe and the USA. Despite China's great commitment to such efforts at influence, the results are not decisive.

China's Foreign Policy objectives and strategic interests in Europe

The European Community (the predecessor to today's European Union, EU) recognized the government of China in 1975 and just three years after this opening in relations, China signed a commercial agreement, which in 1985 was transformed into a comprehensive "agreement for trade and cooperation."¹ This agreement still constitutes the legal framework of their relationship today. Since the second half of the 1970s, the European Community has been committed to supporting China's economic reforms and its admission to the World Trade Organization (WTO), focusing its technical assistance on training and institutional capacity-building. China was eventually admitted to the WTO in 2001.

Since the second half of the 1990s, Europe and China have not represented a significant strategic threat to each other, and have experienced a convergence of interests. The EU's political communication strategy towards China has been based, in the past twenty years, on the hope that, under European cultural influence, Beijing would have liberalized the economy, adopting the rule of law and democratize its political system.² Furthermore, European leaders believed that the relationship with China is a positive fact in itself, so it should not be contingent on specific desired behavior. Despite this expectation among European policy-makers, it is evident that Chinese foreign and domestic policy have not accommodated European values, which indeed today Beijing regularly contradicts.

The European attitude to act as a catalyst for Chinese changes in its domestic and foreign policy has been confounded by the political and economic strength of a country determined to resist any external influence. In addition, the already modest influence that European countries, collectively or individually, have on China has been further weakened by the diversity and often

contradictory national approaches among European countries. The result is what Fox and Godement describe as a policy of "unconditional engagement," that grants all the benefits of both economic and non-economic engagement with China, while asking for very little in return for Europe.³

China has likewise sought influence in Europe. The Chinese strategy in the Old Continent has been based primarily on economic activities and contingent on a multiplicity of factors. These inroads include access to new technologies, entry into the EU and third country markets via European business networks, and the use of relations with EU countries as a useful negotiating lever in competition with Washington. The influence approach of the People's Republic varies according to the economic, geographical and institutional context. In 2017, the latest traceable year, Beijing has concentrated 75% of its investments in Europe in the wealthiest countries (UK, Italy, Germany and France) with particular attention to strategic assets and research and development activities.⁴

The UK, Italy, Germany and France are preferred targets for China's influence efforts. Among the most telling examples of Chinese commercial acquisitions are those of the German KUKA and Daimler and the Italian Pirelli.⁵ Yet the EU also recognizes threats from China that mainly concern "soft security" issues, such as economic competition, illegal immigration, transnational crime, drug trafficking and smuggling, environmental problems and human rights, all things that affect European security only indirectly. China benefits from the fact that its centralized government system allows it to seize the opportunities of an open market like that of the EU and at the same time to be able to protect its economy with industrial policies, limited access and opaque procedures. Furthermore, Beijing's representatives channel political pressure

onto specific European problems, agreeing to dialogue and then transforming the discussion into an inconclusive rhetorical exercise.

However, the side effects of the economic crisis of 2008 made Western Countries more prudent in supporting Chinese investments in strategic industrial sectors. China, shifting the focus, is taking competitive advantages in Southern and Eastern Europe starting with Greece, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria. In Greece, Chinese companies will build new maritime terminals, airports and enter the shipbuilding sector, investments in addition to the € 4.3 billion already agreed with the China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) for the management of docks 2 for 35 years and 3 of the container port of Piraeus, the Athens maritime hub.⁶ With this operation, the Chinese will acquire a logistical base for trade to Europe. Indeed, Beijing has promised a robust financial injection to Greece by declaring its willingness to buy part of the Greek issues of new long-term bonds. In addition to managing the Piraeus cargo terminal and developing an ambitious tourist plan in some islands, including Crete, China is now aiming for a widespread commercial and financial penetration in the country, aiming for more access to the EU common market.

China is committed to penetrating the Mediterranean geo-economic space. China efforts in Greece illustrate how the economy is an integral part of China's geopolitics and security strategy. China is projecting itself in the Mediterranean area to reduce interdependence with the USA and to ensure safer the oil supply lines from sub-Saharan Africa and Persian Gulf to guarantee the country's energy needs. In the Chinese perspective, the Mediterranean appears a wedge between the U.S. and the European economic relationship.

China's efforts to engage Europe through commercial relationships are now nested and integrated into "The Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) infrastructure and geopolitical project

launched by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013. The BRI is one of China's signature strategic policy instruments, a convergence point of its efforts to project influence in the Old Continent. The BRI represents Xi's vision of a vast network commercial infrastructure and relationships: of railways, energy pipelines, highways, and streamlined border crossings, both westward—through the mountainous former Soviet republics—and southward, to Pakistan, India, and the rest of Southeast Asia. Such a network is designed to expand the international use of Chinese currency, the renminbi, and “break the bottleneck in Asian connectivity,” according to Chairman Xi.⁷

The Asian Development Bank estimates that the southern-central Asian area faces a yearly infrastructure financing shortfall of nearly \$800 billion. China plans to expand investment in physical infrastructure and build fifty special economic zones, modeled after the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, which China launched in 1980 during its economic reforms under previous leader Deng Xiaoping. A total of \$ 460 billion has already been invested along the new silk routes. In 2018, trade between China and the BRI countries reached \$ 1,300 billion, an increase of 16.4% over the previous year. In total, 133 states have signed agreements on the BRI project with Beijing. Of these, 22 in Europe have signed the memorandum to join the BRI, including 16 members of the European Union. Most of the EU partners are countries that suffer from economic and financial difficulties, for which Chinese investments represent an irresistible inducement.

The BRI, however, has also stoked opposition in both Asia and in Europe. For some countries that take on large amounts of debt to fund infrastructure upgrades, BRI money is seen as a potential poisoned chalice.⁸ BRI projects are built using low-interest loans as opposed to aid grants. Some BRI investments have involved opaque bidding processes and required the use of Chinese firms. As a result, contractors have inflated costs, leading to canceled projects and

political backlash. Despite these negative reactions, the second forum on the BRI held at the end of April 2019 represented the culmination of the communication efforts made by the Chinese government to persuade the world of its usefulness. The forum featured 283 accomplishments, to demonstrate more transparency and sustainability for the BRI projects.⁹ Interestingly among these projects, China will officially launch the BRI Environmental Big Data Platform.

China's commitment in Europe has recently focused on infrastructure projects in Central and Eastern Europe. These projects were facilitated by three factors: the need for investments by the countries in the region, the low cost of labor and the excellent geographical position. The area is geographically nestled between the Mediterranean Sea, the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea and close to the economic heart of the EU. Due to its strategic importance, central Europe has in the past been a battleground between Germany, the United States, Russia and Turkey. Today Beijing considers it an essential terminal hub of the BRI.¹⁰

Influence over Italian policies is a representative example of the ambition of Chinese projects in Central and Eastern Europe, mainly for two reasons. First, given the difficulties associated with the construction of a land corridor in the Balkans, the Italian cities of Genoa and Trieste are potential landing points for trade flows between East and West. Second, Italian companies could be used to carry out joint activities with Chinese partners, as part of a memorandum of understanding in order to export their products to other countries in the EU, avoiding import checks and trade barriers.

There are many circumstances and different actors, that demonstrate the potential impact of Chinese influence in the Italian political environment. For example, the stated policy positions of the populist Five Star Movement party, a member of the political coalition that is running the Italian Government, appear to adopt similar views with China's promoted narrative.

The party has also advocated for its key members to serve as the Italian government counterparts to finalize the commercial agreement between the two countries.¹¹ While this is arguably demonstrative of how diplomacy generally works between countries – diplomatic maneuver seeks to maximize support in host countries to advance policy – the Italian case suggests ways to identify where Chinese influence can be become more apparent.

In this way, Italy continues to express its support for the BRI, and has already accepted several Chinese investments. 29 bilateral agreements with China - 19 institutional and 10 commercial - signed during President Xi's visit to Rome were worth € 2.5 billion.¹² The Italian government is convinced that participation in the initiative will facilitate an increase in exports to China and that it will unlock new investment opportunities in both directions and in other Asian countries.

However, the Italian government seems to underestimate the geopolitical repercussions of embracing China's commercial requirements. Italy is directly involved in the challenge between the United States, the EU and China. The geographical position of the peninsula represents the border area among continental Europe, North Africa and Middle East. In this three-dimensional interlocked space, the Italian government is in a position to exercise its ambition to be a credible regional actor, either through its relationship with the United States, which has repeatedly warned the Italian government not to join the Chinese initiatives, or with China itself, which sees Italy as a geo-strategical hotspot and a potential supporter of its causes within the EU more than an economic partner.¹³

The following section explores one the key strategic concepts for China's efforts to sway public opinion in Europe - soft power.

Development of a Chinese understanding of soft power.

China's efforts to influence Europe consists of more than economic incentives. China's strategy of outreach, its rhetoric and political engagement abroad with foreign publics has shifted in the 21st century. China's global image in the 1990s, of an economically and militarily strong country, intent on pursuing its national interests, now requires new strategies to sustain its legitimacy and credibility. China's strategic communications policies suggest the acknowledged need for an integrated international profile, that characterizes China as a responsible and cooperative global actor. The changes made within the Chinese external propaganda system, from the institutional, rhetorical, objectives and communication models deployed, seem to confirm this approach. Likewise, the urgency of the current Chinese leadership to develop an original ideological and communicative strategy, capable of increasing the country's media influence and having a strong international impact, clearly emerges in the words of Xi Jinping. In 2013, on the occasion of a collective study session of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi announced that: "*We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's message to the world*" By appealing to concepts such as those of soft power, discursive power and new media, the Chinese President demonstrates a clear conception of international relations and the communication practice as challenges primarily related to China's image and credibility.¹⁴

Moving from the Nye's definition of soft power that "*...a country projects soft power when it has a dominant culture and ideas close to those that prevail in the world, its credibility is supported by the way it behaves internally and internationally, and when it has maximum access to multiple communication channels for which it can better to influence and frame the*

presentation of your point of view and your problems.”¹⁵, Xi Jinping's words seem to conceptualize the national media as a tool to both secure Chinese internal stability and justify the Chinese Communist Party’s foreign policy vision of peaceful development and co-existence abroad. Soft power works to shore up domestic legitimacy and to shape global narratives about China.¹⁶

This outcome is just the final stage of a path initiated in the initial decade of this century. Chinese political communication has gradually shifted away from its Soviet-like propaganda and ideological messaging, in favor of adopting a more updated and institutionalized approach to communicating domestic and international political issues. Over the past decade, US academic and political actors have contributed extensively to the debate in China, inaugurating new ways of conceiving international culture and communication, and introducing concepts previously unexplored by Chinese establishment: above all, those of soft power and public diplomacy. The import of these two western concepts into the Chinese lexicon has gone through a considerable variety of formulations and has sparked a lively internal debate on their correct interpretation. The two notions, previously unexplored by Communist Chinese political actors, have become, within a decade key instrument of national political and intellectual debate.

Since January 4, 2006 when Hu Jintao, on the occasion of the meeting with the Central Executive Group for Foreign Affairs, explicitly declared that “*the growth of the State and the international influence of our nation must be manifested in the areas of hard power, such as economics, science, technology and defense, as well as in those of soft power, or in culture*”.¹⁷ In the same year, the Council of State created a management team with the task of conceiving and developing projects aimed at increasing China's cultural influence abroad.¹⁸ The result of the group's work became visible in the years immediately following the success of the Confucius

Institute, the Beijing 2008 Olympics, and the Shanghai Expo 2010. In general terms, the investments of the Chinese government in promoting its cultural sector increased exponentially: in 2006 the overall budget increased by 23.9% compared to the previous year, reaching 12 billion Yuan; in 2007 a further increase of 37.3% brought the figure to 23 billion Yuan.¹⁹

The turn towards public diplomacy and the promotion of the Chinese image abroad represents a particular aspect of a broader shift in Chinese foreign policy. In addition to traditional diplomacy, in the last decade, Chinese influence activities encompass cultural diplomacy, such as the Year of Chinese Culture programs, artistic exchange programs, the growth of Confucius Institute partnerships with educational institutions around the world, and the promotion of student and government exchange programs. These programs have been implemented to increase the influence and attractiveness of Chinese traditional culture and its value system, a foundational element of contemporary China.²⁰ Probably the latest and the most visible signal of this shift in the Chinese promotion abroad is the acquisition of US Entertainment productions by Chinese players, such as Wang Jianlin, owner of Dalian Wanda and the AMC chain of movie theaters, defined by the New York Times as “a Billionaire at the Intersection of Business and Power in China”.²¹

Moving from the tools to the messages, there are some recurrent themes that support the Chinese narrative. The PPC has established and consolidated strict guidance on how to communicate messages about China, and its culture. The propaganda guidelines provided between 1989 and 2006, and analyzed by Anne Marie Brady identifies the following recurring themes:

- Presenting events in a positive light, emphasizing stability above all else;
- Avoid the circulation of bad news during national holidays or major political events;

- Don't mention difficult-to-resolve issues;
- Give centrality to economic issues;
- Demonize the United States;
- Don't promote the views of political opponents;
- Exploiting foreign policy issues to promote the Chinese position in public opinion;²²

The core concepts of these lines of communication are still the basement for Chinese strategic messaging. Moreover, the narrative promoted by the current Chinese leadership is characterized by a greater emphasis on the themes of cultural nationalism and a greater assertiveness in promoting the figure of a charismatic leader, Xi Jinping, and of the conceptual innovations introduced by them. In his speech at the National Conference on Propaganda and Ideological Work in 2013, Xi Jinping argued for the need to focus attention on the unity and stability of the country, giving priority to positive domestic propaganda. Xi Jinping argued that the role of propaganda was both inward facing and outward looking. Chinese communication should be "guiding people to look objectively and attentively to contemporary China", and counter the distorted vision projected by the western media, as well as promote an accurate vision of China to "the external world" from the perspective of the People's Republic.²³

The Chinese government also sees spread of the Internet and social media as a medium they need to control in order to manage perceptions of the country and the Chinese Communist Party. Since 2006, the Chinese government employed at least 30,000 controllers to ensure continuous monitoring of the growing number of web pages with the help of software tools and network firewalls.²⁴ On a strategic level, these internet monitors contribute to the objectives of Chinese promotional discourse: building consensus (*gongshi*), guiding unity (*tuanjie*) and spreading consensus through education (*jiaoyu*). Internationally, the mission of political

communication through Internet and the new media reflects four essential aspects of the narrative: the promotion of Chinese foreign policy, resistance to hostile foreign propaganda, presenting China's history to the world, the explanation of government policies and of future prospects, and the promotion of Chinese culture abroad.²⁵

Considering the evolution of the approach to the message, ten years ago, Anne Marie Brady observed that Chinese rhetoric promoted its image as a socially and politically stable country, dedicated to pursuing the policy of reform and its openness to continuous economic development.²⁶ These messages constitute a response to the foreign perceptions of threats posed by China. Nowadays, official messages addressed abroad focus on China's position in the world (relations with neighbors, with commercial partners, with the major powers and with the international system as a whole) and the very nature of the country (peaceful and cooperative). The over-arching messaging or narrative strategy is no longer defensive, reactive and aimed at the mere maintenance of the political status quo. Rather, contemporary political communication aimed at foreign audiences seems to be characterized by a 'new assertiveness', capable of presenting also the traditional themes of Chinese foreign policy, with unusual firmness and effectiveness tailoring and adapting the narrative on multiple channels.

China's Public Diplomacy and Cultural Soft Power in Europe

China's inclusion of soft power promotion in its foreign policy is also present in its influence strategies toward Europe. The political and economic influence of China in Europe and the promotion of interests through communication campaigns represent a significant challenge for the European liberal democracies, as well as for the values and the interests of USA in Europe. While Russia's attempts at media-based influence are continuously under scrutiny, European countries generally underestimate China's growing influence, particular through its efforts at influencing public opinion. Beijing's political influence efforts in Europe are bound to be much more pervasive and difficult to monitor because of China's economic leverage and the attention of its leadership on long-term strategic narratives, compared to disinformation campaigns of the Kremlin, still perceived by geographical proximity as the most dangerous.

China has developed, and continues to do so, a complete and flexible set of influence tools, focused mainly in three areas: political and economic elites, media and public opinion, civil society and academia. By expanding its political influence, China exploits the openness of European liberal democracy to its advantage. Culturally and economically, Europe remains open to trade and the flow ideas, just as the Chinese leadership tries to strictly control access to foreign information, actors and capital. The Chinese international political actors have already implemented a variety of tools to influence decision makers in Europe.

First, Chinese investment companies and state-owned banks are increasingly seeking to influence the decision-making process of individual European countries by promising to fill investment gaps in exchange for political support for Chinese government initiatives and priorities. This has prompted some European political elites, such as the populist parties in Italy,

to break ranks with other European democracies and align themselves with Beijing on critical issues like foreign control over 5G infrastructure and ports facilities. Second, increasingly confident of the competitiveness of its political model, China offers an alternative to liberal governance and European cooperation, especially regarding the implementation of Homeland Internal Security control systems.²⁷

The result is an asymmetric political relationship between China and the EU. European politicians increasingly adapt their policies (both foreign and domestic) by conforming to a sort of "preventive obedience" to ingratiate themselves with the Chinese counterparts. Political elites within the European Union (EU) and surrounding areas have begun to embrace Chinese rhetoric and interests, even when they contradict national and/or EU interests.²⁸ In this way, EU unity of effort breaks down as individual countries adopt separate relations with China, especially with regard to unified EU positions on the protection and projection of liberal values and human rights. Beijing also benefits from the "services" of volunteers among European political and professional classes who are happy to promote Chinese values and interests. Thus, local elites not only amplify Chinese messages, but in the process actively build political capital and trust. Influential political elites in EU member states seek to attract Chinese investments or to obtain personal recognition at a global level.²⁹

China's communication strategy toward Europe is shaped by two interconnected motivations. The fundamental one remains the promotion of China as a stable political system. Secondly, Beijing aims to present its political and economic model as an alternative to the rules-based international order, based on Western political and social values, with its distinct Chinese development model, approach to sovereignty, and a history of bilateral economic relationships. With this approach, Beijing pursues three related objectives. First, it aims to build global support

on specific political and economic issues. This includes promoting solid networks between European politicians, businesses, the media, think tanks and universities, thus creating levels of active support for Chinese interests. Secondly, China seeks to weaken unity among Western countries, both in Europe and across the Atlantic. Third, Beijing works to create a more positive global perception of China's political and economic system as a viable alternative to liberal democracies, exploiting and underlining the incoherencies and the contradictions.

These efforts are significantly evident in Italy, where China has taken advantage of the success of its economic model without political liberalization. Beijing leverages illiberal elites and Eurosceptic leaders in frequent high-level exchanges between diplomats and government representatives.³⁰ This influence even extends to staffing decisions in public administrations. Increasingly, Beijing supports Chinese officials and employs former political officials in Italy to serve initiatives led by the Chinese government. The Chinese government also continues to use traditional methods of diplomatic influence to gain leverage against the Italian government, such as freezing economic initiatives for hosting the Dalai Lama.³¹

Another significant area of influence effort is carried out through universities and cultural initiatives. State-backed Chinese investors are increasingly funding overseas education programs, strengthening China's power to shape curricula and knowledge about China internationally.³² Chinese universities are organizing cultural events abroad and entering into cooperation agreements with Western Academic Institutions at home and abroad. Chinese investors in higher education in Europe have focused in particular on Western European countries which host a large number of elite universities, such as the United Kingdom. Beijing is determined to shape how China is taught and studied in the Western Academic Institutions. This approach presupposes to silence the voices that contrast with the official views of the Chinese

government on politically sensitive issues, eventually undermining academic freedom. In this way, China both creates "safe" programs and institutions for elite Chinese students who go abroad to continue their studies, and shapes how the West views China and its behaviour.³³

One approach to influence Western universities is to promote understanding of Chinese culture and language through Confucius Institute program. Currently 160 Confucian Institutes are openly active in Europe. Concerns about the influence of these institutions on university curricula have already led some institutions to close their hosted Confucius Institute programs, as the University of Stockholm did in 2015.³⁴ In another case in 2014, Hanban, the Chinese Ministry of Education branch that oversees Confucian Institutes around the world, censored the materials at a Chinese study conference in Portugal in order to exclude material related to Taiwan.³⁵

Leveraging the network of Confucian Institutes in Europe and taking advantage of the growing demand for expertise in China, Chinese universities are now investing in programs abroad. In April 2017, Peking University confirmed the purchase of Foxcombe Hall in Oxford for £ 8.8 million.³⁶ The Chinese university will establish the HSBC Business School with the open support of the Chinese Communist Party which, despite a campaign to limit Chinese investment abroad, has supported this initiative to open a campus of the University of Beijing in Oxford. The top-down nature of these initiatives has raised concerns about Beijing's major efforts to export its authoritarian values to the western academic world.³⁷ For example, there have been cases where the Chinese government has put pressure on Western publishing houses to block some of their content in China (as in the Cambridge University Press and Springer Nature cases)³⁸; a level of censorship that provides a clear indicator of Beijing's attitude towards open debate and critical thinking . These ideals are fundamental to the academic tradition of

Western liberal democracies, and China's position speaks of the self-censorship effects this also has on Western scholars when dealing with China.³⁹

As depicted, China has committed considerable resources to increase the perceived legitimacy of its actions and interests in Europe. However, at the same time, China continues to hamper its credibility by engaging in repressive actions and reacting strongly to critical inquiries coming from the Western countries. This attitude at the end has a significant impact on the perception of legitimacy for China's representatives in Europe.

China's attempt to control the media narrative in Europe

China has stepped up its efforts to influence European public opinion through media tools, such as broadcasting, print, and online communication. One valuable tool in this regard is the inclusion of paid inserts prepared by the Chinese State media in the main European newspapers. In addition to promoting official Chinese positions among readers, this tool also creates financial dependencies that could be turned into political leverage for Chinese state-run news agencies, with a potential impact on content. Secondly, several Chinese ministries and media organizations are increasingly seeking to enter into cooperation agreements with European media, also by setting up forums and official new media accounts. Lastly, Beijing also engages the globally distributed American film and art industries to censor or at least orient their own content toward more China-friendly representations.

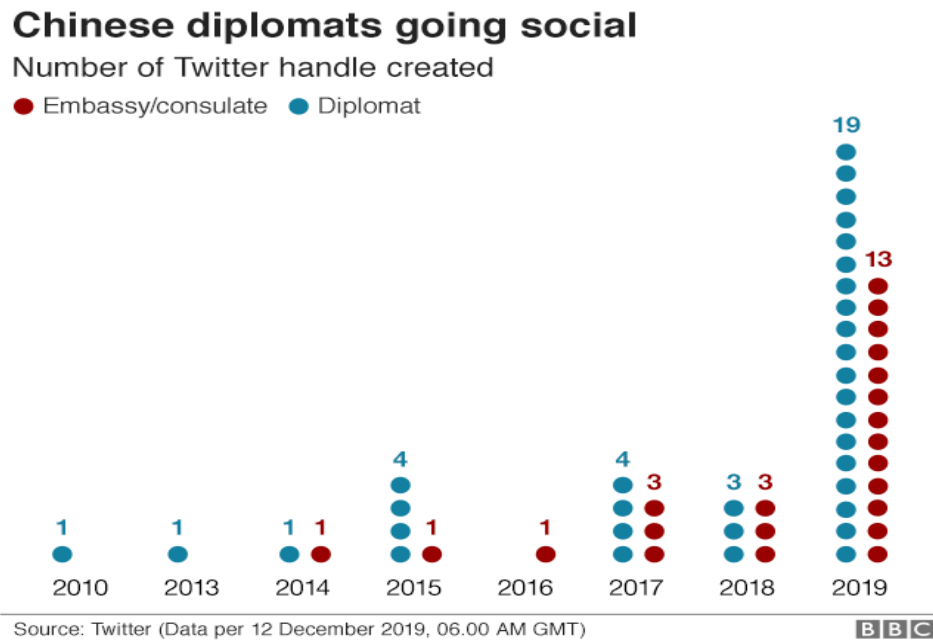
Yet print remains an important tool for the Beijing. China creates support for its interests and views in Europe through paid media inserts.⁴⁰ The main element of this is ChinaWatch, an eight-page insert prepared by the China Daily, China's most relevant English language daily since 2010.⁴¹ These supplements to popular European newspapers serve different goals. First and foremost, readers of the original publication are exposed to China's official point of view on various matters through the inserts. One potential advantage of packaging content in this way, compared to simply using China's own party-state media, is that it is more effective to use well-known media publications in different countries, leveraging their credibility with local audiences than creating a Chinese media. While ChinaWatch carries a disclaimer marking it as paid content, its layout makes it look like editorial content. Combined with the fact that ChinaWatch covers current events, it could easily be mistaken for a part of the paper in which it is carried.

The first European medium to publish supplements was the British newspaper The Telegraph, which started carrying ChinaWatch in 2011. Since then, the China Daily has signed various cooperation agreements directly with other individual media in Western Europe. At present, ChinaWatch is published by at least seven European papers in five languages: English, Spanish, Dutch, German, and French.⁴² Chinese government officials, media corporations, and academics have also considered buying struggling media in Europe with the aim of changing their editorial line and making them more ‘pro-China.’ Outside of Europe, both party-state media and mainland Chinese corporations have made several attempts to buy major Western media institutions, including Newsweek magazine (2010) and Forbes magazine (2017).⁴³

China has also turned to social media platforms for influence. Although Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are blocked in China, Chinese State media have built very active presences on these platforms abroad. China has been using Western social media platforms since 2009, the year the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) announced a major investment to boost the global presence of its media.⁴⁴ The CCP’s aim was, and remains, to track global debates about China, and the coverage any other topic the Party cares about, as well as to steer opinions online closer to its own positions. Chinese social media campaigns and online presence aims to gradually change policy conversations and increase the Party’s narrative on relevant channels.

The reach of Chinese party state media on Western social media has expanded significantly since 2009. The first accounts were focused on English and Chinese language content, and these remain the principal languages used today. But since 2015, the CCP has been pursuing a strategy of media localization, offering content in more languages and targeted at specific countries. Xinhua started a German language Twitter account, @XHdeutsch, as well as its country-specific Romanian and Italian Twitter channels (@XinhuaItalia and @XHRomania)

in 2015. In the same year, Xinhua and the China Daily newspaper started using automatic geolocation to redirect the user to a specific language version of their page on Facebook. In 2020, all major Chinese media targeted at foreign audiences around the world, as well as at overseas Chinese, have one or multiple presences on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.⁴⁵



*Figure 1: China and Twitter: The year China got louder on social media, Zhaoyin Feng
BBC Chinese Service, Washington, 29 December 2019*

Chinese content posted and promoted by official state media on Western channels encompass a range of persuasive efforts, from bluff to polemical attacks, to most often subtle efforts to build Chinese media's brands.⁴⁶ Much of the content consists of regular news stories that are similar to those reported by European news outlets, although it differs from these in that there is more “positive news” and “success stories” about China, such as development achievements in minority areas like Tibet and Xinjiang. On Twitter, the #Tibet and #Xinjiang hashtags are filled with images of animals and landscapes promoted on party-state media. Attractive visuals and human-interest stories are used by most CCP media to draw in users,

featuring cuddly pandas, other baby animals, impressive landscapes, and China’s technological achievements. Political messages are mixed into this content, such as posts promoting the Chinese political system or justifying directly China’s repressive policies in its minority regions.⁴⁷ Many tweets posted by Chinese official media have been highly misleading, such as presenting protests in Hong Kong against the government as pro-government protests. Some Beijing content editors are also quite active on platforms such as Twitter, like Hu Xijin, editor-in-chief of the English-language newspaper Global Times, who has over 100,000 followers, and the China Daily’s Europe bureau chief Chen Weihua. They frequently weigh in on controversial topics like the Hong Kong protests, Huawei, the West’s supposed lack of freedom of speech, and “Western hypocrisy” towards China.

Beijing’s Global Megaphone: Selected Cases of Chinese Media Influence Abroad

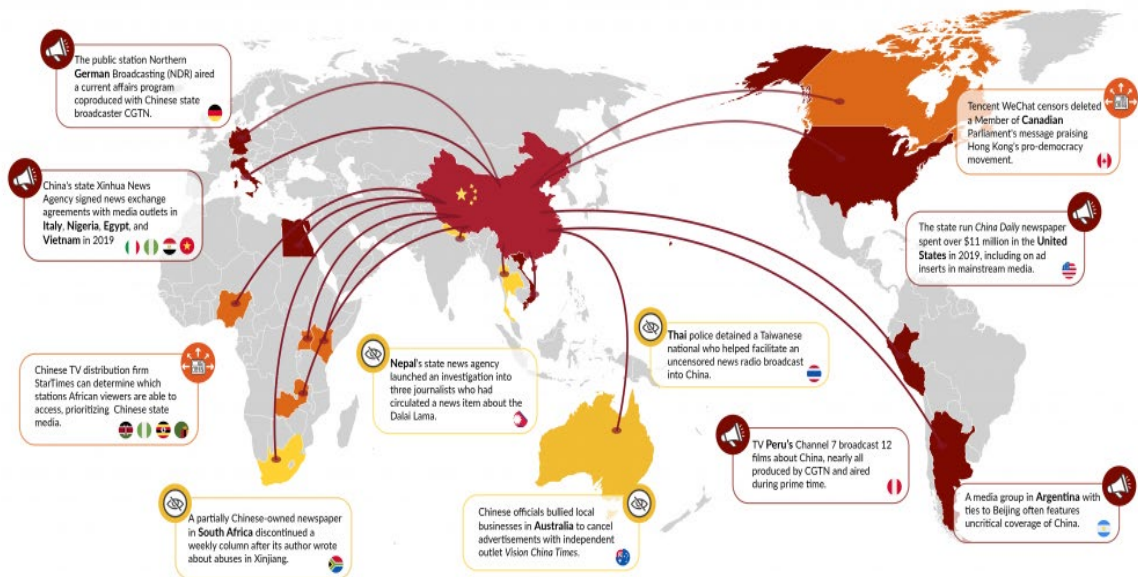


Figure 2: Beijing’s Global Megaphone – The Expansion of Chinese Communist Party Media Influence since 2017, S. Cook, Freedom House-Special Report 2020, January 2020

The impact of this social media messaging remains difficult to assess. However, it is clear that China is waging an asymmetric contest in the information environment: Chinese media can spread their messages while western media are cut off from access to Chinese audiences. While China watchers, experts, and media professionals may recognize much of what they see Chinese media as propaganda, it is clear that these actors are not the target audience. The point, as reported by Liz Carter, *“is not to convince everyone, but to convince enough people to win a public opinion war and drown out voices of reason. This is an often-overlooked aspect of CCP strategy, because those who know enough to care about it are the least likely to be affected by it, and the most likely to underestimate its harmful impact.”*⁴⁸

Finally, Beijing also exploits the possibility of accessing the Chinese media market as a means of inducing film and art and entertainment productions to censor their content. The representation of China in global media content is the focus of the next section, which examines episodes of Chinese Government censorship of public support for the Honk-Kong students' protests in 2020, as well as the Chinese government's commitment to prompting its policy narratives through entertainment - a significant domain of the cognitive influence “battlefield”.

The Role of the Entertainment Tools in the Chinese Influence Campaign: the Italian case

In the last ten years, China has sought to counter American cultural influence in Europe. This effort seeks to question the political-military superiority of the U.S., but above all, the shared cultural values defense of human rights and individual freedoms that still nowadays, provoke tensions and conflicts in official and commercial diplomatic interactions.

In this regard, Xi Jinping defends the importance of information control, not only in the Chinese public sphere, but also in how international media frames China and its domestic issues. A statement of April 22, 2013, just a year after he took office at the top of the Chinese Communist Party, made clear the approach of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (CCP), communicating a strengthening of the "ideological sphere" on all fronts. The document, known as Document 9 and published in its full version from the Chinafile.com website, begins by listing the political "dangers" that undermine the country's leadership and socialism with Chinese characteristics: Western Constitutional Democracy, Universal Values, civil society, neoliberalism, historical nihilism, and a western conception of journalism diametrically opposed to the Chinese principle that the media must be subject to the party discipline.⁴⁹ The document highlights the ruling party's perception that communication and media must be controlled or managed, both internally and abroad.

In this ideological framework defined as a "global information war" by the Chinese press, the Chinese government invests heavily on XI's strategy aimed at ensuring that foreign as well as domestic media serve China's interests. China wages this contest through global strategic communication policy, cross-platform engagement, and national and international media content, which aims to influence international perceptions of China and shape international debates on the Chinese government. Even more important, however, because broadly underestimated, is the

effort of Beijing in conquering not only newspaper and television editors but also the entertainment and creative industries.

The strategy is evident in the commercial activities of large “private” entrepreneurs, such as Wang Jianlin, owner of Dalian Wanda and Legendary Entertainment, defined by the New York Times as “a Billionaire at the Intersection of Business and Power in China”⁵⁰ as well as the creation of multi-service providers as Tencent or Alibaba, that are financially supported by the Chinese Government. These companies guarantee that Western online platforms such as Facebook, Paypal and Amazon, are restricted on the Chinese mainland. Another influence practice represents the leverage gained through the purchase of advertising inserts by Chinese entrepreneurs. Advertising revenue can potentially sway media to be steer towards content more “friendly” to Chinese messaging. In this way, China-influenced publications and transmission channels influence the media scene even when the events are not officially promoted by state spokespersons, public diplomacy, or traditional media.

The spread of this subtle, media-based influence network clearly became apparent, even in Italy, on 4 October 2019, during the global broadcast of the Hearthstone Grandmasters, the most prestigious eSport tournament dedicated to the well-known card game. The tournament champion NG Wai Chung, better known as Blitzchung, after a dazzling victory decided to take advantage of the post-match interview to provide a message of solidarity with the Hong Kong protests. Blizzard, the Hearthstone software house, responded with unprecedented harshness to the gesture, by banning him from the game's eSports competitions for a year and taking away the significant cash prize. The company also fired the two presenters who conducted the interview. While the American software house did not expect the significant criticism it received following its punitive action, this episode shows how the globally lucrative video-game market is strongly

influenced by the Chinese narrative and conditioned by the boycott leverage that Beijing easily exploits to control the foreign perception.

The 2012 global roll-out of an expansion of one of the most important Massively Multiplayer Role-Playing Games (MMORPG), “World of Warcraft” was also strongly “conditioned” by the approval of Chinese Ministry of Culture. The “Pandaria” game expansion features unsubtle Chinese messages, providing a representation of Chinese culture in contrast with the invading foreign invaders in the game contents. China’s attempted influence over popular entertainment properties, such its heavy-handed action against the NBA,⁵¹ illustrated how China perceives representation of its interests, even in cultural industries, as a crucial aspect of its global influence strategy.

This kind of effort to control global narratives is not always successful. The case of the Honk Kong protests illustrates the limits of this strategy. China’s crackdown provided a huge amplification of Hong Kong’s plight, especially in the younger generations, to the rest of the world. The Italian parliament, seeking information on the protests, organized a conference-call with Joshua Wong, an activist and leader of the Hong Kong protest. The parliament's initiative generated a strong protest by the Beijing embassy to Rome, which branded it as "irresponsible behavior."⁵² China’s critique was not well-received by the Italian government. The parliament and the Italian Foreign Office issued statements rebuking China's overreach as "totally unacceptable and totally disrespectful."⁵³ In this regard, the Parliamentary Committee for the Security of the Republic issued in January 2020 a new investigation to assess the exposure of the country system to the interference of external actors in economic sectors of national interest such as banks, energy infrastructures, defense and media-communication companies. The investigation will not focus exclusively on the growing exposure in the various sectors to the

People's Republic of China, but it seems evident, even after the recent interactions with the USA authorities on 5G network, that, given the economic importance of China and the growing links with it, they will receive special attention, especially after the signature of the Memorandum of Understanding with the Italian Republic in March 2019.

Conclusions

The vision of the world spread by the People's Republic elites is: *tianxia*, "all under the sky".⁵⁴ China identifies itself with the world. At a basic level, this worldview may be culturally incompatible with Western countries' concept of universalism. Based on this assumption, there may be fundamental limits to the basis of China's strategic vision for world order and a Chinese messaging strategy grounded preserving its one-party state. By attempting to propose itself as an alternative to the American globalized system, Beijing aims to establish a sphere of geopolitical and cultural influence without adapting to the culturally diverse background of Europe: European public opinion is still grounded in Western terms and ideals, even when it opposes the liberal ideology with anti-colonial or socialist ideologies, public discourse is not framed in Chinese terms; *tianxia* is not a historically grounded basis for popular appeal. This underlying problem emerges in particular in China's relationship with European countries. While European states may have different ambitions, they often still value and defend sovereignty and independence, trying to capitalize on the advantage of the global competition between Washington and Beijing.

There are two key factors that may condition the asymmetrical influence of Beijing's narrative in Europe: European political and economic fragmentation and Europe's decades of experience dealing with a powerful actor like the United States. However, China, unlike the United States, may be less culturally "legible" and not as prescriptive in its policy requests, but may also be more assertive. China's influence in Europe is well positioned and pervasive based on economic incentives and existing political divisions. Exploiting the importance of the internal market as a lever to dictate its national-oriented narrative, the Chinese Communist Party is trying to establish its credibility as a responsible global-power, while discharging or avoiding the diffusion of any critical or inspective messages across media communications. This effort is

visible not only through multiple formal programs of strategic influence (e.g. the Confucius Institutes and news media inserts), but also with a pervasive cultivation effort in the entertainment industries.

Nevertheless, it is premature to suggest that these efforts will yield inevitable influence over Europe. China's soft power campaign in Europe has limited and sometimes disaggregated effects. As reported by a Pew Research Center survey, conducted from May 13 to October 2, 2019, opinion of China across most of Western Europe is, on balance, negative.⁵⁵ The dissonance between image that China aspires to project and the country's actions remain an obstacle to its strategic communications. Rising nationalism, assertiveness vis-à-vis territorial disputes, crackdowns on nongovernmental organizations, censorship of domestic and international media, limits to the entry of foreign ideals, and political repression constrain China's soft power, largely undermining the credibility of the message.

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