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Global Chinese media and a decade of change

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Introduction

The year 2012 stands as a significant milestone in China's government-led external communication activities. It was in early 2012 that Beijing launched television broadcasting and production centres in Washington, DC, USA (CCTV America, now CGTN America) and Nairobi, Kenya (CGTN Africa). Later in the year, it began publishing an African weekly edition of the English-language newspaper *China Daily*; European and Asian weekly editions had launched in 2010 (Zhang, 2013). Set in motion under the leadership of President Hu Jintao, China's global media expansion, part of a larger 'going out' policy for the economy in general, sought to improve the country's image overseas, and to give Beijing a larger say in global information flows (Thussu et al., 2018).

Ten years on, Chinese media's global engagement has not only grown, but diversified. Today, Chinese media companies, both State-owned and privately owned, are engaged

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all over the world in content production and distribution, direct investment in foreign media ventures, infrastructure development, training and media development efforts, and ‘managing’ public opinion overseas (Madrid-Morales and Wasserman, 2018). The growth and diversification of communication strategies can be partly explained by the fact that the global political and economic context under which Hu Jintao set out to improve China’s international image through external media expansion has changed. The rise to power of Donald Trump in the United States, the use of social media for public diplomacy by ‘Wolf Warriors’ in Xi Jinping’s China, and the debates about the coronavirus pandemic for most of 2020 and part of 2021 have encouraged a proliferation of polarised media narratives across the globe (Tumber and Waisbord, 2021). This changing geopolitical context is reflected in the global communicative strategies of the Chinese government, as authors show in several of the articles in this Special Issue.

Over the last decade, academics, diplomats and commentators have struggled to identify the most suitable constructs to understand China’s re-engagement with the global media system, and Beijing’s presumed aim of influencing global public opinion through the media. Debates around nomenclature have seen the rise (and, for some, fall) of concepts such as soft power (Repnikova, 2022), smart power (Nye, 2013), sharp power (Cardenal, 2017) and discursive power (Zhao, 2016). Academic fields as diverse as global communication, international relations, public diplomacy and strategic communications have all contributed to these debates, but more often than not, with limited dialogue between them. The weight of each of these disciplines in shaping and framing academic and non-academic discussions about the role Chinese media play in global communication has changed over the years.

After 10 years of China’s ‘going out’ strategy in the media sector, with this Special Issue we seek to provide answers to some questions that have been left unanswered by the growing body of literature about China’s external communications. These include, how should we think about and conceptualise China’s external communication in the 2020s? Are China’s external/global media still fulfilling the role envisaged for them a decade ago, and – if not – what are they now for? Do Chinese media present the ‘threat’ to media freedom that many have envisioned, especially in countries where democratic institutions are fragile? What is the state of scholarly understanding of Chinese global media, and what key new strands of research and theory have emerged? Before introducing the five articles included in this collection, we review some of the changes to media, inside and outside China, that have contributed to the changing nature of Beijing’s engagement with the world. We also offer some thoughts on how these transformations have reshaped the way researchers study the subject, and the impact they might have on the study of global communication.

From Hu to Xi: Seeing the difference

‘See the difference’ was the slogan espoused by CGTN, the English-language news channel of the Chinese state broadcaster CCTV, when it was relaunched with converged digital and broadcasting outlets on the last day of 2016 (CGTN, 2017). There was more to the relaunch than slicker production and a clearer website. The rise of CGTN and the

eclipse of its predecessor, CCTV News, were emblematic of the two phases of China's external media expansion and the full transition to Xi Jinping's rule.

The first phase, funded in the Hu Jintao era, was billed – at least outwardly – as a 'soft power' initiative to counter the frequently unflattering picture of China painted by Western journalists. If foreigners understood China better, the argument went, they would be sympathetic to its peaceful rise, and – in line with Kurlantzick's idea of a 'charm offensive' (2007) – Beijing could cultivate a benign international image. There was certainly a softness of tone to the early years of China's overseas media initiative. Chinese media workers learned the techniques of Western professionals, helped by the creation of overseas newsrooms and the hiring of foreign reporters and editors.¹ Just as Chinese hands were extended to African trading partners, Chinese media scholars advanced the notion of 'constructive journalism' (Zhang, 2014) as a less negative way of reporting on African developmental challenges than traditional Western narratives. In a broadening of the concept of 'media going out', Chinese information and communications technology helped transform the connectivity of African democracies and autocracies alike (Gagliardone, 2019). News, however, remained problematic. China's inexorable rise and millennia of culture were represented in its external media through consistently positive reporting. The critical edge to 'constructive journalism' was frequently absent. The Western journalists hired for their perceived instant credibility and professionalism were jettisoned when it came to tricky narratives. Particularly difficult political situations were de-emphasised or ignored.

The second phase began as Xi Jinping intervened personally in the media towards the end of his first term in office. During visits to the big legacy news outlets in Beijing in 2016, Xi demanded total loyalty from the assembled workers, telling them to 'hold the family name of the [Communist] Party' (Zhuang, 2016). China's definition of 'soft power' had always been broader than Nye's original concept, drawing on economic and technological as well as cultural strength (Lee, 2016). Now, however, the core media outlets also stressed Chinese morality and ideology as alternatives or counterweights to Western values (Repnikova, 2022). China's more assertive foreign policy under Xi Jinping was mirrored in its media by robust public defence of Chinese state interests. Instead of playing down or disregarding issues framed as contentious in the West, such as the detention and 're-education' of Muslim minority citizens in Xinjiang (Marsh, 2023) or the actions of the Chinese state in the COVID-19 pandemic (Yu, 2022), Chinese news workers took a highly assertive line, combining rapid rebuttal of criticism with outright justification of Beijing's policies. The ideological turn prompted Western accusations of 'sharp power' and misinformation (NED, 2017) but flourished in particular on Western social media platforms that are officially inaccessible within China. Mainstream news organisations such as Xinhua and the *People's Daily*, bolstered by digital natives such as T-House,² took to Twitter, Facebook and YouTube to push the Party line. The message was reinforced by other Chinese state actors such as diplomats, who drew on popular nationalism at home to craft a 'wolf warrior' image characterised by tough pushbacks against any criticism of China (Sullivan and Wang, 2022).

In some parts of the world, China's media expansion has changed shape over the past decade and adapted to shifting circumstances on the ground. The Beijing-based pay-TV

company StarTimes, for instance, has become one of Africa's most important media companies as the continent develops its digital communications (Madrid-Morales, 2021). Elsewhere, political tensions and impartiality constraints have hampered Beijing's ambitions. It is unclear how far Chinese media's expansion in Europe can go, now that regulators have begun to block news output from authoritarian countries. Also uncertain is how much influence Beijing can wield through official media while they continue to deliver the China story, not with a hypodermic needle, but with a stick.

Politically, China can no longer be ignored. As Beijing is developing its own foreign policy initiatives and no longer confines itself to world institutions formed by other nations, it also sees no further need to conform to Western-dominated conventions of global media. We are now far from the era of 'Chinese wine in a foreign bottle' (Cui, 2004), when China needed to learn from Western journalistic and technical standards. China's external media have evolved their own style and strategic approach, whether by training African journalists or by providing hard-pressed editors in developing countries with ready-made Beijing-friendly news. However slowly, China is gaining some control over the access to facts – and 'truths' – and influence over their selection.

Ethics – including journalistic ethics – has entered the battlefield in the digital, globalised 2020s, with scholars such as Thussu (2022) arguing that it is time for a less Western-dominated set of ethical viewpoints. China's external media are well positioned to promote Beijing's alternative definitions of human rights and democracy. This will horrify Western journalists, who have long seen their ethical standpoints as universal, but there is reason enough not to turn a deaf ear. With Xi Jinping entering a groundbreaking third term at the head of the state and the Communist Party, we now – more than ever – need to pay attention to what China's media say.

Studying global Chinese media

The changes in China's domestic political context over the last decade have also had an impact on how researchers study China's external communications, the methodological approaches used to study the subject and, to some extent, the scope and type of questions that are being asked. One of the clearest examples of these shifts is the changing geography of academic research. In the early 2010s, most research on China's mediated engagement with the world focused on Africa, with several Special Issues (Jedlowski and Röschenthaler, 2017; Wasserman, 2013) and edited books (Zhang et al., 2016; Batchelor and Zhang, 2017) on the topic appearing in a short period of time. While research interest on Sino-African media relations has not disappeared, it has become more diluted as the number of studies into the nature of China's global media operations has increased. The amount of research articles on global Chinese media has been increasing in recent years, particularly after 2016. It is around this time that Chinese leaders began using a wider range of strategies to engage more actively with foreign publics in other parts of the world. With this, research on other world regions began to grow as well. For example, the outbreak of COVID-19, and Beijing's efforts to communicate its own narrative on the subject, has brought more attention to Chinese media's role in Europe and North America (e.g., Gill, 2020).

A longitudinal examination of research into global Chinese media also reveals the emergence of new topics of interest. This could be attributed to the changing nature of Chinese media – as we describe in the previous section – but could also reflect changes in how China is viewed in Western capitals: from an emerging economy to a potential challenger of the status quo (see, e.g., O'Brien, 2016). At the outset of the 'going out' policy, academic research was, predominantly, descriptive: it sought to explain and understand the nature of Chinese global media (see, e.g., Li, 2017) – a topic previously largely absent in the study of global communication. Over the years, as the breadth and depth of China's mediated engagements with the world have grown, so has the interest in measuring their impact and influence (e.g., on content, on journalistic values, on audiences' opinions, etc.). This transformation is reflected in some of the terminology used to describe the phenomenon: what used to be discussions around soft power, public diplomacy and media flows (Chang and Lin, 2014) are increasingly being framed in terms of influence operations, disinformation and competition over narratives (see, e.g., Douzet et al., 2021).

Despite the increase in and diversification of research on the topic, there are still gaps in our understanding. Geographically, and in comparison to other world regions, there is a dearth of evidence on Beijing's communication strategies in Asia, particularly Central and Southeast Asia. In the same light, work looking at the different languages in which global Chinese media communicate (from Russian, French or Arabic to Hausa, Portuguese or Tagalog) is scarce. The almost exclusive focus on English-language content, which only represents a fraction of Chinese state media's output for global audiences, is problematic. Other significant gaps include the lack of research that explores the role of the private sector (e.g., StarTimes, ByteDance, etc.) in China's external communications, and the absence of ethnographic, in-depth, research focused on media professionals working for Chinese global media. The articles included in this Special Issue address a few of these lacunae.

Some of the research gaps listed above are difficult to fill because access to research sites and subjects has become increasingly difficult. As anecdotal evidence we can offer examples from our own experience. From 2013 to 2017, we were able to conduct dozens of interviews with journalists working for CGTN, *China Daily*, Xinhua and other global Chinese media. Some of these interviews took place in newsrooms. Today, it's rare that journalists in these news organisations would agree to speak to researchers, particularly those outside China. On a recent research trip to Nairobi, we found that people who had previously been open and willing to speak to researchers simply did not reply or declined invitations.

Restrictions in access to some scholars, particularly those outside China, have coincided with a significant decrease in engagement between Chinese scholars in China and researchers outside the country. There's been a reduction in the number of interactions between researchers in China and outside China at academic conferences, partly caused by the difficulties in international travel that were imposed by Beijing's zero-COVID policy. The schism between scholarship inside and outside China has other expressions. One of them is the longstanding lack of engagement by academics outside China with Chinese-language scholarship. Another one has to do with academic

freedom. While researchers outside China tend to work with relative freedom, those in China now operate under the new intellectual constraints of Xi Jinping's thought control (Pringle and Woodman, 2022).

In the last decade, the study of how Beijing communicates with the world has gone from a relatively niche field of global communication to a contested and politicised space. Think tanks and non-governmental organisations around the world, from Freedom House to the Institute for Strategic Research at the Military School (IRSEM), a research centre linked to France's Ministry of Defence, have published reports with titles such as 'The Long Shadow of Chinese Censorship' (Cook, 2013) and 'Chinese Influence Operations: A Machiavellian Moment' (Charon and Jeangène Vilmer, 2021). The activities of Chinese media, some of which had been operating across the world for decades, have now become a subject of political debate. In the United Kingdom, Ofcom, the communications regulator, revoked CGTN's licence to broadcast in the country in 2021 (Ofcom, 2021). The channel can, nonetheless, still be accessed via satellites serving continental Europe. In the United States, TikTok's parent company, Beijing-based ByteDance, was almost forced to sell its operations outside of China (Knight, 2021). Having experienced the impact of Russian influence operations online and offline, an increasing number of officials in Europe and North America appear to be perceiving Chinese media and Xi Jinping's desire to 'deconstruct Western hegemonic discourse', as the Chinese president put it in a speech (Xi, 2013), as a potential long-term threat.

Cold War, the sequel?

Since 2012, China has emerged as the world's largest investor in 'soft power' by a long way. China has challenged a global order constructed largely by the United States, which used the 'modernisation' paradigm to build a global order where industrialisation and U.S.-style capitalist democracy were universals (see, e.g., Escobar, 2011). It has long been the accepted mission of journalists from the north, working in the Global South, to pressure society in those directions. And despite considerable rhetoric about the need to engage with the world in new ways after 9/11, the United States did little to veer from its long history of applying 'hard power' (e.g., war and diplomatic coercion) internationally in pursuit of policy goals, resulting in little reputational gain; all the while it enriched China through the import of consumer goods and the export of much of its manufacturing sector.

In Africa, where the United States has a much longer history of engagement, including hundreds of millions of dollars spent on media assistance (Myers, 2018), it took China little more than a decade to emerge as one of the most important global actors for nearly every country. China accompanied its insatiable quest for resources with multi-pronged soft power initiatives and high-profile infrastructure projects, relegating the United States to near irrelevance. And just as it had for decades in Latin America, the United States sought to maintain relevance through the classic colonial strategies of military deployment (Paterson, 2018) and the importation of religion and cultural products. China has not come close to beating Hollywood at its own game, and indeed, its news

and cultural output generally does not attract much loyalty in Africa (Madrid-Morales and Wasserman, 2018) or Latin America (Morales, 2021).

But China works doggedly to use its economic power to shape the public conversation about its actions and policies. To deploy Castells' 'network society' (2000), the global network that are Chinese soft power activities stands constantly on the brink of paralysis as it devolves from an ever expanding, all-encompassing network to a 'cultural commune', focusing inward on its 'self-contained meaning' limited by the 'non-communicability of their codes beyond their specific self-definition'; the lack of measurable progress in building a 'better' image of China is a conclusion of several authors in this Special Issue. As Hartig (2016) notes (citing Wang, 2011: 6), China's public diplomacy problem is that while its culture may be admired, its 'politics and governance are at a much lower standing'.

The U.S. and Chinese competition for resources and minds in the Global South arguably marks a new form of Cold War, and benchmarks a new age of imperialism, where an increasing number of further mini-imperialist powers (e.g., UAE, Turkey, Russia) also are proving eager to use money and military force to secure influence and power in Africa. As African journalists have often noted with frustration (Umejei, 2018), Chinese journalism is noteworthy for all that it does not say. And notable in both the Chinese and American story of relations with Africa is the erasure of the concept of imperialism. China and the United States both invest heavily in development, in many guises, and both superpowers portray their engagements across Africa as welcome, collaborative and benign. But global media generally present a narrative of a predatory China and a supportive United States (Paterson and Nothias, 2016). Chinese media, though, present the country as champion of the South, using, as authors in this issue demonstrate, a public relations machinery that is second to none – reacting efficiently to every perceived slight and hammering the 'win-win' message at every turn.

In selling an alternative ideological model, China's soft power machinery seeks legitimacy for its 'constructive journalism' model; but at a cost of diminishing watchdog journalism and the protection it offers for society's less powerful. That de-legitimisation of fact-based journalism carries a global cost, as China remains the world's largest prison for journalists (Guardian, 2020).³ Journalists' suffering as punishment for critique becomes normalised along with an acquiescence to an all-powerful and all-knowing state. Lest there be doubt that governments in Africa are replicating authoritarian practices from China, the rapid uptake of Chinese-style surveillance across the continent should quell it (Timcke et al., 2021). But as long as China gives away news content – something it can do for a long time to come – cash-starved media in Africa, Latin America and the South Pacific will struggle to separate the gift from the ideology. For communication scholars, global Chinese media present an interesting case to re-examine long-held assumptions about global communication. A new model of global communications is apparent, where the battle for local media autonomy, relevance and agency is pitched once again towards ideological warriors from both 'West' and 'East', as in the years of the (first) Cold War. But now, the longstanding advantage U.S. and European media conglomerates brought to the fight seems increasingly to fall short in the face of China's new global confidence.

The articles in this Special Issue

The editors of this issue were among a group of scholars organising the 2022 ICA post-conference titled 'A decade of China's media going global: issues and perspectives'. The event, held at Campus Condorcet in Paris, offered a day of discussion, online and face to face, and the 20 papers presented served as a clear indication of the extent of scholarly interest in the topic. We called for participants to submit their papers for this issue, and those we offer here are the result of long peer review and editing processes. We believe these studies represent a diverse cross-section of the most original and thorough contemporary research about China's global approach to media.

We turn first to social media and begin the issue with a study of Chinese public diplomacy, authored by Maria Repnikova and Keyu Chen. These authors start our discussion with an international relations focus, examining competition for control of the narrative between Chinese and American diplomats. It is competition that plays out in digital media, especially, on Twitter, where ambassadors and embassies 'launch discursive attacks'. These authors find that through a constant invocation of the United States and its failings, Chinese diplomats based in Africa largely bypass Africa and African issues in their public communication, focusing instead on contesting larger claims about China's legitimacy.

Our second research article maintains our attention on Africa, but shifts from diplomacy to journalism. Hangwei Li examined the interaction between Chinese and Kenya media professionals in Nairobi, one of Africa's media hubs. She paints a picture of a Kenyan journalism sector under pressure to conform to a Chinese narrative, but also capable of resisting and exercising journalistic autonomy. Li's descriptions of some forms of pressure are harrowing, especially in cases of individual journalists losing support of their own editors when the Chinese government complained to the Kenya government about news coverage. Li seeks to offer reassurance that African journalistic agency endures, but also describes a powerful influence machinery that threatens that autonomy.

We move next to a different region of the world and a different form of cultural diplomacy. To the extent China's Belt and Road Initiative seeks to reconstruct ancient trade links with the world, its most proximate foci are the countries of Central Asia. Pengnan Hu explores the increasing role of film and cultural policy in China's geopolitical ambitions. Using two co-productions as a case study, *Xuanzang* and *The Composer*, the author demonstrates how cultural memory of the 'Silk Road' is deployed strategically by Chinese filmmakers to signal a mythical, but rhetorically powerful, past of friendly, mutually beneficial, relations – and an implied future of more of the same.

The final two papers in this Special Issue show how Latin America has emerged as a major area of interest for Chinese media expansion. Pablo Morales and Paulo Menecelli examined a case of Chinese broadcasters collaborating with a Brazilian news channel. They sought to empirically measure the influence of the Chinese partnership on broadcast output, and concluded that for this media organisation, the partnership with China has resulted in their Brazilian television audience getting a broadly more positive view of China. Finally, while remaining in Latin America, we zoom out to a macro view of the

impacts of global Chinese media on the continent, and gain a contrasting insight into some of the limits of Chinese soft power activities. Andrea Morante and Denis Wu compared the press coverage of China in nine countries with public sentiment towards China. They found that contrary to Chinese government ambitions, in the 8 years leading to 2021, a period of significant Chinese investment in trying to influence Latin American reporting, the Latin American audience's sentiment towards China deteriorated, suggesting an intercultural gap which soft power efforts to date have failed to address.

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Notes

1. John Jirik, a television producer who, starting in the 1990s, worked on and off for CCTV, recounts the complexities of integrating an international perspective there in Jirik (2016).
2. T-House is a digital-first brand that is an offshoot of CGTN and can be found on Twitter: https://twitter.com/thouse_opinions. T-House's bio on Twitter includes link to CGTN.
3. Including a former student of one of this issue's editors.

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