

# Investing in Narratives

How Beijing promotes its development projects in the Philippines

Full Report

September 2024

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**ASIA**  
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PHILIPPINES

# Acknowledgments

This report was prepared by Bryan Burgess, Timothy Joseph G. Henares, Eun Young Kim, Divya Mathew, Jonathan A. Solis, and Narayani Sritharan. John Custer and Sarina Patterson supported this publication's editing, layout, and visuals. Samantha Custer provided editorial guidance, while Brook Lautenslager and Rodney Knight supported the underlying data upon which this study is based. Cover by Sarina Patterson with photos by Summit Art Creations and Nate Hovee via Adobe Stock Images, used under Adobe's standard license. This study was conducted by AidData, a U.S.-based research lab at William & Mary's Global Research Institute, in collaboration with Asia Society Philippines. We thank Alec Julian A. Templonuevo and Isabel Sofia Santiago for their helpful review and feedback, which strengthened the analysis and findings of this report. We thank the 12 Filipino experts from media, think tanks, government, civil society, the military, and academia for graciously sharing their time and insights on Chinese media narratives via a series of background interviews. This research was made possible with generous support from the United States Department of State. The findings and conclusions of this report are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of our funders, partners, reviewers, or those who participated in background interviews.

## Citation

Burgess, B., Henares, T. J. G., Kim, E. Y., Mathew., D., Solis, J. A., and N. Sritharan. (2024). *Investing in Narratives: How Beijing promotes its development projects in the Philippines*. Williamsburg, VA: AidData at William & Mary.

## Acronyms

BBB	Build! Build! Build! Infrastructure Program
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRNN	Belt and Road News Network
CAPPC	China Asia Pacific Press Center

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCTV	China Central Television
CGTN	China Global Television News Network
CNC	China Xinhua News Network Corporation
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
CPDA	China Public Diplomacy Association
CRI	China Radio International
CRPIP	Chico River Pump Irrigation Project
CSP	Content Sharing Partnership
CUC	Communication University of China
DENR	Department of Environment and Natural Resources
ECC	Environmental Compliance Certificate
ESG	environmental, social, and governance
Exim Bank	Export-Import Bank of China
LGU	Local Government Unit
LSD	Lexicoder Sentiment Dictionary
Mislatel	Mindanao Islamic Telephone Company
MOAs	Memorandums of Agreement
NEDA	National Economic and Development Authority
Northrail	North Luzon Railways Corporation
NRTA	National Radio and Television Administration
NSCR	North-South Commuter Railway
NTC	National Telecommunications Commission

PCOO	Presidential Communications Operations Office
PNA	Philippine News Agency
POGO	Philippine Offshore Gaming Operator
PTV	People’s Television Network
PRC	People’s Republic of China
RSF	Reporters sans frontières (Reporters Without Borders)
SCMP	South China Morning Post
US	United States

## Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Beijing’s State Media Engine.....	3
2.1 The PRC’s State Media Mouthpiece in the Philippines.....	4
2.2 PRC State Media Messaging in the Philippines.....	6
2.2.1 Frequency and Sentiment of PRC Media in the Philippines.....	7
2.2.2 Three Prominent Narratives of PRC Media in the Philippines.....	8
2.2.3. Investment-Specific Narratives of PRC Media in the Philippines.....	10
3. Beijing’s Indirect Media Messaging Influence.....	14
3.1 Content-Sharing Partnerships with Philippine Media.....	15
3.1.1 Media Coverage of the PRC by Philippine Outlets with CSPs.....	18
3.2 Training Philippine Journalists in China.....	24
3.2.1 Profiling PRC-Sponsored Journalism Training and Exchange.....	25
3.2.2 Objectives and Outcomes of PRC Journalism Training.....	27
3.3 Social Media Trolls, Friends, and Influencers.....	28
4. Conflicting or Converging Narratives: Philippine Versus PRC Media Coverage.....	30
4.1 Media Narratives on Implementation Challenges.....	31
4.1.1 Project Delivery Delays.....	32
4.1.2 Project Procurement and Regulatory Concerns.....	33
4.1.3 Environmental and Social Issues.....	34
4.2 Media Narratives on Local Ownership of Investments.....	35
4.3 The Role of Op-Eds to Co-opt Local Credibility.....	37
5. Conclusion.....	40
6. References.....	43

# Figures and Tables

Table 1. Footprint of PRC State-Owned Media in the Philippines.....	4
Table 2. PRC Social Media Footprints Worldwide.....	5
Figure 1. PRC Outlet Articles About the Philippines, 2017-2023.....	8
Figure 2. Frequency of Mentions of Key Search Terms About the Philippines in PRC Media, 2017-2023.....	10
Figure 3. Share of Positive Articles Published by PRC Media Related to PRC-financed Development Projects in the Philippines, 2017-2023.....	13
Figure 4. Share of Positive Articles Published by SCMP Related to PRC-financed Development Projects in the Philippines, 2018-2023.....	14
Table 3. PRC Content-Sharing Partnerships in the Philippines.....	16
Table 4. Sample of Articles About the PRC and its Development Investments Produced by Eight Philippine Media Outlets, 2017-2023.....	19
Figure 5. Share of PRC-focused Stories Produced by Content-Sharing Partnership Outlets, 2017-2023.....	20
Figure 6. Percentage of Positive Stories About the PRC as a Share of All Articles Published by Outlet, 2017-2023.....	21
Figure 7. Positivity share from Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2017-2023.....	23
Table 5. Top 10 Most Expensive PRC-financed Infrastructure Projects.....	31
Figure 8. Sentiment of Coverage Related to Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators in Philippine Media, 2017-2023.....	37
Figure 9. The Proportion of Op-Eds Mentioning China in the Manila Times, 2010-2025.....	38
Figure 10. Quarterly Sentiment Analysis of Op-Eds Mentioning China in the Manila Times, 2010-2024.....	40

# Executive Summary

In this report, *Investing in Narratives: How Beijing promotes its development projects in the Philippines*, we examine how Beijing uses both direct and indirect channels to influence media coverage of its development projects in the Philippines. Our analysis addresses three core questions:

- What specific narratives is Beijing selling about its economic partnership with the Philippines?
- How well is the PRC getting the word out to the Filipino public, via which channels?
- And to what extent are Beijing's narratives influencing local media and discourse?

## Beijing's Direct Messaging

Beijing pushes three central narratives around its development financing in the Philippines: cooperation with the PRC is win-win, its rise is inevitable, and Asia should be led by Asians. These themes are designed to present the PRC as a reliable partner in fostering development, regional stability, and economic growth in the Philippines. PRC state-owned and state-influenced media play a key role in trumpeting these narratives to Filipinos. PRC media often frame investments broadly, focusing on infrastructure projects and their economic benefits while downplaying any challenges. Specific coverage of individual projects tends to tout benefits, while ignoring challenges.

PRC ambassadors reinforce these narratives by contributing op-eds and making public statements in Philippine media. However, China's ability to consistently influence local media has fluctuated, particularly due to geopolitical tensions such as the South China Sea dispute. Despite these challenges, maintaining control over the narrative remains a key element of Beijing's strategy to preserve its image as a benevolent development partner.

## Indirect Messaging: Promoting Preferred Narratives

As trust in the PRC has declined amid geopolitical tensions, Beijing has increasingly turned to indirect methods to shape media coverage in the Philippines. One approach involves content-sharing partnerships (CSPs) with local media outlets. These partnerships allow the PRC to convey its message using Philippine voices, giving them greater local credibility. However, CSPs do not guarantee positive coverage, and local outlets can diverge from the PRC's preferred narrative, demonstrating Beijing's limited control over the Philippine media landscape.

PRC-sponsored journalist training in China represents another indirect tool to socialize Filipino journalists to Beijing's perspectives. While low salaries and scarce resources in the Philippines may make some journalists more susceptible to these influence efforts, the evidence is mixed. Some journalists return with a more favorable view of China, while others remain unchanged or even skeptical of Beijing in their reporting.

Beijing has also attempted to use social media platforms like TikTok and Facebook, working with local influencers to spread pro-China content aimed at younger, tech-savvy audiences. However, PRC messaging has struggled to resonate with local users, largely due to cultural differences and competition from content critical of the PRC. These efforts have achieved limited success in shaping online discourse.

## Convergence and Divergence of Narratives

Despite Beijing's attempts to influence the narrative, local Philippine media often highlights the challenges that PRC media seeks to downplay, such as cost overruns, governance issues, and environmental impacts. This divergence reflects a gap in how PRC-funded projects are portrayed, with Beijing focusing on successes and benefits, while Philippine outlets emphasize the difficulties encountered during implementation.

Additionally, Beijing portrays its projects as locally driven initiatives, aiming to shift responsibility for setbacks onto local actors. However, this narrative has largely failed to resonate with Philippine media, which continues to scrutinize the

extent of PRC involvement in these projects. As a result, the gap between PRC media portrayals and local reporting has widened.

CSPs with local outlets, such as the Manila Times, have resulted in some positive portrayals of Beijing in elite op-eds, even as some negative ones persist. Yet, despite these successes, CSPs do not fully shield the PRC from negative coverage. Even within CSP frameworks, Philippine media continue to critically report on PRC-backed projects, illustrating the limits of Beijing's influence in shaping the overall narrative.



# 1. Introduction

Beijing's economic footprint as a trading partner and financier of infrastructure projects in the Philippines has grown dramatically over the last two decades.<sup>2</sup> Amid rising geopolitical tensions and project implementation challenges, Beijing has leveraged its state-run media and cultivated local intermediaries to promote a positive narrative of the benefits of doing business with the People's Republic of China (PRC). The goal of this narrative building is two-fold: bolster the PRC's image among Filipinos as a preferred economic partner and counterbalance domestic and international criticism of the risks from its investments.

Of course, narrative building is easier said than done. Beijing has more control over the inputs—its preferred messages and distribution channels—than the outcomes. Since the early 2000s, Beijing has employed various direct and indirect media influence tactics to cast the PRC as an attractive economic partner interested in development cooperation and mutual benefit, as well as a critical player in facilitating regional stability. Local responses to these overtures have been mixed, particularly in light of the shifting political landscape and the varying degrees of receptivity to PRC influence across different administrations.

The Philippines' media landscape presents opportunities and challenges for PRC leaders to advance their objectives. Internet connectivity skyrocketed in recent years, reaching an estimated 80 percent of Filipinos by 2023.<sup>3</sup> Beijing has been able to capitalize on the proliferation of digital platforms to disseminate its narratives to its target audiences cheaply and easily. However, the Philippines is not monolithic. Language, culture, and urban-rural divides affect how Filipinos consume media. The PRC has had to adapt its strategies to reach different audiences effectively.

The success of Beijing's narrative-building efforts is a function not only of the content it manages to place in front of the Filipino public but also of the uptake of these stories and narratives in Philippine media and discourse. This raises three critical questions. What specific narratives is Beijing selling about its economic partnership with the Philippines? How well is the PRC getting the word out to the

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<sup>2</sup> Beijing directed US\$9.1 billion in development finance to the Philippines between 2000 and 2022 (Custer et al., 2024).

<sup>3</sup> Statista (2024).

Filipino public, via which channels? And to what extent are Beijing’s narratives influencing local media and discourse?

In this study, AidData, a research lab at William & Mary’s Global Research Institute, in collaboration with Asia Society Philippines, systematically analyzes the PRC’s direct messaging in Chinese state-run media about its infrastructure investments. It explores parallel indirect messaging efforts via journalist training and public diplomacy efforts that seek to cultivate sympathetic voices. Finally, the study assesses how the PRC’s preferred narratives have permeated Philippine media coverage.

This report is part of a broader research agenda that triangulates multiple data sources to examine the distribution of PRC investments, the public messaging surrounding those investments, and the resulting outcomes. Primary data sources include interviews conducted virtually by AidData and Asia Society Philippines with 12 Philippine elites or industry leaders,<sup>4</sup> open-source research to identify the PRC media footprint in the Philippines, updates to AidData’s China’s Global Public Policy Indicators Dataset (2000-2021), social media analytics from FanKarma, and text analysis of articles related to China’s major infrastructure projects pulled from the Factiva Dow Jones News and Analysis database between 2017 and 2023.

In this report, we analyze how Beijing has utilized its media apparatus to shape narratives around its development projects and its role as an economic partner to the Philippines. Chapter 2 delves into the PRC’s direct messaging, examining the content and sentiment of its state-run media covering infrastructure investments in the Philippines from 2017 to 2023. Chapter 3 highlights indirect messaging strategies employed by Beijing—content-sharing partnerships (CSPs), journalist training, and sponsored content—to embed pro-PRC narratives in local Philippine media. Chapter 4 explores the convergence and divergence of PRC-backed media coverage compared to the broader Philippine media landscape. It assesses how Beijing leverages its media to counter negative narratives or selectively acknowledge challenges. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes with key takeaways from our research, providing insights into the effectiveness of Beijing’s media strategy in the Philippines and its implications for future PRC-Philippine relations.

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<sup>4</sup> AidData, with the support of Asia Society Philippines, conducted virtual interviews in June and July 2024 with 12 Philippine elites from diverse backgrounds, including media, think tanks, government, civil society, the military, and academia, many of whom hold roles across multiple domains.

## 2. Beijing's State Media Engine

### Key insights from this chapter

- Beijing promotes three narratives about its engagement in the Philippines: cooperation is win-win, China's rise is inevitable, and Asia is for Asians
- PRC media shape general investment narratives about infrastructure projects in the Philippines, emphasizing economic benefits and downplaying challenges
- PRC state media coverage of specific investment projects in the Philippines is minimal, aside from generalized pronouncements trumpeting their success

China has an extensive state-run media apparatus, and PRC leaders can exert far-reaching control over these assets.<sup>5</sup> Most mainland Chinese outlets are either directly owned or heavily influenced by the government, which allows the PRC to ensure its media aligns with officially mandated narratives.<sup>6</sup> Beijing's extensive regulation of its media allows it to not only restrict the content its citizens consume but also export pro-China narratives to foreign publics and diminish the standing of its rivals.

Chinese state-run and state-influenced media are a linchpin in the PRC's narrative-building efforts in the Philippines, by virtue of their reach, resources, and malleability to serve as Beijing's mouthpiece. In this chapter, we take a closer look at how Beijing has used these direct messaging channels to promote positive stories related to its state-backed infrastructure projects and its role as an economic partner. Section 2.1 provides an overview of PRC state-owned and state-influenced outlets with a presence in the Philippines and their online reach. Section 2.2 uses content analysis of a sample of PRC media to uncover broad

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<sup>5</sup> Both Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) rank China among the worst countries for free and open media. In its 2024 Freedom in the World report, Freedom House gave China a score of 0 out of a possible 4 on independent media (Freedom House, 2024; Component D1: *Are there free and independent media?*). RSF echoed this assessment, stating, "China (172nd [out of 180 countries]), in addition to detaining more journalists than any other country in the world, continues to exercise strict control over information channels, implementing censorship and surveillance policies to regulate online content and restrict the spread of information deemed sensitive or contrary to the party line" (RSF, 2024).

<sup>6</sup> Andrzejewski et al. (2023) further discuss this, detailing the extensive regulatory environment that shapes and enforces media policy to ensure full alignment with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

narratives promoted by these outlets and assess the extent to which they highlight specific PRC infrastructure projects in the Philippines.

## 2.1 The PRC’s State Media Mouthpiece in the Philippines

Beijing uses several messaging channels to push out content to Philippine audiences directly. Some media outlets, such as the China Global Television Network (CGTN) or the print outlet China Daily Global Edition, are specifically designed for foreign audiences, producing content in English and a wide variety of languages. Other outlets produce Chinese language content that, while originally produced for domestic audiences in China, is likely also an important source of information for the Chinese diaspora.

Xinhua, People’s Daily, and China Central Television (CCTV) are among the prominent mainland Chinese newspapers, television, and radio outlets operating in the Philippines (Table 1). The PRC’s footprint relies heavily on television (e.g., CCTV 4 and CGTN) and radio (e.g., China Radio International (CRI) in Tagalog),<sup>7</sup> with more limited print distribution. Xinhua operates a news bureau but does not have a local print circulation. China Daily’s Global Edition is available, though its weekly counterpart is not. Together, these outlets maintain a steady flow of content aligned with Beijing’s diplomatic messaging priorities and amplify these stories via social media and online websites, along with outreach by PRC diplomats, particularly ambassadors, through embassy and consulate websites.

Table 1. Footprint of PRC State-Owned Media in the Philippines

Television				Print Bureau		Print circulation		Radio
<i>CCTV 4</i>	<i>CCTV (other)</i>	<i>CGTN</i>	<i>Xinhua/CNC</i>	<i>Xinhua</i>	<i>People’s Daily</i>	<i>China Daily Global Weekly</i>	<i>China Daily Global Edition</i>	<i>China Radio International</i>
Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes

*Notes: This table visualizes Beijing’s state-run broadcasting footprint by channel type: (1) television, (2) print bureaus, (3) print circulation, and (4) radio. The data reflects the situation as of 2024, not a historical trend. Sources: Compiled by AidData from various sources, including the websites of major television service providers in the Philippines, China Daily, People’s Daily, Xinhua, China Daily’s Media Profile Reports, and the World Radio Map.*

<sup>7</sup> See CRI’s Filipino service website: <https://filipino.cri.cn/>.

With Internet penetration and smartphone availability rising, Filipinos have increasingly embraced social media. Facebook remains the most widely used platform in the Philippines, with TikTok as the second most popular and Instagram rounding out the top three.<sup>8</sup> The PRC has established a notable presence on these platforms, with CCTV, CGTN, China Daily, Xinhua, and People’s Daily actively engaging users worldwide, often in the millions (Table 2). A 2019 study found that across these five PRC state-owned media Facebook pages, 15.1 million users came from the Philippines,<sup>9</sup> a number that has almost certainly grown over the last five years. Although the exact figures of Filipino followers are not publicly available, we see that the PRC has a presence on the channels Filipinos are most likely to use.

Table 2. PRC Social Media Footprints Worldwide

	<i>Facebook</i>	<i>Instagram</i>	<i>TikTok</i>
<i>CCTV</i>	48.9m	949.7k	n/a <sup>10</sup>
<i>CGTN</i>	123.3m	2.3m	56.6k
<i>China Daily</i>	115.1m	1.5m	1.3m
<i>China Xinhua News</i>	97m	1.6m	38.8k
<i>People’s Daily</i>	84.8m	1.3m	4.5m

*Source: Fanpage Karma (social media analytics platform), scraped August 28, 2024.*

According to many Filipino experts interviewed, PRC state media like Xinhua and CGTN are pivotal in shaping local media narratives. PRC state media coverage portrays Chinese-financed development projects and diplomatic initiatives in a positive light, emphasizing economic benefits and collaborative successes. Implementation issues, governance challenges, and environmental concerns associated with these large-scale projects are often downplayed or omitted. Additionally, PRC state media adjusts their messaging around sensitive events, such as South China Sea disputes, to align with broader diplomatic objectives, ensuring the narrative supports Beijing’s strategic interests.

<sup>8</sup> GWI survey in the third quarter of 2023 among 16-64-year-old internet users. See DataReportal, We Are Social, and Meltwater (2024).

<sup>9</sup> Custer et al. (2019).

<sup>10</sup> Although we were unable to locate a CCTV TikTok account, this does not mean they are absent from this space. Maker-White and Martin (2023) identified TikTok accounts associated with CCTV, such as @Pandaorama, @TheOptimist, and @NewsTokss. These accounts are managed by MediaLinks TV, a registered foreign agent based in Washington D.C., which is linked to CCTV. This leads to a larger point that avatar accounts—designed to appear respectable and impartial—are disseminating PRC narratives without the optics of appearing to be from a state-owned media outlet.

PRC officials, and the Chinese ambassador in particular, offer an opportunity for Beijing to put a human face on its messaging by writing op-eds in local Philippine newspapers. As a case in point: between 2016 and 2024, the PRC Ambassador to the Philippines published 20 known op-eds across three outlets: the Manila Times, the Manila Bulletin, and the Philippine Star.<sup>11</sup> This was not a slow and steady drumbeat. Instead, there has been an observable escalation in the frequency of these op-eds over the nine-year period.

In the early years, the PRC Ambassador published just one op-ed a year (in 2016 and 2017). The number of op-eds increased to three in 2018 and tripled in 2021 to nine op-eds before tapering off to two per year in 2022, 2023, and 2024.<sup>12</sup> PRC Ambassador op-eds generally emphasize PRC-Philippine cooperation and present China as an attractive development partner for the benefit of Filipinos.

## 2.2 PRC State Media Messaging in the Philippines

What narratives does Beijing seek to push out about its development projects and broader partnership with the Philippines via its extensive state media apparatus? To answer this question, we conducted text analysis of a sample of PRC media stories oriented towards the Philippines and incorporated qualitative insights from 12 interviews conducted with Filipino experts from media, think tanks, academia, the military, civil society, and the government.<sup>13</sup> We considered the frequency with which six PRC state-run and state-influenced media outlets<sup>14</sup> mentioned the Philippines and 10 of the most expensive PRC-funded infrastructure projects,<sup>15</sup> along with the sentiment of that coverage.

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<sup>11</sup> AidData compiled this listing using a custom methodology (see the Technical Appendix for more detail). We only included op-eds that we could directly verify, excluding those reported in secondary sources. For example, while Han and Elemia (2023) report that a PRC Ambassador wrote an op-ed in *The Daily Tribune*, we were unable to verify it and therefore excluded it from our count.

<sup>12</sup> Our data collection only included a partial year of data from 2024 through August.

<sup>13</sup> Many interviewees hold roles that span multiple domains. The sample's limitations stem from difficulties in engaging pro-PRC voices, as several individuals who initially expressed interest either did not follow through or canceled their interviews. These challenges may affect the report's comprehensiveness and balance.

<sup>14</sup> The six outlets assessed include: China Daily, Global Times, Macau Daily Times, People's Daily, South China Morning Post, and Xinhua News Agency. Given the PRC's tightly controlled regulatory environment in the media, even non-state-run outlets adhere to the CCP's narrative line (Andrzejewski et al., 2023).

<sup>15</sup> The ten most expensive PRC-financed projects in the Philippines include: the construction of three coal-fired power plant projects (Dinginin, Lanao Kauswagan, Mariveles), two railway lines (North-South Commuter Railway, Subic-Clark Railway Project), two water-related investments (Manila Water Company, Kaliwa Dam), two telecommunications-focused investments (Safe City Project, Chelsea Logistics acquisition of 2GO Group), and the Clark Global City Project.

## 2.2.1 Frequency and Sentiment of PRC Media in the Philippines

If the frequency of mentions is a proxy for interest in a particular topic, then there is a high degree of variation in the degree to which PRC state media is focused on the Philippines. Far from static, PRC media coverage related to the Philippines fluctuated widely between 2017 and 2023 (our sample period), with an uptick in mentions concentrated in specific periods, possibly reflecting geopolitical or economic developments in the region (Figure 1). Internationally-focused outlets like Xinhua and China Daily covered the Philippines more than PRC state media outlets with a more domestic audience, with an upswing in articles between 2021 and 2023.

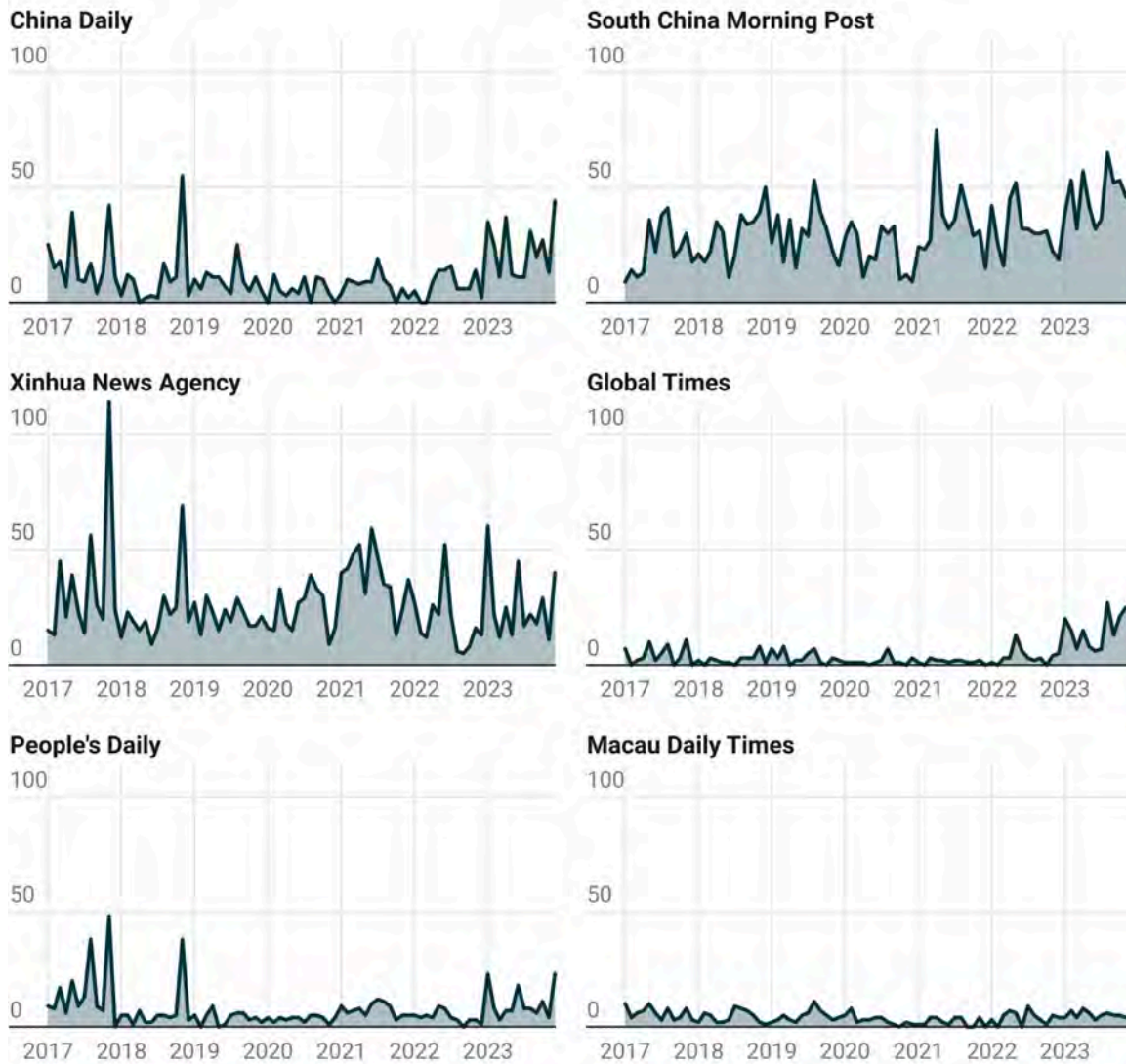
The Alibaba-owned South China Morning Post (SCMP) saw a surge in articles about the Philippines during that same time. SCMP is an example of a Chinese media outlet that, while not state-owned, is still heavily influenced by the PRC government such that it can be relied upon to amplify Beijing's preferred narratives.<sup>16</sup> Comparatively, other outlets like the Global Times, Macau Daily Times, and People's Daily maintained lower and more stable levels of coverage in the Philippines throughout the period. Of the six outlets analyzed, only the SCMP had neutral to slightly negative coverage of PRC-financed development projects. The rest were consistent in trumpeting these investments as successful.

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<sup>16</sup> In 2016, SCMP was acquired by Alibaba, a Chinese multinational corporation based in Hangzhou. Alibaba was co-founded by Jack Ma, who has historically had close linkages to the Chinese Communist Party. Ma has since stepped down as Alibaba CEO and Chair, and in recent years his relationship with Beijing has become strained (Nakazawa, 2023).

Figure 1. PRC Outlet Articles About the Philippines, 2017-2023

Number of articles



Created with Datawrapper

Notes: This graph displays the annual number of articles published by six leading China-based outlets discussing the Philippines. This approach drew from the Factiva DNA database, and therefore coverage is weighted toward English and Romance-language sources, and omits significant volumes of Mandarin-language content. Source: Factiva DNA.

## 2.2.2 Three Prominent Narratives of PRC Media in the Philippines

Beijing's state media coverage revolves around promoting three main narratives about PRC-financed development projects and the broader role of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): (1) win-win cooperation, (2) the PRC's inevitable rise, and (3) Asia for Asians.



Emphasizing projects like the Binondo-Intramuros Friendship Bridge in Metro Manila, PRC state media focuses on how such investments exemplify the strong friendship and positive relations between Manila and Beijing rather than overly fixating on the technical details. Bridges marked with Chinese characters stating “Philippine-China Friendship Bridge” reinforce this *win-win cooperation* narrative. As one expert interviewed noted, PRC state media seek to paint a stark contrast between a rosy picture of the Philippines’ economic cooperation with China and a portrayal of a less harmonious, more bellicose partnership with the United States, focusing on security cooperation (e.g., arms sales and other engagements that could lead to conflict with Beijing).

A second narrative emphasizes the PRC’s *inevitable rise* and portrays resistance to Beijing’s influence as futile. PRC media encourages the Philippines to engage with the PRC in a pragmatic manner, presenting it as a critical player in regional stability and development. By contrast, PRC media depicts the United States as a declining power. Beijing’s messages highlight its successes in regional neighbors like Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, and Indonesia to emphasize what the Philippines will lose by not doing more business with the PRC. Projects in neighboring countries, like the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway in Indonesia and the Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park significant infrastructure developments in Malaysia, underscore this point.<sup>17</sup>

A third narrative revolves around a vision of *Asia for Asians*. PRC media portray China as a benevolent leader bringing security and prosperity to Asia, in contrast to the U.S. as a destabilizing force. For instance, the Global Times, a PRC state-owned media outlet, often depicts the Philippines as a puppet of the U.S.<sup>18</sup> One interviewee noted, “These cartoons suggest that U.S. actions are exacerbating tensions in the South China Sea.” Interviewees point out that PRC media like to emphasize that “[Beijing] has no history of colonization” of other countries in contrast to the U.S., which is framed as a lingering colonial force. PRC outlets often narrowly frame engagement with the U.S. and the West as anti-China, suggesting such alignments constrain democracy and civic space in the Philippines. This tone often meets skepticism from local media, especially

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<sup>17</sup> Busbarat et al. (2023).

<sup>18</sup> Global Times (2023).

elite outlets, which are less likely to propagate these narratives due to their higher editorial standards.

### 2.2.3. Investment-Specific Narratives of PRC Media in the Philippines

The Kaliwa Dam project—a signature effort of former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte’s Build! Build! Build! (BBB) infrastructure program to “solve a persistent water shortage problem for Metro Manila”<sup>19</sup>—was the most frequently covered infrastructure project by PRC-influenced media during the period.<sup>20</sup> Financed by the Export-Import Bank of China (Exim Bank) with a preferential buyer’s credit worth US\$230.19 million (constant USD 2019), Kaliwa Dam was implemented by the state-owned China Energy Engineering Group in partnership with the Philippine Metropolitan Waterworks and Sewerage System.<sup>21</sup> SCMP and Xinhua provided the most coverage of Kaliwa Dam (Figure 2), with SCMP citing the project as “a positive counterpoint to rising tensions in the South China Sea.”<sup>22</sup> The project was also covered by China Daily, People’s Daily, and Global Times, albeit to a lesser extent.

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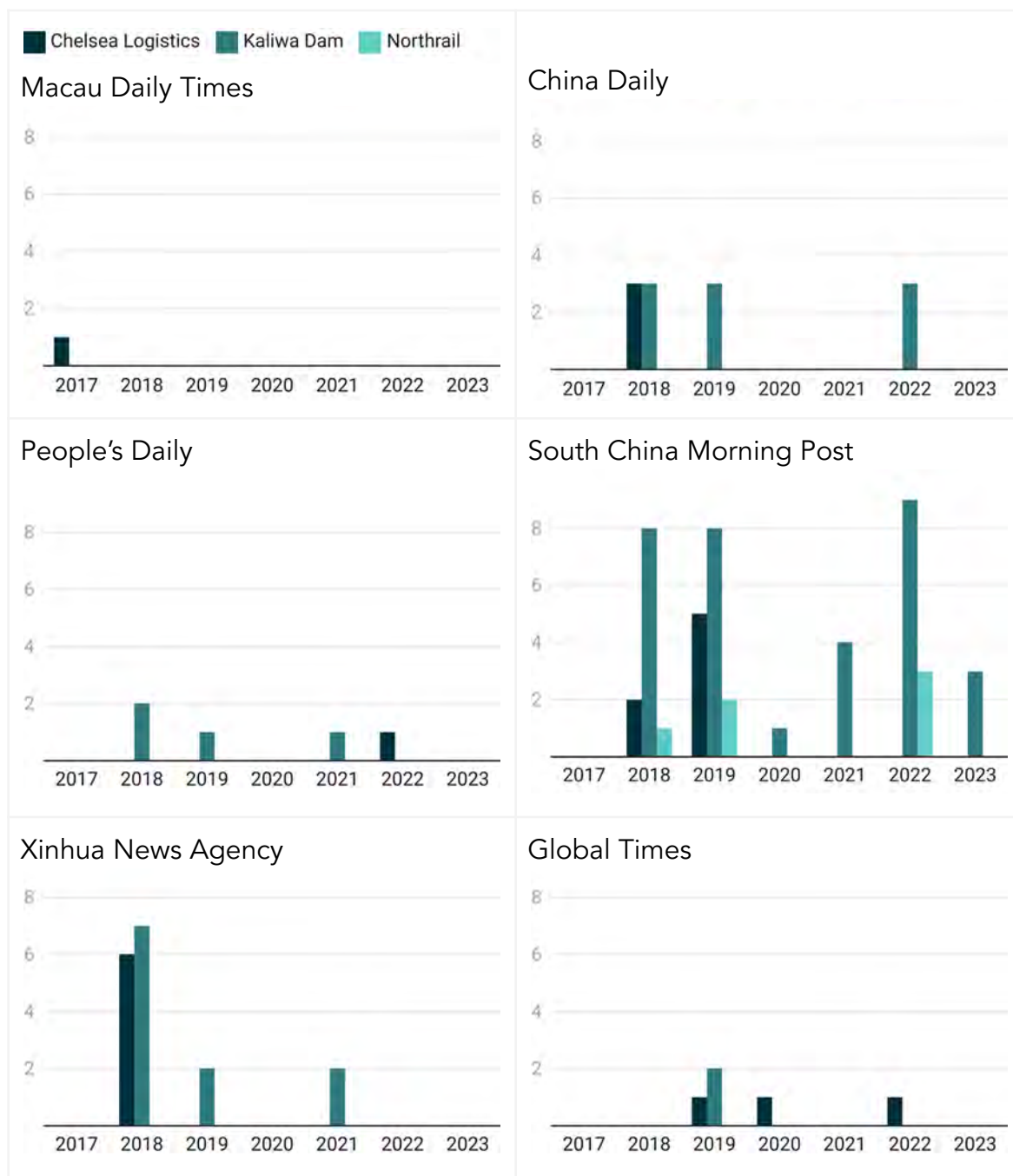
<sup>19</sup> PNA (2022).

<sup>20</sup> We examine 10 big-ticket projects. The PRC outlets only covered these three.

<sup>21</sup> Custer et al. (2023) and Dreher et al. (2022).

<sup>22</sup> Like this April 2023 article quoting a vice president from the think tank South China Sea Probing Initiative, “Despite the South China Sea dispute, relations between China and the Philippines have always grown considerably strong during the past five years,” Yan added, pointing to “at least 40 cooperation programmes going on in Manila”, including the construction of the Kaliwa dam in the northern Philippines” (Robles, 2023).

Figure 2. Frequency of Mentions of Key Search Terms About the Philippines in PRC Media, 2017-2023



Notes: This graph displays the annual count of articles with keywords relating to specific PRC-brokered investment projects published by six leading China-based outlets between 2017 and 2023. Six of the nine largest projects had no identified articles published; therefore, only counts for the three projects represented are displayed. For further details, see the Technical Appendix. Source: Factiva DNA.

A US\$253.51 million loan issued by the Bank of China in 2017 was a second project that attracted outsized attention in coverage from PRC state-owned and state-influenced media. The loan was part of a larger US\$3 billion development finance package for the Philippines committed by PRC President Xi Jinping during President Duterte’s October 2016 state visit to Beijing.<sup>23</sup> This particular loan allowed the Chelsea Logistics and Infrastructure Holdings Corporation—the largest shipping and logistics company in the Philippines—to acquire a stake in 2GO Group, an integrated transport solutions provider.<sup>24, 25</sup> The Chelsea Logistics project was unique in attracting coverage from all six PRC state-owned or state-influenced outlets included in this assessment.

A significant omission in PRC state media coverage was the China Exim Bank-financed railway project overseen by the now-defunct North Luzon Railways Corporation (Northrail).<sup>26</sup> A signature priority of former Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, the Northrail would become the subject of heated debate in Philippine media (see Chapter 4) and was ultimately canceled. The SCMP was the only outlet to mention the canceled Northrail project, noting that the current administration of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. was looking to Japan for new rail projects and that President Benigno Aquino’s administration had dropped the project due to cost overruns.<sup>27</sup> The other five outlets did not cover the project between 2017 and 2023.

The SCMP also covered stories about the efforts of China Telecommunications Corporation and the Dito Holdings Corporation to win the Philippines’ third telecoms contract. The two parties created the Mindanao Islamic Telephone Company (Mislattel) as a special-purpose vehicle, which was later renamed Dito Telecommunity Corporation. The joint venture went on to become the third-largest telecommunication provider in the Philippines.

SCMP’s coverage of the Mislattel (Dito Telecommunity) deal, though brief, was fairly candid in acknowledging the contentious legal battle for the contract and objections from other bidders. It also noted the financial ties between former

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<sup>23</sup> Custer et al. (2023) and Dreher et al. (2022).

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

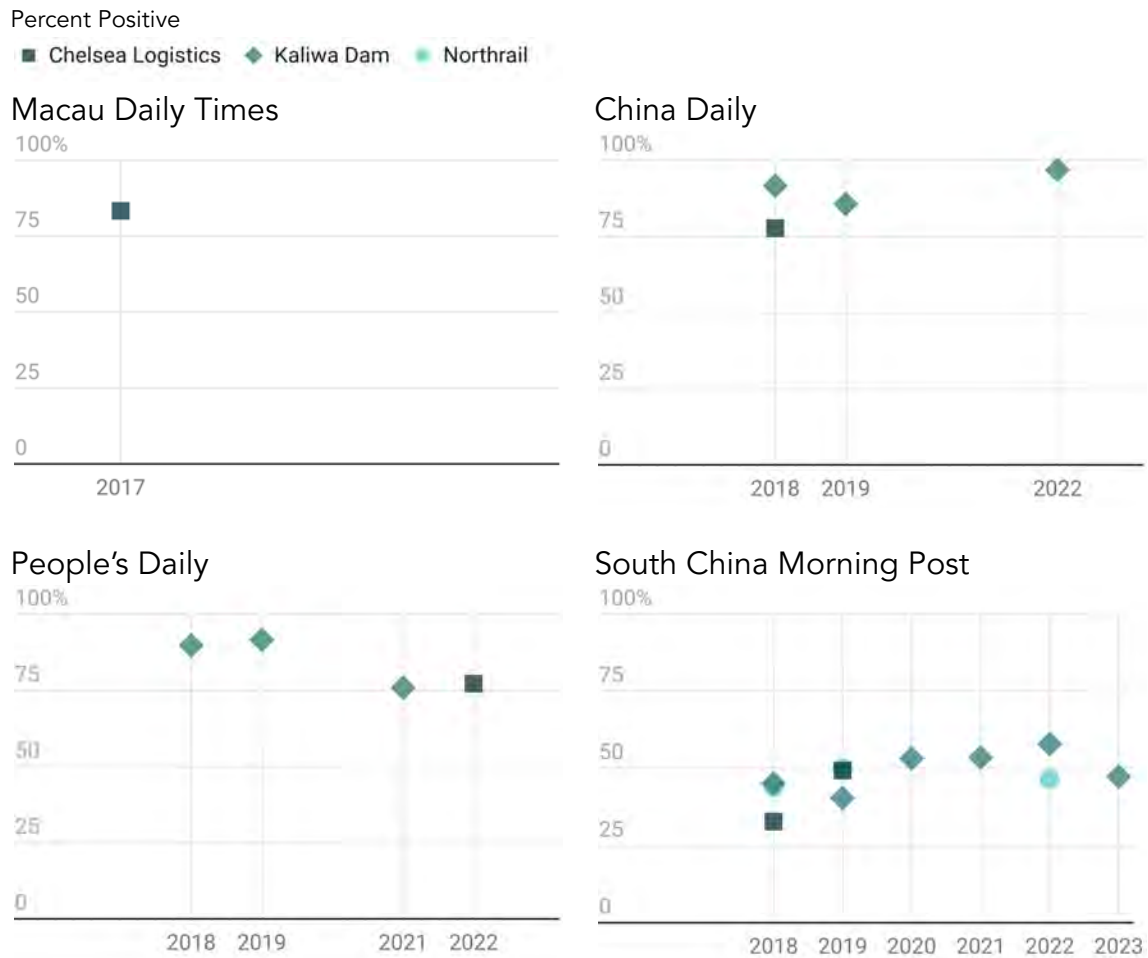
<sup>25</sup> Chelsea Logistics is the publicly listed shipping and logistics arm for Udenna Corporation, primarily controlled by Filipino business leader and Chinese diaspora member Dennis Uy and his family (Custer et al., 2024).

<sup>26</sup> Romero (2023).

<sup>27</sup> South China Morning Post (2022).

President Duterte and Dennis Uy, head of Udenna Corporation (a partner in the Mislattel consortium)—the latter donated ₱31 million to the president’s election campaign.<sup>28</sup> These developments were not reported by other PRC media, though Beijing’s later investments in the Philippines’ telecom market were picked up by Xinhua, China Daily, and the Global Times.<sup>29</sup>

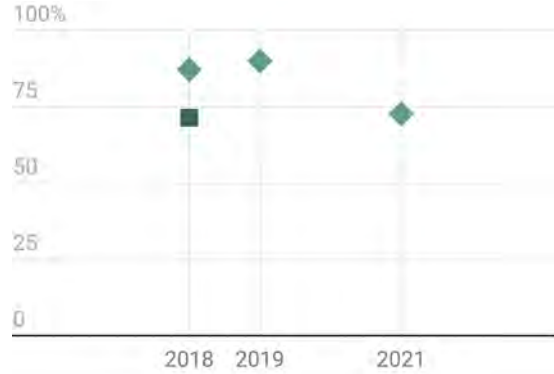
Figure 3. Share of Positive Articles Published by PRC Media Related to PRC-financed Development Projects in the Philippines, 2017-2023



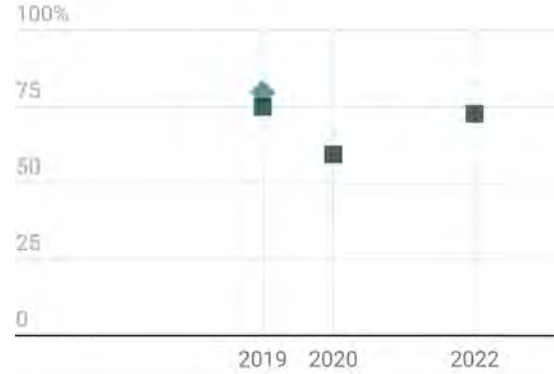
<sup>28</sup> Robles (2018).

<sup>29</sup> AidData. (n.d.).

### Xinhua News Agency



### Global Times



Notes: This graph displays the average annual percentage of articles with positive recorded sentiment as a share of all articles identified with keywords relating to specific PRC-brokered investment projects across six leading PRC outlets between 2017 and 2023. The positivity share is calculated based on the aggregated sentiment for all key terms in an article; therefore few articles are purely “negative” or “positive” but rather are a weighted sum. For further details, see the Technical Appendix. Software: Bing sentiment lexicon (Minqing and Bing, 2004); ‘quanteda’ R package (Benoit et al., 2018). Source: Factiva DNA, calculations by AidData.

Figure 4. Share of Positive Articles Published by SCMP Related to PRC-financed Development Projects in the Philippines, 2018-2023



Notes: This graph displays the average annual percentage of articles with positive recorded sentiment as a share of all articles identified with keywords relating to specific PRC-brokered investment projects published by the South China Morning Post between 2018 and 2023. Positivity share is calculated based on the aggregated sentiment for all key terms in an article; therefore few articles are purely “negative” or “positive” but rather are a weighted sum. For further details, see the Technical Appendix. Software: Bing sentiment lexicon (Minqing and Bing, 2004); ‘quanteda’ R package (Benoit et al., 2018). Source: Factiva DNA, calculations by AidData.

### 3. Beijing's Indirect Media Messaging Influence

#### Key insights from this chapter

- There are limits to Beijing's ability to control the narrative: its content-sharing partnerships with Philippine outlets do not guarantee positive coverage
- Low salaries and scarce resources may make Philippine journalists more easily persuadable in the face of PRC influence tactics, but the evidence is mixed
- PRC social media messaging struggles to resonate with local audiences due to limited cultural understanding and competition with content critical of the PRC

PRC state-owned and state-influenced media may offer the most direct channel to reach the Filipino people without intermediation; however, it does not operate in a vacuum. Beijing complements this direct messaging with indirect tactics to cultivate sympathetic Filipino voices and leverage its distribution channels to amplify its preferred narratives, often without direct attribution to the original source. Pro-China narratives from trusted local sources in the Philippines are less likely to invite scrutiny than an official PRC outlet, and new technologies allow PRC actors to capture and engage with new and youthful audiences.

In this chapter, we take a closer look at three tools of indirect influence in depth: content-sharing agreements between PRC and Philippine media outlets, PRC-sponsored training of Philippine journalists, and the PRC's use of social media influence tactics. For each of these three, we examine who Beijing partners with for its indirect messaging, how it leverages agreements, training, and technological tools to advance its narratives, and which narratives it seeks to alternately highlight or obscure.

### 3.1 Content-Sharing Partnerships with Philippine Media

Between 2000 and 2023, PRC media outlets brokered twelve content-sharing partnerships (CSPs) with counterpart outlets in the Philippines (Table 3).<sup>30</sup> CSP agreements are a powerful tool for Beijing to put a local face on its messaging: Philippine media can republish and reshare content from PRC media under their bylines, as well as co-create new content.<sup>31</sup> CSPs are a potentially influential passthrough vehicle for Beijing to leverage local media outlets to disseminate its preferred narratives, using content produced by PRC media outlets but with no requirement to disclose the original source. Using local outlets to amplify strategic messaging from the PRC can help it gain more credibility and less scrutiny with a Filipino audience.<sup>32</sup>

Philippine partners vary from niche interest circulars with limited distribution to outlets with a national reach. Smaller partners tend to be Chinese-language publications, such as the Philippine Chinese Daily and United News, which cater to the Filipino-Chinese diaspora community. Beijing partners with mainstream Philippine media outlets such as the Manila Times and Philippine Daily Inquirer, which reach a broader English-speaking audience nationwide. PRC media outlets like Xinhua and China Radio International have also brokered CSPs with the state-run Philippine News Agency (PNA).

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<sup>30</sup> Sonshine Media Network International (SMNI) had a content-sharing partnership with CGTN (Crisostomo, 2023) but has since lost its license to broadcast in the Philippines (Mendoza, 2024). We therefore do not include it on this list. Two interviewees cited this media organization as routinely echoing pro-PRC narratives.

<sup>31</sup> As several experts pointed out, the PRC cannot own local Philippine media due to Article XVI, Section 11 of the Philippine Constitution, which restricts ownership to “citizens of the Philippines, or to corporations, cooperatives, or associations wholly owned and managed by such citizens,” though there are ongoing efforts to change this provision (Porcalla, 2023).

<sup>32</sup> Custer et al. (2019).



Table 3. PRC Content-Sharing Partnerships in the Philippines

Name	Description	Medium	Language	PRC Partnered Media
ASEAN Chinese Business Online	China News Service	Print	Chinese	China News Service since 2017
Business Daily (Chinese Commercial News)	Daily broadsheet newspaper written in Chinese, the Philippines' oldest existing Chinese-language newspaper.	Online	Chinese language	People's Daily since 2016
Eagle Broadcasting Corporation	A Filipino media company involved in television and radio broadcasting in the Philippines and internationally.	TV/Radio	English/Tagalog	China Radio International since 2008
Manila Times	Oldest English-language newspaper in the Philippines.	Print	English	Xinhua, no date available
Philippine Chinese Daily	Daily broadsheet newspaper written in Chinese.	Print	Chinese	People's Daily and China News Service since 2016
Philippine Daily Inquirer	Official news website of the English language newspaper, the Philippine Daily Inquirer. Regularly publishes content from China Daily and participates in the Asia News Network.	Print	English	China Daily, no date available
Philippines News Agency	The official news agency of the Government of the Philippines. PNA is under the supervision of the Presidential Communications Operations Office via the News and Information Bureau.	Online Agency	English	Xinhua; China Radio International (CRI), no date available
People's Television Network (PTV News)	The flagship broadcasting agency of the Philippines Government. PTV is under the supervision of the Presidential Communications Office. PTV began simulcasting programs from CGTN in 2017.	TV	English	CCTV, no date available
Radyo Pilipinas (RP1)	Filipino and English-language radio station owned by the Presidential Broadcast Service, under the supervision of the Presidential Communications Office.	Radio	Tagalog	China Radio International (CRI) since 2017
United News	English-language edition of the United Daily News, the Philippines' second-largest Chinese-language newspaper	Print	English	People's Daily since 2016
World News	Chinese-language daily broadsheet in the Philippines. It is the largest Chinese-language newspaper in the Philippines.	Print	Chinese	China News Service since 2016

*Notes: The Philippines News Agency signed two partnership agreements with PRC entities. Content-sharing partnerships are formally signed agreements and contracts between a state-run PRC outlet and a Philippine outlet. We only include outlets where we were able to verify these agreements with information from the outlets themselves. For further information, see the Technical Appendix. Source: AidData.*

Philippine experts interviewed noted that PRC content-sharing partners had influenced local media narratives by directing media content to highlight the positive aspects of PRC involvement while avoiding controversial topics. Beijing uses rebuttals and sponsored content to proactively address or counter negative media reports, further shaping the media landscape in favor of the PRC's objectives. As discussed below in sections 3.2 and 3.3, the PRC also engages local media figures and influencers through study tours or training programs to amplify its preferred narratives.

Nevertheless, Beijing's narrative-shaping via local media in the Philippines may have limits. Interviewees acknowledged that public sentiment towards the PRC has been characterized by persistent skepticism and resistance, and the ongoing South China Sea disputes have further complicated the PRC's messaging efforts.<sup>33</sup> For example, the "China Window" section in The Philippine Star has faced criticism for excessive advertising, highlighting the disconnect between the PRC's media push and broader public opinion. Relatedly, Beijing's efforts to target the Muslim population in Mindanao with advertisements in major newspapers attracted criticism from readers concerned about foreign influence.

Interviewees had mixed opinions over the degree of regionalization evident in Beijing's direct media strategy. Some experts characterized the PRC's direct media as Manila-centric, with its regional strategy lacking sophistication. Other experts observed that Beijing's approach has evolved over the last two decades to increasingly tailor messaging to different Philippine regions. In Ilocos Norte, President Marcos' home province, local sentiment toward China remains relatively positive towards PRC investments and projects, contrasting with more critical national sentiment. Statements about the South China Sea made in Iloilo, aligned with Beijing's preferred narratives, have faced less local scrutiny.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Recent polling data from Social Weather Stations (2024) reflect this trend, with Filipinos indicating a significant decline in trust levels toward the PRC, dropping approximately 50 points from +10 in 2016 to -40 in 2023 (+100 to -100 scale).

<sup>34</sup> Vidal (2024).

### 3.1.1 Media Coverage of the PRC by Philippine Outlets with CSPs

With just a limited number of CSPs, Beijing has the potential to substantially influence a broad swath of coverage related to the PRC and its development investments in the Philippines. Using the Factiva Dow Jones News and Analysis database, we assessed the volume and sentiment of stories by eight Philippine media outlets related to a basket of keywords about the PRC government and specific development projects bankrolled by Beijing. Three of the Philippine outlets—the Philippine Daily Inquirer, the Manila Times, and the Philippine News Agency—had known CSPs with PRC media outlets; the remaining five did not.

Between January 2017 and December 2023, the eight media outlets published 61,452 articles that matched one or more keywords related to the PRC government or specific infrastructure projects. The three CSP outlets published roughly one-third of these articles (see Table 4) overall; however, the share of this coverage fluctuated substantially across the seven-year period. In early 2020, the three CSP outlets became an outsized voice in influencing early narratives about the COVID-19 pandemic, as the share of PRC-focused content they produced grew to more than 40 percent (Figure 5). This may indicate that the CSPs are even more valuable to the PRC in the context of a crisis, as Beijing can utilize these relationships to scale up more favorable coverage.

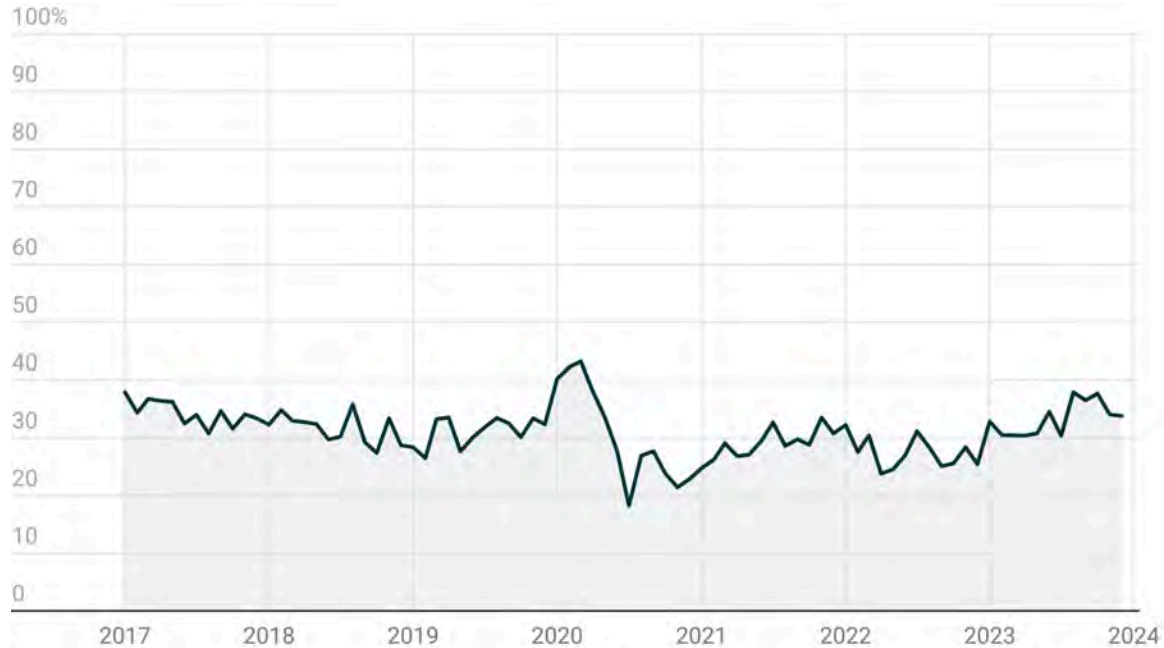
Table 4. Sample of Articles About the PRC and its Development Investments Produced by Eight Philippine Media Outlets, 2017-2023

Source	Total Articles about PRC, 2017-2023	PRC Project Articles, 17-23	% of articles covering PRC Projects
Philippine Daily Inquirer*	11,441	311	3 percent
Manila Bulletin	14,851	258	2 percent
BusinessWorld	6,368	246	4 percent
The Philippine Star	7,208	237	3 percent
Manila Standard	6,766	169	2 percent
Business Mirror	6,380	150	2 percent
The Manila Times*	3,952	122	3 percent
PNA (Philippines News Agency)*	4,486	73	2 percent
<b>Total</b>	<b>61,452</b>	<b>1,566</b>	<b>3 percent</b>

*Notes: This table shows the breakdown of PRC-focused articles published by eight Philippine media outlets between January 2017 and December 2023. An asterisk indicates that an outlet had a known content-sharing partnership with the PRC. Source: Factiva DNA, AidData Analysis.*

Figure 5. Share of PRC-focused Stories Produced by Content-Sharing Partnership Outlets, 2017-2023

Percent of Total Coverage

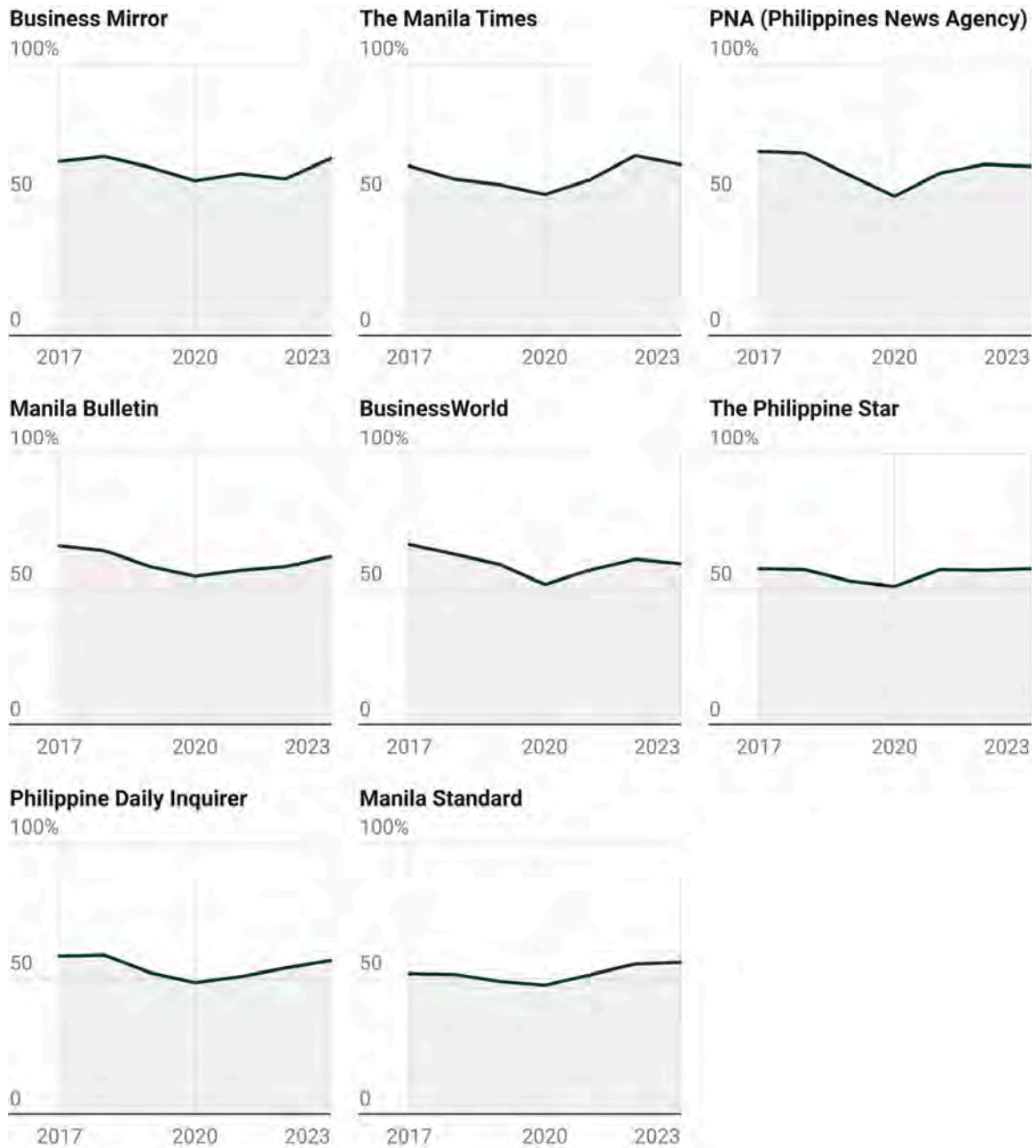


Notes: This chart visualizes the percentage of PRC-focused articles produced by three Philippine outlets with known content-sharing partnerships with PRC media as a share of articles published by all eight outlets during the same period of January 2017 to December 2023. Source: Factiva DNA, calculation by AidData.

A content-sharing partnership agreement does not necessarily guarantee Beijing that coverage by its Philippine partners will always be positive. In 2020, for example, the sentiment of PRC-focused coverage worsened across the sample. One of Beijing’s CSP partners, the Philippine Daily Inquirer, produced some of the least favorable coverage during this period, along with the Manila Standard, which did not have such an agreement. By contrast, the BusinessMirror and Manila Bulletin published the most coverage of the PRC in 2020. The PNA, a content-sharing partner with Beijing, along with the BusinessMirror, had the most consistently positive coverage across the seven-year period (Figure 6).<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup>During much of this period, the PNA was under President Duterte, whose tenure was marked by warm relations with China. The early years of President Marcos Jr., also within this period, saw a continuation of these favorable China-Philippine relations, though they eventually began to sour.

Figure 6. Percentage of Positive Stories About the PRC as a Share of All Articles Published by Outlet, 2017-2023



Notes: This graph displays the average annual positivity of all articles discussing the PRC across eight Philippine media outlets between January 2017 and December 2023. Positivity share is calculated based on the aggregated sentiment for all key terms in an article; therefore few articles are purely “negative” or “positive” but a weighted sum. For further details, see the Technical Appendix. Software: Bing sentiment lexicon (Minqing and Bing, 2004); ‘quanteda’ R package (Benoit et al., 2018). Source: Factiva DNA, calculations by AidData.

Coverage by the eight Philippine outlets tended to focus almost exclusively on broader topics of PRC-Philippines relations (97 percent of articles) rather than

individual investment projects (3 percent of articles). This trend was consistent across all outlets, regardless of whether or not they had a CSP with a PRC outlet. The Manila Times and PNA, both CSP outlets, had the fewest articles relating to the PRC's 10 biggest development finance projects than any other source.

Philippine experts interviewed confirmed that media coverage of the PRC's investments across the Philippines is relatively limited. Most local media stories about China focus on security issues, particularly the South China Sea disputes, and controversies surrounding Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators (POGOs), which the PRC opposes.<sup>36</sup> These issues also involve human rights concerns, including human trafficking, exploitation, and forced labor. In contrast, the PRC's infrastructure investments are under-covered in Philippine media relative to the volume of development finance dollars Beijing has channeled into the country over the last two decades.

Even when Philippine media cover Beijing's development investments, the stories are not necessarily conducive to advancing the PRC's preferred narratives. Philippine experts interviewed noted that Philippine outlets cover critical perspectives on project implementation just as frequently as positive milestones like groundbreaking and ribbon-cutting ceremonies. Content analysis of the eight Philippine outlets' coverage reinforced this point.

The Philippine Daily Inquirer is a prime example of the limitations of the PRC in brokering CSPs to mute criticism and divert attention from controversies. The outlet had the highest volume of stories on Beijing's big-ticket infrastructure projects, but these stories were only marginally positive at best (Figure 7). Its content-sharing partnership with China Daily did not stop the Inquirer from providing continuing coverage of the troubled Northrail project. Nor did the outlet adopt the PRC's official line that the Kaliwa Dam was the jewel in the crown of PRC-Philippines' cooperation. Instead, the Inquirer published hard-hitting stories about the environmental and displacement concerns surrounding the project's construction.<sup>37</sup> The Inquirer's coverage indicates a balanced mix of interest and skepticism in Beijing's value proposition.

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<sup>36</sup> Punongbayan (2024).

<sup>37</sup> Lalu (2022)

Figure 7. Positivity share from Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2017-2023



Created with Datawrapper

Notes: This graph displays the average annual positivity of articles with keywords relating to nine PRC-brokered investment projects published by the Philippine Daily Inquirer between 2017 and 2023. Positivity share is calculated based on the aggregated sentiment for all key terms in an article; therefore few articles are purely “negative” or “positive” but a weighted sum. For further details, see the Technical Appendix. Software: Bing sentiment lexicon (Minqing and Bing, 2004); ‘quanteda’ R package (Benoit et al., 2018). Source: Factiva DNA, calculations by AidData.

The type of content-sharing partnership brokered between Beijing and the local outlet may be one factor in explaining the divergence in coverage. A 2020 study by the International Federation of Journalists found that the PRC embassy

pursued close ties with the Manila Times and Manila Bulletin, frequently inviting them to events and targeting their staff for journalist training programs.<sup>38</sup> The Inquirer is a member of the Asia News Network alongside China Daily and regularly republishes content from China Daily.<sup>39</sup> Comparatively, the Inquirer maintained a higher degree of editorial independence than its peers. Given the opaque nature of these CSPs, further study is warranted to closely investigate the types of partnerships where Beijing exerts the most influence.

## 3.2 Training Philippine Journalists in China

Individual journalists often hold the power of the pen in shaping content about the PRC's engagement in the Philippines. This fact is not lost on Beijing and likely motivates the PRC's willingness to host training programs for Philippine journalists and communications professionals in China. Given data limitations, it is difficult to quantify the frequency of training and the volume of participating journalists. Instead, this section triangulates insights from Philippine expert interviews, open-source searches, and the Factiva Dow Jones News and Analysis database to create a qualitative picture of these trainings, including *who participates, what they do there, and what the PRC gains from these efforts*.

Participants in PRC-sponsored trainings can be from government-affiliated news outlets (e.g., Philippine News Agency, People's Television Network) and agencies (e.g., the Presidential Communications Operations Office and the Philippine Information Agency). However, journalists from private sector media outlets like the Manila Bulletin, Philippine Star, and the BusinessMirror have also been known to participate in these trainings.

Given the regional diversity of the Philippines' media market, Beijing has included journalists in its trainings from provincial and local media outlets outside of the National Capital Region to engage a broad spectrum of Philippine media professionals.<sup>40</sup> In our surface-level search (see the Technical Appendix), we found the PRC places less emphasis on including social media influencers in these trainings, which still appear to predominantly focus on traditional media. That said, the widespread use of social media in the Philippines may push the PRC to

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<sup>38</sup> Lim and Bergin (2020).

<sup>39</sup> Han and Elemia (2023).

<sup>40</sup> Garcia (2023).



make greater efforts to engage with influencers in their training programs in the near future. One interviewee noted, “The battleground is not traditional media, but social media; influencers [are] where it is at.” However, they added, “Social influencers get [their information] from traditional media—so [traditional media] is still important.”

### 3.2.1 Profiling PRC-Sponsored Journalism Training and Exchange

PRC-sponsored journalist training may last from a few days to several months. These exchanges may be exclusively focused on the Philippines or include participants from elsewhere in the world. The China Asia Pacific Press Center (CAPPC) and China Public Diplomacy Association (CPDA) have hosted some of the more ambitious exchange programs for journalists.

In 2023, for example, the CAPPC hosted over 60 media practitioners from 51 countries, including the Philippines, for a four-month exchange program with workshops for journalists on covering major domestic events, utilizing media internships, and engaging in cultural experiences.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the CPDA has held annual exchanges since 2014 to foster connections between journalists in China and other regions.<sup>42</sup> To grow in their understanding of China, participating journalists in the CPDA program attend lectures on Chinese politics, economy, culture, and language.<sup>43</sup>

PRC-sponsored journalism trainings are often presented as helping professionals acquire new technical skills, particularly in new media technologies and exposure to Chinese media practices. One illustrative example is a 10-day workshop hosted by the Communication University of China (CUC) and Renmin University in September 2016. The training targeted 21 media executives and journalists from four Southeast Asian countries, including the Philippines. China Daily highlighted the experience of one participant from Myanmar who was able to acquire relevant skills in floor layouts, overhead lighting temperatures, and software usage to support his new digital studio.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Agoot (2023).

<sup>42</sup> Abdi, M (2024) and The Analyst News (2022).

<sup>43</sup> By 2024, an estimated 100 journalists from over 90 countries had participated in the exchange program (Abdi, 2024).

<sup>44</sup> Yuan and Zhang (2016).

Strengthening ties among countries via regional networking organizations is another attribute of PRC-sponsored trainings. The Belt and Road News Network (BRNN) is an online platform launched by the People's Daily, a PRC state-owned news outlet, which focuses on stories related to the BRI. In April 2019, its first council meeting in Beijing brought together over 30 media organizations from multiple continents to discuss cross-border cooperation and finalize its 2019-2020 work plan.<sup>45</sup> At these regional fora, the PRC promotes topics such as “socialist journalism with Chinese characteristics” and the BRI.

The inclusion of site visits to Chinese media organizations and cultural attractions are frequently incorporated into journalist exchanges. For example, the Chinese National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) hosted a two-week training in China in 2023, with journalists, bloggers, social media influencers, and government officials from Manila and Davao participating in seminars, media site visits, and cultural heritage tours. The training event occurred in Beijing and Nanning (a sister city to Davao City).<sup>46</sup> NRTA Deputy Director Yan Ni told participants that the training aimed to “deepen our friendship [and] help participants get a better understanding of China...so that we can be able to seek more cooperation and opportunities in the future.”<sup>47</sup>

That same year, a Manila Bulletin journalist described an 11-day visit to China, which included tours of historical sites like the Great Wall and the Forbidden City in Beijing, the Terracotta Warriors in Xi'an, and modern technological hubs like Baidu's Apollo Park, and Huawei's Shanghai Research Center. While highlighting China's past and present achievements, there was no indication of formal training sessions, per se. Instead, the focus was on cultural immersion and educational experiences.<sup>48</sup>

Likely an indication of Beijing's interest in promoting an alternative narrative related to its domestic policies in Xinjiang, some of the journalism exchanges it has facilitated included visits to Xinjiang Province. Beijing has attracted international criticism over its handling of Xinjiang's Turkic-Muslim Uyghur population—from accusations of mass detentions and forced labor to cultural

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<sup>45</sup> Crismundo (2019).

<sup>46</sup> Garcia (2023).

<sup>47</sup> Garcia (2023).

<sup>48</sup> See Hernando-Malipot (2023) for the journalist's first-person description of the experience.

repression and rampant surveillance.<sup>49</sup> Seeking to cultivate more sympathetic voices, the PRC has invited foreign journalists, particularly from Muslim-majority countries and regions, to tour Xinjiang themselves. For example, in 2019, the PRC organized a 10-day, all-expenses-paid trip to Xinjiang for journalists and writers primarily from Qatar, Albania, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates, along with Philippine journalists from Mindanao—where a significant Muslim population resides.<sup>50</sup>

### 3.2.2 Objectives and Outcomes of PRC Journalism Training

Although the format and participant roster vary, there is more continuity in Beijing's stated objectives of these trainings to build goodwill, help journalists cultivate technical skills, and enable participants to develop networks with counterparts in China and across the developing world.<sup>51</sup> Several Philippine experts interviewed also argued that there was a more self-serving motivation for the PRC: influencing journalists' worldviews to align with Beijing's preferred narratives and produce more favorable stories. This strategic objective is likely even more important in a context like the Philippines, where the PRC has significant economic and geopolitical interests.

The evidence is mixed regarding whether and how the PRC's journalism trainings have helped Beijing alter Philippine media narratives. Philippine experts interviewed for this study were divided on this question. Some interviewees reported that colleagues who had participated in these trainings demonstrated more favorable attitudes toward China, even if this may not have shown up in their work. Other interviewees, including one who had directly participated in a PRC-sponsored training event, expressed skepticism about their effectiveness.

A third group argued that these professional trainings are influential in shaping their colleagues' reporting in favor of China. Rappler investigative reporter and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Maria Ressa shared a similar view in a 2018 public statement at the National Endowment for Democracy. Ressa lamented the Duterte administration's policy of sending Philippine state media personnel for

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<sup>49</sup> Gunter (2021).

<sup>50</sup> Han and Elemia (2023).

<sup>51</sup> Custer et al. (2019).

training in China, arguing that such international training provided an opening for Beijing “to influence the information ecosystem.”<sup>52</sup>

One case is Martin Andanar. A former secretary of the Philippine Presidential Communications Operations Office (PCOO),<sup>53</sup> Andanar participated in several trainings conducted by PRC state media, including a 2018 session with over 50 journalists from Philippine state-run media, all of which are attached to the PCOO.<sup>54</sup> Since leaving the PCOO, Andanar is now an anchor for the PRC-state run CGTN network.<sup>55</sup> Finally, the journalists from Mindanao who visited Xinjiang province did seem to express support for China’s counter-terrorism measures, aligning with the narratives promoted by China’s government.<sup>56</sup>

Digitization, low pay, and demanding workloads put significant strains on many Philippine journalists. In this context, PRC-funded professional training may be seen by journalists as beneficial for long-term skill development and potential higher compensation, or, in the short term, as a subsidized opportunity for cultural immersion in China. Further, ensuring accurate and fair reporting often requires time and resources beyond what may be available to many journalists. Access to PRC sources can appeal to resource-constrained writers who need information.

### 3.3 Social Media Trolls, Friends, and Influencers

Globally, the PRC is turning to social media to spread a pro-China message and push mis- or disinformation about contentious issues.<sup>57</sup> As described in Chapter 2, PRC state-run or state-influenced media outlets have accounts on most social media channels to amplify their digital content. Less direct is the proliferation of online troll farms and other fake accounts that the PRC can use to spread mis- or disinformation to foreign publics, along with partnerships with social media influencers. The Philippines is particularly vulnerable to these digital overtures, as its highly connected population ranks fourth globally in time spent on social media.<sup>58</sup> Philippine experts interviewed cited an expanding Chinese presence on

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<sup>52</sup> Bednarz (2018).

<sup>53</sup> Now reorganized and renamed the Presidential Communications Office (see: <https://mirror.pco.gov.ph/>).

<sup>54</sup> Parrocha (2018).

<sup>55</sup> Piatos (2024).

<sup>56</sup> Han and Elemia (2023).

<sup>57</sup> Brandt et al., (2022).

<sup>58</sup> Kemp (2024).

TikTok, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube as part of their efforts to sway public opinion.

According to interviewees, as many as 10,000 false accounts have been used to spread fake videos and deep fakes, as well as attack prominent political and military leaders. The PRC uses these tools to promote three security-related narratives: (1) China is a responsible international actor; (2) criticism of China's behavior and motives are thinly veiled U.S. attempts to undermine Philippine sovereignty; and (3) discussing, let alone debating, the South China Sea could lead to conflict with the PRC, implying that the Philippines is powerless.

Beijing also deploys Philippine social media influencers to promote positive narratives about the PRC.<sup>59</sup> In parallel with journalist trainings, PRC officials have sponsored social media personalities to tour China, encouraging them to present a positive narrative in contrast to perceived Western condescension.<sup>60</sup> Despite YouTube's reach in the Philippines, the PRC appears to have utilized this channel less than in other countries. Philippine YouTube vloggers have released a handful of videos that share the common format of a pro-China travel blog: delightful journeys and a personality "debunking" viewers' misconceptions about travel in China.<sup>61</sup> However, it is unclear if these videos were PRC-financed, and the reach is comparatively limited: no video has more than 20,000 views, compared to millions that vloggers from India, Europe, and the U.S. accrue on their China travelogues.

Another example of unsuccessful PRC media promotion is the piece released by the Chinese Embassy in Manila, titled "Iisang Dagat" (translated as "One Sea"). While the piece aimed to emphasize the positive relationship between the two countries, the accompanying YouTube video—featuring images of COVID-19 aid—is widely viewed as a cynical attempt to divert attention from Beijing's maritime actions.<sup>62</sup> As of April 27, 2020, the video had accumulated over 100,000 dislikes, generating significant negative reactions from Filipinos.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Seitz et al. (2022).

<sup>60</sup> In one instance, a British couple released a travel blog in the Xinjiang region that whitewashed the government's repressive policies against the Uyghur minority (Wang, 2024).

<sup>61</sup> Videos with titles like: "First Time in CHINA! NOT What I EXPECTED as a FILIPINO BACKPACKER 2024 #china #travelvlog"; "pinay living in the city 🇵🇭, palengke day, buhay sa china | filipina in china 中国 🇨🇳"; "WHAT A FILIPINO THINKS ABOUT CHINA AFTER VISITING IT?"

<sup>62</sup> Robles (2020).

<sup>63</sup> ABS-CBN News (2020).

Beijing can control the resources and attention it devotes to these social media tactics, but shifting local narratives is complicated in practice. Philippine experts interviewed argue that the PRC's social media tactics are not all that effective for two reasons. First, PRC messaging often suffers from an inability to connect to local audiences, a fact experts attributed to a lack of understanding of Philippine society. Second, Beijing's actions in one sphere can undercut its appeal in another. As a case in point, Philippine outlets regularly post videos of aggressive maneuvers by the PRC's People's Liberation Army Navy to assert Beijing's claims in the South China Sea that garner hundreds of thousands of social media views (Rappler, 2024; Rappler, 2023b).

## 4. Conflicting or Converging Narratives: Philippine Versus PRC Media Coverage

### Key insights from this chapter

- Despite Beijing's attempts to control the narrative, PRC media downplays project implementation challenges, while Philippine media highlights these issues
- Beijing portrays its projects as locally driven initiatives, but Philippine media fail to buy into this attempt to shift responsibility for setbacks onto local actors
- CSPs may lead to positive portrayals of Beijing in Philippine elite op-eds, but they do not protect the PRC from negative coverage

Beijing employs a multifaceted strategy in the Philippines, combining direct and indirect messaging to shape local media and public perception. As we have seen in this report, Beijing deploys the PRC's extensive state-owned and state-influenced media apparatus, along with various indirect influence tactics (e.g., CSPs with Philippine media outlets, collaboration with social media influencers, training of Philippine journalists), all aimed at promoting favorable views of China's role in the region.

Of course, influencing local narratives is easier said than done, and Beijing has more control over the tactics it uses to exert influence than the response. Philippine experts interviewed suggested that Beijing's comfort operating in a heavily state-controlled information environment at home makes it more difficult for PRC officials to make inroads in influencing narratives in the Philippines' more diverse and independent media space. Moreover, escalating tensions between the two countries related to maritime or economic disputes further disrupt Beijing's narrative-building efforts.

In this chapter, we examine the degree to which PRC and Philippine media messages conflict or converge in three respects: implementation challenges in PRC-financed infrastructure projects, the degree of emphasis on local ownership

versus PRC involvement in infrastructure investments, and the role of op-eds in allowing the PRC to borrow local credibility in promoting a favorable image.

## 4.1 Media Narratives on Implementation Challenges

Beijing's ability to deliver on its promise of being an attractive economic partner to the Philippines partly hinges on local perceptions of its financing of big-ticket infrastructure projects under the BRI. In some cases, this follow-through has failed to bear fruit: some promised projects failed to materialize, while others have encountered implementation challenges leading to a range of reactions from negative criticism over environmental, social, or governance outcomes to outright legal challenges.<sup>64</sup>

Beijing's efforts to promote the success of PRC-backed infrastructure projects in the media can often obscure significant challenges—cost overruns, governance issues, and environmental impacts—encountered during implementation. In this section, we examine the extent to which verified implementation challenges occurring in 10 of the largest PRC-financed development projects were acknowledged or addressed in official PRC media compared to eight Philippine outlets<sup>65</sup> in their coverage between 2017 and 2023 (Table 5).

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<sup>64</sup> Custer et al. (2024).

<sup>65</sup> The Philippine Daily Inquirer, Manila Bulletin, BusinessWorld, the Philippine Star, Manila Standard, BusinessMirror, the Manila Times, and the Philippines News Agency.



Table 5. Top 10 Most Expensive PRC-financed Infrastructure Projects

Project Title	Commitment Year	Sector	Amount (USD Millions)
Dinginin Coal-Fired Power Plant Construction	2016	Energy	1180.80
Lanao Kauswagan Coal-Fired Power Plant Construction	2016	Energy	944.64
Mariveles Coal-Fired Power Plant Construction	2010	Energy	686.61
Phase I, Section I of the Northrail Project	2004	Transport and Storage	411.78
Manila Water Company Capital Investment	2019	Water Supply and Sanitation	314.59
Phase 1 of the Safe City Project	2021	Communications	275.94
Clark Global City Project	2017	Industry, Mining, Construction	265.04
Chelsea Logistics and Infrastructure Holdings Corp. acquisition of 2GO Group	2017	Business and Other Services	253.51
Project Management Consultancy of the Philippine National Railways South Long-Haul Project	2019	Transport and Storage	246.93
New Centennial Water Source-Kaliwa Dam Project	2018	Energy	230.19

Source: AidData. 2023. *Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset, Version 3.0*. Retrieved from <https://www.aiddata.org/data/aiddatas-global-chinese-development-finance-dataset-version-3-0>

#### 4.1.1 Project Delivery Delays

Beijing’s appetite to bankroll ambitious and complex infrastructure projects in the Philippines has increased its vulnerability to project delivery delays. The energy sector is a case in point. Custer et al. (2024) found that the average PRC-financed energy project in the Philippines takes 866 days to complete from dollars committed to project completion. For example, the Dinginin and Lanao Kauswagan coal-fired power plants in Central Luzon and Northern Mindanao, respectively, faced significant operational delays, such as COVID-19 work stoppages and shipping complications.

Media coverage of the Dinginin coal-fired power plant by the Manila Bulletin and Philippine Star was predominantly negative in 2020, with over 80 percent of articles expressing criticism of the project, largely due to project delays and environmental concerns related to emissions and impact on the ecosystem. By 2022, the negative coverage had mostly dissipated, with only the BusinessMirror publishing articles about the project, and these were more neutral in tone. This shift may be partly attributed to resolving major delays, particularly the

completion of the second power generation unit in mid-2021, and perhaps a broader change in media focus towards the project's successes.

The Lanao Kauswagan coal-fired power plant also attracted a heightened share of negative coverage in Philippine media from 2017 to 2020, corresponding with a period when the project's completion date was postponed numerous times, and other operational delays likely fueled negative sentiment. Following the project's completion in 2020, negative coverage declined in 2021 as these challenges were resolved and attention shifted away from earlier controversies.

#### 4.1.2 Project Procurement and Regulatory Concerns

Several high-profile PRC infrastructure projects in the Philippines have had to weather accusations related to procurement irregularities.<sup>66</sup> The North Luzon Railway project is one prominent example. Financed with a US\$400 million loan from China's Exim Bank, Northrail aimed to construct an 80 km railway line from Caloocan in Metro Manila to Malolos in Bulacan province. The project's mounting costs and chronic delays soon became the subject of legal disputes. A Supreme Court ruling highlighted procurement flaws and determined the loan agreement should have been subject to competitive bidding. China's Exim Bank subsequently canceled the loan in 2012, and the Philippines' Department of Finance was required to repay US\$180.79 million of the loan, plus interest, complicating the project's financial and legal issues.<sup>67</sup>

Coverage of the Northrail in Philippine media reflected the controversies over the legal disputes and the Supreme Court deliberations, with negative articles peaking between 2017 and 2018. Once the Northrail project was canceled in 2019, negative coverage waned as media attention shifted to the North-South Commuter Railway (NSCR) initiative supported by Japan and the Asian Development Bank.<sup>68</sup> However, a resurgence of negative sentiment in 2023 suggests that as the Philippines navigates new challenges related to its ongoing

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<sup>66</sup> Custer et al. (2024).

<sup>67</sup> See project ID # 63805 (<https://china.aiddata.org/projects/63805/>) in AidData's GCDF 3.0 dataset. Custer et al. (2023) and Dreher et al. (2022).

<sup>68</sup> The NSCR continues the vision of a railway system connecting Central and Northern Luzon. It is now under the management of the Department of Transportation and supported by Japan and the Asian Development Bank. The NSCR is poised to become a vital component of the Philippines' rail infrastructure, driving improved connectivity and economic growth in the region (Rappler, 2023a).

rail infrastructure efforts, this has rekindled media scrutiny of the Northrail's legacy.

Large-scale PRC infrastructure projects have also had to contend with another governance-related challenge: regulatory hurdles. For example, a PRC-financed Safe City Project to enhance public safety through the installation of advanced Closed-Circuit Television systems across 16 to 18 local government units (LGUs) struggled to obtain multiple approvals from the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) and the National Telecommunications Commission (NTC).<sup>69</sup> These delays were further complicated by the need to secure Memorandums of Agreement (MOAs) with participating LGUs and the proposal to have Huawei Technologies supply critical equipment for the project despite accusations of the entity's involvement in cyber espionage.<sup>70</sup>

Philippine media sentiment related to the Safe City Project evolved in response to these regulatory challenges. Initially, domestic media coverage was largely positive or neutral. However, there was an uptick in negative sentiment towards the project between 2017 and 2019, coinciding with the project's regulatory difficulties and national security concerns over the involvement of Huawei. As the project stalled in 2022 due to funding issues, negative media coverage largely diminished. Nevertheless, outlets like the Philippine Star and the Philippine Daily Inquirer continued to file negative stories, reflecting unresolved concerns related to project delays and Huawei's involvement.

#### 4.1.3 Environmental and Social Issues

Roughly 40 percent of PRC-financed development projects in the Philippines are associated with at least one type of environmental, social, or governance (ESG) risk, according to Custer et al. (2024). The Kaliwa Dam is a particularly contentious example of a PRC-funded infrastructure project encountering prominent environmental and social challenges. Intended to provide a new water source for Metro Manila, the Kaliwa Dam project faced opposition over concerns about its

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<sup>69</sup> Tuquero (2019).

<sup>70</sup> Huawei Corporation is a telecommunications company that is private sector in name, but with an opaque ownership structure and suspected ties to the Chinese Communist Party (Custer et al., 2024).

environmental impact,<sup>71</sup> displacement of indigenous communities,<sup>72</sup> and lack of necessary government permits.<sup>73</sup> Despite these unresolved issues, construction on the project has continued, exacerbating tensions between the government and affected communities.

Philippine media coverage of the Kaliwa Dam project has reflected these concerns, with a significant rise in negative sentiment across all eight analyzed outlets, peaking in 2021.<sup>74</sup> This surge in coverage appears to have been driven by environmental and social concerns, including the displacement of indigenous communities and deficiencies in environmental assessments. Negative stories about the project began dissipating in 2022 as construction commenced, which may have alleviated earlier concerns over the delayed start. Media coverage subsequently shifted from the initial controversies to on-the-ground developments, with a reduction in negative coverage.

The Kaliwa Dam has also been a focal point of the PRC's direct messaging efforts. State-owned and state-influenced media outlets such as the South China Morning Post, Xinhua News Agency, China Daily, and the Global Times have characterized the project as a cornerstone of Sino-Philippine cooperation. For example, in April 2023, three SCMP articles discussing the South China Sea disputes cited the Kaliwa Dam as evidence of strengthening PRC-Philippines relations. This degree of involvement by PRC outlets could indicate a strategy on Beijing's part to proactively counter negative coverage of its high-profile projects. Noticeably, the only other big-ticket investments to receive substantial coverage in PRC media sources were similarly contentious investments such as the Northrail project and China Telecom's Mislattel deal.

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<sup>71</sup> Although the government issued an Environmental Compliance Certificate (ECC) in October 2019, questions remain about the adequacy of the environmental assessments conducted and the potential for the project to cause deforestation and disrupt local ecosystems. An official at the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) revealed that "the ECC was issued because it was a priority project of the government and the agency had no recourse but to approve it," raising concerns about the integrity of the approval process (Yap et al., 2019).

<sup>72</sup> Located in the municipalities of General Nakar and Infanta in Quezon Province and Teresa in Rizal Province, the project has been criticized for threatening to displace 10,000 members of the Dumagat-Remontado indigenous communities.

<sup>73</sup> The Philippine Commission on Audit highlighted that Kaliwa Dam lacked permits from relevant government agencies, jeopardizing the loan agreement with China Eximbank and the commercial contract with the Chinese contractor.

<sup>74</sup> A sharp increase from 2017, when over three-quarters of the coverage was positive in tone.

## 4.2 Media Narratives on Local Ownership of Investments

Extensive involvement by Chinese firms in planning, financing, and execution is a common feature of PRC-backed development projects in the Philippines.<sup>75</sup> By contrast, Beijing's preferred narrative is to present these investments as locally-led initiatives. Infrastructure projects like Kaliwa Dam and Chico River Pump Irrigation Project (CRPIP), for instance, were presented as responsive to the Duterte administration's national development agenda, even as they were heavily funded and implemented by Chinese firms under the BRI.

Philippine experts interviewed argued that Beijing aims to minimize the visibility of the PRC's footprint and shift responsibility for implementation challenges such as delays, cost overruns, or unfulfilled promises away from Chinese firms and onto local stakeholders. Interviewees particularly pointed to this pattern as most prominent in the framing of PRC-backed infrastructure projects during the Duterte administration.

Local media outlets' financial struggles may have furthered this localization narrative. Economic hardships can render local outlets more vulnerable to external influences,<sup>76</sup> including those from PRC-backed entities, subtly favoring Chinese firms by minimizing their involvement in problematic aspects of the projects. Interviewees shared that news stories favorable to the PRC-funded projects flood the media real estate, and disagreeable voices are drowned out.

Positioning the PRC's development finance investments in the Philippines as locally-led initiatives could also be a defense mechanism for Beijing to navigate an operating environment where public trust in China has eroded. Seventy-six percent of Filipinos surveyed in March 2024 perceived China as the greatest threat to the Philippines, according to OCTA Research.<sup>77</sup> Although dissatisfaction with high-visibility infrastructure projects financed by the PRC and implemented by Chinese firms is only one factor among many, these dynamics likely exacerbate broader economic and political frustrations.

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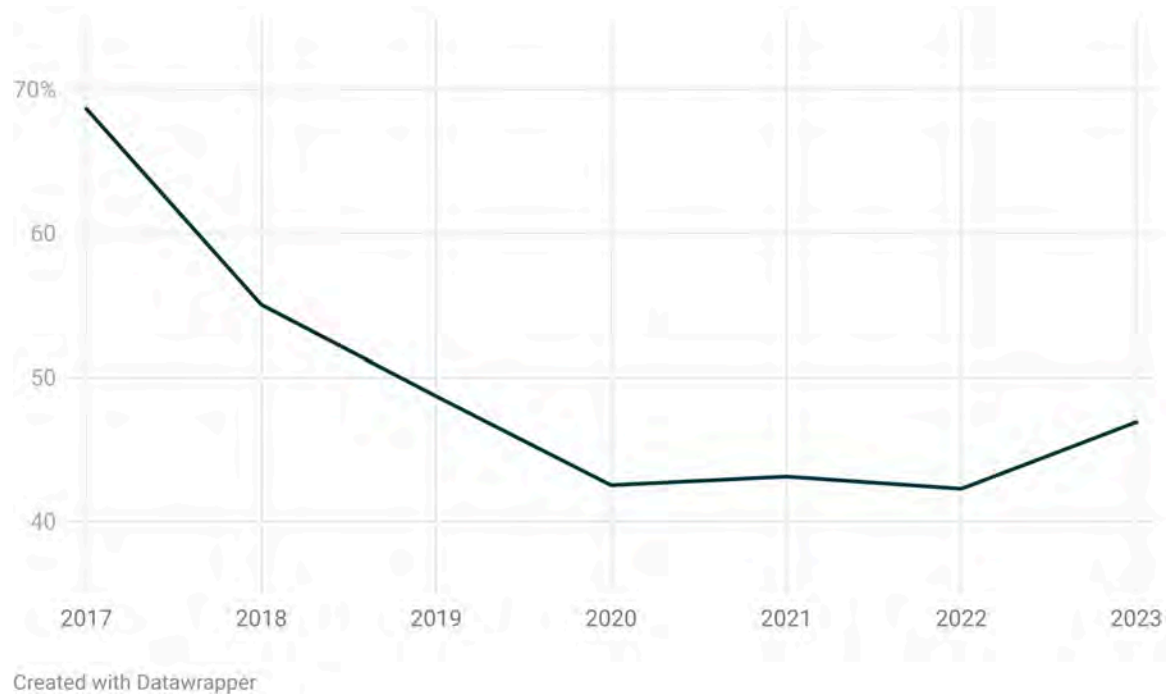
<sup>75</sup> Custer et al. (2024).

<sup>76</sup> Some Philippine media experts interviewed for this study shared that many nationwide media outlets in the Philippines are struggling to turn a profit, with the situation even more challenging for provincial media. For individual journalists, the prospect of higher wages offered by PRC-funded media relative to what they could earn from Philippine outlets is a powerful enticement to align themselves with Beijing's preferred narratives. Meanwhile, the lack of resources for professional development further contributes to the appeal of PRC-funded training programs (see Section 3.2).

<sup>77</sup> Strangio (2024).

Negative reactions to Beijing’s assertive maritime claims in the South China Sea are an important driver of public opinion. Interviewees pointed to the controversial decision to allow certain Chinese businesses, including POGOs, to remain open during the pandemic while local businesses were closed as a factor reinforcing negative views of Beijing’s influence. Furthermore, the negative coverage of the PRC and its associations in the Philippines has contributed to a broader anti-Chinese sentiment, impacting the Filipino-Chinese community. As a result, topics related to China are often met with suspicion. As shown in Figure 8, positive coverage of POGOs in Philippine media has declined steadily since 2017 and hit an all-time low in 2020.

Figure 8. Sentiment of Coverage Related to Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators in Philippine Media, 2017-2023



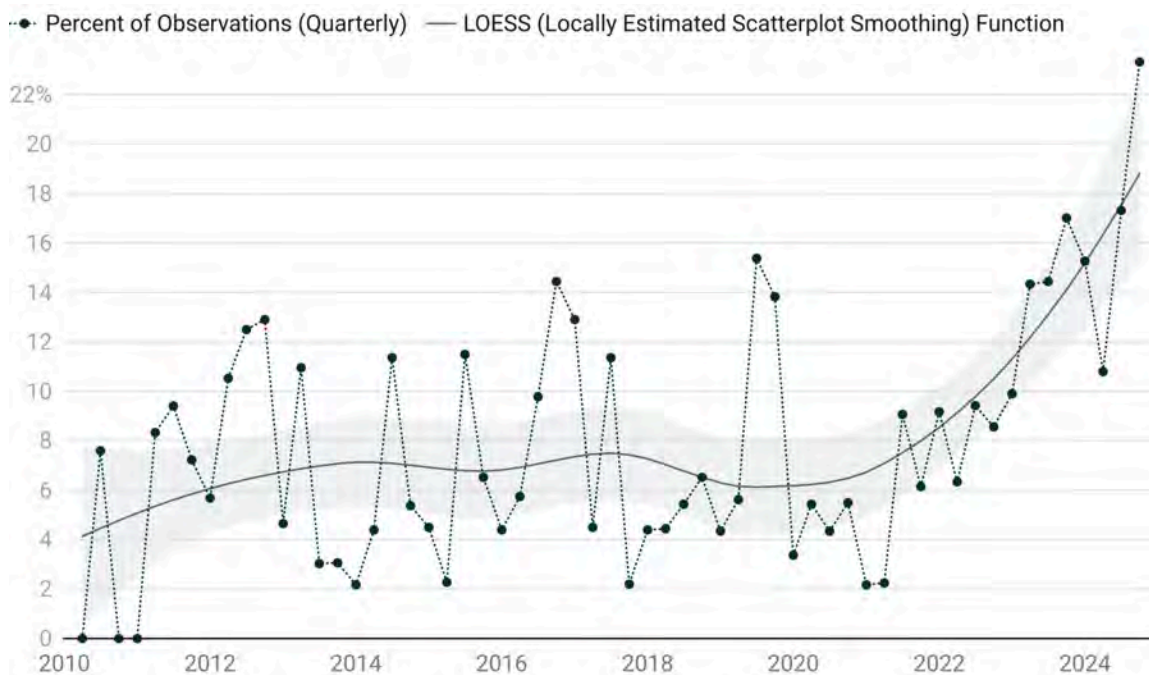
Notes: This graph displays the average annual positivity of articles published in the Philippine media between 2017 and 2023 that contained the term “POGO,” an acronym for “Philippine Offshore Gaming Operator.” Positivity share is calculated based on the aggregated sentiment for all key terms in an article; therefore, few articles are purely “negative” or “positive” but are weighted sums. For further details, see the Technical Appendix. Software: Bing sentiment lexicon (Minqing and Bing, 2004). Source: Factiva DNA, calculations by AidData.

### 4.3 The Role of Op-Eds to Co-opt Local Credibility

For many Philippine experts interviewed, the Manila Times stands out among well-established local media outlets for its uniquely pro-China stance. Moreover, the Manila Times has a content-sharing partnership with Xinhua to reshare, republish, and co-create content with its PRC counterpart. To assess the potential reach of this PRC-Philippine media partnership in shaping elite opinion and national discourse, we take a closer look at the volume and sentiment of stories with the keyword “China” appearing in Manila Times’ op-eds between January 1, 2010, and August 23, 2024.

The percentage of Manila Times op-eds mentioning “China” increased significantly over the last fifteen years (Figure 9). There was a notable spike around the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. However, it is in the first half of 2024 that op-eds mentioning China have reached an unprecedented level. This latest surge corresponds with heightened elite commentary related to escalating tensions between the two countries over maritime disputes in the South China Sea. That said, taking the long view across the fifteen-year period, there is a decreasing variance quarter-to-quarter in the volume of China-focused op-eds, suggesting that China has become an increasingly stable and prominent topic among Manila Times’ opinion columnists.

Figure 9. The Proportion of Op-Eds Mentioning China in the Manila Times, 2010-2025



Notes: This figure shows the percentage of op-ed articles on manilatimes.net that mention “China,” observed quarterly from 2010 to August 23, 2024. Due to fluctuations in quarterly percentages, a trend line with confidence intervals (CIs) is included to aid interpretation. Wider CIs indicate greater variation quarter-to-quarter. For this analysis, we employed a LOESS (locally estimated scatterplot smoothing) function, a non-parametric statistical method, to apply a curve of best fit (i.e., a smooth line) to our time series data points without assuming a normal distribution. This moving regression is a useful technique to identify long-term trends in inherently noisy data. Content Source: The Manila Times (www.manilatimes.net).

To gauge how the Manila Times’ CSP with PRC media may influence its editorial tone, we conducted a sentiment analysis applying the Lexicoder Sentiment Dictionary (LSD).<sup>78</sup> This approach provides a systematic method to track shifts in sentiment, offering insights into potential bias or changes in attitude toward China in the newspaper’s op-eds quarter-to-quarter during the period of interest (January 1, 2010, to August 23, 2024).

In 40 out of 56 quarters analyzed (71 percent of the time), the average sentiment of Manila Times op-eds with the keyword “China” was positive (Figure 10). This finding reinforces the anecdotal impression that many interviewees shared that the Manila Times provided uniquely favorable coverage of the PRC. The sentiment of Manila Times’ op-eds was more volatile between 2010 and 2016,

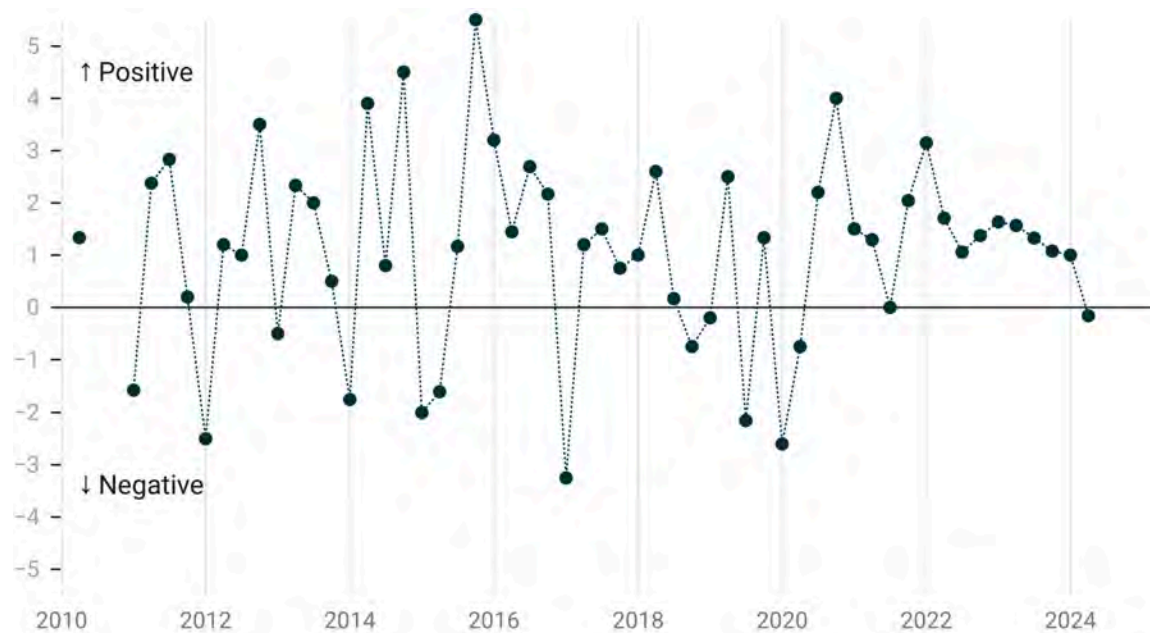
<sup>78</sup> The LSD is a bag-of-words dictionary that quantifies sentiment by assigning positive or negative scores to words within a text, enabling an objective measurement of the tone of op-eds over time (Young and Soroka, 2012).



reflecting both favorable and critical coverage, likely corresponding with the souring of bilateral relations between Manila and Beijing during the administration of President Aquino. The Manila Times' coverage was subsequently more favorable to China for several years, in alignment with President Duterte's pro-China posture, albeit with continued variability.

Interestingly, the Manila Times' generally favorable sentiment towards China has remained relatively stable without showing significant decline, even with the transition to President Marcos Jr., whose administration has introduced a more cautious tone toward China. This stability, despite broader negative shifts in the national discourse, indicates that the Manila Times may be maintaining a consistent tone potentially influenced by its CSP with Xinhua, thus insulating its coverage from public and governmental attitudes.

Figure 10. Quarterly Sentiment Analysis of Op-Eds Mentioning China in the Manila Times, 2010-2024



Created with Datawrapper

Notes: This figure shows the overall sentiment of op-eds mentioning 'China' in The Manila Times by quarter from 2010 to August 23, 2024. Data points above the horizontal dashed line indicate overall positive sentiment scores among op-eds mentioning "China" that quarter, while the data point below suggests overall negative sentiment that quarter. Of the 56 possible quarters, 42 are positive (72.9 percent). Software: Lexicoder Sentiment Dictionary (Young and Soroka, 2012); 'quanteda' R package (Benoit et al., 2018). Content Source: The Manila Times ([www.manilatimes.net](http://www.manilatimes.net)).

## 5. Conclusion

In this report, *Investing in Narratives: How Beijing promotes its development projects in the Philippines*, we set out to disentangle the PRC's use of direct and indirect messaging channels to influence more favorable media coverage of its engagement in the country. In this chapter, we conclude by surfacing several overarching insights that emerge from our research.

### How does the PRC leverage state media to directly advance its preferred investment narratives in the Philippines?

PRC state media play a central role in Beijing's efforts to shape local narratives about China as a development partner and its investments in the Philippines. State-owned and state-influenced outlets highlight the benefits of PRC-backed projects to Filipinos while downplaying challenges related to Beijing's debt-financed investments in the Philippines. Beijing's preferred narratives emphasize win-win cooperation, regional stability, and economic partnership. In addition to media coverage, PRC officials, including ambassadors, engage directly with the Philippine public through op-eds and public statements in local newspapers sympathetic to Beijing's message.

Nevertheless, over the past decade, the PRC's ability to directly influence the Philippines' local media environment has fluctuated, influenced by geopolitical events and the launch of initiatives like the BRI. With the high-profile dispute in the South China Sea grabbing most of the attention, the PRC has become less able to rely on direct messaging tactics to amplify its preferred narratives. This narrative control is critical to Beijing's strategy to maintain a favorable image in the Philippines and divert what attention it can from maritime disputes.

### What strategies does the PRC employ to indirectly shape media messaging in the Philippines—and to what effect?

Beijing has increasingly relied on indirect messaging, using intermediaries to shape or convey its narratives without direct attribution, as trust and approval of the PRC have declined due to recent geopolitical events. This approach reflects heightened scrutiny of PRC content from state-run media among Philippine

lawmakers and the public, and the growing sophistication of Beijing's influence operations. Pro-PRC narratives from trusted local sources in the Philippines are less likely to face skepticism than content from official PRC outlets.

However, content-sharing partnerships between PRC state-owned media and Philippine outlets do not always guarantee Beijing the outcomes it wants. While these CSPs with Philippine media allow Beijing to present its narratives through a local lens, they do not guarantee positive coverage, underscoring the limitations of indirect messaging to manage its image abroad.

The outcomes of PRC-sponsored journalist training programs in the Philippines are mixed. While some journalists regard these programs as valuable opportunities for sponsored travel and cultural immersion, others may come away with a more favorable view of the PRC. Nonetheless, this shift in perspective does not consistently influence their reporting. In some cases, the influence is more pronounced, with participants producing coverage that aligns more closely with PRC narratives. These varied results highlight the nuanced and often unpredictable impact of journalist training programs on media coverage.

Beijing has recognized the importance of social media in the Philippines, cultivating relationships with influencers on platforms like TikTok and Facebook to disseminate positive narratives, particularly during politically sensitive events. This approach targets both youth and adults, recognizing that the Filipino population is highly digitally connected, adding authenticity to the messaging by employing local voices. Nevertheless, PRC messaging struggles to resonate with local audiences, as underscored by the limited presence of pro-PRC influencers in the Philippines.

## To what extent do PRC and Philippine media narratives converge or diverge, and why?

Beijing's narrative surrounding PRC-backed infrastructure projects in the Philippines often minimizes or ignores significant implementation challenges, including cost overruns, governance issues, and environmental impacts. While the PRC strives to promote a positive image of these projects and their benefits to Filipinos, Philippine media frequently spotlights setbacks and failures, revealing a

clear divergence in the narrative. This divergence is evident in text analysis and insights from interviews with Philippine media experts.

Beijing's efforts to portray PRC-backed projects as locally led initiatives aim to minimize China's visible footprint, subtly shifting responsibility for setbacks onto local conditions or partners. However, this strategy often fails when local media critically assess the true extent of PRC involvement. For instance, PRC-friendly media outlets highlighted the successes of projects like the Kaliwa Dam and CRPIP as part of the Philippines' national development agenda under the Duterte administration's BBB infrastructure program, while omitting that these initiatives were heavily funded and implemented by Chinese firms. This divergence between PRC and local narratives further underscores the significant challenges Beijing faces in managing its image abroad.

Nevertheless, it is important not to underestimate the potential for the PRC's indirect messaging tactics to influence Philippine media coverage. Content analysis of the Manila Times, a content-sharing partner of Xinhua, is a case in point. The percentage of Manila Times op-eds mentioning "China" increased significantly over the last fifteen years. In 71 percent of the quarters analyzed between 2010 and 2024, the average sentiment of Manila Times op-eds related to China was positive. The favorability of this coverage has been durable and has become even more firmly entrenched in recent years, despite fluctuations in the official stance of Philippine presidential administrations towards China.

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