

Influencing the Narrative:

How the Chinese government mobilizes students and media to burnish its image

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Executive Summary



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Executive Summary

Since the early 2000s, Chinese leaders have mobilized an impressive array of government agencies, media outlets, and educational institutions at home and abroad as a megaphone to tell China's story to the world. In the report, we take a data-driven approach to answer one overarching question: How does Beijing use informational diplomacy and student exchange to advance its national interests among its closest neighbors in East Asia and the Pacific (EAP)? AidData, a research lab at William & Mary, collected quantitative data on China's overtures to twenty-five EAP countries between 2000 and 2019, which we analyze to understand which tools Beijing uses to mobilize media and students to promote its preferred narrative.

What tools does Beijing deploy to shape the media narrative in EAP countries and with what response?

We define informational diplomacy as a set of broad-based communications activities that China undertakes to cultivate influence by attracting foreign publics to empathize with its preferred narrative and adopt its views. We restrict our focus to three types of informational diplomacy: (i) international broadcasting via Chinese state-run and state-influenced media outlets; (ii) Beijing's overtures to cultivate relationships with EAP media outlets to serve as friendly and credible interlocutors; and (iii) Beijing's attempts to influence the behavior of journalists in EAP countries to amplify and not detract from its narrative.

FINDING #1: Beijing's media engagement is far from monolithic and varies across different EAP countries

Low levels of media freedom at home enable Beijing to deploy a formidable set of trusted mouthpieces as an extension of the state. Beijing relies heavily on Xinhua, China Global Television Network (CGTN), and China Central Television (CCTV-4) in most countries; however, its FM radio efforts are concentrated in the Mekong subregion of Southeast Asia. Beijing has the most balanced broadcasting portfolio in Cambodia, Myanmar, South Korea, and Thailand, complementing its print media presence with radio and television. Small island nations are on the other end of the spectrum: they attract none of Beijing's traditional media tools.

Chinese state-run media outlets have responded enthusiastically to the opportunity to reach new constituencies in EAP countries with social media such

as Weibo, Facebook, and Twitter. Beijing's social media overtures appear to be getting the greatest traction among Southeast Asian countries like Myanmar, Fiji, Cambodia, the Philippines and Malaysia, where, on average, its state-run media Facebook pages have the largest fan bases adjusted to the proportion of population with internet access. The response from citizens in Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam has been relatively tepid toward the Facebook offerings of Chinese state-run media. In terms of content, the Belt and Road Initiative and military issues accounted for the majority of posts across the Twitter feeds of six Chinese state-run media outlets.

Beijing is adept at borrowing the credibility and networks of domestic media outlets in EAP countries. Between 2000 and 2017, Chinese leaders have brokered 73 known content-sharing partnerships that allow EAP media outlets to reprint, share or jointly produce content with China's state-run newspapers. They also arranged 82 press junkets for EAP journalists to visit China. Interview appearances by the highest echelon of Chinese officials with foreign media outlets are rare but repeated in certain EAP countries, particularly weighted toward high-income countries and the fast-growing, populous economies of Southeast Asia. Ambassadors within EAP countries were also important and prolific contributors of op-eds, particularly in the less populous small islands of Samoa and Tonga and city-states like Singapore and Brunei.

Beijing also indirectly influences the behavior of EAP media outlets by rewarding those who comply with its preferred media narrative and withholding privileges, such as access to officials or visas to visit China, from those who do not. For example, the Chinese government prevented several accredited journalists from Australia and Papua New Guinea from covering three events organized by the Chinese delegation alongside the 2018 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Papua New Guinea (RSF, 2018). Similarly, the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China (FCCC, 2018) reports that Beijing denies or truncates visas for journalists covering sensitive topics, such as stories on the treatment of Uighurs in Xinjiang.

FINDING #2: Over time, Beijing has shifted its strategy for cultivating other communicators from emphasizing ad hoc interactions to institutional partnerships

Beijing's emphasis has shifted from press trips (2004-2009), to interviews with Chinese senior leaders (2010-2013), and finally, media partnerships (2014 onwards). This trend implies that Chinese leaders are willing to experiment with new tactics to see what works, as well as incrementally pivot from ad hoc

engagements such as journalist visits and leader interviews to brokering longer-lasting institutional partnerships between Chinese and EAP media outlets. In addition, Beijing targets a different mix of informational diplomacy tools to countries depending upon its strategic interests and anticipated results.

Beijing employs the most diversified strategy to cultivate other communicators in countries like Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, and Malaysia using multiple tools in tandem. Conversely, Beijing has one go-to strategy for smaller and less populous economies like Brunei, Samoa, and Tonga—over 80 percent of informational diplomacy events there was in the form of op-eds by China's heads of state. When working with highly democratic countries, Beijing relies less on content-sharing partnerships between Chinese and EAP media outlets and more on ambassador op-eds. The opposite is true for less democratic countries.

Interestingly, we also find that senior Chinese leaders placed greater emphasis on giving interviews with foreign media outlets in EAP countries that scored higher on measures of political process, civil liberties, and political rights. These findings suggest that Beijing views its best chance to influence the narrative within EAP publics as being through the personal appeal of senior leaders and ambassadors in their own words.

FINDING #3:

Criticism of Beijing has become more muted and the overall tone of media coverage related to China has smoothed out to be consistently close to neutral over the last two decades

In the early years of the 2000s, the tone of reporting on China among EAP news outlets was prone to wide fluctuations, with high points in 2006 and 2008 quickly followed by precipitous drop-offs in favorability in 2007 and 2009. These rapid mood swings appear to be most associated with coverage from low- and middle-income countries, as opposed to steady, gradual improvement in sentiment among outlets from the advanced economies of the region. Unfortunately, this is followed by a gap in the data for the period of 2010-2012.

We see a different story when the data coverage resumed in 2013. Beijing has not garnered positive coverage across the board, but aggregate perceptions have smoothed out to be consistently close to neutral. However, this "closer to neutral" outcome is much better than the coverage Beijing received in 2005. While there are likely many factors in play, one might argue that China's informational diplomacy overtures could be inoculating Beijing from more extremely negative views than has been the case in the past.

What journalists in the region do not say about China is arguably as important as what they do say. EAP news outlets have expanded their reporting on human rights over time, but this uptick does not seem to correspond with a major increase in China-specific human rights

stories, with the exception of 2008 (possibly in light of the Olympics, as well as crises in Xinjiang and Tibet). The trend lines could suggest that China has been able to keep itself out of the media spotlight in terms of human rights and that there is less interest (or less willingness) to report on China-related human rights issues as a proportion of all human rights stories in the EAP region.

What tools does Beijing use to attract students from EAP countries and with what response?

In the study, we view international student exchange as activities Beijing undertakes to socialize educated elites in EAP countries to Chinese political or professional norms and values, as well as cultivate lasting relationships with this next generation of leaders and influencers. We examine three aspects of Beijing's student exchange activities: (i) international students from EAP countries studying in China; (ii) Chinese students studying in other EAP countries; and (iii) Beijing's efforts to foster an enabling environment to facilitate additional student exchange with EAP countries.

FINDING #4:

Beijing deploys scholarships to prime the pump and stoke demand among countries that traditionally have not sent large volumes of students to study abroad in China

The number of young people from EAP countries studying in China has increased over time and by 2016 represented roughly 41 percent of all international students in China (China Power Team, 2017; Bislev, 2017). Many international students want to study in China for one of two reasons: (1) access to cheap, high-quality educational opportunities; and (2) positioning themselves to work for companies where Mandarin language skills or contacts would be useful.

Nonetheless, the aspiration to study in China is not equally shared across the EAP region. South Korea is the EAP region's single largest exporter of international students to China. However, Timor-Leste, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, Cambodia, and Laos saw the most dramatic increases in students pursuing educational opportunities in China between 2002 and 2016.

Beijing has doubled down on offering scholarships to international students as an inducement to study in China. The Ministry of Commerce, the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the World Academy of Sciences, provincial governments, Chinese universities, and many other Chinese institutions offer scholarships. In addition, China's Ministry of Education administers EAP-specific scholarship opportunities for students

from member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Pacific Islands Forum. Students from less politically free countries in the EAP region received nearly 30% more scholarships to study in China than their counterparts in freer countries. Poorer countries (by GDP per capita) attracted seven times more scholarships for students to study in China than wealthier countries in the region did.

Beijing disproportionately targets scholarships to EAP countries that lag behind their peers in sending their students to study abroad in China. The number of students an EAP country sent to study in China was negatively correlated with the volume of Chinese government-backed scholarships a country received. In this respect, Beijing may view the provision of scholarships as a means to jump-start interest among students from countries where it has not traditionally had a strong customer base, as opposed to passively responding to existing demand. Mongolia, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Myanmar, who initially sent lower numbers of students to China, were among the big winners in attracting Chinese government-backed scholarships in absolute terms. However, Beijing paid outsized attention to small Pacific island states such as Tonga, Samoa, and Fiji, when we take population into account.

EAP students often view Chinese scholarships—which not only cover tuition fees, but also provide stipends to subsidize travel, housing, and living costs—as more generous than those offered by other countries (Custer et al., 2018). However, contrary to popular belief, we find that Chinese government scholarships were actually less generous than those provided by the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, Australia, and other countries. After adjusting for purchasing power parity, Chinese scholarships carried roughly two-thirds of the value of most scholarships offered by other developed nations in relative terms.

FINDING #5:
Beijing actively uses cooperative agreements, institutional partnerships, and Chinese language learning and testing opportunities to attract exchange students from EAP countries

Beijing has brokered bilateral cooperative agreements with counterpart governments as well as institution-level partnerships in the region to raise awareness and ease the process for EAP students to study in China. Australia, Laos, Singapore, and the Philippines appear to be important target audiences for China's efforts in this regard, based upon tracking data from the China Scholarship Council. Beyond these institutional arrangements, the Chinese government publishes announcements and scholarship information via embassy websites, as well as facilitating exchange programs and visits to China for educators and school administrators. International students were most likely to say that they heard about a scholarship opportunity via public announcements (36 percent) or a personal

contact (31 percent), according to a survey of international students studying in China (Myungsik and Elaine, 2018).

Beijing employs multiple strategies to ensure that EAP students do not view language as a barrier to choosing China as their study abroad destination. First, Chinese educational institutions increasingly offer university-level courses using English as the medium of instruction in order to accommodate international students. Second, the Chinese Ministry of Education facilitates Chinese language learning opportunities and advertises scholarship opportunities to study abroad through its network of 98 Confucius Institutes in sixteen EAP countries as of 2018. Third, China offers Mandarin language proficiency testing—Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK)—via 260 testing centers and local Confucius Institutes across the EAP region. The locations of these HSK centers are highly and positively correlated with the volume of students from EAP countries studying in China.

In absolute terms, there is a high degree of overlap between the countries receiving the most Confucius Institutes and HSK centers: South Korea, Thailand, Japan, Australia, and Indonesia. While less populous island nations and city-states such as Vanuatu, Brunei, and Fiji have lower numbers of Confucius Institutes and HSK centers in absolute terms, they attract outsized attention from Beijing relative to the size of their population.

What are the lessons learned from Beijing's efforts to mobilize students and media in EAP countries?

Chinese leaders have invested substantial amounts of senior-level attention as well as financial and human resources to carry out informational diplomacy and student exchange activities at scale. However, Beijing's activities may not be equally well positioned to realize the gains it hopes for with foreign publics and leaders. Using responses to the Gallup World Poll, we assessed the probability that a survey respondent approved or disapproved of Chinese leadership in light of their country's exposure to five informational diplomacy tools. We are only able to speak to insights from student exchange descriptively due to data limitations.

FINDING #6:

The messenger matters: the general public may be more receptive to messengers they deem to be closer to, and familiar with, their countries than those seen as farther removed

Content-sharing partnerships with EAP media outlets were associated with both increased approval and decreased disapproval of Chinese leadership. This finding is in line with our assumption that, as citizens are exposed to more Chinese content disseminated through locally recognized and trusted media outlets in EAP countries, this would function as a means to win over skeptics, as well as reinforce key messages with supporters.

In a similar vein, ambassador op-eds were associated with a higher likelihood of approval of Chinese leadership among EAP publics. Chinese ambassadors may hold greater credibility and sway with EAP citizens because they are more knowledgeable of, and recognizable to, audiences in the country to which they are assigned. Comparatively, the role of China's senior leaders (e.g., President, Premier) appears to be mixed: interviews with these leaders were associated with lower approval and lower disapproval of Chinese leadership, but op-eds were correlated with lower approval and higher disapproval.

FINDING #7:

Favorability may follow familiarity: journalist exchanges and student exchange activities humanize China, such that foreign nationals are more open and favorable toward Beijing.

Journalist exchanges were associated with a higher likelihood of approval of Chinese leadership among EAP publics, as were inbound press visits to China. This finding is consistent with the observations of many interviewees within EAP countries (Custer et al., 2018) that press trips increase the familiarity of EAP journalists with their Chinese counterparts and create sympathy for Beijing's policy positions. Relatedly, a global study of Chinese government scholarship recipients indicates that international students have more positive impressions of the host country the longer they study in China (Myungsik and Elaine, 2018). Additionally, former study abroad participants appear to be effective recruitment tools for Beijing to prime the pump for the next generation, as they share their positive experiences with others in their networks at home.

How should Beijing's target audiences and strategic competitors respond to its overtures?

In its bid to win over foreign publics and leaders, China has two formidable advantages: vast foreign currency reserves and centralized control over its domestic media. While Beijing's informational diplomacy and student exchange activities can promote mutual understanding, these mechanisms could easily be used for multiple purposes, both benign and malign. Reflecting on the evidence presented in the report, we pose two recommendations for countries on the receiving end of Beijing's overtures, as well as two recommendations for its strategic competitors who seek to preserve their own influence in the EAP region.

RECOMMENDATION #1:

Recipient countries should better regulate and enforce disclosure of media content produced, funded, or co-created with the support of foreign governments.

Beijing's enthusiasm for brokering content-sharing partnerships implies that EAP publics will likely consume more Chinese government messaging in future. However, Beijing's limited transparency increases the risk that media consumers may not be able to responsibly consume content if they cannot readily identify the source.

RECOMMENDATION #2:

Recipient countries should increase investigative journalism capacity as a safeguard to co-optation.

Beijing's willingness to use all-expenses-paid trips to China as carrots and restricting access to visas or events as sticks puts it in a position to influence the substance and tone of reporting in EAP countries. Countries on the receiving end of Beijing's overtures can decrease the risk of co-optation of their media coverage through encouraging greater investigative journalism capacity.

RECOMMENDATION #3:

Beijing's strategic competitors should proactively compete to attract top talent from EAP countries to study abroad.

China's reputation for generous scholarship support has reinforced in the mind of foreign students that China is a good value-for-money alternative to studying in their home countries or other top-tier study abroad destinations. Beijing's strategic competitors can ensure they continue to attract top international students from EAP countries through reducing the perceived costs of

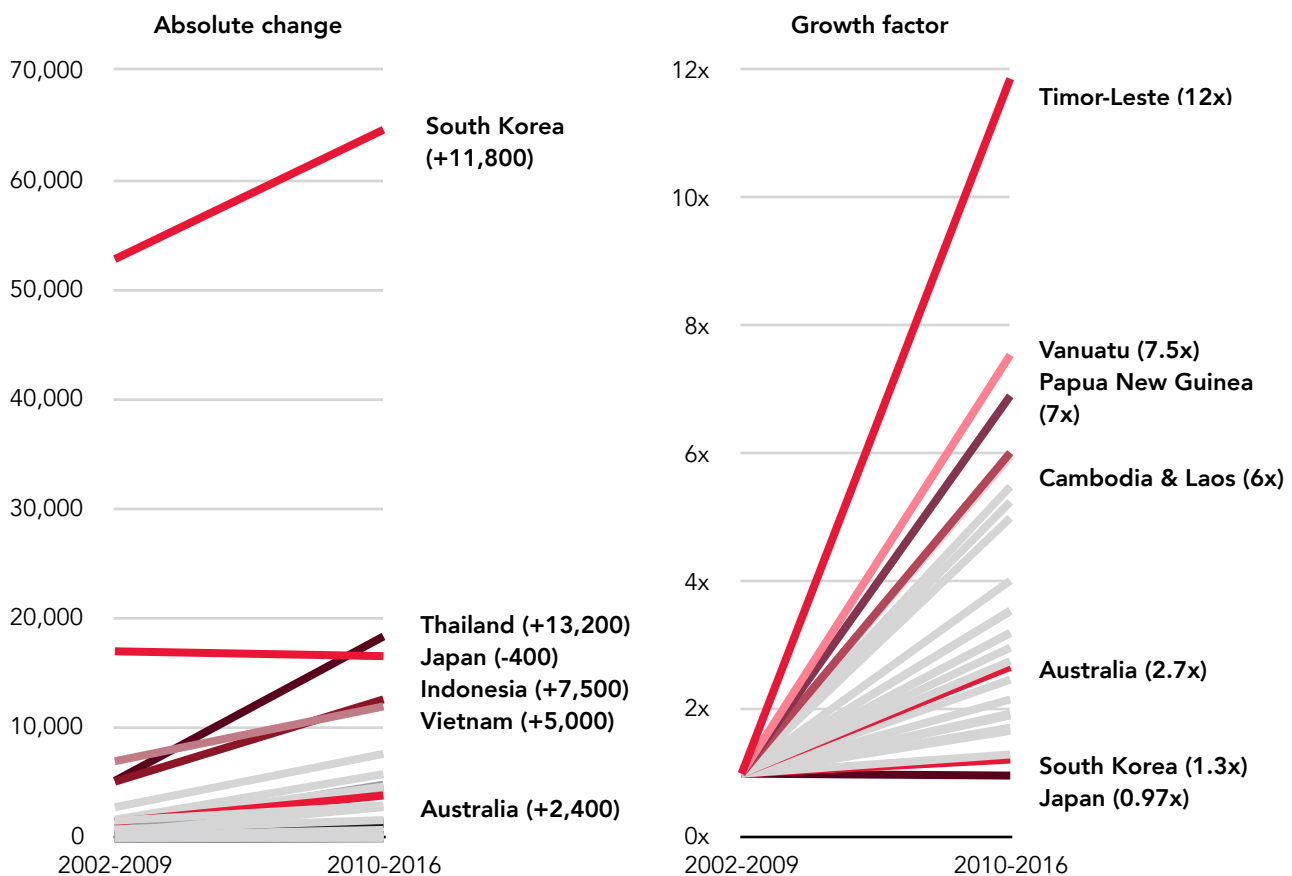
their study abroad programs (e.g., through scholarships, cooperative agreements) and reducing other barriers to entry (e.g., language training, visa restrictions).

RECOMMENDATION #4:
Beijing’s strategic competitors should partner with EAP media to localize their messages and increase their resilience to co-option.

The public diplomacy budgets of many of Beijing’s competitors have seen a decline in recent years amidst pressures to reduce public spending and greater interest in cultivating hard over soft power capabilities. To maintain their competitive edge, Beijing’s strategic competitors should better resource efforts to facilitate exchange programs for foreign journalists, broker content-sharing partnerships with local media outlets, and invest in training programs to promote responsible investigative journalism.

Figures

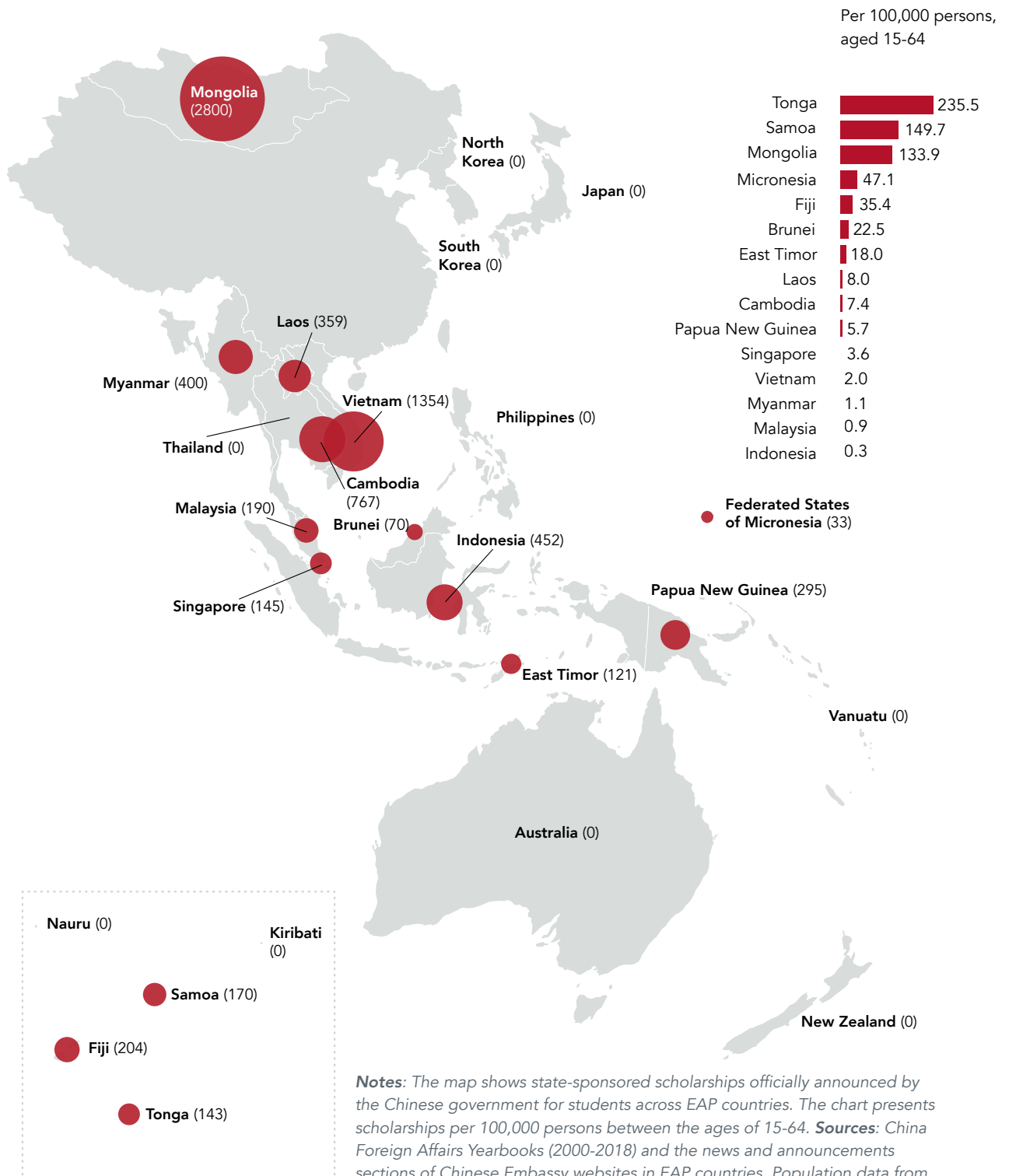
Growth in volume of international students in China, 2002-2016



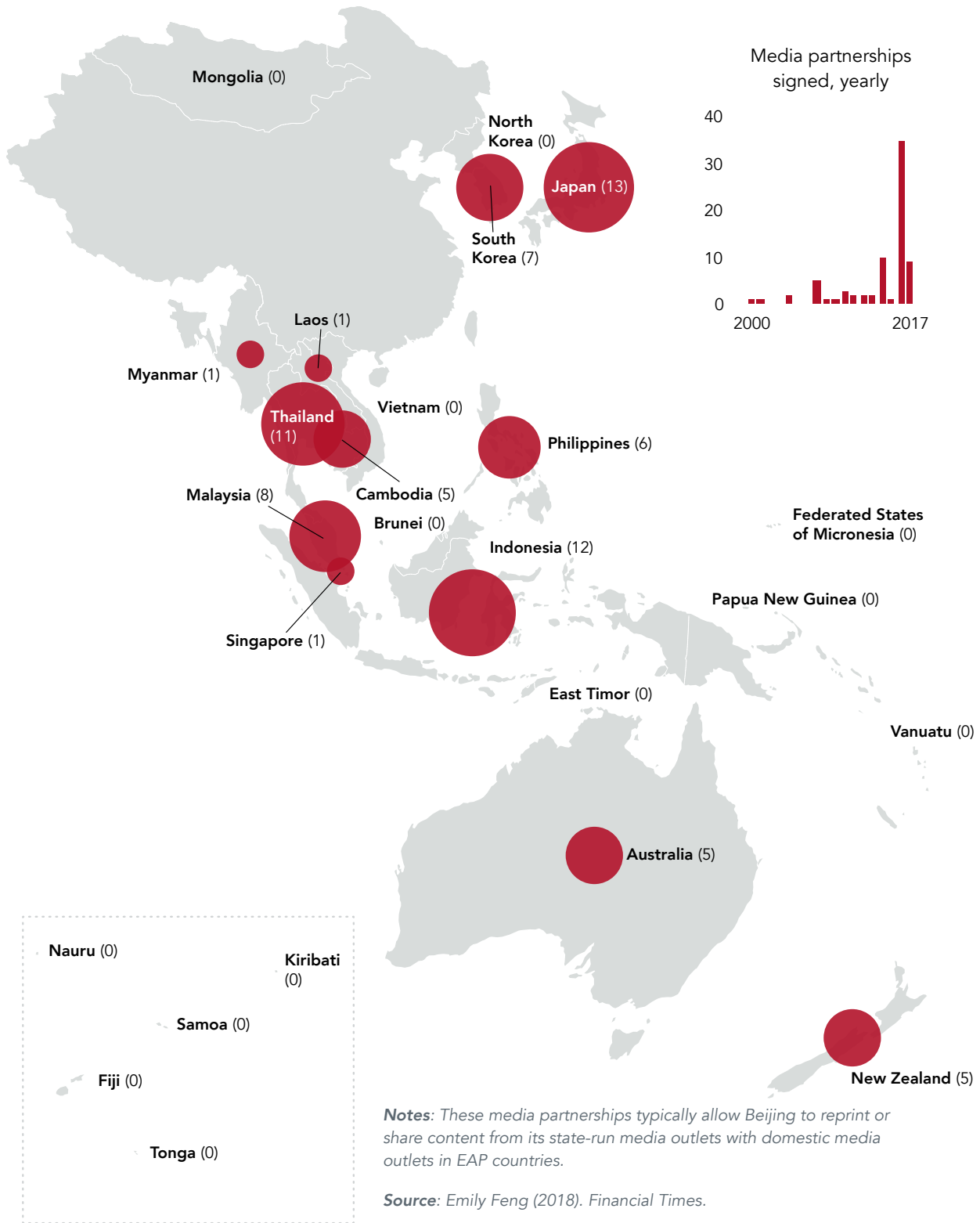
Notes: This figure presents the factor by which inbound international students studying in China grew from 2002 to 2016 for each EAP country.

Source: China Foreign Affairs Yearbooks (2002-2016).

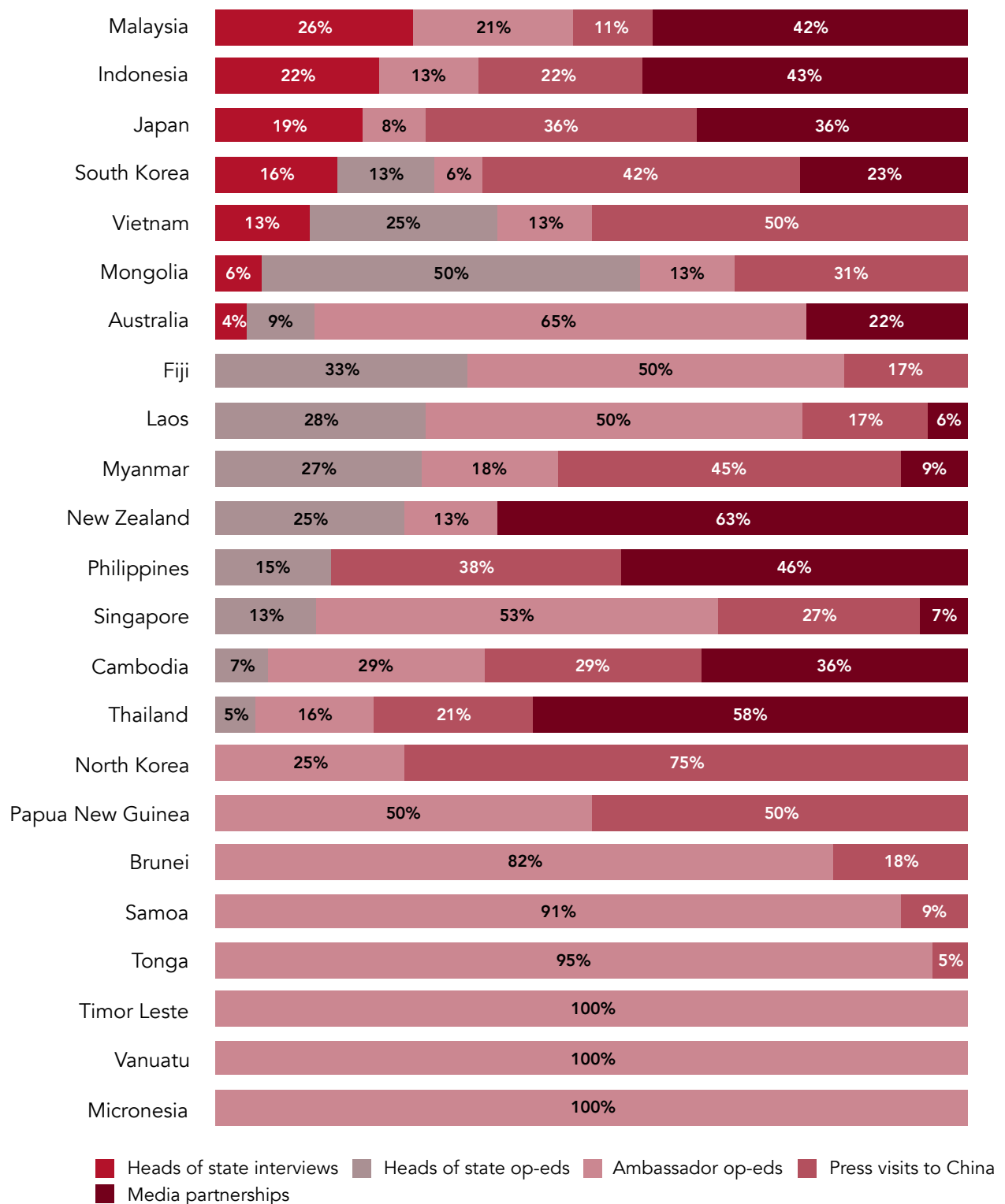
Chinese government scholarships, 2000-2018



Media partnerships between China and EAP countries, 2000-2017



Composition of China's informational diplomacy activities in EAP countries, 2002-2017



Notes: This figure visualizes how the composition of China's informational diplomacy efforts varies by country over the period 2002-2017. We treat each count of an informational diplomacy activity received by a country over the period of 2002-2017 as an event and calculate the share of events each of tool received out of all events.

Sources: China Foreign Affairs Yearbooks (2002-2017). Chinese Embassy Websites' News Sections (2005-2017).

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About AidData

AidData is a research lab at William & Mary's Global Research Institute. We equip policymakers and practitioners with better evidence to improve how sustainable development investments are targeted, monitored, and evaluated. We use rigorous methods, cutting-edge tools and granular data to answer the question: who is doing what, where, for whom, and to what effect?

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