

## CHAPTER SIX

# Media

When the Xinhua News Agency leased a massive sign in Times Square in 2011 and then agreed to a twenty-year lease for a new US headquarters on the top floor of a Broadway skyscraper, it was clear that, as analyst He Qinglian put it, “The Chinese have arrived.”<sup>1</sup> Xinhua’s foray into Manhattan was followed by a website of the *People’s Daily*, the mouthpiece of the Communist Party, which set up shop in the Empire State Building.<sup>2</sup>

At a time when Western media outlets are challenged by the internet and weakened by uncertain business models, China’s rise as a major player in the media landscape around the globe has become all the more worthy of attention. The Chinese government’s campaign to “grab the right to speak” from Western media outlets and independent Chinese voices, which it accuses of distorting news about China and sullyng China’s image, has come with a rapid expansion of China’s English-language media operations, a concerted campaign to control overseas Chinese-language media, and ongoing efforts to block attempts by Western media to contend inside China. Xinhua News Agency journalist Xiong Min summed up the motivation for China’s new campaign in 2010. “The right to speak in the world is not distributed equally,” she wrote. “Eighty percent of the information is monopolized by Western media.”<sup>3</sup> It was time, she said, to end that monopoly by means of what China has called the Grand External Propaganda Campaign (大外宣).

China refers to its attempt to control the narrative about China as a war, a *huayuzhan* (话语站) or a discourse war.

Since coming to power, president Xi Jinping has overseen the intensification of this external propaganda blitz, which was launched in 2007 by former party general secretary Hu Jintao. As Xi told the November 2014 Foreign Affairs Work Conference in Beijing: “We should increase China’s soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China’s messages to the world.”<sup>4</sup> This is the task CCP propagandists have now undertaken in an increasingly fulsome way. On February 19, 2016, Xi visited the headquarters of the *People’s Daily*, Xinhua News Agency, and China Central Television (CCTV), where he again stressed the importance of external propaganda work.<sup>5</sup> At the August 2018 National Meeting on Ideology and Propaganda, Xi stated: “To present good images, we should improve our international communication capability, tell China’s stories well, disseminate China’s voice, show an authentic and comprehensive China to the world, and raise the country’s soft power and the influence of Chinese culture.”<sup>6</sup> External propaganda work has long been an important foreign policy instrument for the Chinese Communist Party and the People’s Republic of China, but under Xi it has become a top priority of China’s party-state.

## State Media

China’s Communist Party and government have a long history of trying to influence international opinion. Over the years, the themes of its external propaganda have varied substantially—usually in parallel with dramatic fluctuations in its own domestic political campaigns (运动) and related slogans (口号), shifts in ideology (意识形态), meta propaganda narratives (提法), and substantive elements in China’s diplomacy (外交). The shifts in Beijing’s propaganda lines (宣传路线) throughout PRC history have been dizzying, but they are always important to follow as indicators of the country’s direction.

During the 1950s, Communist China used organizations such as the China News Service, a successor to the party’s International News Agency (founded in 1938), to appeal to overseas Chinese for support of

the new revolution. The party placed this news service under the State Council's Office for Overseas Chinese Affairs. Other propaganda campaigns targeted allies in the Western world, such as black nationalist figures from the United States like Robert Williams, who were given airtime on shortwave broadcasts from Beijing, and a few Western writers and journalists, like Edgar Snow, Felix Greene, and William Hinton, who were offered rare, and sometimes lucrative, peeks behind the Bamboo Curtain.

During the Cultural Revolution, from 1966 to 1976, Beijing's propaganda outreach to overseas Chinese slowed, as the party persecuted those in China with foreign ties. But following the arrest of the Gang of Four in 1976 and the economic reform program led by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s, the party once again directly engaged with the overseas Chinese community as well as with mainstream Western society and media, appealing to all comers to help China modernize. In 1980, the party formed the External Propaganda Group (对外宣传小组) and placed it under the Propaganda Department of the CCP Central Committee. Zhu Muzhi, the former chief of the Xinhua News Agency and a vice minister of propaganda, was its first head. In 1991, the group was transferred to the State Council, where it was still internally referred to as the External Propaganda Group. For foreign consumption, however, it was called the State Council Information Office.

As the reform period began and the Cultural Revolution ended, Beijing added to its stable of foreign-facing propaganda publications—such as *Beijing Review*, *China Reconstructs*, and *China Pictorial*—by starting or reopening more than twenty periodicals, including the English-language *China Daily*, the overseas edition of the *People's Daily*, the overseas edition of *Outlook* (望), and the *Voice of China* (华声报). The party also resumed publishing material for overseas Chinese. During the Cultural Revolution, the number of magazines targeting overseas Chinese had shrunk to ten, whereas by the end of the 1980s it surpassed 130. Before 1982, the state-run Xinhua News Agency had focused almost solely on providing news to domestic Chinese clients. In 1983, however, it also began sending news to international clients. The China News Service (CNS), which had suspended operations during the Cultural Revolution, also

resumed work, sending hundreds of stories a day to overseas Chinese-language media. Today the CNS employs more than two thousand people worldwide, working out of forty-six bureaus. The party directed its media outlets in their overseas work to support socialism with Chinese characteristics, push the policies of reform and opening up, and oppose hegemonism—or, in other words, fight against Western ideological control.

In the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, China's propaganda agencies redoubled their efforts to “grab the right to speak,” or gain “discourse power” (话语权). The worldwide torch-lighting ceremony touched off free-Tibet rallies and other human-rights protests that angered Chinese authorities and some Chinese as well. An anti-CNN movement began in China, alleging that Western media outlets were distorting “China's story.” This was the genesis for what has come to be known as the Grand Overseas Propaganda Campaign, first promoted by the administration of party chief Hu Jintao and premier Wen Jiabao. The *International Herald Leader*, a publication of the Xinhua News Agency, reported in 2009 that foreign propaganda work had been elevated by the party to a “systematic, strategic position,” the goal of which was to “grab back the right to speak, and improve China's international image.”<sup>7</sup> Reports that had first surfaced in Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post* in 2009 that China had earmarked \$7 billion for the campaign were reprinted in the Chinese media, most notably in the March 14 edition of *Phoenix Weekly*.<sup>8</sup>

The Grand Overseas Propaganda Campaign has been grand. Chinese sources report hundreds of millions of dollars being spent on a multitude of projects designed to bolster China's image. The expansion of the Xinhua News Agency is but one example. From 120, the number of Xinhua bureaus around the world has now grown to more than 200, and its client base has expanded to more than 1,450.<sup>9</sup> What is more, it now reports in seven languages and competes directly with all the major wire services of the world. In the United States, Xinhua doubled the number of bureaus, adding Chicago, Houston, and San Francisco to its original footprint in Washington, New York, and Los Angeles. Xinhua, like other state-owned Chinese media outlets, also began hiring local talent, and in 2009 it began a TV broadcast in English.

As part of this vigorous propaganda campaign, the party has sought to turn China Central Television into a global competitor to CNN. CCTV was already airing in America as of 2004, when it cooperated with EchoStar, America's second-largest satellite TV company, to launch the Chinese "Great Wall Platform" package, including twelve Mandarin channels, two Cantonese channels, one Hokkien channel, and one English channel. That same year, Rupert Murdoch's News Group helped CCTV place programming on Time Warner and NewsCorp's US television network. CCTV also expanded its offerings in the United States, expanding its bureau in Washington and hiring American reporters too. By 2012, CCTV, recently renamed the China Global Television Network (CGTN), was broadcasting in seven languages. Its programs for American audiences regularly feature personalities from Russia's state-funded propaganda outlet, RT, which, like CGTN, was recently required to register as a foreign agent; RT, in turn, regularly features CGTN personalities.

China Radio International (CRI) was also given a foreign platform. Decades ago, the Beijing-based propaganda outlet relied solely on short-wave broadcasts to beam China's message to the world, but in the late 2000s it began leasing local stations around the globe and across the United States that it supplied with content made in Beijing. CRI has used a US-based company through which it leases stations. That firm is EDI Media Inc. (鷹龍傳媒有限公司), which also owns other media properties that toe Beijing's line: G&E TV, G&E Studio Network, and EDI City Newsweek (城市新聞週刊).<sup>10</sup> A CRI subsidiary in China, Guoguang Century Media, holds a majority stake in G&E Studio.<sup>11</sup> When it comes to reporting on mainland China, the content of all of EDI's outlets mirrors that of China's state-owned media.

China's state-run media have proved to be nimble in accomplishing Beijing's goal of penetrating US markets. In 2013, the Hong Kong-based Phoenix Satellite TV group, which has close ties to the Chinese state and broadcasts in China, attempted to purchase two major FM stations in Los Angeles that shared the same frequency. One of them, KDAY, covers West LA, while KDEY stretches into Riverside and San Bernardino counties to the east of the city. Greater Los Angeles is home to

more than a half million Chinese, the second-biggest concentration next to New York City. But none of the region's Chinese-language radio stations are particularly loyal to Beijing, representing either independent Chinese voices or those supporting the banned religious sect Falun Gong. According to sources close to the deal, Phoenix structured the offer to avoid a US law that limits foreign ownership of US radio stations to 25 percent. In filings with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), Phoenix was listed as owning 20 percent of the US-based investor RBC, while the remaining 80 percent was owned by an editor at Phoenix who is also a US citizen.<sup>12</sup> Under such a setup, no FCC regulations would have been broken. To be extra sure that the deal would go through, however, advisors to Phoenix convinced the Hong Kong company to seek approval from the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS), a Treasury Department bureau that monitors foreign investments in the United States on national-security grounds. In a ruling that surprised the potential investors, CFIUS declined to approve the deal, referring it to then president Obama. Sources close to the deal noted that the fact that a Phoenix employee in the United States had pleaded guilty to espionage-related charges did not help Phoenix's case.<sup>13</sup> RBC pulled out of the deal on September 25, 2013.

But the efforts to break into the LA radio market did not end there. In the summer of 2018, a New York firm, H&H Capital Partners, announced that it was buying a Mexican radio station, XEWW, whose signal covers much of Southern California.<sup>14</sup> Sources involved in that deal said that H&H sought to buy a Mexican station in order to avoid scrutiny in the United States. H&H is a New York-based firm led by several individuals who worked as reporters for *Global Times* (环球时报), a state-run newspaper in China. Filings from H&H to the FCC about the deal suggest that Phoenix Satellite TV remains a player in the purchase, as the address that H&H gave for its Los Angeles-based holding company was the same as Phoenix's offices in LA.<sup>15</sup> H&H's attempt to buy XEWW to broadcast into the United States has been challenged at the FCC by a Chinese-language radio station linked to Falun Gong.<sup>16</sup>

China's main English-language newspaper, *China Daily*, has also expanded operations in America, starting a North American edition in

2009. In addition, through its marketing arm, China Watch, the paper began distributing English-language content directly as advertising inserts in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Des Moines Register*, and the *Washington Post*, among other leading US newspapers. Often, it's hard to tell that China Watch's material is an advertisement, as was the case highlighted by president Donald Trump with a China Watch insert in the Sunday *Des Moines Register*—an insert that the president suggested was aimed at undermining political support both for the president and the Republican party.<sup>17</sup> Rough estimates from newspaper executives indicate that *China Daily* pays \$250,000 for each insert in major US dailies. In 2009, the *Global Times*, part of the *People's Daily* group, started an English-language newspaper as well.

Chinese investment in the US media market is not limited to the central government. Chinese provincial media firms also have a footprint in the United States. Sky Link TV (天下衛視) is one example. It is fully owned by Guangzhou Media American Co. Ltd. (美國廣視傳媒有限公司), which, in turn, is owned by GZ Television Media (廣州影視傳媒有限公司), a Chinese state-owned media outlet. Sky Link's story also illustrates the switch from Taiwan money to mainland money in the US Chinese-language media world. Sky Link was established in 1989 by a Taiwanese corporation. In 2009, it was purchased by a private Chinese company; three years later, the Chinese state-owned GZ Television Media bought Sky Link TV, a takeover that was hailed by the PRC's Ministry of Commerce as a key "cultural export" in 2014.<sup>18</sup> When Sky Link TV reports on China, the Sino-US relationship, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other important issues concerning China, it follows and quite often repeats verbatim the official line from PRC media. Its major business partners include CCTV and Xinhua.

Xi Jinping clearly has an abiding interest in the success of the Grand Overseas Propaganda Campaign. In March 2018, the party announced plans to unite its various individual efforts into a mammoth overseas-facing propaganda organ, known as the Voice of China, by merging the foreign operations of China Global Television Network, China National Radio, and China Radio International.<sup>19</sup> (It is not clear whether the parallel with the Voice of America was intentional.)

Despite all of these efforts, President Xi still appears to be unsatisfied with the results of the party's "discourse war." In August 2018, the Chinese government announced a shake-up in its propaganda organs, reflecting significant concern at the heart of the party that China was not winning its ideological battle with the West.<sup>20</sup>

## Diaspora Media

In the early 1990s, the state-owned China News Service and the Overseas Chinese Office of the State Council dispatched editorial personnel to the United States to found the Chinese-language TV broadcaster SinoVision and the newspaper *Qiaobao* (侨报). Shanghai's *Xinmin Wanbao* sent staff to the United States to start up an American edition as well. Chinese officials backed this push as part of an effort to fight back against the negative publicity generated by the party's crackdown on protests around Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989.

The SinoVision/*Qiaobao* story is illustrative of Beijing's push to dominate Chinese-language media in the United States. SinoVision, *Qiaobao*, and the *Sino American Times* (美洲时报) all belong to the Asian Culture and Media Group (美國亞洲文化傳媒集團). Sources in these firms say that the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council of PRC (OCAO, 中國國務院僑務辦公室) set up the firm in the early 1990s but hid its financial role in these companies.

Most of the major executives and editors in these businesses served either as editors and reporters for the state-run China News Service or as officials for the Overseas Chinese Office of the State Council.<sup>21</sup> The chairman of the board of the group served as a deputy director of the OCAO. The president of *Qiaobao's* Western edition worked for years as a CNS reporter.<sup>22</sup> In 2015, CNS described the work of the top executives of the *Qiaobao's* Eastern edition (美东侨报) as part of the PRC's broader push to strengthen its "soft power" and fight back against "Western media hegemony."<sup>23</sup> *Qiaobao* is the sole major newspaper to use simplified Chinese characters in an effort to appeal to immigrants from mainland China living abroad. Almost all the news stories in *Qiaobao* about China, the Sino-US relationship, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other



important issues important to China are taken directly from official Chinese media outlets or websites, including CCTV, Xinhua, and the *People's Daily*. Its current editor is I-Der Jeng. In an email communication with *Foreign Policy* magazine, Jeng stated that the paper receives no editorial direction from Beijing.<sup>24</sup> However, like its parent company, numerous reporters and editors on the paper come from China's state-owned press outlets.<sup>25</sup>

The group's main TV outlet is SinoVision. It operates two twenty-four-hour channels (one Chinese and one English language), and it is on the program lineups of cable systems covering about thirty million people in the United States. Like its sister newspapers, SinoVision was established in 1990 as part of the PRC's first push to establish propaganda outlets in the United States. It is headquartered in New York City, with branches in Boston, Washington, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle. According to Wang Aibing (王艾冰), a former executive of SinoVision, starting in 1990, the State Council's Overseas Chinese Affairs Office gave \$800,000 a year to SinoVision, ultimately increasing its subsidy to between \$2 million and \$3 million a year. Wang made this charge in a 2011 letter to the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office alleging widespread corruption at the station.<sup>26</sup> Allegations of corruption and governmental subsidies have not been corroborated.

What is clear, however, is that, like *Qiaobao*, SinoVision's content echoes China's official media. The vast majority of its stories about China, Sino-American relations, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other important issues for the PRC government are taken directly from official Chinese media outlets or websites, including CCTV, Xinhua, and the *People's Daily*. In an essay, *Qiaobao*'s Eastern Group president, You Jiang, defended his paper's support of the PRC's agenda by saying that it stemmed not from Beijing's direction but from demands from pro-PRC immigrants in the United States.<sup>27</sup>

Forays such as these by PRC organizations to assert direct control over Chinese-language media in the United States sparked a battle with publications owned by private interests from Taiwan and Hong Kong that did not share the PRC's ideological bent. PRC officials openly acknowledged the political nature of this battle, and in a 2007 interview,

Guo Zhaojin, the president of the state-owned China News Service, noted that if China could gain control of Chinese-language publications in the United States, China would be better able to influence the overseas Chinese community, have a say in American politics, and “protect the national image.” Guo further observed that more than one-quarter of America’s minorities relied on foreign-language media to obtain their news. Foreign-language media, said Guo, was a “giant hiding in plain sight.”<sup>28</sup>

Beijing seems to be winning the battle against Chinese-language outlets expressing dissenting views. Over the course of the last twenty years, a series of once-independent Chinese-language media have fallen under Beijing’s control. The Sing Tao Newspaper Group was established in Hong Kong in 1938. In the mid-1990s, its original owner<sup>29</sup> was forced to divest her interests in the paper, and it was soon taken over by a pro-PRC businessman,<sup>30</sup> who, starting in 1998, became a member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, which functions as part of the broader united front organization network. Sing Tao’s coverage of China is now aligned with that of state-run media from Beijing. In fact, in May 2001, the year he purchased Sing Tao, the new owner established a joint venture with the Xinhua News Agency to create an information-service company known as Xinhua Online.

Another case in point is the *World Journal* (世界日报), for years the premier Chinese-language paper in the United States serving immigrants from Taiwan and only one of the six newspapers owned by the United Daily News (UDN), Taiwan’s most influential newspaper company. The paper once dominated news coverage in Chinatowns across America, and it acted as the voice of the Chinese Nationalist Party of Taiwan. Unlike PRC-controlled outlets, the *World Journal* did cover events such as the death of the jailed Chinese human-rights advocate and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo. But the *Journal*’s coverage has shifted in recent years and become more pro-PRC in a variety of areas, such as China’s militarization of the South China Sea and its handling of Taiwan and Hong Kong. Sources at the *Journal* observe that the paper’s owners in Taiwan are interested in growing their business in China, which may help explain the paper’s evolving editorial stance. For exam-

ple, in March 2004, the *World Journal* published recruitment notices on the front page, announcing its intention to establish a mainland news group and recruit reporters in China. In a 2015 essay, an executive<sup>31</sup> at *Qiaobao*, one of the *Journal's* main competitors, noted the *Journal's* evolving editorial stance. “No longer do they only report negative news about the mainland,” he wrote.<sup>32</sup> According to sources inside the newspaper, Chinese consulates in both New York and San Francisco have pressured *World Journal's* local offices not to publish ads related to the religious sect Falun Gong, which has been outlawed in China. The New York office has already acquiesced in full for the East Coast edition. The West Coast edition now only runs Falun Gong ads in throwaway sections of the paper. The *World Journal's* executive editor, Vincent Chang, took issue with the view that the *World Journal* has modified its position on China. “Since I took the post as *World Journal's* chief content officer in October of 2016, I have made it my goal to make this paper as neutral and journalistic as possible,” he wrote, adding that the paper’s content is “independent of any government influence.”

*Ming Pao* is another formerly independent newspaper that has fallen under Beijing’s control. For years, its US edition was popular among Cantonese-speaking immigrants in the United States. In January 2007, the Hong Kong Ming Pao Group announced a \$600 million merger with the two largest Chinese-language media outlets in Malaysia, the Xingzhou Media and Nanyang News. The merger was welcomed in Beijing. Guo Zhaojin, then president of the China News Service, said the new company would develop into one of the largest Chinese print media platforms in the world, with more than five newspapers in major cities in North America, Southeast Asia, and Greater China and a daily circulation of more than one million copies.

China’s efforts to dominate Chinese-language media coincided with two other developments in the 1990s. The Chinese immigrant community boomed in the United States as hundreds of thousands of mainland Chinese became US citizens, transforming the complexion of a community that had previously been dominated by immigrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Second, Taiwan’s political system transitioned from an authoritarian state to a democracy, leading to new calls from the island

and from some of its immigrants in the United States for an independent Taiwan. Seeking to capitalize on the ever-larger number of mainlanders in the United States and to battle the nascent Taiwan independence movement, PRC authorities established organizations and Chinese-language schools to bolster their propaganda work in the United States. The party's United Front Work Department founded the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification in 1988, and within a decade it had more than one hundred chapters in sixty countries, including more than a dozen offices in the United States. Chinese officials described Chinese-language media, Chinese-language schools, and Chinese-backed organizations as the "three treasures" (三宝) of united front work overseas.<sup>33</sup>

By the mid-1990s, analyst He Qinglian estimated that, of the some one hundred Chinese-language newspapers in the United States, more than one-third were funded by money from the mainland.<sup>34</sup> Owners of these newspapers, seeking subsidies from Beijing, cozied up to PRC authorities with statements such as "opposing Taiwan independence and fostering peaceful unification are the glorious missions and historical responsibility of overseas Chinese publications."<sup>35</sup>

Beijing also moved to take control of online and social media outlets. *Duowei* is an online news site that was for years an independent Chinese-language media outlet. Among its many scoops was the prediction of the composition of the sixteenth Politburo Standing Committee. But in 2009, *Duowei* was purchased by a Hong Kong businessman with substantial business interests in China,<sup>36</sup> including two companies listed on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange. The businessman is a founding member of the Tsinghua University Center for US-China Relations and is also fond of writing pro-Beijing essays on China's claims to the South China Sea. *Duowei* is now headquartered in Beijing. Since selling *Duowei*, the online news source's founder<sup>37</sup> has moved to *Mingjing* (Mirror Media), a Chinese-language web presence based in Canada, where he indicated that last year he received a large investment from the PRC. Since then, *Mingjing* has significantly modified its editorial stance, switching its focus from politics to real estate, immigration, and invest-

ing. Part of the reason for this modification appears linked to the disappearance in China of the wife of one of *Mingjing's* reporters after *Mingjing* aired interviews with a dissident Chinese businessman.<sup>38</sup>

Beijing has also moved to tighten the ideological consistency for these papers. In 2001, the Office of Overseas Chinese Affairs and the China News Service began a biannual conference, the Forum on the Global Chinese Language Media, hosting representatives from hundreds of Chinese-language periodicals from around the world. Kicking off the first conference in 2001, Guo Zhaojin, the president of the China News Service, said a key goal of the meeting was to persuade participating Overseas Chinese media to use copy from the China News Service instead of reports from competing Chinese-language news services from Taiwan or from the West.<sup>39</sup> The conference also appears to serve as a platform for Beijing to convince critics to modify their tone and to ensure that overseas Chinese-language newspapers follow the party's line. Essays released during the conferences praised the censorship of views opposed by the party and stressed the necessity of, in the words of one piece in 2015, "properly telling China's story" (echoing Xi Jinping's instructions).

And Beijing's efforts have had some successes. Ranked the number-five Chinese website in the United States, BackChina was once an independent media voice like *Duowei*. But in 2017, its editors attended the ninth forum in China, and since then BackChina's reporting has become far more positive about the PRC.

In 2006, the China News Service held the first Advanced Seminar for the Overseas Chinese Language Media, for select groups of editors and reporters from overseas; a seminar in 2006, for example, focused on the correct reading of "socialism with Chinese characteristics," while a workshop in 2010 concerned China's policies in Tibet and Xinjiang. At the thirteenth seminar in 2015, He Yafei, then the assistant director of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, argued that overseas Chinese media needed to promote the Belt and Road Initiative and essentially embrace the role of becoming a mouthpiece of the CCP, promoting China's national strategy.<sup>40</sup> Beijing also dispatched Chinese officials overseas to

instruct Chinese-language media on how to “correctly” report the news. As the Beijing 2008 Olympics approached, Politburo member and head of China’s Olympic Committee Liu Qi met at the PRC consulate in New York with representatives of the Chinese-language press to lay out China’s demands for their coverage of the event.<sup>41</sup>

In a further effort to shape the overseas Chinese press, the China News Service established the China News Service Overseas Center, which provides news reports, editorials, and layout for overseas Chinese media outlets around the globe. The idea behind the center was that if Beijing were to provide and package content for overseas Chinese papers, and could convince them to run it, Beijing would then mold the message.<sup>42</sup>

Given these efforts by Beijing, the space for truly independent Chinese-language media in the United States has shrunk to a few media outlets supported by the adherents of Falun Gong, the banned religious sect in China, and a small publication and website called *Vision Times*. According to the publisher of its New York edition, Peter Wang, *Vision Times* was formed expressly to address the issue of the shrinking space for independent Chinese voices in the United States. Since then, it has focused on two areas—human-rights reporting and traditional Chinese culture. Wang noted that while some of the staff of the paper may be Falun Gong adherents, the paper is not a Falun Gong operation. *Vision Times* began its online presence in 2001, started printing a newspaper in 2005, and claims a circulation in the United States and Canada of below 60,000.<sup>43</sup>

Much of the competition between pro-PRC and dissenting voices plays out within the chat rooms of Wenxue City (文学城), the most popular Chinese-language website in the United States. Launched in 1997 by a group of students from the University of Michigan, the website was sold in 2000 to a Taiwanese American businessman, Wayne Lin.<sup>44</sup> Lin conceives of Wenxue City as a Chinese-language version of Reddit, a platform for political, economic, educational, business, and cultural information for Chinese-speaking people. For years after Lin bought the site, China attempted to cultivate Lin and his business, inviting him to three of the biannual Chinese-language media conferences in China

(2007, 2009, and 2011) and providing him with a China News Service feed. Then, starting in 2012, Chinese authorities blocked Wenxue Cheng's website in China but would not tell Lin why. Wenxue City has also been the target of numerous denial-of-service attacks, Lin said, adding that he suspected China was the source. "Over the past few years, the Chinese government has become more aggressive in influencing Chinese-language media," he said.<sup>45</sup>

### **WeChat as a Source of News in the Diaspora Community**

China's social media giant WeChat is another major source of news within the Chinese American community. But it is more than that; for many users in the United States, China, and around the world, WeChat is a digital ecosystem so ubiquitous that it constitutes a lifestyle—a drum-beat that determines the rhythms of the day. In the United States, as in China, WeChat censors news and comments in accordance with rules set by China's Communist Party. Indeed, WeChat is an example of how China is now exporting PRC media censorship overseas. Links sent via WeChat between users in the United States routinely won't open if those sites are blocked in China.

In an analysis of WeChat articles popular in the United States, researcher Zhang Chi found that the most successful pieces skewed significantly to the right of the US political spectrum.<sup>46</sup> Zhang noted that the right-wing view on WeChat generally embraces a social Darwinist, zero-sum conception of racial politics, with Chinese in America portrayed as beaten down by a system that favors other racial groups and illegal immigrants from Latin America. One popular WeChat channel blamed the wildfires in 2017 in Northern California on an undocumented immigrant.

Numerous other channels reported on alleged plans for mass riots and a civil war in the United States led by the leftist group Antifa. When a Chinese jogger was struck and killed in a DUI case in a suburb of Los Angeles, a popular WeChat channel reported that the motorist was undocumented and had committed the act to extend his stay in the United

States.<sup>47</sup> Zhang noted that another cause of concern was the fact that these WeChat channels helped foster anxiety among first-generation Chinese. As with other Chinese immigrants who rely on traditional Chinese-language media for information, the anti-American hothouse created by WeChat's "news channels" leads to a type of resentful pro-Chinese nationalism that is ripe for exploitation by the Chinese government.

WeChat may be no more slanted in its treatment of information than American media that serve domestic political extremes, but there is no precedent for the situation WeChat has created: A vast and vital community of Americans gets most of its "news" from, and does most of its communicating via, a platform known to be censored by a foreign government that opposes free speech and has been named by the US National Security Strategy as the greatest long-term security challenge the nation faces.

WeChat also appears to have different rules for different regions. In 2014, some Chinese Americans began to lobby against a law that sought to reintroduce race as an element of admissions into the University of California system. The campaign started just as WeChat was gaining popularity among the Chinese American diaspora. WeChat's owner, Tencent, tweaked its own rules and gave campaign organizers the ability to collect hundreds of people into supergroups of five hundred or more. Ten WeChat supergroups were handed out to movement organizers and then used to connect with Chinese American voters. The law died in the California legislature.

## Western Media

The Chinese Communist Party has always recognized the usefulness of the overseas media (both in local languages and Chinese) as a means to get its message out. Foreign- and Chinese-language media have always served the cause of China's revolution. For example, in the 1930s, foreign journalist Edgar Snow sang the praises of the Chinese Communist Party and specifically its chairman, Mao Zedong. The party conducted



a campaign in the United States in the 1940s to turn the American public against the regime of Chiang Kai-shek and to soften criticism of China's Communists. Organizations such as the Institute of Pacific Relations, which provided Americans with in-depth coverage of Asia, were staffed by Communist agents and played an important role in fashioning public opinion on America's relations with China. To be sure, these techniques were not unique to the Chinese Communist Party. The government of Chiang Kai-shek and its "China lobby" also used the overseas press to serve its purposes. In the 1950s, the KMT government conducted a campaign against pro-Communist newspapers in the United States, convincing the US government to shutter several pro-PRC outlets and expel pro-PRC journalists.

The events of 1989 sparked a significant change in China's foreign propaganda campaign. Following China's crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators in Beijing and other cities, China's image sank to a low not seen by Chinese officials in decades.<sup>48</sup> China Books and Periodicals, which had been operating in the United States since the 1950s, closed its offices on Fifth Avenue in New York City. And the Foreign Languages Press (a department of the China International Publishing Group) saw its cooperative agreements dwindle.

It was then that Chinese officials revived an old tactic that the Communist Party had employed before the revolution—using friendly foreigners and pro-PRC Chinese immigrants to publicize China's story. Chinese officials called this tactic of localizing the work of foreign propaganda, the "borrowed boat" strategy.<sup>49</sup>

One such friendly American was a China scholar<sup>50</sup> who was for years associated with Random House. According to Huang Youyi, the chief editor of the Foreign Languages Press posted to the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s, this American argued that for China to improve its image in the United States, it needed to work through American organizations, and so he collaborated with Huang on a book series, "The Culture and Civilization of China," which the Yale University Press began publishing in 1997. The American's "understanding of the US publishing industry and his friendly attitude towards China became an

indispensable condition for the success of the cooperation,” Huang wrote.<sup>51</sup> Books from the series are still given to foreign guests of the Beijing government.

In a period of deep crisis for China’s reputation, Huang’s success in using foreigners to publish material beneficial to China’s image became a model for other Chinese operations. From the early 1990s, the Chinese Communist Party began to seek opportunities to cooperate with Westerners, Western media and publishing companies, and overseas Chinese to tell its story.

### **Lack of Reciprocity**

It is important to compare Beijing’s efforts to wage its “discourse war” and garner “discourse power” overseas with the efforts, and ability, of Western media organizations to access China’s market to a similar degree. For decades, those efforts have faced roadblocks placed in their path by the Chinese government. A key roadblock has been China’s ban on Western investment in media except when it involves such things as fashion, cars, and lifestyle.

Unlike Chinese reporters in the United States, who are restricted only from entering high-security military installations, Western reporters in China are subject to a panoply of regulations, many of them unwritten. A 2017 report by the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China notes that in a survey of 117 foreign journalists based in China, 40 percent felt reporting conditions had deteriorated compared to 2016; nearly half said they had experienced harassment, interference, and physical violence during their work in China; 15 percent said they encountered difficulties during their visa renewal process; and over 25 percent said they had learned that their Chinese contacts had been detained and otherwise hounded by Chinese authorities for speaking with them.<sup>52</sup>

China has also moved against Western media outlets on many fronts. Both Chinese- and English-language websites of the *New York Times* have been blocked in China since 2012 following a story detailing the wealth of the family of China’s then premier Wen Jiabao.<sup>53</sup> The Eng-

lish- and Chinese-language sites of the *Wall Street Journal* and Reuters are also blocked, and those belonging to the *Financial Times* and the *Economist* are blocked on an intermittent basis.

The Chinese government has also made it difficult for resident foreign reporters to obtain and renew journalist visas. Following the *New York Times* report on the Wen family's money, China did not approve a new journalist visa for a *Times* reporter for three years. While the situation has improved somewhat since 2015 for resident journalists, the Chinese government still delays visa applications for journalists and uses the threat of expulsion from China as a way to pressure Western media outlets to soften their coverage of China. This is especially true of freelance journalists or independent documentary filmmakers who are dependent on onetime visas to carry out a specific assignment. Here delays and outright refusal to process visas in a timely manner have been common.

There is some indication that China's pressure tactics have paid off. In 2013, Bloomberg News was preparing to publish a report detailing connections between one of China's richest men and members of the Politburo—the top organ in the Chinese Communist Party—when Bloomberg spiked the story. The outlet's editor in chief, Matthew Winkler, was quoted on a conference call likening the decision to censorship of foreign news bureaus that wanted to continue to report in Nazi Germany.<sup>54</sup> Other observers noted that the real reason Bloomberg News killed the story involved the company's substantial business interests—especially in “Bloomberg Boxes” selling access to financial information—in China.

## International Service Broadcasters

Another roadblock in Western attempts to bring alternative messages to China has been Beijing's efforts to limit the influence of the Mandarin services of the Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Asia. Starting in the first decade of the 2000s, the Chinese embassy in Washington, DC, and the leadership of VOA's Mandarin service began an annual meeting to allow embassy officials to voice their opinions about VOA's content.

PRC embassy officials have also reached out to VOA hosts to convince them to be more supportive of the regime. VOA personalities have hosted events at the embassy. One of VOA's TV editors even publicly pledged his allegiance to China at an embassy event.<sup>55</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that some VOA staffers interviewed for this report believe that China's outreach campaign has succeeded in pushing the VOA Mandarin service away from programs with direct relevance to China toward programming that seeks instead to highlight American everyday life or teach American-style English to Chinese listeners. An example would be a program called *Cultural Odyssey*, a VOA TV series that focused on Americana, such as fried chicken, doughnuts, and national parks. For years, *Cultural Odyssey* ate up one-third of the Mandarin service's travel budget. Another program featured English teacher Jessica Beinecke, which launched her on a career as an English-teaching TV personality on mainland China itself. VOA officials internally praised these programs as both "non-political and non-sensitive," a current senior VOA staff member noted. What's more, VOA officials sought to scale back what were perceived to be sensitive reports. After running two years of a radio series on aspects of modern Chinese history, including the Cultural Revolution and other events post-1949, VOA cut the program in 2009 despite several of those shows garnering well over three million hits each on the web. In 2011, the Broadcasting Board of Governors sought to cut 65 percent of the workforce from the Mandarin service. However, reporters and editors in the service fought back: they lobbied Congress, and the cuts were restored. In 2012, a Chinese immigrant, who was also a former Chinese dissident and a specialist on the US political system, became the first female Chinese head of the service. She was later fired over a controversial interview that drew the official ire of the PRC, which threatened repercussions.<sup>56</sup>

Since her dismissal, VOA's Mandarin service has resumed a pattern of avoiding stories that could be perceived to be too tough on China, according to several staffers. For example, blogs written by dissidents such as Cao Yaxue, who runs the human rights-related site China Change, have been removed from the VOA website. Several prominent Chinese commentators are no longer on VOA's lineup of analysts. Many staffers

now describe VOA's content as neither pro- nor anti-China. The emphasis, the staffers observed, is on travel, culture, and language, programming the likes of which Chinese viewers can access equally well on CGTN or China's Internet. By contrast, the content of Radio Free Asia remains far more hard-hitting than its counterpart VOA.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

China has used America's openness to convey its message both to English- and Chinese-speaking residents of the United States. US rules allow foreign media companies, even ones run by foreign governments, to broadcast freely via American cable and satellite networks. Unlike in China, the United States government does not block any Chinese websites, many of which are funded by the PRC government. While the Communications Act of 1934 theoretically allows foreigners to own only 20 to 25 percent of terrestrial wireless radio and TV stations, the law has been loosened considerably over the past decade, and it does not even apply to cable channels or leasing arrangements wherein a foreign entity, including one owned by a foreign government, can pay an American licensee for airtime. Chinese media outlets have used all such strategies to publicize the views of the Beijing government.<sup>57</sup> Perhaps more worrisome, China has also been successful in funding or convincing pro-PRC businessmen to fund pro-PRC media outlets in the United States that nominally appear independent so that the three most important traditionally independent Chinese-language newspapers now increasingly side with Beijing.

By contrast, the Chinese government severely limits the scope of US and other Western media outlets in China and has banned Western media investment in China, except in very limited innocuous areas, such as in fashion, automobiles, investing, health, and lifestyle. The idea that a Western TV news network could lease a Chinese station and broadcast news to China around the clock—as their Chinese counterparts do here in the United States—is not even thinkable. Equally, there is no chance that a Western media company would be allowed to invest in a Chinese publication that reported mainstream news.

Both the expansion of Chinese state-owned English-language media in the United States and Beijing's increasing control of Chinese-language media outlets in the United States are very problematic for an open dialogue. For one, these media are under the control of a foreign government, not simply a foreign individual or firm. Second, the diminishing space within America's Chinese-language media for independent voices runs counter to the goals of a liberal society seeking a diversity of perspectives. Furthermore, the PRC's control of Chinese-language media outlets in America, and its increasingly strong position among English-language outlets, provides China with the potential for mobilizing Chinese Americans and Americans alike to espouse policies counter to US interest. The constant drumbeat of anti-American reporting in pro-Beijing media outlets headquartered in the United States creates an unhealthy environment.

### **Promoting Transparency**

A major challenge is the fact that China has worked successfully to mask its influence operations with respect to US media. On paper, for example, the Asian Culture and Media Group controls the pro-China Sino-Vision and *Qiaobao* as a private company. The reality is that it is staffed by people who served the state-run China News Service and were, sources insist, dispatched to the United States by the Chinese government to establish propaganda operations in the United States. Given its nominal status as a private company, taking action to shut down its operations would be fraught with even more legal and ethical challenges than those involving media corporations directly owned by the PRC. The same holds true for publications and websites that were once independent but have now increasingly fallen under the sway of the PRC. If US law protects the rights of publishers of newspapers or websites to put their personal political imprint on their enterprises, how can the US government move to deny it to those of a pro-PRC bent?

At a minimum, what US authorities can do is work to establish the real ownership structure of Chinese (and other foreign) companies purchasing US-based media. Any foreign-owned or foreign-controlled

media (including print media), and particularly those that advance a foreign government line, should be required to register under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA).

Beyond FARA, there should also be a review to see whether these organizations and their employees should also register under existing lobbying laws as foreign agents. In addition, there is an argument to be made for ensuring that employees of these organizations be given a disclosure package making them aware that they are working for a foreign-agent institution.

### **Promoting Integrity**

Figuring out how to properly counter the PRC's influence operations in both English- and Chinese-language media presents enormous challenges in a free society. The United States could consider restrictions on state-controlled media outlets, which would not include publicly funded broadcasters, such as the BBC, which maintain editorial independence. Failing that, the recent requirement that state-run publications, TV and radio broadcasters, and potentially their employees, register as agents of a foreign government is a partial solution.<sup>58</sup> And in late 2017, Russia's RT registered as a foreign agent<sup>59</sup> while in September 2018, the US Justice Department reportedly also ordered CGTN and Xinhua to register as agents of a foreign power.<sup>60</sup>

When it comes to independent Chinese-language media, the US government should consider doing more to help such independent outlets survive, including using grants via the Fulbright program or other vehicles, such as the State Department International Visitors or Speakers' Bureau. Domestically, the US government could also consider aiding the operations of independent Chinese-language media, including manufacturing credits for printing press operations, and nonprofit tax designations to allow journalism business models to survive the current transitional crisis. Private charitable foundations can also make a difference in helping independent Chinese-language media remain editorially independent and financially viable.

## Promoting Reciprocity

The time has come for the US government to demand reciprocity for American journalists attempting to do their professional work in China. To the extent that they are prevented from doing so as a result of visa denials and restrictions of access, the US State Department should respond in kind by restricting visas and access for Chinese journalists in the United States. To the extent that American journalists experience harassment and physical violence, this should also have a bearing on the granting of visas and access to Chinese journalists.