

Influencing the Narrative:

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

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December 2019



 **AIDDATA**
A Research Lab at William & Mary



U.S. DEPARTMENT *of* STATE

Acknowledgements

This report was prepared by Samantha Custer, Mihir Prakash, Jonathan A. Solis, Rodney Knight, and Joyce Jiahui Lin (AidData, William & Mary). The findings and conclusions of this report are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funders, partners, and advisors we thank below.

This study greatly benefited from the contributions of a group of experts who gave feedback at various stages of the research design, execution, and drafting of this publication. We would like to thank Samuel Brazys (University of Dublin), Joshua Kurlantzick (Council on Foreign Relations), Brad Parks (AidData, William & Mary), and Nancy Snow (Kyoto University) for their insightful feedback on our early research design and taxonomy development for informational diplomacy and student exchange. We also greatly appreciate the time and attention of our peer reviewers who helped us refine our thinking and prose for this final report, including: George Barnett (University of California-Davis), Joshua Kurlantzick (Council on Foreign Relations), Bonnie Glaser and Matthew Funaiolo (Center for Strategic and International Studies), Futao Huang (Hiroshima University), and Brad Parks (AidData, William & Mary).

The authors owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to the broader team of AidData staff and research assistants who spent countless hours alongside the research team assisting with data collection and project management tasks associated with this publication: Siddhartha Ghose, Brooke Russell, Austin Baehr, Wenyang Pan, Xinyao Wang, Xiaofan Han Ziyi Fu, Jiaxin Tang, Shishuo Liu. John Custer, Soren Patterson, and Parker Kim (AidData, William & Mary) were integral to the editing, formatting, layout, and data visualizations which we hope make this publication far more engaging for you to read.

This research study was conducted with generous support from the United States Department of State.

Citation

Custer, S., Prakash, M., Solis, J., Knight, R., and J. Lin. (2019). *Influencing the Narrative: How the Chinese government mobilizes students and media to burnish its image*. Williamsburg, VA. AidData at William & Mary.

Appendix

To access the technical annexes for this report, please refer to the electronic version which can be found online at: www.aiddata.org/publications/influencing-the-narrative.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction: Quantifying how China translates media and students into influence in the region	1
1.1 Why does China engage in informational diplomacy and what tools does it use?	2
1.2 Why does China foster international student exchange and what tools does it use?	3
1.3 How do we quantify the extent to which China’s overtures are associated with its desired outcomes?	4
2. How does China use media to change the narrative from the “China threat” to its “peaceful rise”?	8
2.1 Which informational diplomacy tools has China deployed in East Asia and the Pacific over time?	8
2.2 Which countries attract more of China’s informational diplomacy and with what initial response?	21
2.3 To what extent is the reporting about China changing in ways that are in line with its goals?	23
2.4 Concluding thoughts	25
3. How does China use student exchange to form bonds and socialize norms with tomorrow’s leaders?	27
3.1 Which student exchange tools has China deployed in East Asia and the Pacific over time?	28
3.2 Which countries attract more of China’s student exchange efforts and with what initial response?	37
3.3 Concluding thoughts	38
4. Are China’s informational diplomacy efforts associated with the outcomes Beijing wishes to achieve?	41
4.1 To what extent is China’s informational diplomacy associated with more favorable perceptions?	41
4.2 To what extent is China’s informational diplomacy associated with foreign policy alignment?	44
4.3 Concluding thoughts	46
5. Implications of Beijing’s informational diplomacy and student exchange overtures	47
5.1 Lessons learned for China on its informational diplomacy and student exchange activities	47
5.2 Implications for countries on the receiving end of Beijing’s overtures to media and students	47
5.3 Considerations for China’s strategic competitors in view of Beijing’s growing influence	48
5.4 Concluding thoughts	48
References	50

Boxes

Box 1: Informational diplomacy versus propaganda, disinformation, information warfare, and sharp power	3
Box 2: Three takeaways from Ties That Bind	5
Box 3: Key players directing China’s engagement with domestic and foreign media	10
Box 4: Expanding China’s reach through partnerships with EAP media outlets and localized content	14
Box 5: Beijing’s less benign tactics to influence the behavior of domestic and foreign journalists	20
Box 6: Key players in China’s student exchange machinery	27
Box 7: Limitations to studying Chinese soft-power gains through student and scholarly exchanges	39

Tables

Table 1. Taxonomy of China’s informational diplomacy activities in the EAP region	9
Table 2: Chinese media footprint in EAP countries, 2019	12
Table 3. Taxonomy of China’s student exchanges activities in the EAP region	28
Table 4: Modeling China’s informational diplomacy tools and public perceptions of Chinese leadership	42
Table 5: Modeling China’s public diplomacy tools and alignment with China in international fora	44

Figures

Figure 1. Chinese state-owned media Facebook pages and fans in EAP countries, 2019	11
Figure 2. Substantive focus of Chinese international broadcasters on Twitter	13
Map 1. Media partnerships between China and EAP countries, 2000-2017	15
Map 2. Interviews with China’s heads of state in EAP media, 2002-2013	16
Map 3: Op-eds by China’s heads of state in EAP media, 2013-2017	17
Map 4. Op-eds by China’s ambassadors in EAP media, 2010-2017	18
Map 5: State-sponsored press trips by EAP journalists to China, 2002-2017	19
Figure 3: Composition of China’s informational diplomacy activities in EAP countries, 2002-2017	22
Figure 4: Average tone of reporting (GDELT) on China in EAP countries	23
Figure 5: Volume of mentions of “human rights” and “China” in EAP news articles, 2000-2018	24
Figure 6. Volume of international and EAP students in China, 2002-2016	30
Figure 7. International students in China by home region, 2016	30
Figure 8. Growth in volume of international students in China, 2002-2016	30
Map 6: Chinese government scholarships, 2000-2018	31
Figure 9. Value of Chinese government scholarships versus strategic competitors, 2019	32
Figure 10. Volume of Chinese students studying abroad in EAP countries, 2000-2017	33
Figure 11. Educational exchange partnerships between China and EAP countries, available years	34
Figure 12. Confucius Institutes in the EAP region, 2004-2018	35
Map 7: Chinese language testing (HSK) centers active in 2019	36
Figure 13: Volume of Chinese scholarships for EAP students, 2000-2018	37
Figure 14: Average ratings of Chinese leadership in the Gallup World Poll, 2006-2018	43
Figure 15: Average alignment of EAP countries in UNGA voting with China, 2000-2018	45

Technical Annex (please see the companion document)

Acronyms

APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative (also known as One Belt, One Road)
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCTV	China Central Television
CGTN	China Global Television Network
CC	Confucius Classroom
CCPPD	Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China
CI	Confucius Institute
CRI	China Radio International
CRTV	China Radio and Television
CSSA	Chinese Students and Scholars Association
CSC	China Scholarship Council
EAP	East Asia and Pacific
FCCC	Foreign Correspondents' Club of China
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GDELT	Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone
HSK	Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
PIF	Pacific Islands Forum
PPP	Purchasing Power Parity
TVK	National Television of Kampuchea
UK	United Kingdom
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
US	United States
USD	United States Dollar

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Quantifying how China translates media and students into influence in East Asia and the Pacific

China's rapid ascent as an economic heavyweight over the last two decades has been met with both global admiration and apprehension (Zhang, 2018). Nowhere is this tension felt more strongly than among its closest neighbors (Zhao, 2016): the twenty-five countries of the East Asia and Pacific (EAP) region. Optimists welcome an economically strong China they hope will generate positive byproducts for its neighboring countries in the form of new trade deals and investments. However, there has been unease among journalists, scholars, and policymakers within EAP countries, who view China's growing assertiveness as a threat to their national sovereignty, as well as among Beijing's strategic competitors, who view its actions as counter to their own interests.

The implications of this great debate are not lost on Chinese leaders, who increasingly see the need to reshape a prevailing international narrative that they view as hostile to its ambitions (Deng, 2018; Li, 2013). Image management has become increasingly important in the era of Chinese President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as Beijing has had to assuage fears among foreign publics regarding its intentions amidst allegations of "debt-trap diplomacy" and zero-sum competition (Hartig, 2016; Shullman, 2019). Moreover, Chinese leaders recognize that negative global sentiment toward China's development model and governance system may fuel unrest with the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) rule at home (Benner et al., 2018).

Since the early 2000s, Chinese leaders have mobilized an impressive array of government agencies, media outlets, and educational institutions at home and abroad as a megaphone to tell "China's story to the world" (Zhao, 2016; Kurlantzick, 2007). This exercise in image management is not unique to China, and arguably Beijing has arrived fairly "late in the game" (Melissen and Sohn, 2015), as foreign powers like the United States, Australia, and Japan have long sought to project their own narratives to move the needle of global public opinion (Graham, 2008; Byrne, 2018; Watanabe, 2018). In fact, Beijing's playbook includes tactics originally used by other powers—from expanding the reach of China's mass media communications and partnerships with foreign media outlets to attracting international students to study in China and sending Chinese students abroad as people-to-people ambassadors.

Nonetheless, Beijing's moves to consolidate, expand, and professionalize its efforts to present a different side of the story, have raised questions about its motives, means, and opacity. The CCP's monopoly over the

reporting of China's domestic media—coupled with deep pockets to "go global" with its international broadcasting, partnerships with foreign media, and scholarship programs—has been met with vocal resistance among those who view Beijing's overtures as a more sinister form of penetration and malign influence in their countries (Hamilton, 2018; Brady, 2017).

Despite the prominence of these debates, there has been a relative dearth of data-driven studies on the scope, tactics, and influence of Beijing's efforts to tell China's story. Existing research in this area tends to focus on macro-level trends in international education and media, theoretical discussions of China's strategic intent and competition with the West, or case studies of China's overtures in specific contexts. Our aspiration for this report is to begin closing this evidence gap by answering one question: *How does China use informational diplomacy and student exchange to tell its story and advance its national interests in East Asia and the Pacific?*

To this end, AidData, a research lab at William & Mary, collected quantitative data on China's overtures to twenty-five EAP countries between 2000 and 2019. We strove to include in this report the best available data for as many facets of informational diplomacy and student exchange over as many years as possible; however, since the comprehensiveness of the information is only as strong as the data available, the specific date range varies depending upon the activity. In this report, we examine this data to better understand which informational diplomacy and student exchange activities Beijing has used over time and with which countries in the EAP region.

Throughout this report, we build upon the conceptual and methodological foundation of previous work conducted by Custer et al. (2018) to systematically analyze China's public diplomacy overtures in twenty-five EAP countries. The authors defined public diplomacy as a collection of instruments used by state and non-state actors to advance their country's economic, foreign policy, or reputational interests through influencing the perceptions, preferences, and actions of foreign citizens and leaders. We adapt and extend the authors' original definition, theory of change, and taxonomy of public diplomacy tools¹—which was based upon an exhaustive review of forty academic studies and interviews with nine recognized public diplomacy scholars and practitioners—for a deeper examination of informational diplomacy and student exchange.² For more information on how this

definition, theory, and taxonomy were extended for this report, please see the Technical Annex.

As a one party-state, China blurs the lines between organs of the CCP and agencies of the Chinese state. Moreover, there are various committees and agencies with overlapping responsibilities for activities related to informational diplomacy and student exchange. For the sake of simplicity, we use China and Beijing interchangeably in throughout this report to refer to this amorphous group of committees and agencies responsible for the direction, supervision, and execution of media and student exchange initiatives on behalf of the People's Republic of China (PRC). We do, however, provide some reference points on the key players within the PRC party-state apparatus in Chapters 2 and 3.

In the remainder of this chapter, we speak to China's motivations for why it seeks to mobilize media (Section 1.1) and students (Section 1.2) to tell its story, as well as discuss how we will assess the extent to which these efforts are correlated in the long-term (Section 1.3).

Section 1.1

Why does China engage in

informational diplomacy and what tools

does it use?

Managing global public opinion is important to China as an end in and of itself, as well as for its instrumental value in helping "craft an international environment that is conducive to their interests" (Brazys and Dukalskis, 2019). Chinese leaders have publicly sought to overcome China's loss of face (*mianzi*) from a "century of humiliation" (Wu, 2016; Crossley, 2019; Connor, 2017) by promoting a "dream" of "national rejuvenation" to restore China's lost stature in the eyes of global citizens (Liu, 2017; Cheng, 2016).³ As Hartig (2016) describes, Beijing views itself as operating within an international environment that is "potentially hostile" to its interests, where its true intentions are "misunderstood" and it must proactively push out a message that it is a "friendly, peaceful, and reliable partner."

In this vein, Chinese leaders have coined banner terms to project China as a benevolent power and legitimize its development model, such as: *community of common destiny*, *Belt and Road*, the *China model*, the *China Dream*, and *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics*, among others (Qian, 2018; Zhao, 2016; Yang, 2013). Alongside these general messages, Beijing has sought to contest the "hegemony of universal [or Western] values" in specific domains, such as by promoting alternative conceptions of human rights (Kania, 2018) and controlling the terminology

used by the media to discuss issues of concern to China (Gregory, 2018).⁴

Informational diplomacy is one of several public diplomacy tools China can use to move the needle of public opinion.⁵ In our view, informational diplomacy is a game of attraction: a set of broad-based communications activities that China (or any foreign power) could undertake to cultivate influence by attracting foreign publics to empathize with its preferred narrative and adopt its views.⁶ In this report, we restrict our focus to three types of Chinese informational diplomacy: (i) international broadcasting via Chinese state-run and state-influenced media outlets; (ii) China's overtures to cultivate relationships with EAP media outlets to serve as friendly and credible interlocutors; and (iii) China's attempts to influence the behavior of journalists in EAP countries to amplify, or not detract from, China's preferred narrative. In Chapter 2, we discuss these activities and the major players in greater specificity.

Information is not necessarily neutral and can represent different things to different people (Alleyne, 2003). Moreover, information can be used to deceive and manipulate, just as easily as it can educate and persuade. To this end, foreign powers may engage in communications that are malign in intent, clandestine in execution, and explicit in seeking to deceive, manipulate, or damage others (Shullman, 2019; Kenney et al., 2019; China File, 2018). As a case in point: Facebook⁷ and Twitter⁸ deleted or curbed the privileges⁹ of numerous Chinese-state backed accounts on their social media services in August 2019 for spreading information depicting Hong Kong protesters as violent and extreme (Gleicher, 2019; Twitter Safety, 2019).¹⁰

In keeping with the intent of this study—to examine China's efforts to shape the media narrative in EAP countries as part of its public diplomacy—the authors chose to focus on informational diplomacy, as opposed to related but distinct concepts of propaganda, disinformation, information warfare, and sharp power.¹¹ We provide a brief discussion of how we distinguish informational diplomacy from these concepts in **Box 1**.

At the same time, we acknowledge that these concepts are inherently fuzzy, and the boundaries can be porous in practice. For example, a state may use the same communications channels to disseminate falsehoods as they do truths, as in the case of earlier examples of Twitter and Facebook. Moreover, we recognize the promotion of false narratives could advance Beijing's reputational goals, whether through curbing domestic dissent or tarnishing the image of strategic competitors, even if we do not view such behavior as consistent with the definition of informational diplomacy.

In light of this complexity and the desire to restrict our focus to information as a tool of public diplomacy, we do not parse between what is true versus false messaging within China's information campaigns, which is beyond this particular study's scope even as it is an important line of inquiry for future research.

Nevertheless, the groundwork laid in this study to quantify the mechanisms, reach, and prospective influence of China's informational diplomacy apparatus will still be useful for those studying disinformation to better understand the overt communications mechanisms China is able to deploy to tell its story to the world, which ostensibly could be dual use in spreading true and false messages.¹²

Section 1.2

Why does China foster international student exchange and what tools does it use?

In its bid to display "the charm of China to the world" through international education (China Daily, 2014), Beijing is taking a page from the playbooks of foreign powers like the United States and the United Kingdom that were pioneers of such efforts since the Cold War.¹³

Box 1. Differentiating informational diplomacy from propaganda, disinformation, information warfare, and sharp power

Propaganda is a close cousin to informational diplomacy in its aims but differs in the tactics and transparency of implementation. Huang (2015) argues that governments can engage in benign propaganda that does not aim to brainwash citizens, but rather signal the state's power. Other scholars argue that the aim is not necessarily objectionable, but rather it is the tactics states use in carrying out propaganda such as "manipulating and distorting information, lying and preventing others from finding out the truth" that attract disapproval (Kenez, 1985, p. 4; Cull et al., 2003, p. 318). Benign propaganda may be used for self-promotion, but also carry malign intent to damage others and may or may not be transparent. Conversely, "hard propaganda," as described by Huang (2018), employs "inaccurate, exaggerated, or fabricated information or rhetoric that favors the regime or disfavors its antagonists" (p. 1035). Hard propaganda seeks to coerce rather than attract, manipulate messages in order to damage others and may hide the identity of who is sending the communications.

Disinformation, in the international context, refers to the actions of a sending country to create and disseminate information that is deliberately false for the purpose of misleading and manipulating foreign publics (Qazvinian et al., 2011). While false information may appear in the context of informational diplomacy or benign propaganda, we would view this as cases of misinformation, "where people may confidently hold wrong [or inaccurate] beliefs," as opposed to an intentional promotion of falsehoods (Kuklinski et al., 2000, p. 790). Disinformation differs from informational diplomacy in its malign intent, the fact that the sender's actions are often clandestine or not easily traceable, and that the communications seek to damage others (Drekhsan and Wardle, 2017).

Sharp power is a term to describe the practice of authoritarian regimes to use censorship or manipulation of information, among other tools, in order to undermine democratic institutions in open societies (Walker et al. 2017). In Walker's view, the very openness of democracies is what makes them vulnerable to authoritarian influence, particularly in a country's culture, academia, media, and publishing (CAMP) sectors (Walker, 2018). By definition, sharp power implies malign intent on the part of an

authoritarian country to disrupt the conduct of democracies through either transparent or clandestine actions that affect the information landscape. Meanwhile, Diamond and Schell (2018) further argue that transparency (or lack thereof) may be the defining feature between what they call "normal public diplomacy" versus opaque "sharp power."

Information warfare implies active contestation in the form of "conflict or struggle between two or more groups in the information environment" (Porche et al., 2013, p. XV). As Singer (2001) elaborates, the objectives of information warfare include "the offensive and defensive use of information and information systems to deny, exploit, corrupt, or destroy an adversary's knowledge, communications...access and processes." Rather than a game of attraction or persuasion, information warfare is about manipulation and aggression. A sending country engaged in information warfare may exploit disinformation, misinformation, or propaganda as part of its operations, but also a much broader set of activities aimed at disrupting the flow of communication or access to information, such as hacking and cyberwarfare (Libicki, 1995).

The significance of international education to China's global ambitions is not limited to the Chinese government bureaucracy, but rather extends to the chief executive. Former Chinese President Hu Jintao viewed international education as an instrument to "rejuvenate" brand China following a century of humiliation (Dervin et al., 2018) and President Xi Jinping considers student exchange as central to realizing his "China Dream" (Xinhua, 2014).

Beijing not only invites foreign students to study in China, but also sends Chinese students abroad as brand ambassadors (Bislev, 2017).¹⁴ President Xi Jinping urged the United Front Work Department to prioritize mobilization of Chinese students overseas (Mattis and Joske, 2019; Suzuki, 2019). Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education published a directive to strengthen patriotic education in line with the Chinese Communist Party's vision, deploy Chinese students to gather "patriotic energy" overseas, and galvanize support for the "China Dream" among foreign nationals (China MoE, 2016). Overseas embassies were asked to support these efforts by facilitating a "three-dimensional network" between overseas Chinese students, their host educational institutions, and the "motherland" (ibid).

On the one hand, Beijing's active promotion of international student exchange activities has been met with enthusiasm in several respects. China's efforts to become a top-tier study abroad destination is a welcome development among young people in EAP countries who see this as expanding their choices for where to complete their studies. Meanwhile, the growing number of Chinese students overseas has been a boon to EAP economies in the form of tuition payments to local universities and consumption of local goods and services (Bislev, 2017), as well as an opportunity to promote mutual understanding.

On the other hand, China's efforts to send Chinese students abroad as brand ambassadors has been met with pushback from those who view these overtures as thinly veiled attempts on the part of the CCP to conduct espionage, bully universities into self-censorship, and influence public discourse (Hamilton, 2018; Brady, 2017). The fact that Chinese Student and Scholar Associations (CSSAs) receive funding from the Chinese government, liaise with embassy officials, and are viewed as recruiting grounds for new party members has provoked further disquiet among countries that are the recipients of Beijing's overtures (Diamond and Schell, 2018; Brady, 2017; Allen-Ebrahimian, 2018).

Our purpose here is not to defend or demonize Beijing's aspirations, but rather to consider whether, how, and to what effect it uses student exchange as an element of its public diplomacy with EAP countries. In this study, we view international student exchange as

activities China could undertake to socialize educated elites in EAP countries to Chinese political or professional norms and values, as well as cultivate lasting relationships with this next generation of leaders and influencers.¹⁵ We examine three aspects of China's student exchange activities in this report: (i) international students studying in China; (ii) Chinese students studying in other EAP countries; and (iii) Beijing's efforts to foster an enabling environment to facilitate additional student exchange with EAP countries. In Chapter 3, we discuss these activities and the major players in greater specificity.

Section 1.3

How do we quantify the extent to which China's overtures are associated with its desired outcomes?

We broadly conceive of Beijing's endgame for all of its public diplomacy tools as seeking to achieve two ends: (1) more favorable public opinion among EAP citizens toward China; and (2) closer alignment of EAP leaders with Beijing's foreign policy interests (Custer et al., 2018). While China's aspirations are global, Chinese leaders have pointed to the importance of shoring up goodwill and influence beginning in its backyard, particularly the twenty-five countries of the East Asia and Pacific region that Beijing considers to be within its "greater periphery" (Zhang, 2017; Swaine, 2014).¹⁶ This raises a critical question: to what extent are Chinese informational diplomacy and student exchange activities associated with the reputational and foreign policy gains that Beijing hopes for in the EAP region?

In this study, we answer this question in two ways. First, we examine what the initial response of EAP countries may be to China's overtures. In Chapter 2, we assess whether the tone and substance of reporting on China within EAP countries has changed in ways that are beneficial to Beijing over the last two decades. In Chapter 3, we explore how foreign students on Chinese scholarships differ in their attitudes toward their host country before and after completing their course of study in China. Second, in Chapter 4, we construct a set of statistical models to test whether public perceptions of Chinese leadership and the voting behavior of EAP leaders in international fora are associated with exposure to Chinese informational diplomacy, as part of a broader public diplomacy toolkit. Due to the limited time span and observations of our data, we do not include student exchange in the Chapter 4 analysis.¹⁷

To gauge perceptions of Chinese leadership, we use responses to the Gallup World Poll, an annual public

Box 2. Three takeaways from *Ties That Bind: Quantifying China's public diplomacy and its good neighbor effect in East Asia and the Pacific*

*Excerpts reprinted with permission of Custer et al. (2018)

Custer et al. (2018) sought to define, quantify, and analyze the spectrum of China's public diplomacy activities, from how it packaged positive messages about its culture, values, and beliefs for a general audience to how it fostered mutual understanding and closer ties between Chinese citizens and their counterparts in other countries. The authors collected data on China's public diplomacy activities between 2000-2016 in twenty-five EAP countries and quantified proxy measures for four dimensions of its overtures: Confucius Institutes (cultural diplomacy), sister cities (exchange diplomacy), official finance with diplomatic intent (financial diplomacy),

and official visits (elite-to-elite diplomacy). While they did discuss qualitative insights into China's use of informational diplomacy and student exchange in the EAP region, Custer et al. did not include these tools in their quantitative analysis due to time and resource constraints. We summarize three takeaways below.

1. China increased the volume and diversity of its public diplomacy overtures in East Asia and the Pacific across the board from 2000-2016, but strategically targeted a different mix and volume of tools to countries in light of the anticipated risk and reward.

Worth an estimated US\$48 billion, Beijing's financial diplomacy—debt relief, budget support, humanitarian assistance, and infrastructure investments—dwarfed its use of other tools in the EAP from 2000-2016. Meanwhile, China entertained more visiting dignitaries and elites each year

than any other EAP country, while its own leaders traveled to receiving countries regularly. In addition, Beijing experimented with a wider set of public diplomacy tools, most notably Confucius Institutes (CIs), sister cities, exchange programs, as well as forays in international broadcasting and partnerships with local media. The advanced economies (e.g., Japan, South Korea, and Australia) attracted the highest volume and most diverse set of Chinese public diplomacy activities: they received a disproportionate share of Chinese sister cities, CIs, and official visits. The populous and fast-growing economies of Southeast Asia (e.g., Indonesia, Cambodia, and Malaysia) received the second highest volume of Chinese public diplomacy, primarily driven by financial diplomacy. China's public diplomacy with less populous city states and Pacific islands in the region is quite sizable in per capita terms, but most of its engagement was in the form of official visits.

opinion survey, in which respondents from twenty-five EAP countries answered a question regarding whether they approved or disapproved of Chinese leadership. For our proxy measure of foreign policy alignment with Beijing, we use data on voting patterns in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). More information on the sources, methods, and rationale for these proxy measures is available in the Technical Annex.

In the following chapters of this report, we first analyze the scope, distribution, and responses to China's informational diplomacy (Chapter 2) and student

exchange (Chapter 3) activities in the EAP region. We then examine the extent to which informational diplomacy, as part of a broader public diplomacy toolkit, is associated with tangible reputational and foreign policy gains for Beijing with EAP countries (Chapter 4). In conclusion, we reflect on what we have learned and discuss the implications for the EAP region (Chapter 5). As an additional reference, in **Box 2** we provide three takeaways from the *Ties That Bind* report by Custer et al. (2018) that quantifies China's public diplomacy toolkit in the EAP region, which this study builds upon.

2. Beijing targeted its public diplomacy to open market opportunities for Chinese firms and sway natural resource 'gatekeepers,' but tailored its overtures in response to local factors (e.g., Internet penetration, size of the Chinese diaspora, and popular discontent).

Countries that offered high-value market opportunities tended to receive more Chinese public diplomacy activities. However, the driver was not necessarily overall wealth, but rather openness to Chinese goods, services, and investments. Chinese leaders bestowed more official visits on resource-rich countries where they presumably could persuade government officials to give them access to resource rents. However, as countries transitioned from being consumers of Chinese imports to attractive markets for Chinese investment, Beijing shifted its tactics to emphasize cultural and exchange

diplomacy. It also varied its approach based upon local realities. Countries with higher levels of Internet use received more exchange and cultural diplomacy and fewer official visits. Those with higher numbers of Chinese migrants received more sister cities and CIs. Meanwhile, countries with higher levels of domestic unrest (i.e., riots, strikes, and protests) received more CIs.

3. Financial, cultural, and elite-to-elite diplomacy were associated with more favorable views of China; countries were most likely to vote with Beijing when they received more official visits and Confucius Institutes.

Survey respondents to the *Asian Barometer*—a public attitudes survey—in countries exposed to a higher volume of financial diplomacy and official visits were more likely to view China as having the best development model and as a positive force in their

countries. Meanwhile, respondents living in countries with more CIs viewed Beijing as more influential and regarded that influence as positive. Beijing's relationships with elites and its cultural diplomacy appear to go hand in hand with its ability to influence how EAP countries vote in the United Nations General Assembly—the more official visits an EAP country received, the more likely they were to vote with China in UNGA. We also saw a relationship between a country's UNGA voting patterns and the presence of Confucius Institutes, though countries that were already aligned with China may be more likely to opt-in to the CI program and request more of such institutions. Finally, EAP countries were more likely to vote with Beijing in UNGA if they had more of two types of financial diplomacy: concessional official development assistance (aid) and infrastructure financing for projects that were less visible to the public (the pet projects of leaders).

¹ These public diplomacy tools include cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, elite-to-elite diplomacy, financial diplomacy, and informational diplomacy. Student exchange was envisioned as a subset of exchange diplomacy in the original study.

² Although the authors quantified several facets of China's public diplomacy in *Ties That Bind*, due to time and resource constraints they were unable to exhaustively examine informational diplomacy and student exchange, which had been identified as important aspects of China's overtures by interviewees in three EAP countries, as well as scholars and experts. This study picks up where the previous one left off.

³ Hamilton (2018) describes this shift as akin to a "hundred-year marathon" that Chinese leaders are undertaking in their bid to resume China's place in the world following the century of humiliation that ended in 1949.

⁴ For example, Gregory (2018) reports that the Chinese Communist Party annually updates and distributes a document to the Chinese media community with guidance on "prohibited terms and words" for their reporting.

⁵ There is no universally accepted definition of public diplomacy; however, many scholars view information as one of the tools that a foreign power uses to "engage with international audiences to advance foreign policy goals" (Soft Power 30 and Brown, 2017).

⁶ Specifically, Custer et al. (2018) envisioned informational diplomacy as a bid "to increase awareness of, and sympathy for, [its] policies, priorities, and values" among foreign publics and decision-making elites. Please see the Technical Annex for a more fulsome discussion of different approaches to defining public diplomacy and its tools.

⁷ Facebook removed seven pages, three groups, and five Facebook accounts that originated in China and were involved in "coordinated inauthentic behavior" focusing on the Hong Kong protests. As disclosed by Nathaniel Gleicher, Head of Cybersecurity Policy, upon investigation of deceptive tactics used by the individuals behind this coordinated campaign, Facebook confirmed that they were associated with the Chinese government (Gleicher, 2019).

- ⁸ As disclosed by Twitter Safety (2019), the social media company closed “936 accounts originating from within the People’s Republic of China” as their internal investigation had led the company to determine that these accounts were part of “a state-backed operation” to “coordinate” and “amplify” messages to “deliberately sow political discord in Hong Kong, including undermining the legitimacy of the protest on the ground.” The company further reported that the 936 accounts represented the “most active portion” of this coordinated campaign that likely involved a larger network of approximately 200,000 accounts. Two examples given included: @Hkpoliticalnew and Dream News (@ctcc507).
- ⁹ Twitter took the additional step of banning more mainstream Chinese state-backed media like China Daily from promoting tweets after they placed ads suggesting that the Hong Kong protesters were sponsored by Western interests and were becoming violent (Conger, 2019).
- ¹⁰ Diamond and Schell (2018), Brady (2008, 2015, 2017), and Hamilton (2018) have written on numerous ways in which China has engaged in covert or coercive tactics to penetrate and sway the media narrative in the US, East Asia and the Pacific, and globally. Conger (2019) and Frenkel et al. (2019) note that such practices are not unique to China, as other countries have employed similar tactics.
- ¹¹ As Shirk (2018) rightly noted (in her dissenting opinion to the Hoover Institution report, “China’s Influence and American interests”), there is a spectrum of activities of varying legitimacy a foreign power like China may undertake to cultivate influence with other countries. For this reason, it is all the more important to avoid labeling all of China’s media engagement as either benign or malign.
- ¹² We do not cover in this study explicitly covert channels of communication that are less easily traced back to China, as this does not comport with our definition of informational diplomacy (though it would be relevant to a study focused on disinformation).
- ¹³ The United States, for example, has invested heavily in East-West scholarly exchange programs since the Cold War, sponsoring roughly 160,000 international students to study in the US via its Fulbright Program and issuing more than 250,000 non-immigrant visas annually to international students who self-finance their education or receive university-based scholarships. The fact that 46 current and 165 former heads of government are products of US higher education is not lost on Beijing (Spilimbergo, 2009, p. 528). China’s launch of the Yenching Program—a prestigious scholarship program at Peking University that is similar to the US Fulbright and Rhodes programs—is a case in point (Yang, 2007; Metzgar, 2015).
- ¹⁴ Bislev (2017) argues that because students are “non-governmental,” they may be more effective interlocutors to come alongside counterparts in other countries to overcome misconceptions about Chinese people, and by extension, improve perceptions of China overall.
- ¹⁵ We recognize that China may have additional motivations to promote international student exchange, such as the desire to upskill their workforce, disrupt other societies, or acquire intelligence. However, we restrict our focus here to understanding what role student exchange activities play as part of a broader public diplomacy toolkit a sending country would use to influence the opinions and behavior of foreign publics to advance its reputational and foreign policy objectives.
- ¹⁶ As described by Zhang (2017) and Swaine (2014), this “greater periphery” refers to the land and maritime regions adjacent to China.
- ¹⁷ According to our theory of change, we would expect that China invests in building relationships with young people in EAP countries that will generate returns for Beijing down the road only if and when these individuals assume positions of influence. Thus, to approximate the returns on these relationships, one would need to lag the data for a longer duration than what is available for this study.

CHAPTER TWO

How does China use its own media and those of other countries to change the narrative from the “China threat” to its “peaceful rise”?

Key findings in this chapter:

- *Beijing’s international broadcasting mix—from traditional print media, radio, and television to newer social media tools—is far from monolithic and varies across different EAP countries.*
- *Over time, Beijing has shifted its strategy for cultivating other communicators from emphasizing ad hoc interactions to institutional partnerships, but its engagement is still customized by country type.*
- *Beijing adjusts its strategy to shape the narrative in strong participatory democracies: it places greater emphasis on appeals from its senior leaders and ambassadors via op-eds and interviews.*
- *Criticism of Beijing has become more muted and the overall tone of media coverage related to China in EAP countries has smoothed out to be consistently close to neutral over the last two decades.*

Beijing has long used the megaphone of mass media to “promote understanding and friendship between the people of China and... [the rest of] the world” (Zhang, 2011, p. 58).¹⁸ Nevertheless, Chinese leaders became more proactive about “telling China’s story to the world” over the past decade in an effort to regain control over its global brand¹⁹ and shift the media narrative from the “China threat” to that of its “peaceful rise” (Brady, 2017; Hartig, 2016). To this end, Beijing has stepped up its international broadcasting efforts, localizing its coverage to speak to EAP publics,

as well as cultivating relationships with domestic media outlets in other countries.²⁰ In this chapter, we provide a snapshot of different dimensions of Beijing’s informational diplomacy (Section 2.1), examine how its approach varies over space and time (Section 2.2), and assess the response of EAP countries to these overtures (Section 2.3).

Section 2.1

Which informational diplomacy tools has China deployed in East Asia and the Pacific over time?

In this section, we quantify how Beijing uses three types of informational diplomacy with EAP countries: (i) international broadcasting via Chinese state-run and state-influenced media outlets; (ii) cultivating relationships with EAP media outlets to serve as friendly and credible interlocutors; and (iii) influencing the behavior of journalists in EAP countries to amplify, or not detract from, China’s preferred narrative. As shown in **Table 1**, we first identified illustrative activities for each type of informational diplomacy and then collected the best available information for the period of 2000-2019 (though the specific data range varies depending upon data availability). In **Box 3**, we give a brief overview of the major players that provide strategic and operational support for Beijing’s international broadcasting efforts and engagement with foreign media.

Table 1. Taxonomy of China’s informational diplomacy activities in the EAP region

Sub-focus	Activity set	Activity	Captured?	Note	
Government as communicator: China’s state-run media footprint in EAP countries	Social media and web engagement by official state organs, state-owned media companies	Number of Facebook pages, Weibo and Twitter activity by state-owned media targeting EAP countries	✓	Able to quantify for most media outlets	
		Number of Chinese state-run media channels present in EAP countries (e.g., CGTN/CCTV, Xinhua TV)	✓	Able to quantify for most countries, present day	
	Traditional broadcasting via TV, radio, print media	China Radio International (CRI) presence in major EAP cities	✓	Able to quantify for most countries, present day	
		Number of countries that have print circulation of Chinese print media (e.g., China Daily Global Weekly or China Daily Global Edition)	✓	Able to quantify for most countries, present day	
		Number of Chinese state-run media bureaus present in EAP countries (e.g., Xinhua, China Daily)	✓	Able to quantify for most countries, present day	
Cultivating other communicators	Personalized informational diplomacy by senior Chinese leaders and/or ambassadors leveraging foreign media from EAP countries	Interviews given to EAP news media by the highest echelon of Chinese leaders (President, Vice President, Premier, Vice Premier)	✓	Able to quantify for most countries and years	
		Op-eds written and placed in EAP news media by the highest echelon of Chinese leaders (President and Premier)	✓	Able to quantify for most countries and years	
		Op-eds written and placed in EAP news media by Chinese ambassadors to EAP countries	✓	Able to quantify for most countries and years	
	Influencing through content sharing with EAP media outlets	Content sharing agreements and partnerships between Chinese state-run media and EAP news media	✓	Able to quantify for most countries and years	
		Training, socialization, and recruitment of journalists in EAP countries	Number of journalist exchange visits from EAP countries to China	✓	Able to quantify for most countries and years
			Number of journalist exchange visits from China to EAP countries	✓/X	Able to quantify for some countries and years
			Number of local correspondents in EAP countries recruited to work for Chinese state-run media	X	Not able to quantify
Shaping the broader media environment	Politics of access: Using state-directed administrative procedures to penalize or reward foreign journalists and media outlets based on their coverage of China	Denial of visas (issuance or renewal) to foreign journalists from EAP countries who are critical of Chinese policies	X	Not able to quantify	
		Punitive action toward academics and journalists from EAP countries who are critical of Chinese policies	X	Not able to quantify	
		State lists of journalists from EAP countries with limited access to events	X	Not able to quantify	

Box 3: Key players directing China's engagement with domestic and foreign media

As a one party-state, China blurs the lines between organs of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and agencies of the Chinese state, both of which contribute to the direction, supervision, and execution of mass media initiatives including but not limited to print, radio, television, and digital media at home and abroad. Chinese leaders have a long-standing administrative tradition of “one office, two name plates” (Brady, 2008) as a practical workaround for the technical separation between the Party and the State. For this reason, when we are talking about key players in China's informational diplomacy machinery we must take both the party and the state into account.

The CCP Central Committee serves in a high-level coordination role, facilitating linkages and providing policy guidance for party organs that feed into China's “propaganda and thought work” at home and abroad (Brady, 2015). Most importantly, these are: the CCP United Front Work Department, charged with mobilizing support for the CCP and its policies, particularly among the Chinese diaspora; the Foreign Affairs

Commission, responsible for China's overall foreign policy; the External Propaganda Leading Group, charged with overseas publicity work; the CCP Propaganda Department, which oversees the day-to-day operations of Chinese media; and the CCP International Liaison Department, responsible for cultivating relations with foreign political parties and politicians (Diamond and Schell, 2018).

President Xi Jinping's March 2018 reorganization of the Chinese state bureaucracy is widely seen as further consolidating or facilitating party control over Chinese media and engagement with foreign journalists (Bowie and Gitter, 2018; ChinaFile Conversation, 2018). For example, the CCP Propaganda Department took on oversight of three state-run media enterprises—China International Television, China Radio International, and China National Radio—which have been merged into a new catchall Voice of China, as well as overseeing China Daily, Xinhua, and the broader publishing, television, film, and print media industry (Xinhua, 2018). This effectively puts the CCP in a position, via the Propaganda Department, to circumvent government agencies and issue orders or guidance to these Chinese media outlets directly (ChinaFile Conversation, 2018). At the

same time, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, the primary conduit for outreach to Chinese-language media in other countries previously under the purview of the State Council, was placed under the auspices of the United Front Work Department (Xinhua, 2018).

Perhaps the clearest example of this blurred party-state leadership is that the “nerve center” for China's overseas publicity work goes by two different names, the State Council Information Office (a government agency) and the External Propaganda Leading Group (a party organ), but is effectively the same organization which assigns tasks and budgets for all entities engaged in such work (Diamond and Schell, 2018).

Meanwhile, the Department of Public Diplomacy within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—responsible for the communications activities of Chinese embassies and spokespeople abroad, outreach with international media, and exchange programs—is under the watchful eyes of two masters, the State Council (a government agency) and the CCP Central Committee via the Foreign Affairs Commission and the Leading Small Groups for External Propaganda and Education and Propaganda (ibid).

2.1.1

Low levels of media freedom at home enable Beijing to deploy a formidable set of trusted mouthpieces as an extension of the state in promoting its preferred narrative

Home to the “largest media market in the world” (BBC, 2018), Chinese leaders have a wide network of state-run outlets they can conscript to promote Beijing's preferred narrative abroad. Due to low levels of media freedom within China,²¹ Beijing also has *de facto* influence over a second tier of media outlets that may not be state-run directly but which we would consider to be state influenced. While this dynamic allows Beijing to better control how its messages are disseminated, its target audiences may be more skeptical of Chinese media outlets if they view them as extensions of the state.

The Chinese government's major print media holdings include the People's Daily (*Renmin Ribao*), with web pages in English; China Daily, the official English language newspaper; Global Times (*Huanqiu Shibao*),²² which offers both English and Chinese language editions; and Reference News (*Cankao Xiaoxi*), published by Xinhua News Agency (BBC, 2018). Beijing can also turn to several multimedia holdings such as China Central Television (CCTV), its national broadcasting arm; China Global Television Network (CGTN), its international broadcasting arm with content in five languages; China National Radio (CNR); and China Radio International (CRI) with programs in over 60 languages (WorldRadioMap.com, 2019). The Chinese government also controls the Xinhua News Agency and the China News Service, both state-run news agencies with web pages in English (ibid).

2.1.2 Beijing’s international broadcasting mix—from traditional print media, radio, and television to newer social media tools—is far from monolithic and varies across different EAP countries

Overall, China relies heavily on Xinhua, CGTN, and CCTV-4 in most EAP countries; however, its radio efforts are heavily concentrated in the Mekong subregion of Southeast Asia (i.e., Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos). Eleven out of the twenty-five EAP countries attracted at least three different categories of international broadcasting from China (Table 2). Beijing has the most balanced broadcasting portfolio in Cambodia, Myanmar, South Korea, and Thailand, where it complements a strong print media presence with forays in radio and television.²³ Small island nations are on the other end of the spectrum: they attract none of Beijing’s traditional media tools.

Citizens in EAP countries are prolific consumers of news and information via social media sites (Techwire Asia, 2018; RVC, 2016).²⁴ Chinese state-run media outlets have responded enthusiastically to this opportunity to reach new constituencies with social media such as Weibo, Twitter, and Facebook in certain media markets, though not all. At present, Beijing’s social media overtures appear to be getting the greatest traction among Southeast Asian countries like Myanmar, Fiji,

Cambodia, the Philippines and Malaysia, where, on average, its state-run media Facebook pages have the largest fan bases adjusted to the proportion of population with internet access (Figure 1). Comparatively, the response from citizens in Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam has been relatively tepid toward the Facebook offerings of Chinese state-run media. China does not appear to target its social media engagement toward high-income countries (e.g., Australia, South Korea, and New Zealand), nor smaller Pacific island nations.

While the extent of Beijing’s international broadcasting footprint is important, so is the substance of these communications, as it helps us understand the topics that Beijing wants EAP citizens to know about or discuss. We categorized the Twitter feeds of six different Chinese state-run media outlets to identify the substantive focus of their communications across five thematic areas, including art and culture, sport, science and technology, Xi Jinping, BRI, and the military. Signature policies of senior leaders, such as BRI, as well as military issues attracted the most attention from Chinese media (Figure 2). Xinhua is a case in point: news stories related to BRI and the military account for nearly half of its Twitter activity. Even China Daily, which placed less emphasis on these issues compared to other outlets, covered them twenty-five percent of the time.

Figure 1. Chinese state-owned media Facebook pages and fans in EAP countries, 2019

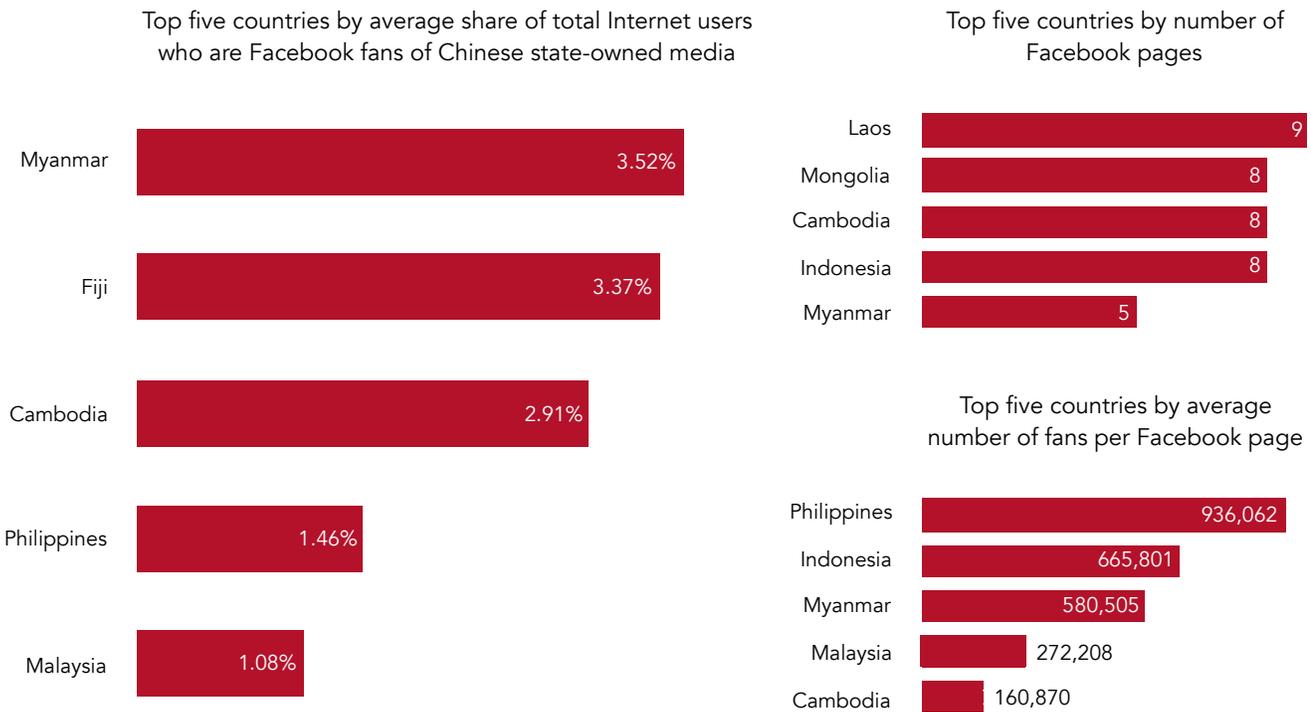


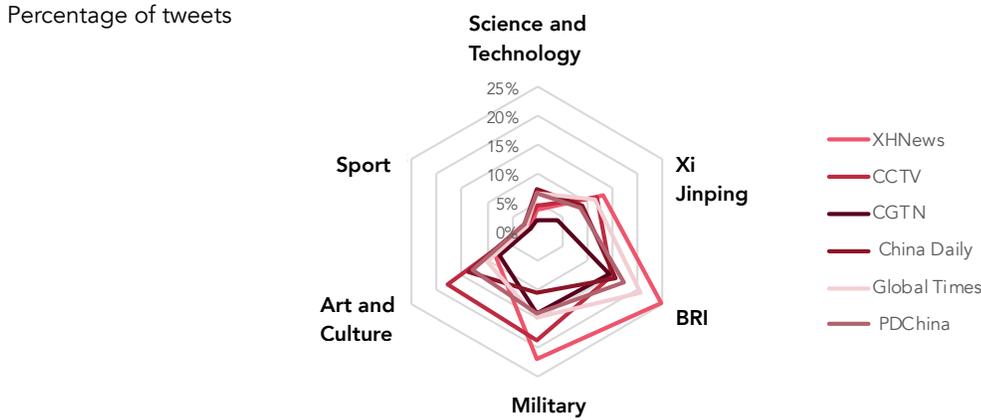
Table 2: Chinese media footprint in EAP countries, 2019

	Television				Print Bureaus		Print Circulation		Radio
	CCTV 4	CCTV (other)	CGTN	Xinhua/CNC	Xinhua	People's Daily	China Daily Global Weekly	China Daily Global Edition	CRI Languages
Australia	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	0
Brunei	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	0
Cambodia	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	9
Fiji	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	0
Indonesia	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	1
Japan	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	0
Kiribati	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	0
Laos	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	9
Malaysia	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	0
Micronesia	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	0
Mongolia	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	3
Myanmar	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	5
Nauru	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	0
New Zealand	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	0
North Korea	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	1
Papua New Guinea	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	0
Philippines	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	0
Samoa	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	2
Singapore	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	0
South Korea	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	1
Thailand	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	5
Timor-Leste	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	0
Tonga	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	2
Vanuatu	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	2
Vietnam	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	9

Notes: This table visualizes China's international broadcasting footprint in EAP countries across four Chinese state-run media avenues: (1) television (whether a country has CGTN, CCTV-4, Other CCTV, or Xinhua TV/CNC); (2) print bureaus (whether Xinhua and People's Daily bureaus are present in the country); (3) print circulation (whether a country has print circulation of China Daily Global Weekly or China Daily Global Edition); and (4) radio (the number of languages in which CRI broadcasts via FM frequencies in major cities). This footprint is not historical, but rather as of 2019.

Sources: Data was compiled by AidData from: the websites of major television service providers in EAP countries; the websites of China Daily, People's Daily, and Xinhua; China Daily's Media Profile Reports; and the World Radio Map.

Figure 2. Substantive focus of Chinese international broadcasters on Twitter



Notes: The figures above visualize the substantive focus of Chinese international broadcasters, proxied by analysis of the Twitter feeds of six different state-run media outlets (Xinhua News, China Daily, CCTV, CGTN, Global Times, and PDChina). For each state-run media outlet, we analyze the most recent 3,500 tweets, which usually covers the past two or three years. We then use keyword searches to categorize tweets across six major thematic topics and a catchall “other” category. The five thematic topics of interest include Art & Culture, Sport, Science & Technology, Xi Jinping, Belt and Road Initiative, and Military. For example, to identify and categorize mentions relevant to the BRI topic, we used keywords including, but not limited to: BRI, Belt and Road, bridges, and cooperation.

Source: Data was extracted by AidData from Twitter’s API.

2.1.3

Beijing is adept at borrowing the credibility and networks of domestic media outlets in EAP countries through content-sharing partnerships, journalist exchanges, guest op-eds, and interviews

When Chinese officials entrust their messages to media outlets in other countries, they may lose control over how these messages are received, but they may benefit in three other respects. Media outlets in EAP countries have a readymade base of readers, viewers, and listeners that offer a shortcut to reach Beijing’s target audiences. Moreover, these domestic media outlets are better positioned than a foreign power to know how to frame or position a message for maximum salience with their fellow citizens. Finally, when a domestic media outlet is disseminating sympathetic messages or content on Beijing’s behalf, Chinese leaders are able to benefit from the perceived credibility of these local interlocutors.

Between 2000 and 2017, Chinese media outlets brokered 73 known partnerships with counterparts in EAP countries (see **Map 1**).²⁵ Beijing partners with a wide range of EAP media, which allows these media outlets to reprint or share content from China’s state-run newspapers. Previously, Custer et al. (2018) observed that many of these content-sharing partnerships tend to be with Chinese-language media owned or operated by the Chinese diaspora.²⁶ This lends credence to the idea that Beijing views the Chinese diaspora as a gateway to communicating with EAP publics (Brady, 2017). Geographically, the lion’s share of Beijing’s content-sharing partnerships target the fast-growing, populous economies of Southeast Asia (e.g., Thailand and Indonesia) or high-income

countries like Japan, South Korea, and Australia that may be seen as strategic competitors. Small Pacific island states received little attention, as did Mongolia and Vietnam. See **Box 4** for more insight on these content-sharing partnerships in practice.

Beijing has made use of its senior leaders as information ambassadors to promote a positive media narrative toward China through giving interviews or placing op-eds with EAP news outlets. Interview appearances by the highest echelon of Chinese officials²⁷ with foreign media outlets are rare but repeated in certain EAP countries. Between 2002 and 2013, members of this elite club of Chinese officials gave official interviews with domestic media outlets in seven countries (see **Map 2**). Only five of these countries garnered the attention of such officials on multiple occasions: Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, South Korea, and Vietnam. This trend is once again heavily weighted toward high-income countries and fast-growing Association of Southeast Asian Nation (ASEAN) economies.

The Chinese government appears to treat guest op-eds by China’s heads of state as a consolation prize for countries it deems to be in its strategic second tier. Senior leaders placed op-eds in the local media of twelve EAP countries between 2013 and 2017 (**Map 3**), but South Korea was the only big winner on both op-eds and interviews from the highest echelon of leadership. Mongolia, Laos, and Myanmar, by contrast, attracted substantial attention in terms of high-level op-eds, but not interviews.

Ambassadors within EAP countries were also important and prolific contributors of op-eds, particularly in the

less populous small islands of Samoa and Tonga and city-states like Singapore and Brunei. There were only three countries in the EAP region that received no ambassador op-eds at all (**Map 4**).²⁸ Guest op-eds may be more appealing to senior leaders and ambassadors than interviews for two reasons: it is less time consuming to submit an op-ed if it is largely prepared by staffers and also less risky, in that they have more control over the topic and means of delivery than with an interview in real-time.

Press trips or “junkets” are a prime opportunity for Beijing to ingratiate itself with journalists from EAP countries by impressing them with China’s culture, people, wealth, and infrastructure. These junkets are elaborate affairs where journalists are treated to multi-course meals, cultural exhibitions, and visits to model

development projects or cities as part of a tightly controlled program of events (Custer et al., 2018).²⁹ Between 2002-2017, Beijing arranged 82 such junkets for EAP journalists to visit China (**Map 5**).

Many of these press trips (41 percent) were targeted toward journalists from open democracies that were also economic heavyweights such as South Korea, Japan, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Interestingly, Anglophone democracies like Australia and New Zealand did not receive similar attention in terms of journalist visits. This could indicate a supply-side decision on Beijing’s part, if Chinese leaders feel these activities will not generate the desired results and hinder relations or that Anglophone journalists are more likely to report negatively on China regardless of how they are treated.

Box 4: Expanding China’s reach through partnerships with EAP media outlets and localized content

Sino-Cambodia media cooperation dates back to the early 2000s, when China Central Television (CCTV) gave Cambodian TV stations the right to use its news reports for international news broadcasts. Xinhua also signed an agreement with Agence Kampuchea Presse (the Cambodian News Agency) for a free daily information sharing service and agreed to provide satellite discs and equipment. Since then, China’s media presence in Cambodia has become more multifaceted and far-reaching. Yunnan Mobile Digital TV Company and National Television of Kampuchea (TVK) initiated an 80-channel transmission network for digital terrestrial television (Gai, 2012). Cambodia-China Friendship Radio organized film tours with the Chinese embassy and the Cambodian Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts from 2016 to 2018 (Xinhua, 2016). In 2017, China launched the Nice TV channel, a joint venture between Cambodia’s Ministry of Interior and the Chinese firm NICE Cultural Investment Group featuring content in Khmer (China Daily, 2017). Cambodia announced it would air a CCTV-produced documentary, “Amazing Cambodia,” dubbed in Khmer to

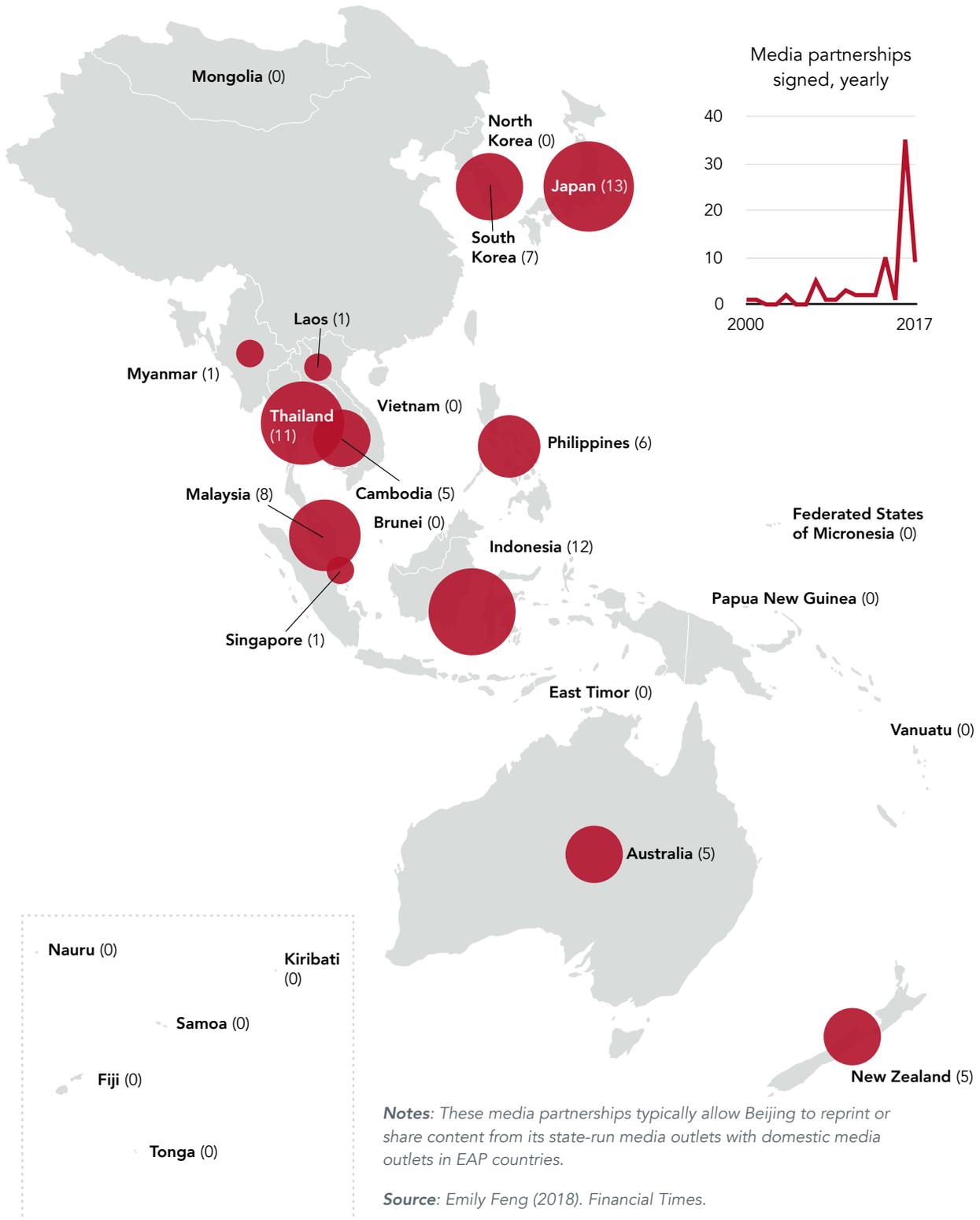
commemorate the 60th anniversary of Sino-Cambodia diplomatic ties in 2018 (Xiang Bo, 2018). Meanwhile, TVK and China Intercontinental Communication Center jointly produced an 80-minute documentary titled “The History Timeline of China-Cambodia Friendship” which was aired in Khmer and Mandarin on CCTV in 2019 (Xinhua Net, 2019).

Outside of Cambodia, Xinhua News Agency has been making inroads with other countries through offering content in additional languages and tailoring it to the local context. In Thailand, CNC—the TV arm of Xinhua—signed a cooperation agreement with TNN24, a major Thai-language news channel, to provide English-language news shows on China to TNN24 who would then dub and broadcast them in Thai (CNC, 2013). In 2014, Xinhua Net launched a Malaysia channel in Chinese, English, and Arabic (XinhuaNet, 2014). A Korean version followed in 2015 and there are also channels for Singapore, Thailand, and Japan. In 2018, Xinhua went a step further and announced the start of its Japanese News Service, a multimedia news service with photographs, videos and audio reports, all in Japanese (Xinhua Net, 2018). Another state-owned media agency, China Radio International, launched its “China

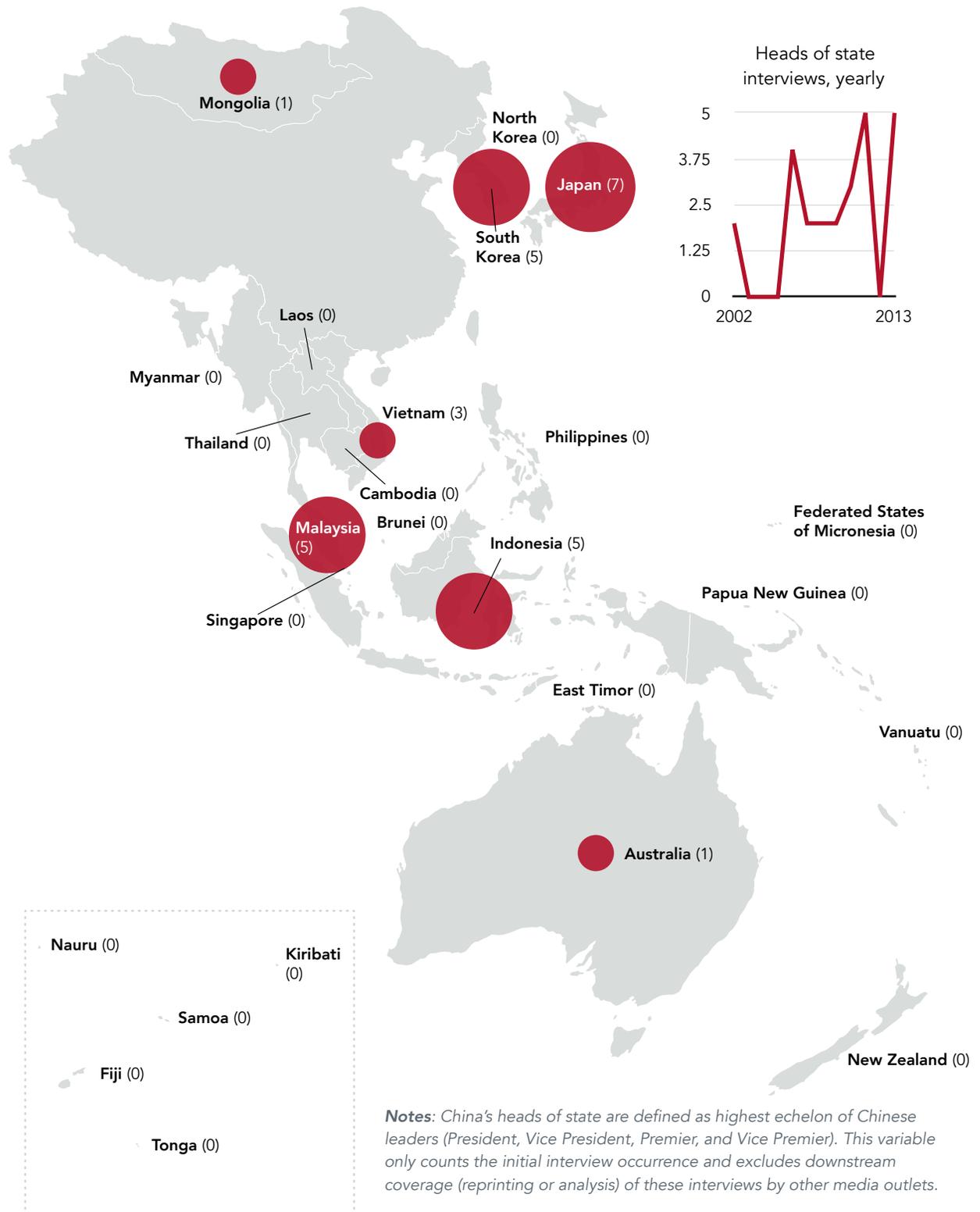
Theatre” program in 2015, a platform created for showing selected Chinese movies and TV dramas dubbed into foreign languages. As of 2017, CRI had signed China Theatre agreements with the national TV networks of 23 countries, including New Zealand and Mongolia.

In addition to establishing content-sharing partnerships and facilitating press visits, Beijing also offers training courses for technical experts. Since 2000, the Chinese Ministry of Commerce has mandated the China Radio & TV Company for International Techno-Economic Cooperation to conduct technical training courses on radio and TV management as part of its technical cooperation efforts with developing countries (CRTV, 2011). Foreign participants in such courses are exposed to lectures on Chinese radio and television broadcasting from staff of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television. They also visit CCTV, CRI, and the manufacturing plants of radio and TV equipment (CRTV, 2017). According to CRTV, more than 1,400 official and technical personnel from over 100 countries have participated in these training courses as of 2017 (CRTV, 2017). CRTV claims that attendees of these training courses will go on to become the “backbones” of their radio and TV institutions” (CRTV, 2017).

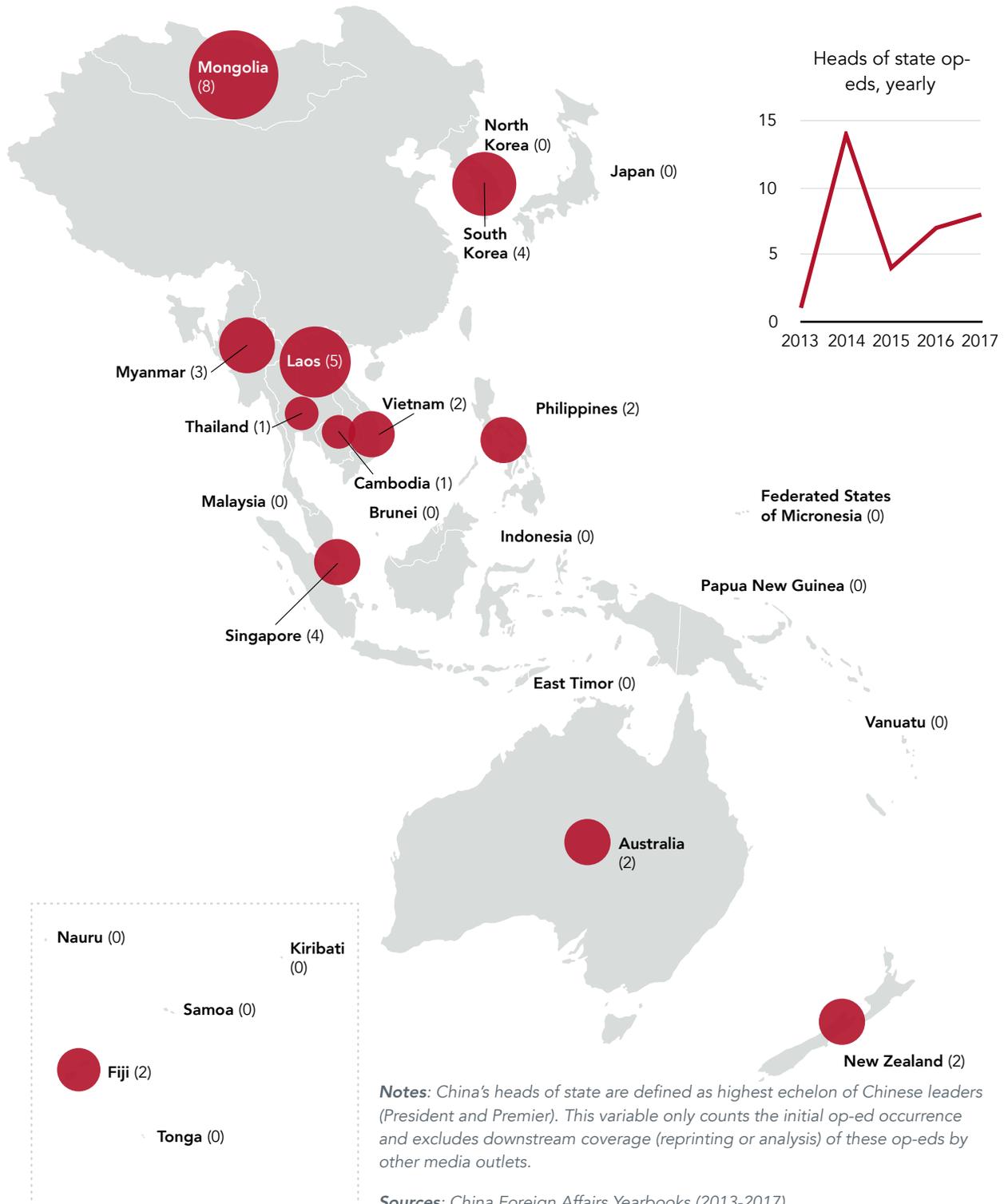
Map 1. Media partnerships between China and EAP countries, 2000-2017



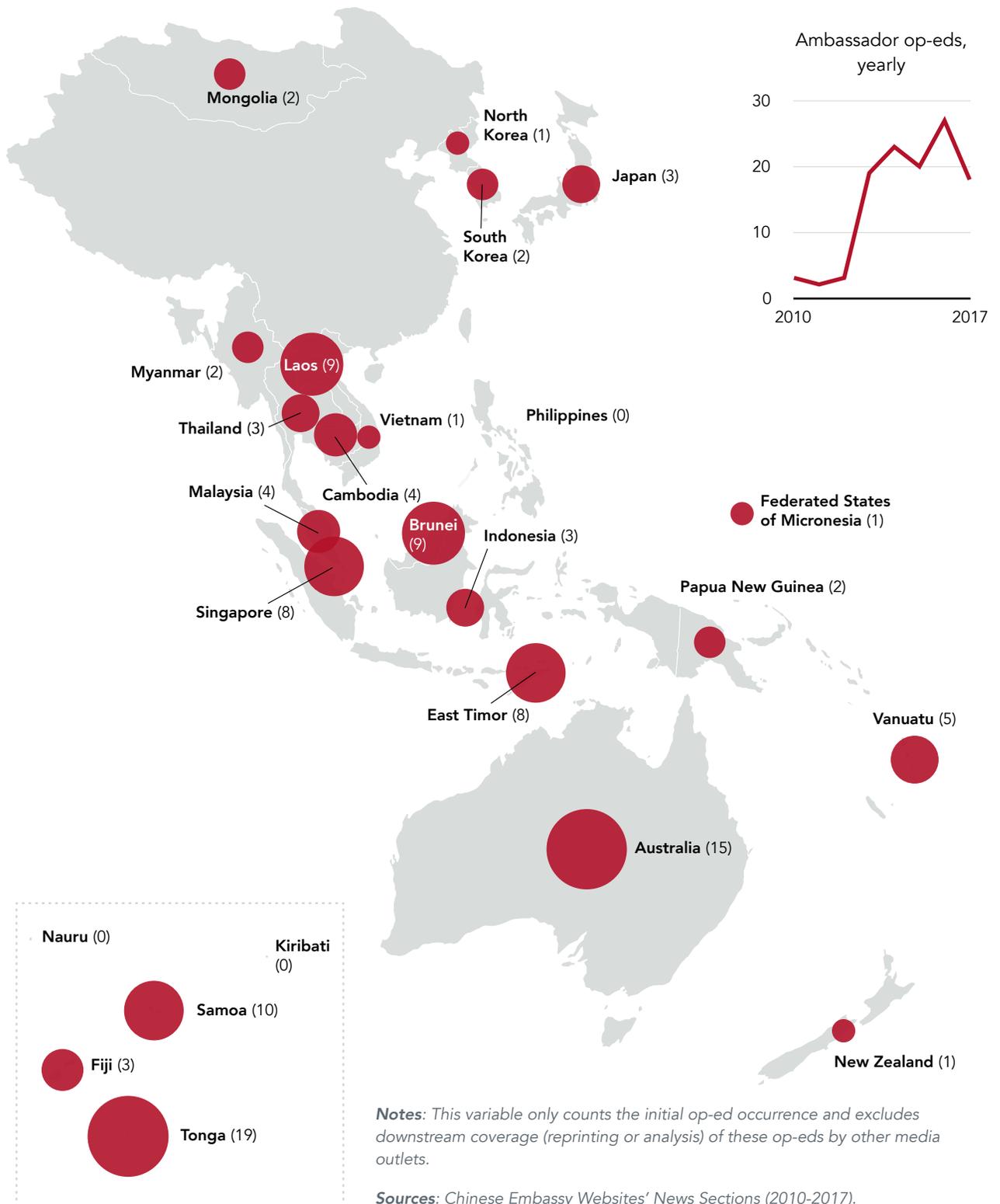
Map 2. Interviews with China's heads of state in EAP media, 2002-2013



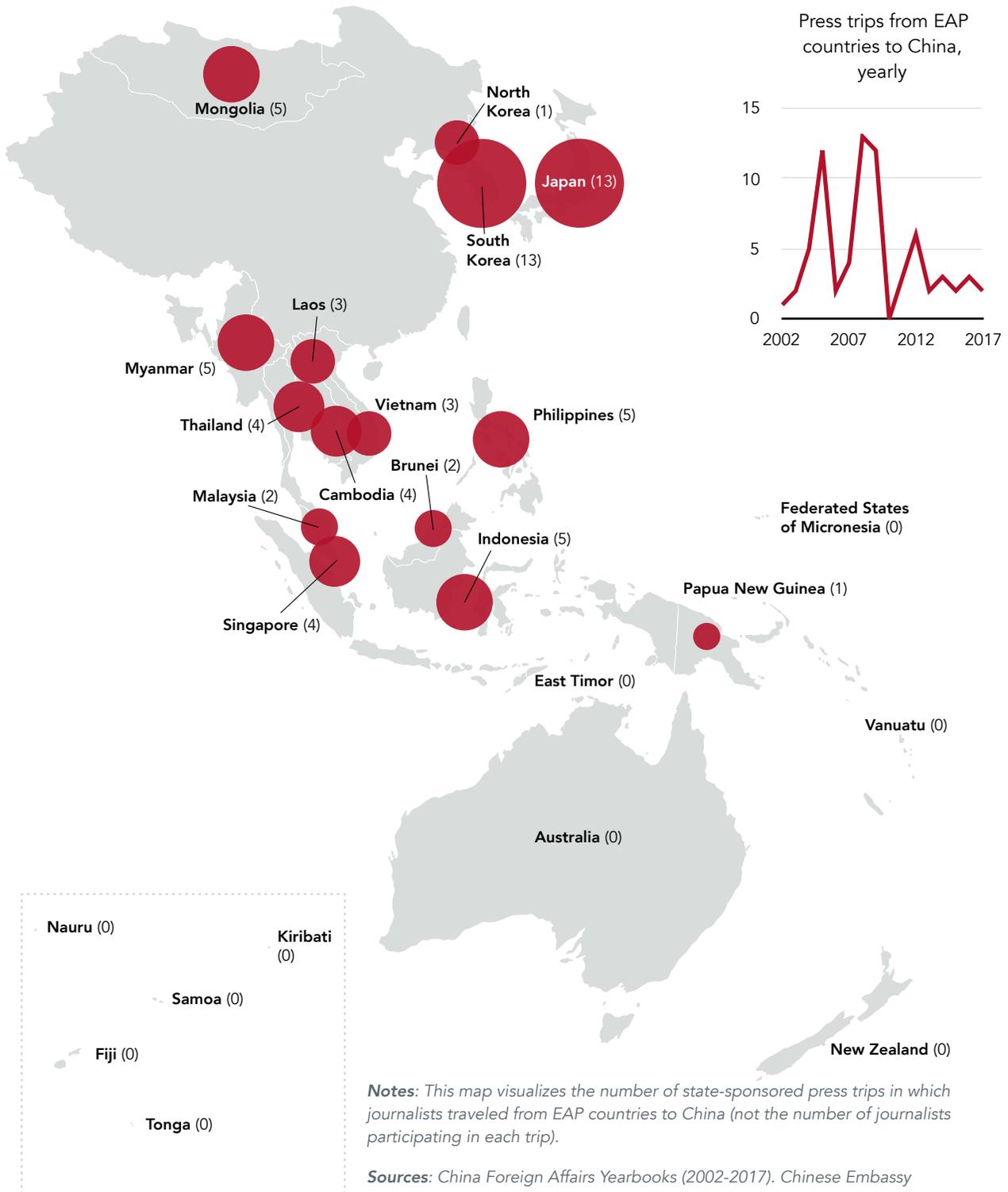
Map 3: Op-eds by China's heads of state in EAP media, 2013-2017



Map 4. Op-eds by China's ambassadors in EAP media, 2010-2017



Map 5: State-sponsored press trips by EAP journalists to China, 2002-2017



2.1.4

Beijing is not shy to use the promise of access to officials or visas to visit China as a carrot for those who comply with its preferred media narrative or as a stick for those who do not

While we lack systematic quantitative data to explore this in depth, there are good reasons to believe that China indirectly influences the behavior of EAP media outlets by rewarding those who comply with its preferred media narrative and withholding privileges, such as access to officials or visas to visit China, from those who do not. For example, the Chinese government prevented several accredited journalists

from Australia and Papua New Guinea from covering three events organized by the Chinese delegation alongside the 2018 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Papua New Guinea (RSF, 2018).

Similarly, the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China (FCCC) reports that Beijing denies or truncates visas for journalists whom they deem as covering sensitive topics, such as stories related to the treatment of Uighurs in Xinjiang province (FCCC, 2018). These journalists are typically from media outlets in the EAP region, such as Sankei Shimbun (Japan) and Australian Broadcasting Corporation. **Box 5** provides additional examples.

Box 5: Beijing's less benign tactics to influence the behavior of domestic and foreign journalists

In keeping with our definition of informational diplomacy, this report has primarily explored aspects of China's engagement with journalists that could be considered relatively benign, in that they seek to persuade or inform, rather than explicitly manipulate or cajole. However, it is also clear from scholarship, investigative journalism, and anecdotal reports that Beijing also employs less constructive, malign tools in an attempt to coerce or control its own journalists, as well as foreign media. As a case in point: 55 percent of Foreign Correspondents' Club of China (FCCC) members surveyed felt the reporting environment within China had deteriorated from the previous year of 2018—an increase from 40 percent in 2017 (FCCC, 2019). In this box, we briefly outline several examples of these more malign tools of control in practice: denials of new visas or renewals of visas, harassment or physical violence, and interference in reporting.

A growing number of FCCC members surveyed in 2018 reported that they had encountered problems renewing their visas—whether the direct threat of cancellation or a change to non-renewal status (FCCC, 2019). Swedish reporter Jojje Olsson of the Daily Expression had his visa denied by Chinese authorities in 2016 due to “instigating hatred against China” (Reporters Without Borders, 2019, p. 18). More recently, Chinese officials denied BuzzFeed reporter Megha Rajagopalan a visa after working in the country for six years. Rajagopalan had reported on Xinjiang's heavy surveillance measures and re-education camps, ultimately winning a 2018 Human Rights Press Award for her work.

Half of the FCCC members surveyed in 2017 said that they had directly experienced some form of interference, harassment, and physical violence related to their reporting in China (FCCC, 2018). For example, Voice of America was pressured to cut short a live interview with Chinese dissident Guo Wengui (also known as Miles Kwok) in 2017 and four journalists were fined as a

result of the incident. More broadly, 24 of 27 FCCC survey respondents that reported from Xinjiang experienced interference in their journalism (ibid). Individuals invited to train or study journalism are not exempt from China's strict narrative control. In 2018, Chinese officials expelled German student David Missal from Tsinghua University in Beijing, after he pursued a research project that investigated human rights in China. Such coercive tactics are not limited to foreign journalists, as scholars such as Hassid (2008) have reported that Chinese journalists are harassed by their own government to ensure they provide the “proper coverage” of China (Hassid 2008) and citizens regularly encounter censorship on social media platforms when posting calls for collective action that could potentially spur greater public mobilization (King et al., 2013).

Section 2.2

Which countries attract more of China's informational diplomacy and with what initial response?

Beijing is not monolithic in its informational diplomacy, and there is substantial variance in the volume and diversity of tools it has used to shape the media narrative across EAP countries. In this section, we isolate five proxy measures for Chinese informational diplomacy for which we have sufficient geographic and temporal coverage to perform a deeper analysis: media partnerships, interviews from senior leaders, op-eds from senior leaders, op-eds from ambassadors, and inbound press trips by journalists to China. Using this data, we examine: (i) the composition (or mix) of Chinese informational diplomacy tools over space and time; and (ii) recipient country characteristics that might explain potential variation in which informational diplomacy activities Beijing favors with whom.³⁰

2.2.1

Over time, Beijing has shifted its strategy for cultivating other communicators from emphasizing ad hoc interactions to institutional partnerships, but its engagement is still customized by country type

There has been a gradual shift over time in Beijing's emphasis from press trips (2004-2009), to interviews with Chinese senior leaders (2010-2013), and finally, media partnerships (2014 onwards) (see **Maps 5, 2, and 1**, insets). This evolution implies two things about Beijing's strategy. First, Chinese leaders are willing to experiment with new tactics to see what works. Second, they have incrementally pivoted from ad hoc engagements such as journalist visits and leader interviews to brokering longer-lasting institutional partnerships between Chinese media outlets and their counterparts in EAP countries.

Beijing has targeted a mix of informational diplomacy tools to different countries depending upon its strategic interests or assessment of which approaches would most likely generate the desired results. **Figure 3** represents the composition of Beijing's efforts to cultivate other communicators in each EAP country from 2002-2017, across five activity types. Chinese leaders employed the most well-rounded strategy to cultivate other communicators in countries like Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, and Malaysia, which received at least four of the five types of activities. Conversely,

Beijing has one go-to strategy for smaller and less populous economies like Brunei, Samoa, and Tonga—over 80 percent of informational diplomacy events was in the form of op-eds by China's heads of state.

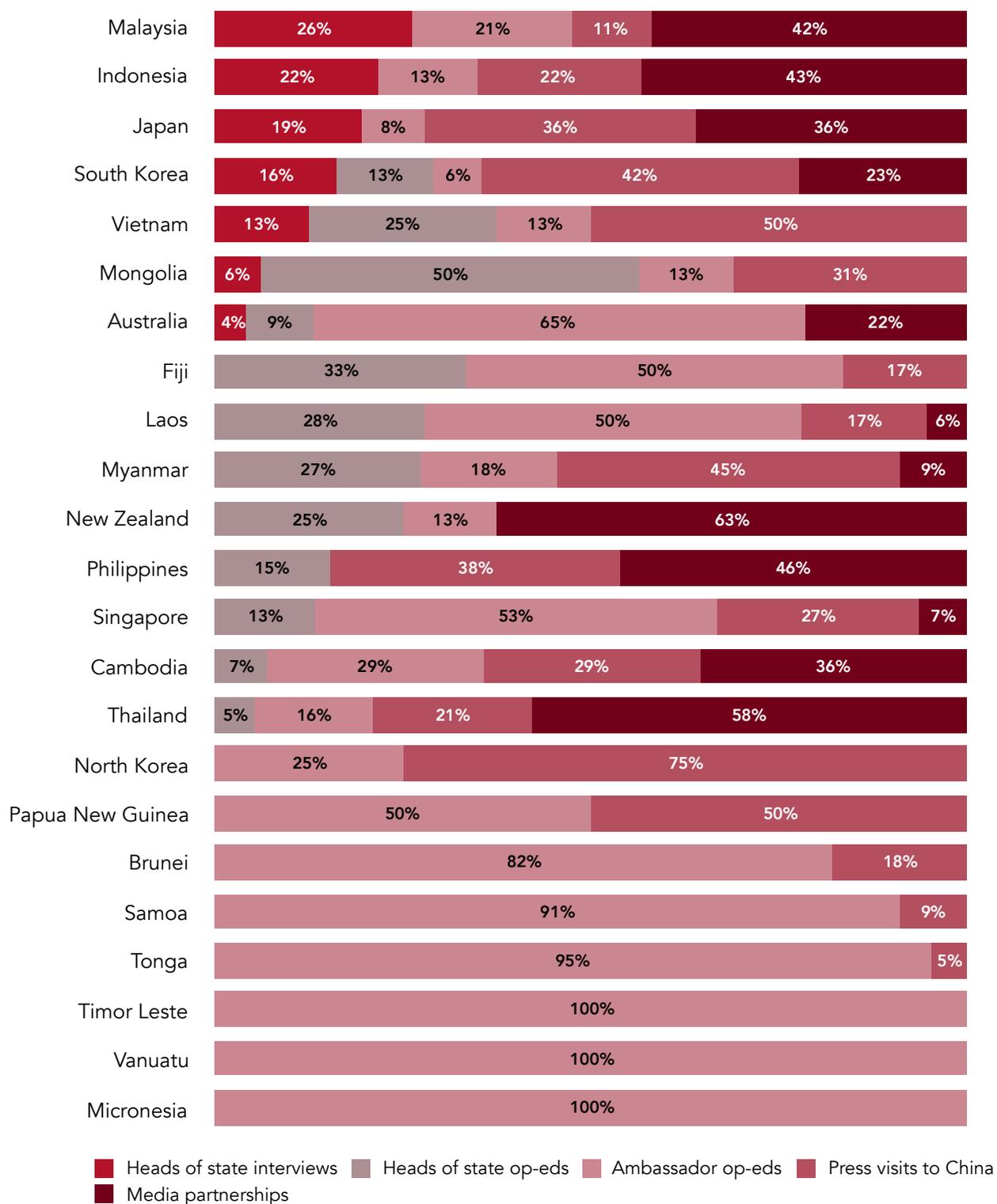
2.2.2

Beijing adjusts its strategy to shape the media narrative in strong participatory democracies: it places greater emphasis on appeals from senior leaders and ambassadors via op-eds and interviews

When working with highly democratic countries, Beijing relies less on content-sharing partnerships between Chinese and EAP media outlets and more on ambassador op-eds (see Technical Annex).³¹ The opposite is true for less democratic countries. Why might this be the case? These media partnership agreements typically entail Chinese media outlets sharing, sponsoring or jointly producing content for publication in an EAP media outlet.³² Democratic countries may have higher expectations that domestic media disclose content sourced from foreign governments, reducing the value proposition for Beijing to work with EAP media outlets. Alternatively, the media in democratic countries may be more wary of outside influence and concerned with maintaining an independent voice than those in less democratic countries.

Op-eds are somewhat different, in that they are typically printed under the by-line of an individual and are understood to be opinion rather than fact-based pieces, which may be less controversial in more democratic societies. Interestingly, we also find that senior Chinese leaders placed greater emphasis on giving interviews with foreign media outlets in EAP countries that scored higher on measures of political process, civil liberties, and political rights (i.e., the ability to participate in selecting their government).³³ Considered together, these findings suggest that Beijing views its best chance to influence the media narrative within EAP publics as being through the personal appeal of its most senior leaders and ambassadors in their own words.

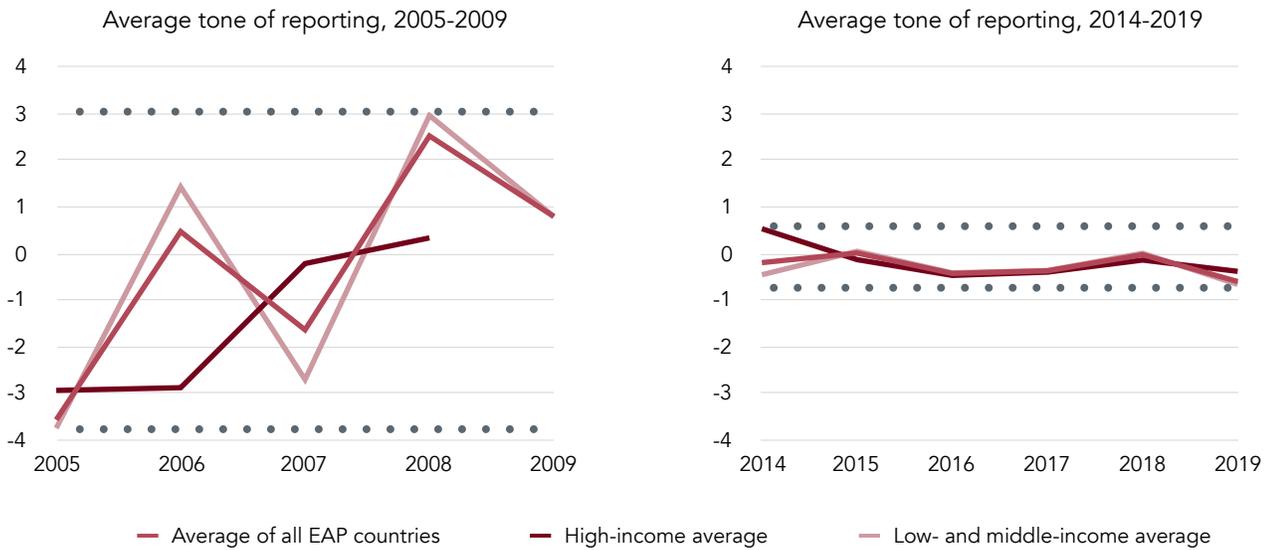
Interestingly, Beijing is less likely to use ambassador op-eds and journalist visits with countries with high levels of internet penetration. It is possible that Chinese leaders are being responsive to changing information consumption patterns; as citizens become more digitally connected, they may bypass traditional media in favor of social media and digital platforms for real-time news (The Jakarta Post, 2019). In response, Beijing may be switching focus to other tools in countries with greater numbers of internet users in order to get the desired results.

Figure 3: Composition of China's informational diplomacy activities in EAP countries, 2002-2017

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

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

Figure 4: Average tone of reporting (GDELT) on China in EAP countries



Notes: On a scale of -4 to +4, negative values indicate that media coverage is more negative toward China on average, while positive values indicate a more positive coverage of China in local news. We present the average tone of reporting across all 24 EAP countries and disaggregate the average by income-level according to the World Bank’s income classification schema. We break the graph into two separate time series due to a gap in coverage from 2010 to 2013 in our source data, the Global Database on Events, Language, and Tone (GDELT). The database does not include any data for Nauru and has some gaps for other EAP countries from 2005 to 2009.

Source: GDELT (<https://www.gdeltproject.org/>).

Section 2.3

To what extent is the tone and substance of reporting about China changing in ways that are in line with its goals in EAP countries?

If China succeeds in rehabilitating its image as a responsible, benevolent partner to other countries, it can “subtly contest...rather than directly confront” the current world order to advance its interests (Brazys and Dukalskis, 2019). If it fails, it will encounter greater opposition. In this section, we take a descriptive look at the tone and substance of domestic media coverage on China within EAP countries. These measures of domestic media coverage provide a barometer of the broader discourse about China within EAP countries, as well as how foreign journalists and media outlets may be responding to Beijing’s overtures.

2.3.1

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

In the early years of the 2000s, the tone of reporting on China among EAP news outlets was prone to wide fluctuations with high points in 2006 and 2008, quickly followed by precipitous drop-offs in favorability in 2007 and 2009 (Figure 4). Interestingly, these rapid mood swings appear to be most associated with coverage from low- and middle-income countries, as opposed to a more steady, gradual improvement in sentiment among outlets from the advanced economies of the region. Unfortunately, this is followed by a gap in the data for the period of 2010-2012.

We see a remarkably different story when the data coverage resumed in 2013.³⁴ Beijing has not garnered positive coverage across the board, but aggregate perceptions have smoothed out to be consistently close to neutral. However, this “closer to neutral” outcome is much better than the coverage Beijing received in 2005. While there are likely many factors in play to explain these trends, one might argue that China’s informational diplomacy overtures could be

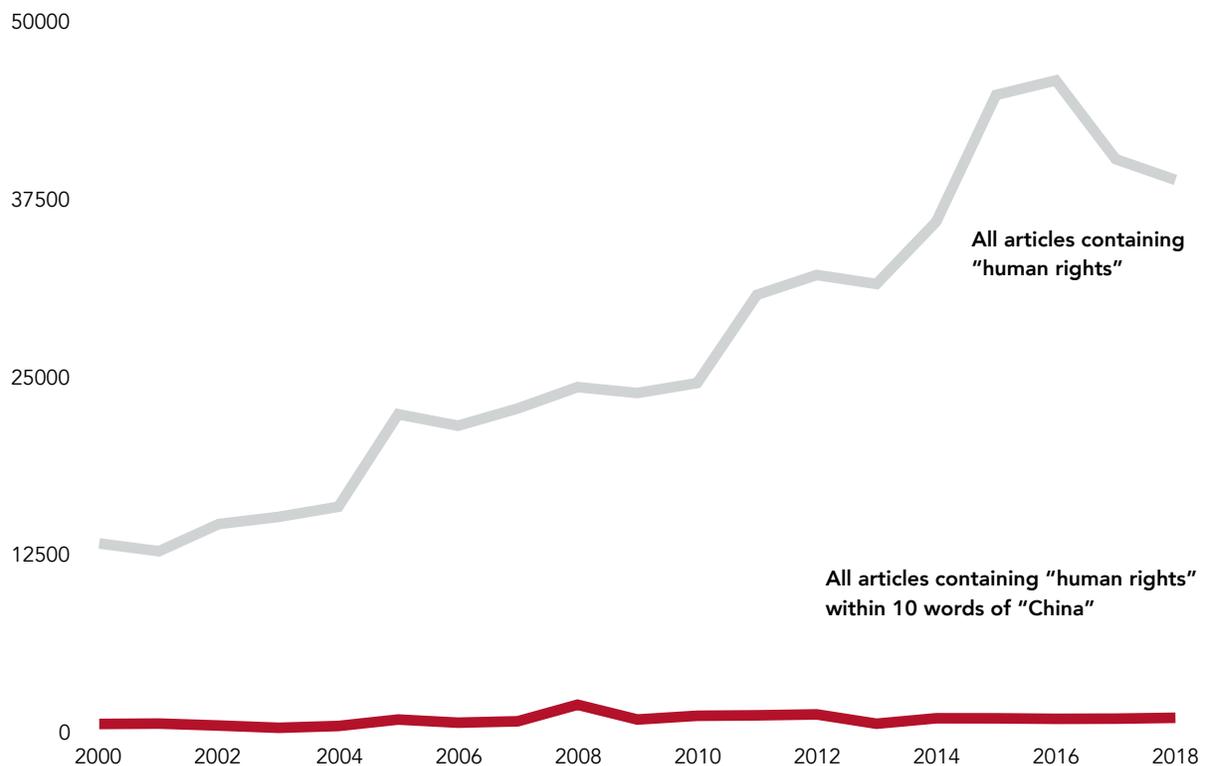
inoculating Beijing from more extremely negative views than has been the case in the past. While perhaps not the ideal outcome for Beijing, the generally neutral tone of reporting on China among EAP countries since 2013 is preferable to the outright negative reporting of the mid-2000s.

Given Beijing's sensitivities about how it is portrayed in the international media, what journalists in the region do not say about China is arguably as important as what they do say. China watchers know that there is routinely a set of politically fraught issues for Chinese leaders where no coverage is equivalent to good coverage. Some of these sensitive issues are region-specific, such as the South China Sea dispute among Association of Southeast Asian Nation (ASEAN) countries. However, more often than not, these issues fall under the rubric of policy positions Beijing holds which are portrayed in the Western media as violations of individual human rights (e.g., Tibet, Xinjiang, Tiananmen Square).

By extension, if the number of stories in EAP news outlets that cover China-related human rights issues experience a decline, Beijing might consider this a success for its informational diplomacy efforts. To this end, we analyzed the frequency of China-specific human rights³⁵ stories versus overall mentions of human rights within EAP news coverage over time (Figure 5).

Two things are immediately striking: EAP news outlets have expanded their reporting on human rights over time, but this uptick does not seem to correspond with a major increase in China-specific human rights stories, with the exception of 2008 (possibly in light of the Olympics, as well as crises in Xinjiang and Tibet). The trend lines could suggest that China has been able to keep itself out of the media spotlight in terms of human rights and that there is less interest (or less willingness) to report on China-related human rights issues as a proportion of all human rights stories in the EAP region.

Figure 5: Volume of mentions of "human rights" and "China" in EAP news articles, 2000-2018



Notes: This figure visualizes the proportion of human rights stories that were very likely China-related out of all human rights stories reported by EAP news outlets between January 1st, 2000 and December 31st, 2018. We conducted two keyword searches of Factiva, an international news database maintained by Dow Jones, isolated to only news stories from English medium media outlets within EAP countries. The first search captured all mentions of "human rights," and the second search captured mentions of human rights within 10 words of "China" or "Chinese." This data does not cover the following countries: Laos, Micronesia, Nauru, Samoa, Timor-Leste, and Tonga.

Source: Factiva (2000-2018).

Section 2.4

Concluding thoughts

In this chapter, we have seen that the Chinese government has mobilized its senior leaders, vast bureaucracy, and state-run media operations as megaphones to broadcast narratives of China's "revival, transformation, and innovation" from ancient civilization to its peaceful rise as a modern superpower (Guo, 2018). Beijing has also proactively cultivated journalists and media outlets within EAP countries to further amplify its messages far and wide with EAP citizens.

The tone of reporting about China among EAP media outlets has smoothed out, from wide fluctuations in perceptions in the early 2000s to close to neutral in more recent years. Meanwhile, the uptick in EAP journalists writing about human rights issues in the last two decades has not translated into greater scrutiny of Beijing, as its rate of mentions in such stories has remained fairly flat. While we cannot know with certainty, if it is true that EAP journalists are self-censoring or holding back from writing human rights-related stories about China, this is indeed a win for Beijing.

Nevertheless, Beijing's ability to dictate how Chinese journalists tell its story to the world and its efforts to co-opt domestic media in EAP countries have not gone unnoticed or uncontested. Scholars,

journalists, and policymakers in open democracies such as New Zealand and Australia have been among the most vocal about the perceived threat of China's malign influence in distorting their national discourse (Brady, 2017; Hamilton, 2018). Beijing's efforts to purchase ownership stakes in foreign media outlets, invite foreign journalists to participate in all-expenses-paid trips, and funnel content from their state-run media through EAP media outlets have also been met with increasing scrutiny by receiving countries throughout the region, as well as China's strategic competitors in the West.

These controversies aside, EAP countries still appear to have a demand for, and interest in, hearing China's side of the story as underscored by extensive content-sharing agreements, inbound press visits to China, and the volume of op-eds from Chinese senior leaders and ambassadors successfully placed within media outlets across the region.

In Chapter 3, we turn from Beijing's use of mass media communications to tell its story at scale to the micro-level relationships it seeks to cultivate with an elite crop of young people in EAP countries. Specifically, we look at China's state-facilitated student exchange programs that sponsor aspiring EAP students to pursue higher education in China and seek to mobilize Chinese students overseas as people-to-people ambassadors with their counterparts in EAP countries.

¹⁸ For example, Beijing established China Radio International (CRI) in 1941 and launched an English-language channel of the radio service in 1947. China's international television broadcasting came later with China Central Television's Mandarin language service (CCTV-4) to serve "Chinese-speaking people overseas," followed by English, Spanish, French, Arabic, and Russian language offerings by 2009 (Zhang, 2011, p. 58).

¹⁹ Beijing has taken a series of reputational hits for its handling of events such as the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, the 2008 Olympics, as well as unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang (Wu, 2012). In response, the Chinese government circulated guidance as early as 2009 to provincial leaders on how they could help China project "a non-threatening, responsible, and peaceful image" (Wu, 2012, p. 9; Ding, 2008) through disseminating positive information, managing foreign public opinion, and engaging with the media.

²⁰ China Central Television consolidated its foreign language channels under China Global Television Network (CGTV) in 2016 in an effort to "offer a distinctive alternative" to other media. Xinhua, China's state-run news agency, has brokered content-sharing deals with foreign media outlets, subsidized circulation of its content, and branched out into television and social media (Custer et al., 2018).

²¹ The Committee to Protect Journalists lists China as among the most heavily censored and tightly controlled media environments in the world (CPJ, 2015). Solis and Waggoner (forthcoming) find that China historically hovers closer to zero (no freedom) than one (perfect freedom) on their Media System Freedom (MSF) score. Meanwhile, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) print/broadcast media perspectives measure shows that China's domestic media is highly reflective of the government's point of view (Coppedge et al., 2018).

²² While some experts would argue that the Global Times is not an authoritative Chinese news source, we still include this publication here as our focus is on capturing media outlets that ostensibly are influenced, or owned by, the Chinese government.

²³ In assessing China's international broadcasting overtures with EAP countries, we measure: (i) the availability of the four major state-owned television channels; (ii) the presence of Xinhua and People's Daily print bureaus; (iii) the presence of China Daily's print circulation (weekly or global edition); and (iv) the number of languages in which China Radio International broadcasts via FM radio in major cities across EAP countries.

- ²⁴ According to RVC (2016), “the Asia-Pacific region accounts for more than half of all social media users...with 426 million monthly active users of Facebook and one-third of all Twitter users.” Techwire Asia (2018) estimates that there are approximately 1.8 billion active social media users from the Asia-Pacific region, a 42 percent penetration rate.
- ²⁵ In the Feng (2018) data, Japan was erroneously recorded as having 47 media partnerships with China. We consulted with the author and corrected the error for the analysis in this report.
- ²⁶ For example, interviews conducted by Custer et al. (2018) confirmed such content-sharing partnerships with the Fiji Sun (Fiji), Sin Chew (Malaysia), and the Philippine Star (Philippines).
- ²⁷ This data was collected from the interview and op-ed records reported in the China Foreign Affairs Yearbooks. Interviews and op-eds are captured as having been done with or by “country leaders,” with a minor difference in how a leader is defined. The yearbooks capture interviews with the president, vice president, premier, and vice premier; however, op-eds are only captured for the president and the premier.
- ²⁸ For more information about the temporal coverage for each EAP country, see the Technical Annex.
- ²⁹ These impressions were further corroborated through interviews in six additional countries in the South and Central Asia region.
- ³⁰ We constructed a panel OLS regression model (including country and year fixed effects) to assess which factors may explain how Beijing allocates its informational diplomacy tools in different countries. Due to data limitations, we only were able to conduct this analysis for eighteen of the twenty-five EAP countries. For our explanatory variables, we tested the following possible country-level characteristics that might prompt Beijing to vary its allocation choices: internet penetration, level of electoral democracy, control of corruption, rule of law, GDP per capita, and voice and accountability. All covariates were lagged by one year. For further information on the variable sources and definitions, the model specification, and statistical results see the Technical Annex.
- ³¹ More precisely, in our panel OLS regression results, we see that there is a statistically significant negative correlation between the number of media partnerships between Chinese and EAP media outlets and the level of electoral democracy. By contrast, we see a statistically significant positive correlation between the level of electoral democracy and the number of ambassador op-eds. We use the V-Dem Polyarchy Index for our measure of electoral democracy. Please see the Technical Annex for further information on the variable sources and definitions, the model specification, and statistical results.
- ³² By sharing, we mean that China is provided an EAP media outlet with access to content at a free or subsidized rate for distribution to that outlet’s audience. By sponsoring, we refer to China purchasing space within an EAP media channel to advertise or place its own content. By jointly-produced content, we refer to content that is co-created by a Chinese media outlet and an EAP media outlet, usually for consumption by the EAP country’s media market.
- ³³ Specifically, in our panel OLS regression results, we see a statistically significant positive relationship between the Voice and Accountability score of EAP countries and the use of interviews by Chinese senior leadership. The Voice and Accountability Index contains numerous indicators measuring aspects of the political process, civil liberties, and political rights. These indicators measure the extent to which citizens of a country are able to participate in the selection of governments. This category also includes indicators measuring the independence of the media, which serves an important role in monitoring those in authority and holding them accountable for their actions. Please see the Technical Annex for further information on the variable sources and definitions, the model specification, and statistical results.
- ³⁴ We are uncertain why this gap in coverage exists; however, because our variable of interest is an average of the tone of reporting on China across years and GDELT’s methodology did not change over the period of study, we consider the time frames to be comparable.
- ³⁵ In queries of our data source, the Factiva News dataset, we assume that if the terms “China” and “human rights” are within a distance of ten words from each other, then the article is a China-specific human rights story. We tested our methodology with other relevant search terms that could capture critical media coverage on China (such as “Xinjiang,” “South China Sea,” “Tiananmen Square,” and “Uighurs”) but we chose to limit our evaluation of the results to ‘human rights’ only. This is because the term “human rights” is sufficiently broad to capture a range of relevant issues without change in interpretation. For this reason, it also allows for better comparison of coverage over time than other terms, which may see reporting spikes during particular periods when they are most relevant and popular.

CHAPTER THREE

How does China use international student exchange to form bonds and socialize norms with tomorrow's leaders?

Key findings in this chapter:

- *Beijing strategically deploys scholarships to prime the pump and stoke demand among EAP countries that traditionally have not sent large volumes of students to study abroad in China.*
- *Chinese students have an affinity for studying in the economically advanced, open democracies of the EAP region, but we do not find evidence that these destinations are dictated by the government.*
- *Beijing actively uses cooperative agreements, institutional partnerships, and Chinese language learning and testing opportunities to attract foreign exchange students from EAP countries.*
- *Poorer and less politically free countries are the primary beneficiaries of Beijing's scholarships.*
- *International students appear to be more positive toward China the longer they study abroad.*

China's Ministry of Education (MoE) articulates its aspirations as seeking to "accelerate [the] internationalization of education...to enhance its international status, influence, and competitiveness" (China MoE, 2010).³⁶ Beijing's interest in international education lies in the fact that today's students will likely be tomorrow's leaders. Student exchange offers the opportunity for Chinese nationals to form bonds with and socialize new norms among future leaders in other countries to be sympathetic toward Beijing's views. In this chapter, we provide a snapshot of Beijing's student exchange activities across three domains (Section 3.1) and then examine how its approach to student exchange appears to vary over space and time, as well as the initial response of EAP countries to these overtures (Section 3.2).

Box 6: Key players in China's student exchange machinery

The Chinese Ministry of Education (MoE) is the primary regulatory body for education in China: it approves the curriculum and textbooks for teaching across primary, secondary, and tertiary-level institutions within China. The MoE manages the budgets for various educational exchange programs, including scholarships for domestic students and scholars to study abroad and for international students to study at Chinese institutions. The Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCPPD) influences the work of the MoE through the "Leading Group for Centralized Education Work" within the ministry, which is tasked to "deploy ideological and political work in the field of education" (RFA, 2018) such as undertaking activities to fulfill President Xi's ambition to increase "patriotic energy" for the "China Dream" among domestic and international students.

The China Scholarship Council (CSC) is a non-profit arm of the MoE that implements its international academic exchange programs. To this end, it facilitates partnerships between Chinese educational institutions and counterparts in EAP countries to foster student and scholarly exchange. The CSC publishes annual reports that help the MoE monitor the number of student exchange partnerships by country and region, as well as the level of education. China's Confucius Institutes (CIs) and Confucius Classrooms (CCs) are also important promotional tools for student exchange programs because they increase the visibility and attractiveness of study abroad opportunities in China, as well as giving prospective applicants valuable Mandarin language training to be competitive for Chinese government-backed scholarships. The Hanban, a public institution operating under the MoE's direct supervision, reviews and approves new request for CIs and CCs abroad, as well as providing an

administrator, teachers, teaching materials, and funding to host schools in EAP countries.

Chinese embassies play a dual role in promoting scholarship opportunities for EAP students to pursue their higher education in China, as well as being charged with mobilizing Chinese students overseas to serve as people-to-people ambassadors with their counterparts in EAP countries. Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSAs) are student organizations registered in most universities outside of China that are responsible for organizing Chinese cultural events for engagement with the larger university student body, as well as to support expatriate Chinese students with general life, study and work-related issues. CSSAs have recently come under fire for their ties to the CCP via local Chinese embassies, which are said to recruit, fund, and influence their work.

Section 3.1

Which student exchange tools has China deployed in East Asia and the Pacific over time?

In this section, we quantify how Beijing uses three types of student exchange overtures with EAP countries: (i) attracting foreign students to study in China; (ii)

facilitating Chinese students to study abroad in EAP countries;³⁷ and (iii) fostering an enabling environment to facilitate additional student exchange with EAP countries in the future. As shown in **Table 3**, we first identified illustrative activities for the three types of Chinese student exchange activities in the EAP region and then collected the best available information for the period of 2000-2018 (the specific date range varies by availability). In **Box 6**, we give a brief overview of the major players that provide strategic and operational support for Beijing's student exchange overtures with EAP countries.

Table 3. Taxonomy of China's student exchanges activities in the EAP region

Sub-focus	Activity set	Activity	Captured?	Note
Chinese students in EAP countries (outbound student exchange)	State-backed support for Chinese students studying abroad in EAP countries	Scholarships for Chinese students studying in EAP countries (number and financial value)	X	Difficult to quantify
		Support for Chinese Student and Scholars Associations (CSSAs) in EAP countries	X	Difficult to quantify
	Chinese students as ambassadors for Chinese culture, values, and positions abroad	The number of Chinese students studying abroad (both state-sponsored and not state-sponsored)	✓	Able to quantify
International students in China (inbound student exchange)	State/municipal-backed support for EAP students studying in China	Scholarships for EAP students studying in China (number and financial value) issued by the central or municipal Chinese government	✓/X	Able to quantify the number of scholarships, but not the financial value
		Shorter-term educational exchanges /cross-cultural experiences targeted to EAP students to come to China	X	Difficult to quantify
	EAP students socialized to Chinese culture, values, and positions through Chinese educational institutions	The number of EAP students studying abroad in China (both those sponsored by the Chinese government and those that are not)	✓	Able to quantify
Fostering future student exchange (building an enabling environment)	State cultivation of partnerships between Chinese and EAP educational institutions	Formal agreements between state-backed educational institutions in China and universities in EAP countries to promote EAP students studying in China or Chinese students studying in EAP countries	✓/X	Able to quantify for some years, not others
		State sponsorship or facilitation of Chinese language teachers/tutors within EAP educational institutions at the tertiary or secondary level	✓	Able to quantify if using CI data as a proxy
	State efforts to facilitate easier access for EAP students to study in China and Chinese students to study in EAP countries (legal/immigration Infrastructure)	State-sponsored visits and/or exchanges for school administrators and teachers from EAP countries with their counterparts in China	X	Not able to quantify
		Cooperative agreements between China and the host country to reduce transaction costs (i.e., visa restrictions and/or red tape) for Chinese students to study in EAP countries or EAP students to study in China	✓/X	Able to quantify for some years, not others

3.1.1

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

China is working hard to position itself as a premier destination for international students to pursue their higher education (CSIS, 2017).³⁸ It attracts international students through “a combination of scholarships, loosened visa requirements, and cooperative agreements” (Custer et al., 2018). As shown in **Figures 7 and 8**, the number of young people from EAP countries studying in China has gradually increased over time and by 2016 represented roughly 41 percent of all international students in China (China Power Team, 2017; Bislev, 2017).³⁹ Many international students want to study in China for one of two reasons: (1) access to cheap, but high-quality educational opportunities;⁴⁰ and (2) positioning themselves to work for companies where Mandarin language skills or contacts would be useful.⁴¹

Nonetheless, the aspiration to study abroad in China is not equally shared across the EAP region. South Korea is historically the EAP region’s single largest exporter of international students to China by far.⁴² However, Timor-Leste, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, Cambodia, and Laos saw the most dramatic increases in students pursuing educational opportunities in China between 2002 and 2016 (**Figure 8**).

Beijing has doubled down on offering scholarships to international students as an inducement to study in China. These scholarships were sponsored by myriad Chinese institutions, such as the Ministry of Commerce, the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the World Academy of Sciences, provincial governments, Chinese universities, and various other programs administered across central government agencies (Latief and Lefen, 2018).⁴³ In addition, China’s MoE administers EAP-specific scholarship opportunities for students from member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)⁴⁴ and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF).⁴⁵ These scholarships are typically administered by the China Scholarship Council (State Council, 2014).

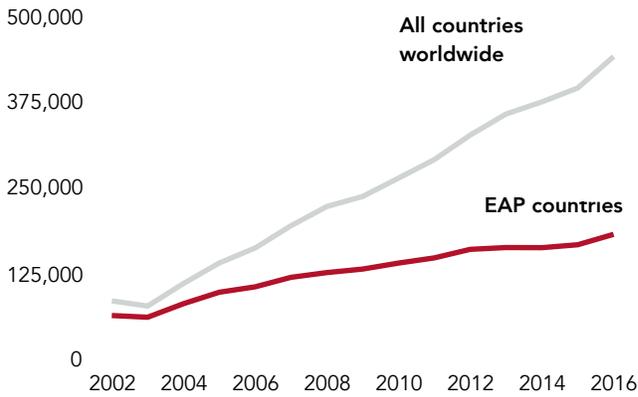
Notably, Beijing appears to disproportionately target scholarships to EAP countries that lag behind their peers in sending their students to study abroad in China. In other words, the number of students an EAP country sent to study in China was negatively correlated with the volume of Chinese government-

backed scholarships a country received. In this respect, Beijing views the provision of scholarships as a means to jump-start interest among students from EAP countries where it has not traditionally had a strong customer base, as opposed to passively responding to existing demand.

Mongolia, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Myanmar, who initially sent lower numbers of students to China were among the big winners in attracting these Chinese government-backed scholarships in absolute terms (**Map 6**). The distinction between all international students studying in China versus those whose study was facilitated by Chinese scholarships is important because the latter group represents the clearest exertion of effort by Beijing to influence foreign publics, as opposed to merely being a destination that attracts them. While they received relatively few scholarships in absolute terms, it appears that Beijing pays outsized attention to small Pacific island states such as Tonga, Samoa, and Fiji when we take population into account (**Map 6, inset**).

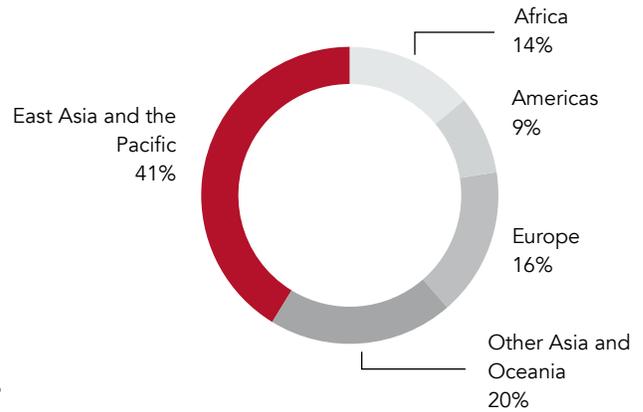
EAP students often view Chinese scholarships—which not only cover tuition fees, but also provide stipends to subsidize travel, housing, and living costs—as more generous than those offered by other countries (Custer et al., 2018). However, contrary to popular belief, we find that Chinese government scholarships were actually less generous than those provided by the US, UK, Japan, Australia, and other countries. After adjusting for purchasing power parity, Chinese scholarships carried roughly two-thirds of the value of most scholarships offered by other developed nations in relative terms (see **Figure 9**).

Figure 6. Volume of international and EAP students in China, 2002-2016



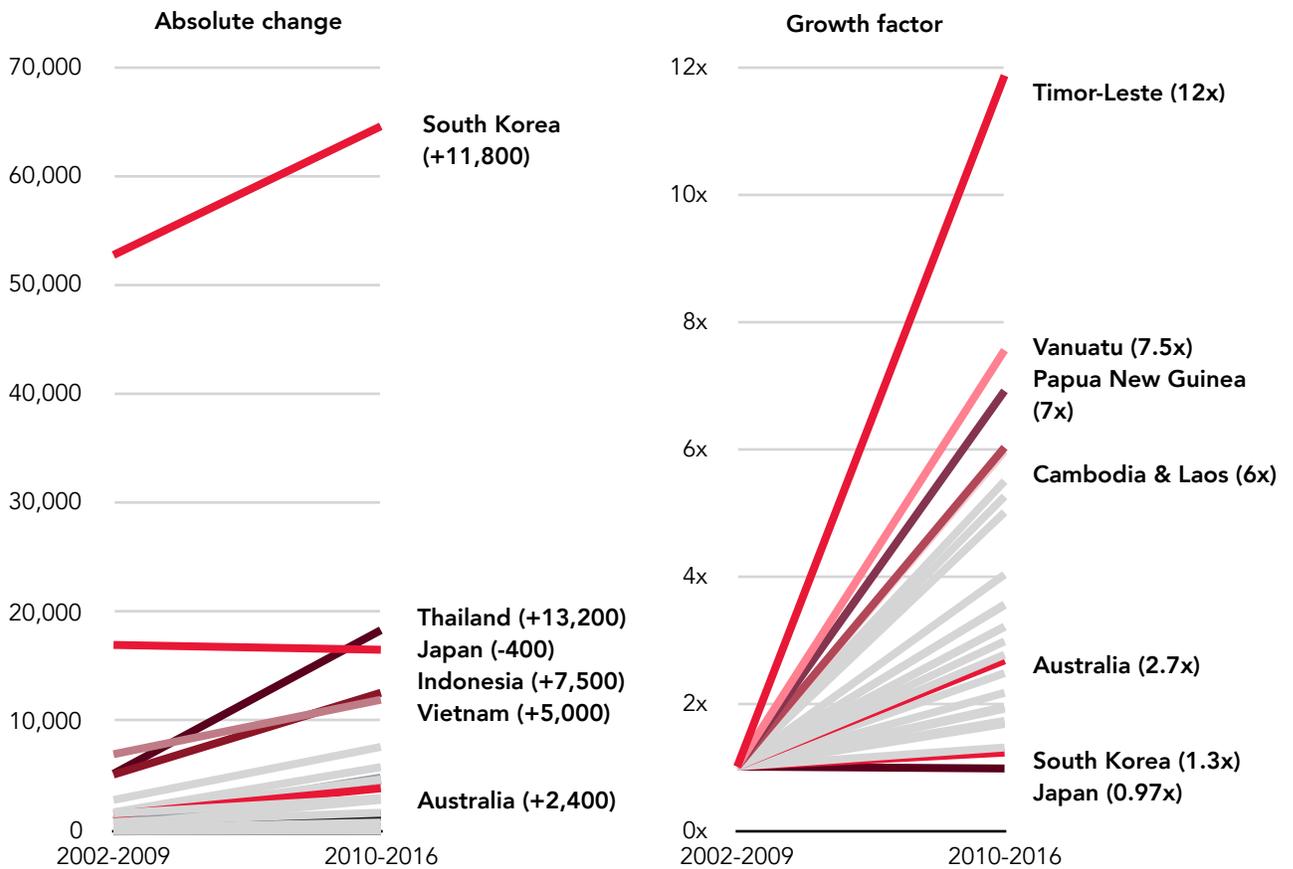
Source: China Foreign Affairs Yearbooks (2002-2016).

Figure 7. International students in China by home region, 2016



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

Figure 8. Growth in volume of international students in China, 2002-2016



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

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

Map 6: Chinese government scholarships, 2000-2018

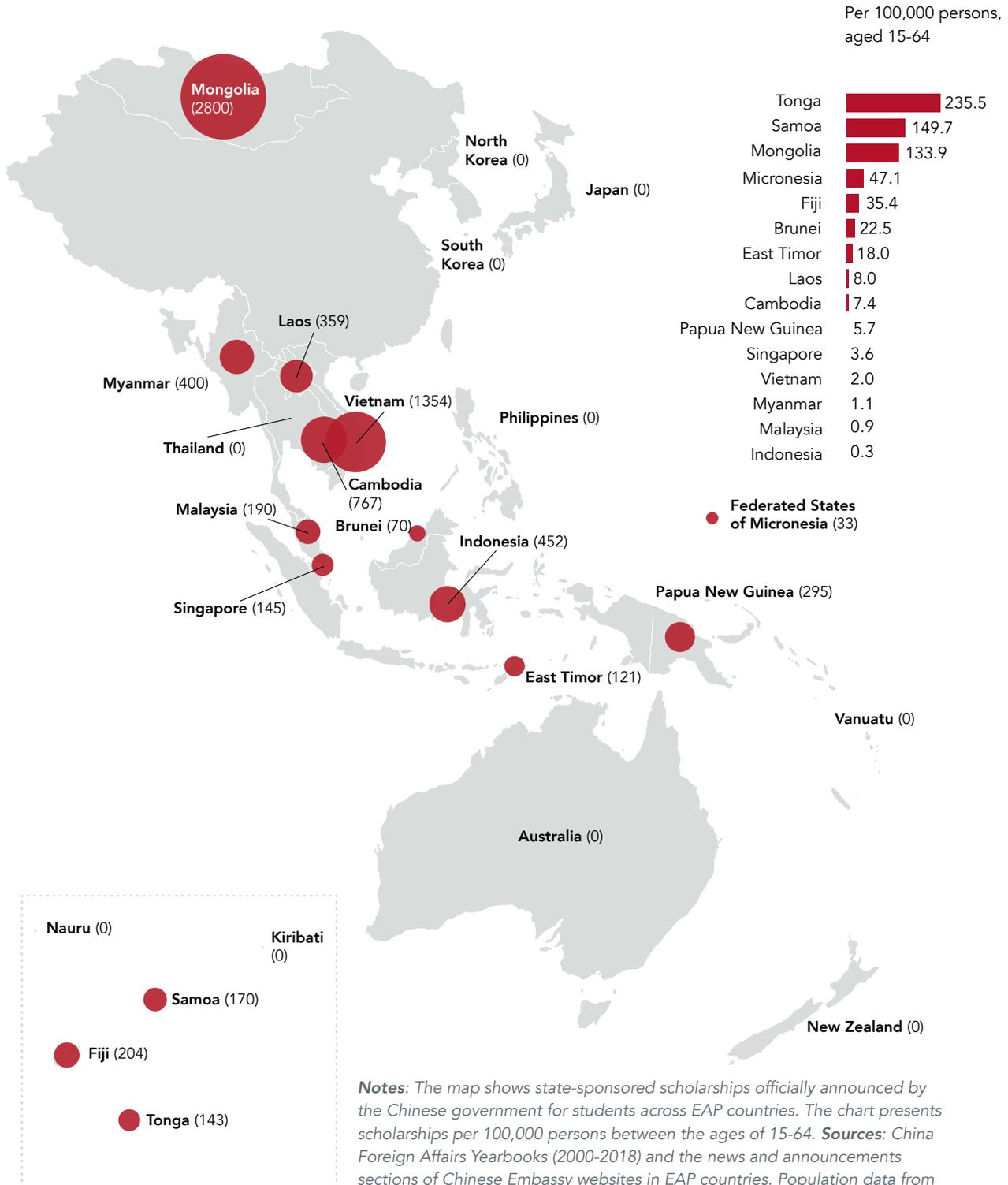
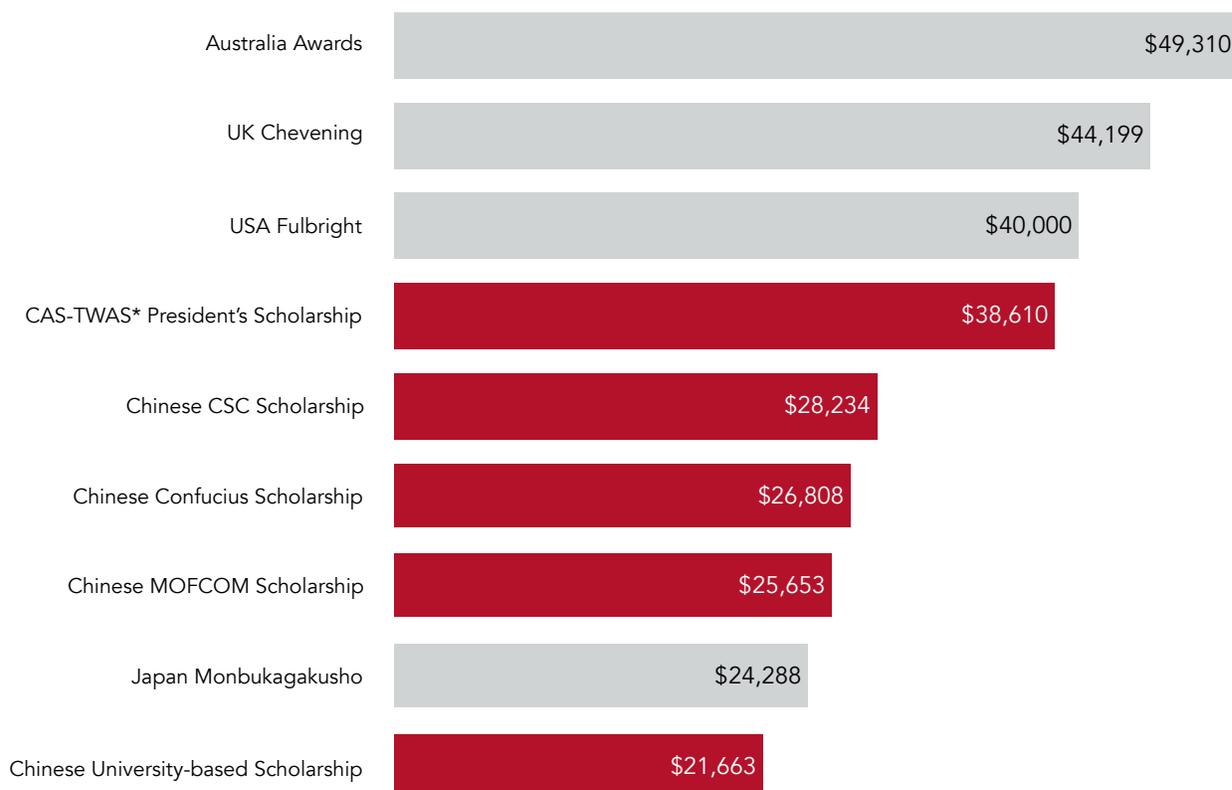


Figure 9. Value of Chinese government scholarships versus strategic competitors, 2019

Adjusted to PPP, USD 2019



*CAS-TWAS: Chinese Academy of Sciences and the World Academy of Sciences

Notes: We compared the dollar value of select flagship scholarships from major comparison countries (the US, the UK, Australia, and Japan) with various Chinese scholarships.

Sources: This data was compiled by AidData from multiple sources, including the official websites of various scholarship providers. For a detailed comparison, see the Annex.

3.1.2

Chinese students have an affinity for studying in the economically advanced, open democracies of the EAP region, but we do not find evidence that these destinations are dictated by the government

Globally, the preponderance of Chinese students overseas gravitates toward higher education institutions in advanced economies⁴⁶ and the EAP region is no exception to this general rule. Japan and Australia attract the highest number of Chinese students pursuing graduate and postgraduate degrees among EAP countries, followed by South Korea and New Zealand (**Figure 10**). One widely acknowledged reason for Chinese middle-class parents' pursuit of a foreign education for their children is bypassing the National University Entrance Examination (*Gaokao*), a highly

competitive exam that every Chinese person is required to take in order to pursue higher education within China (Economist, 2016).

Chinese students comprise the highest percentage of foreign degree seeking-students in Australia (AG DET, 2018). Although Japan received the highest number of Chinese students from 2000 to 2017, the volume of students has been declining since 2012 (**Figure 10**). This is despite the Japanese and Chinese governments declaring 2012 as a "Friendship Year for Japan-China People-to-People Exchanges" (MoFA Japan, 2012).⁴⁷ Nonetheless, Chinese students represented the largest segment of international students in Japan (40 percent) in 2017, followed by students from Vietnam (JASSO, 2017).

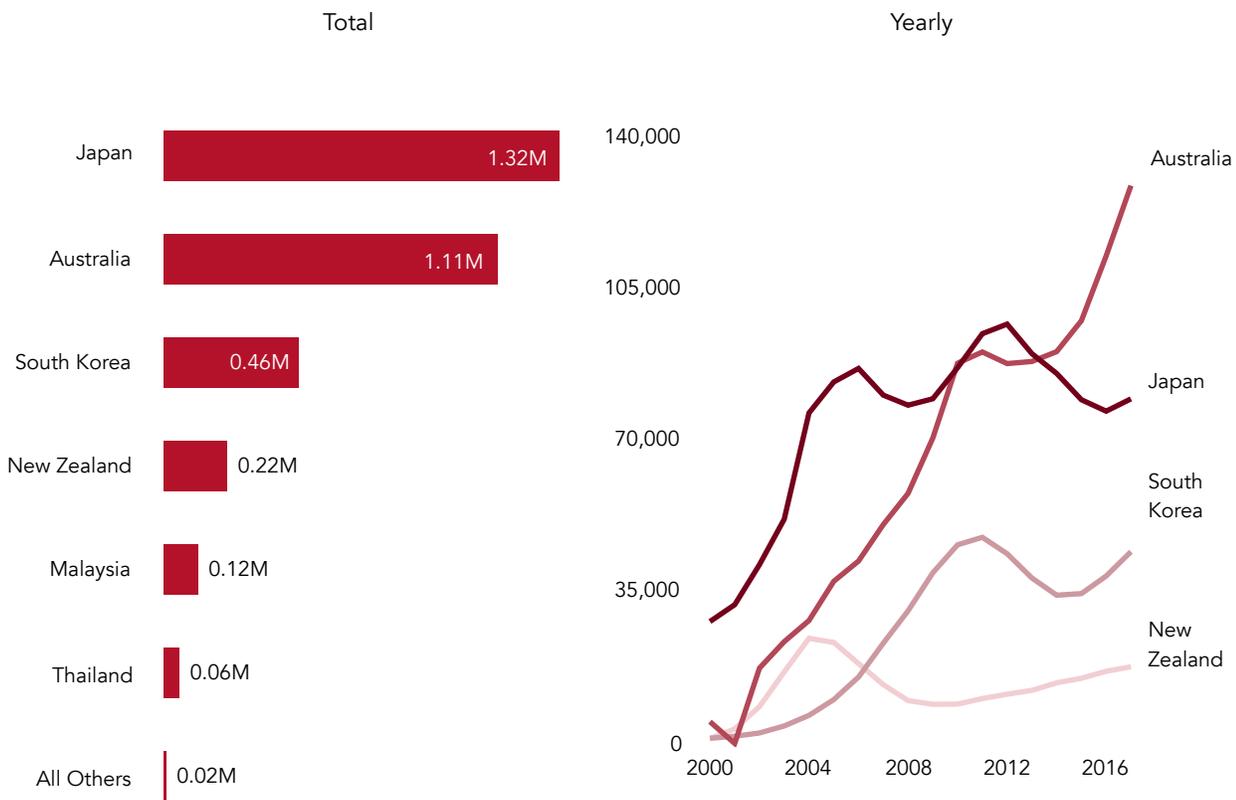
Outside of the advanced economies, Malaysia and Thailand are leading the way as attractive destinations for higher learning among Chinese students overseas (SCMP, 2019). This higher demand from Chinese students to study in Malaysia and Thailand may be explained by the fact that these countries have doubled down on investments in the education sector to fulfill their aspirations to become “world-class” (Selvaratnam, 2016).

While Chinese students overseas do have a revealed preference to study in the economically advanced, open democracies of Australia, South Korea, and Japan, we do not see a clear indication that these destinations are being specifically dictated by the Chinese state as an extension of its public diplomacy. That is not to say, however, that Beijing does not

leverage this strong and growing presence of Chinese students overseas to enhance its influence with EAP countries. In fact, there is a growing debate on the impact of higher numbers of Chinese students studying overseas on academic standards, campus life, and university revenues of the receiving countries (Bislev, 2017; Hamilton, 2018).⁴⁸

Anecdotal reports and investigations in other regions of the world have highlighted Beijing’s support of Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSAs) as indicative of its interest in co-opting Chinese overseas students to advance China’s influence with foreign publics (US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2018, p. 10; Hamilton, 2018). See **Box 6** for further discussion of the role of CSSAs as a pass-through for Chinese government influence.

Figure 10. Volume of Chinese students studying abroad in EAP countries, 2000-2017



Notes: This chart shows the number of Chinese degree-seeking students that studied in higher education institutions across select EAP countries between 2000 and 2017.

Source: UNESCO-UIS database on the global flow of tertiary-level students. Retrieved on 22 October 2019.

Figure 11. Educational exchange partnerships between China and EAP countries, available years

	2004	2006	2007	2009	2010
Australia	5	9	9	20	20
Brunei	0	2	2	2	2
Cambodia	0	0	7	0	0
Indonesia	0	6	6	6	6
Japan	8	9	9	13	7
Laos	5	10	5	10	10
Malaysia	2	3	3	2	3
Mongolia	5	7	7	7	7
Myanmar	0	4	4	4	4
New Zealand	4	6	7	7	7
North Korea	5	7	7	7	7
Philippines	0	0	6	8	8
Singapore	8	10	10	10	11
South Korea	4	3	3	5	5
Thailand	1	4	5	5	4
Vietnam	0	6	6	6	6

Notes: This table visualizes the number of partnership agreements between the Chinese government and institutions in EAP countries to facilitate both inbound and outbound student exchange activities. The number reported for a given country in a given year represents the total number of existing partnerships recorded at that time. Red cells indicate there was a drop in partnerships from the previous year for which records are available; green cells indicate there was an increase in partnerships; white indicates no change. EAP countries not shown did not have any institutional partnerships in China Scholarship Council annual reports.

Sources: China Scholarship Council annual reports (2004, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2010).

3.1.3 Beijing actively uses cooperative agreements, institutional partnerships, and Chinese language learning and testing opportunities to attract foreign exchange students from EAP countries

The first hurdle Beijing must clear to get traction for its study abroad programs is ensuring its intended target audiences in EAP countries have visibility on the value proposition of educational opportunities in China. To this end, the Chinese government has engaged in a proactive advertising campaign to spread the word of study abroad opportunities in China via several channels. Beijing has brokered bilateral cooperative agreements with counterpart governments as well as institution-level partnerships in the region (Figure 11) to raise awareness and ease the process for EAP

students to study in China.⁴⁹ Australia, Laos, Singapore, and the Philippines appear to be important target audiences for China's efforts in this regard, based upon tracking data from the China Scholarship Council (CSC). That the Chinese government actively reports on these agreements via CSC annual reports reinforces the perception that this type of activity is important to Beijing.

Beyond these institutional arrangements, the Chinese government advertises its study abroad programs via other means, including: publishing announcements and scholarship information via embassy websites; facilitating exchange programs and visits to China for educators and school administrators; and taking advantage of the positive spillover effects, as past scholarship recipients tell their friends and

acquaintances about study abroad opportunities in China. International students were most likely to say that they heard about a scholarship opportunity via public announcements (36 percent) or a personal contact (31 percent), in a survey of international students studying in China on state-sponsored scholarships (Myungsik and Elaine, 2018).

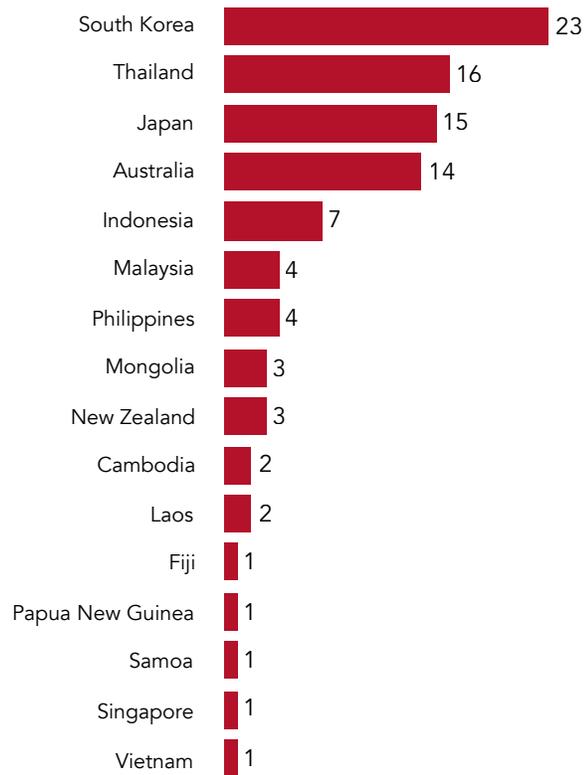
A second hurdle Beijing must overcome is ensuring that EAP students view the benefits of studying in China as outweighing the costs, one of which may be language. Beijing employs multiple strategies to ensure that EAP students do not view language as a barrier to choosing China as their study abroad destination. First, Chinese educational institutions increasingly offer university-level courses using English as the medium of instruction in order to accommodate international students (Zhang, 2018; Guo et al., 2018). Second, the Chinese Ministry of Education facilitates Chinese language learning opportunities through its network of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms. Third, China offers Mandarin language proficiency testing—*Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi* (HSK)—via testing centers and local Confucius Institutes.

Between 2004 and 2018, China established 98 Confucius Institutes in partnership with universities in 16 EAP countries across the region.⁵⁰ Operated by the Hanban—a public institution affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Education—Confucius Institutes provide an important entry point to both advertise Chinese study abroad opportunities, as well as overcome any perceived language barrier (Figure 12). Since many Chinese government scholarships require applicants to demonstrate Mandarin language proficiency, Beijing has opened up 260 HSK testing centers throughout the region (Map 7).⁵¹ The locations of these active HSK centers are highly and positively correlated with the volume of inbound students from EAP countries studying in China.

In absolute terms, there is a high degree of overlap between the countries receiving the most Confucius Institutes and HSK centers: South Korea, Thailand, Japan, Australia, and Indonesia top both lists. When we adjust the number of Confucius Institutes and HSK centers operating in EAP countries to a per capita basis, a slightly different story emerges. While less

populous island nations and city-states such as Vanuatu, Brunei, and Fiji have lower numbers of Confucius Institutes and HSK centers, they attract outsized attention from Beijing relative to their population size. It is unclear whether Beijing opened HSK centers and Confucius Institutes in response to revealed demand for Chinese study abroad opportunities in EAP countries or in order to spur new demand. However, at minimum, it is reasonable to conclude that Beijing has demonstrated its willingness and follow-through to use these tools to reduce barriers to entry for EAP students to study in China.

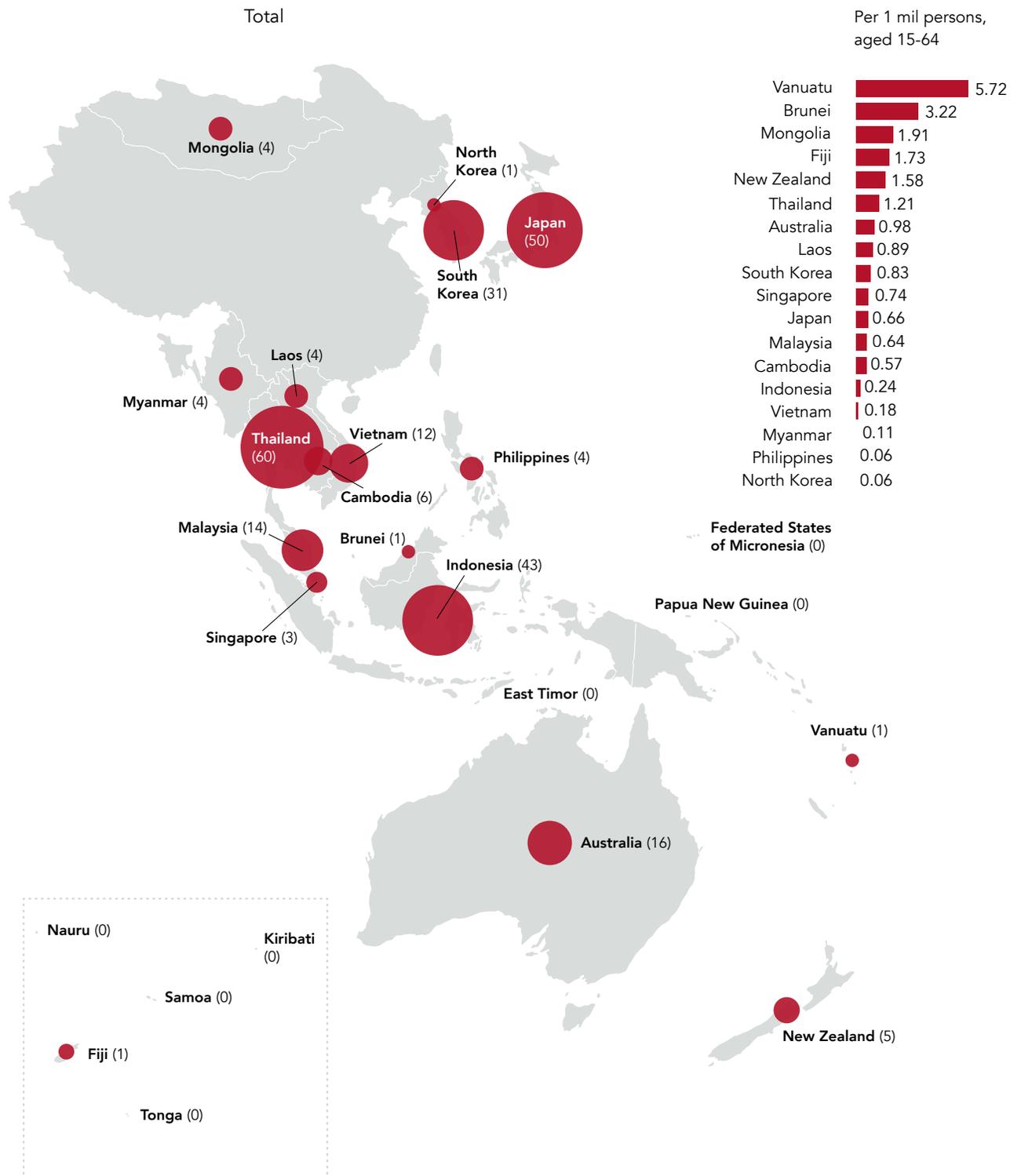
Figure 12. Confucius Institutes in the EAP region, 2004-2018



Notes: The authors extended the original data from Custer et al. (2018) for 2004-2016 by two additional years through 2018.

Sources: Hanban website (n.d.). Hanban Annual Reports (2004-2018).

Map 7: Chinese language testing (HSK) centers active in 2019



Sources: Hanban website (n.d.). Population data from the World Bank's World Development Indicators for 2018.

Section 3.2

Which countries attract more of China’s student exchange efforts and with what initial response?

Taking a page out of the playbook of China’s strategic competitors, Chinese leaders view international education—attracting foreign students to study in China and sending Chinese students abroad—as a powerful tool in China’s arsenal to expose a growing number of people from EAP countries to Chinese people, culture, and worldviews (China MoE, 2010). In the tradition of early pioneers such as the United States and the United Kingdom, China uses student exchange as a means to garner favorability and admiration in the near term, as well as to gain prospective long-term benefits from having a cadre of opinion makers and leaders in other countries who empathize with its interests.

In this section, we take a closer look at one of Beijing’s tools—scholarships for students from EAP countries to study abroad in China—to understand the profiles of the countries that are most likely to receive this

assistance, as well as the attitudes of Chinese scholarship recipients toward China before and after they complete their studies.

3.2.1

Poorer and less politically free countries are the primary beneficiaries of Beijing’s scholarships

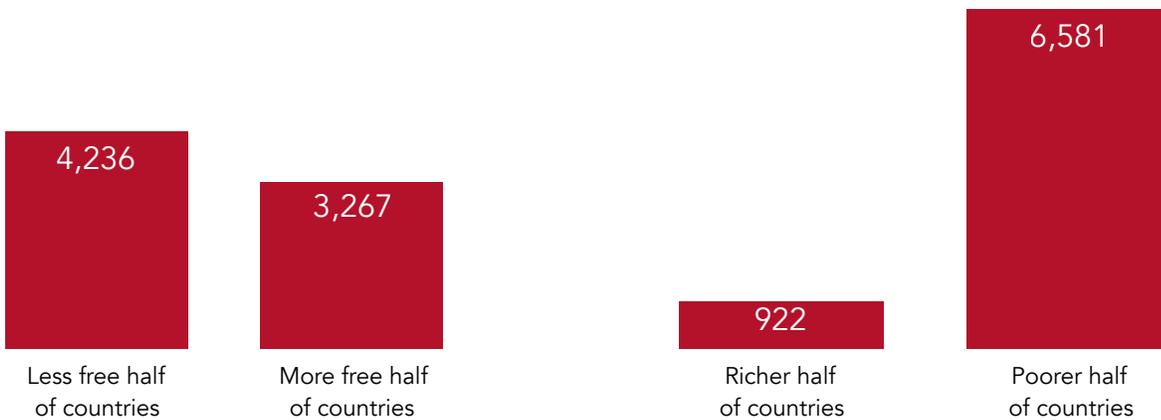
Students from less politically free countries in the EAP region (per their 2019 Freedom House score) received nearly 30% more scholarships to study in China than their counterparts in more free countries. Several of these less free countries—Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar—are among the largest exporters of students pursuing higher education opportunities in China. Meanwhile, poorer countries (by GDP per capita) attracted seven times more scholarships for their students to study in China than wealthier countries in the region did (Figure 13).⁵²

These broad trends are consistent with patterns in other parts of the world. According to a study of the background of Chinese state scholarship recipients globally, Myungsik and Elaine (2018) found that nearly 90 percent of the scholarship students they surveyed came from partly free or not free countries. They also found that 62 percent of these students belonged to countries that had a GDP per capita lower than that of China (ibid).

Figure 13: Volume of Chinese scholarships for EAP students, 2000-2018

Grouped by 2019 Freedom House Score

Grouped by GDP per capita



Notes: This table presents data on the number of Chinese scholarships announced for recipients in EAP countries from 2000-2018, grouped by 2019 Freedom House’s Freedom in the World scores.

Sources: Chinese Embassy Websites’ News Sections (2000-2018). Freedom House’s 2019 Freedom Index.

Notes: This table presents data on the number of Chinese scholarships received by EAP countries from 2000-2018, grouped by average GDP per capita over the same period.

Sources: Chinese Embassy Websites’ News Sections (2000-2018). GDP per capita data from the World Bank’s World Development Indicators for 2018.

3.2.2

International students are more positive toward China the longer they study abroad

At the start of their studies, international students appear to have polarized opinions of China. In their global study, Myungsik and Elaine (2018) found that most students had either a completely positive or negative opinion of China on a Likert scale prior to beginning their study abroad programs. Upon completing their studies, the vast majority of international students who resided in China for three or more years reported having positive impressions of China, regardless of their original views (*ibid*). This pattern held true for both male and female students and was strongest in larger Chinese cities.

While we do not have region-disaggregated data at our fingertips, the fact that the profiles of Chinese scholarship recipients were similar across our examination of EAP countries and a global survey of scholarship recipients (per the discussion in 3.2.1) lends credence to the assumption that the effects observed by Myungsik and Elaine (2018) would also likely be true for the EAP region. In this respect, this previous empirical research aligns closely with our assumption that as international students become familiar with Chinese people, language, ideas, and culture through their study abroad programs, they are likely to become increasingly favorable toward their host country in ways that are beneficial to China's interests. As previous recipients of Chinese scholarships return home, they are likely to share their positive experiences with the next generation of students aspiring to study abroad and who trust the views of their predecessors.

Section 3.3

Concluding thoughts

In this chapter, we have seen that Beijing is living up to its rhetoric to "internationalize" its education system and become a premier study abroad destination (China MoE, 2010). It has wielded the power of its purse to give scholarships to students from EAP countries as inducements to study in China. Moreover, it has proactively invested in cooperative agreements, institutional partnerships, as well as Mandarin language teaching and testing to reduce barriers to entry for international students.

Beijing has also gained a formidable advantage compared to other EAP countries in deploying its public diplomacy toolkit in ways that are mutually reinforcing to its international education objectives. Its Confucius Institutes not only spread Chinese language and culture but also function as recruiting grounds for China's study abroad programs. Its vast informational diplomacy efforts amplify the perceived prestige of studying in China. Meanwhile, President Xi Jinping's large-scale infrastructure investments in Belt and Road Initiative countries have created an additional economic rationale for EAP students who view studying in China as positioning them well for job opportunities at home with Chinese companies.

China is an increasingly popular destination for international students from EAP countries who view it as place to go to receive a quality education at a fraction of the price of the alternatives. A global study of Chinese scholarship participants indicates that international students are more positive regarding their impressions of the host country, the longer they study in China (Myungsik and Elaine, 2018). Finally, former study abroad participants appear to be among the more effective recruitment tools for Beijing to prime the pump for the next generation.

Nevertheless, Beijing's aspirations and student exchange activities are not without controversy. China's strategic competitors are concerned that Chinese government-backed student exchange activities will displace their own soft power standing or spread ideologies that run counter to their interests. Meanwhile, the growing volume and visibility of Chinese students overseas have raised the alarm among vocal detractors warning that Beijing impresses their people-to-people ambassadors into patriotic service to advance China's interests with their university peers.

Now that we have a better understanding of how China deploys its informational diplomacy and student exchange tools, we explore in Chapter 4 whether these tools are associated with the reputational and foreign policy gains Beijing hopes for in the East Asia and Pacific region. Specifically, we construct a set of statistical models to test whether public perceptions of Chinese leadership and the voting behavior of EAP leaders in international fora is associated with exposure to Chinese informational diplomacy, as part of a broader public diplomacy toolkit. Due to the limited time span and observations of our data, we do not include student exchange in the Chapter 4 analysis.

Box 7: Limitations to studying Chinese soft-power gains through student and scholarly exchanges

Students and scholarly exchanges have been widely recognized as a tool for a country to expand its influence beyond its own borders in a gradual but long-lasting way. While pioneers of research on soft power have long studied the use of student exchange by Western nations, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and other European countries, China is a recent entrant to the global arena of student exchanges. Hu Jintao may have acknowledged the role of international student exchanges in rejuvenating the image of China, but only since President Xi's incumbency in 2013 has China begun to invest heavily in nurturing future leaders from other countries through Chinese education. As a result, researchers have only recently started to explore how international students who pursue education at Chinese institutions perceive China, and the downstream effects of these exchanges on Beijing's soft-power gains.

For this report, we were unable to perform a robust statistical analysis of the reputational gains from China's student exchange activities on perceptions of Chinese leadership, as we determined that the period from 2000 to 2018 was inadequate to account for the time lag in which we would expect to see changes in behavior following exposure to student exchange. We would expect the gains for Beijing from student exchange activities to be realized much later down the road, only if and when young people from EAP countries who studied abroad in China assume positions of influence and power. To approximate the returns on these relationships, the data would therefore need to be lagged for a longer duration than what is available for this study. With time, more systematic longitudinal data could be gathered on Chinese exchange programs with EAP countries, which would allow researchers to test time-lagged models of soft power gains. Below, we highlight three pieces of previous research on student

exchange—including the aspects of student exchange studied, the type of data gathered, and the analytical approaches taken—as examples of the kind of longitudinal that could be performed on China's student exchange activities in the future.

Spilimbergo, A. (2009). Democracy and Foreign Education. *American Economic Review*. V99 N1.

Spilimbergo uses the UNESCO Statistical Yearbook panel data on student exchanges worldwide for a 53-year period from 1950-2003, with stronger coverage since 1960, to study the effects of foreign education in promoting democracy in students' home countries upon return. The author tests this hypothesis empirically through a series of regression models, which control for country and year fixed effects, as well as other covariates such as GDP per capita, democracy in neighboring countries, educational attainment, and democracy in trading partners. The study finds a strong relationship between foreign education and growing levels of democracy, measured through Freedom House's yearly Index of Democracy in the home country, but only if the student studied in a democratic destination country. The observed effects are more robust as the lag specification is increased. Spilimbergo observes statistically significant, positive correlations between observed levels of democracy in a home country and the volume of students that studied in democratic countries 40 years ago. This long lag specification support previous findings by Acemoglu et. al. (2005) that links between education and democracy operate only with very long lags.

Weymouth, Stephen J. and J. Muir Macpherson (2011). The Social Construction of Policy Reform: Economists and Trade Liberalization around the World. *International Interactions* 38, 5(2012): 670-702.

Weymouth and Macpherson's study takes a different approach to studying the impacts of foreign education. They evaluate a database from the American

1981-1997 of 6,493 US-trained economist members with PhDs, who share a common belief in the benefits of free trade and who operate with varying degrees of political influence around the world. The authors use the number of Fulbright grants allocated by the US as an instrumental variable for the number of US-trained economists. Their analysis finds that these economists were able to accelerate the reform process in their home countries toward a freer trade environment.

Atkinson, C. (2010). Does Soft Power Matter? A Comparative Analysis of Student Exchange Programs, 1980-2006. *Foreign Policy Analysis* V6 I1:1-22.

Atkinson's work offers insights into the nuances of what makes soft power gains more effective through student exchanges. The key hypothesis that Atkinson tests is whether countries that participated in military exchanges and student exchanges with the United States observed lower levels of human rights abuses. Atkinson uses a database for the period 1980-2006, covering a blend of highly authoritarian or democratic countries, as well as countries that fell between these two ends of the spectrum. The key findings of this research are that countries who participated in military and civilian exchanges were less likely to commit human rights abuses. Military exchanges are a more likely predictor of reduced human rights violations than civilian exchanges. Atkinson's study also uses time lags to explore the relationships between her dependent and independent variables. By comparing the results of the two kinds of exchanges, Atkinson argues that there are at least three contextual conditions that need to be fulfilled: (i) deep and prolonged social interactions with the hosts while abroad; (ii) a sense of community or common identity between exchange students and their hosts; and (iii) attainment of a politically influential position by the exchange student upon return to home country. Military exchanges qualify the three conditions more readily than civilian student exchanges.

- ³⁶ This references China's National Medium- and Long-Term Education Plan (2010-2020).
- ³⁷ Chinese students enrolled in the higher education institutions of EAP countries are arguably an extension of China's people-to-people diplomacy in presenting a softer, more personal appeal to foreign publics to think well of China.
- ³⁸ Wang and Tang (2018) also point out that China's student exchange activities may generate positive spillover benefits for its BRI agenda: "the education of international students is an important way for the successful implementation of China's overseas projects in [partner countries]." Moreover, having trained professionals in ASEAN countries may help reduce operational risks of BRI projects due to language, culture, and political issues, and lower the overall costs by providing local staff versus foreign management on external assignments (Wang and Tang, 2018).
- ³⁹ This growing interest in studying in China is not unique to the EAP region: China attracted a 420 percent uptick in international students globally between 2002 and 2016 (China Power Team, 2017; Bislev, 2017).
- ⁴⁰ China offers a world-class educational infrastructure (e.g., labs, research equipment, and internationally recognized scholars) at a fraction of the cost of institutions with similar facilities in Australia, Japan, the US and Europe. See Custer et al. (2018) and Custer et al. (forthcoming).
- ⁴¹ There is an expectation among these young people that there will be growing demand among government, social and private sector actors for people familiar with China, proficient in Mandarin, and having professional networks or educational credentials from China. Education in China would set them up for success at these goals. See Custer et al. (2018).
- ⁴² Roughly 70,000 South Korean students studied in or visited China in 2017 alone (Chinese MoFA, scraped by AidData and CSIS).
- ⁴³ The China MOE also facilitates the exchange of general and senior scholars through its 'Study in Asia' program. See: Chinese Embassy in Singapore (2019): <https://bit.ly/2YS1Wgl>
- ⁴⁴ This program is called the China/AUN full scholarship program. See: State Council (2014): <https://bit.ly/2YXSLv2>
- ⁴⁵ This program is called the China/Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) scholarship program. See: State Council (2014): <https://bit.ly/2YXSLv2>
- ⁴⁶ North American higher education institutions attract the largest share of Chinese foreign education-seeking students globally.
- ⁴⁷ Japan and China agreed to this friendship year in order to facilitate a wide range of exchanges to "further enhance mutual understanding and promote mutual trust" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, Feb 2012).
- ⁴⁸ Chinese students overseas may enhance the perceived value of partnering with China as the receiving country accrues tangible benefits from these study abroad activities. These benefits are both direct, in the form of tuition payments to local universities, as well as indirect through the students' consumption of housing, goods, and services which boosts the local economy (Bislev, 2017). Hamilton (2018) notes that the consumption power of Chinese students overseas has gained outsized importance for universities in receiving countries, leading to a preoccupation among policymakers and universities who seek to safeguard continued access to Chinese students as a boon to local economies. Hamilton (2018) speaks at length about China's purported intent to use Chinese students overseas as a means to disrupt public discourse within EAP countries in ways that are advantageous to Beijing, such as encouraging universities to engage in self-censorship.
- ⁴⁹ These bilateral cooperative agreements may also include easing visa requirements for international students and scholars to study or visit China or for Chinese scholars to study or visit a counterpart country in the region.
- ⁵⁰ The authors extended the original data from Custer et al. (2018) for 2004-2016 by two additional years through 2018. AidData staff and research assistants web scraped the updated data from the Hanban website (<http://english.hanban.org>) and the China Foreign Affairs Yearbooks.
- ⁵¹ The HSK proficiency exams are similar to that of the TOEFL, which tests English language proficiency for non-native English-speaking students to demonstrate a working knowledge of English for higher education in the US, Canada, and the UK.
- ⁵² More precisely, when grouping the numbers of scholarships announced by China from 2000-2018 according to countries' freedom scores in 2019 (Freedom House), we see that 30% more scholarships were announced for EAP countries in the bottom half by level of freedom than for those in the top half. Also, when grouping the number of scholarships announced by China from 2000-2018 by average GDP per capita over the same period (World Bank data, adjusted to 2000 US dollars), we see that China announced seven times as many scholarships for EAP countries in the bottom half by GDP per capita than for those for the top half.

CHAPTER FOUR

Are China's informational diplomacy efforts associated with the outcomes Beijing wishes to achieve?

Key findings in this chapter:

- *Content-sharing partnerships were associated with both higher approval and lower disapproval of Chinese leadership among citizens in EAP countries.*
- *In contrast to other public diplomacy tools, informational diplomacy does not appear to be associated with EAP leaders voting in closer alignment with China in the United Nations General Assembly.*

Over the past two decades, Chinese leaders have not only waxed eloquently in public about their aspirations to influence foreign publics and leaders (Zhao, 2016; Guo, 2018), but they have also matched that rhetoric with decisive action. In Chapters 2 and 3, we quantified how Beijing has deployed two public diplomacy tools—informational diplomacy and student exchange—over time and space across the EAP region. We also observed that the tone and substance of reporting within EAP countries have improved in line with Beijing's aspirations (Chapter 2). Meanwhile, China has attracted a growing volume of international students to study in China who, upon completing their education, return home with more favorable impressions of their host country (Chapter 3).

In this chapter, we build upon this quantitative data to assess whether Chinese informational diplomacy is associated with two longer-term outcomes of interest to Beijing: more favorable popular perceptions of Chinese leaders (**Section 4.1**) and EAP leaders in closer foreign policy alignment with China (**Section 4.2**). As discussed in Chapter 1, we determined that the period from 2000 to 2018 was inadequate to adequately account for the time lag in which we would expect to see changes in citizen and leader behaviors following their exposure to China's student exchange activities. Therefore, we focus instead on informational diplomacy, as a part of China's broader public diplomacy toolkit, in the remainder of this chapter.

Section 4.1

To what extent is China's informational diplomacy associated with more favorable popular perceptions of China?

China's informational diplomacy overtures aim to broadcast Beijing's preferred narrative at scale via content-sharing partnerships with EAP media outlets, press visits to China, and interviews and op-eds from Chinese senior leaders and ambassadors. Therefore, as Beijing deploys these informational diplomacy tools, we would expect to see public perceptions becoming more favorable toward China (a first-order effect). Then, if informational diplomacy (as part of a broader public diplomacy toolkit) is successful in shifting public opinion, this may trigger a set of second-order effects, such that policymaking elites are willing to vote with China in international fora.

In this section, we examine the relationship between popular perceptions of Chinese leadership and five proxy measures of informational diplomacy for which we have the best coverage across the EAP region over time (see **Table 4**). As a proxy for favorability toward Beijing, we use responses to the Gallup World Poll—an annual public opinion survey—in which respondents answered a question regarding whether they approved or disapproved of Chinese leadership.⁵³ Moreover, we control for a respondent's socio-economic circumstances and the attributes of the country in which they live, recognizing that these factors may also shape how they view Chinese leaders.

Due to data limitations, we only assess whether there appears to be a statistically significant relationship between our Chinese informational diplomacy measures and popular perceptions of Chinese leadership and do not claim that this association is causal.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, our statistical model is still a useful empirical test to assess the strength and direction of the association between informational diplomacy and Chinese leaders' perceived favorability in the EAP region.

Table 4: Modeling China's informational diplomacy tools and public perceptions of Chinese leadership

Factor	Proxy measures used
Perceptions of Chinese leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proportion of respondents to the Gallup World Poll who approved of Chinese leaders • Proportion of respondents to the Gallup World Poll who disapproved of Chinese leaders
Chinese informational diplomacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of ambassador op-eds • Number of senior leader interviews and op-eds • Number of media content-sharing partnerships signed • Number of inbound journalist visits from EAP countries to China
Individual-level socio-economic characteristics (controls)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender • Age • Education level • Income • Employment status • Resident in urban or rural area
Attributes of the countries in which an individual lives (controls)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GDP per capita • Electoral democracy • Major episodes of political violence

Notes: Please see the Annex for more information on the variables and model specifications.

4.1.1

Content-sharing partnerships were associated with a higher probability of approval and lower disapproval of Chinese leadership

Before we take into account the potential role of informational diplomacy, it is important to capture a baseline of trends in Beijing's perceived favorability within EAP countries over time. Surprisingly, we find that China's favorability ratings actually declined across the region on average from 2000 to 2018. The proportion of respondents who approved of Chinese leadership job performance dropped and those that disapproved grew (**Figure 14**). This is contrary to what we expected to see in two respects. First, we previously observed shifts in the tone of reporting and the proportion of human rights articles mentioning China that were favorable to Beijing. Second, we know from Chapters 2 and 3 that Beijing has been proactive in presenting an attractive face to EAP publics.

This broader regional trend raises two points for consideration. First, there are myriad factors that may contribute to how Chinese leaders are perceived by EAP publics. Some of these factors Beijing can control: its own rhetoric, policies, and actions. However, Beijing has little control over how its actions will be perceived, the countermoves of foreign powers that seek to

advance their own interests, and the socio-political dynamics within the countries it seeks to woo. Second, it could be that perceptions of Chinese leaders would have been even worse, absent Beijing's informational diplomacy overtures.

From this baseline of perceptions of Chinese leadership, we then assessed the probability of a given survey respondent approving or disapproving of Chinese leadership in light of their country's exposure to five different informational diplomacy tools. We also assessed whether and how perceptions of Chinese leadership were associated with a composite index of four other Chinese public diplomacy tools from Custer et al. (2018): sister cities, Confucius Institutes, financial diplomacy, and elite-to-elite visits. Of the public diplomacy tools we tested, only content-sharing partnerships with EAP media outlets were associated with both increased approval and decreased disapproval of Chinese leadership.

This finding is in line with our assumption that as citizens are exposed to more Chinese content disseminated through locally recognized and trusted media outlets in EAP countries, this would function as a means to win over skeptics, as well as reinforce key messages with supporters. Similarly, Cook (2019) observes that such partnerships effectively allow Beijing

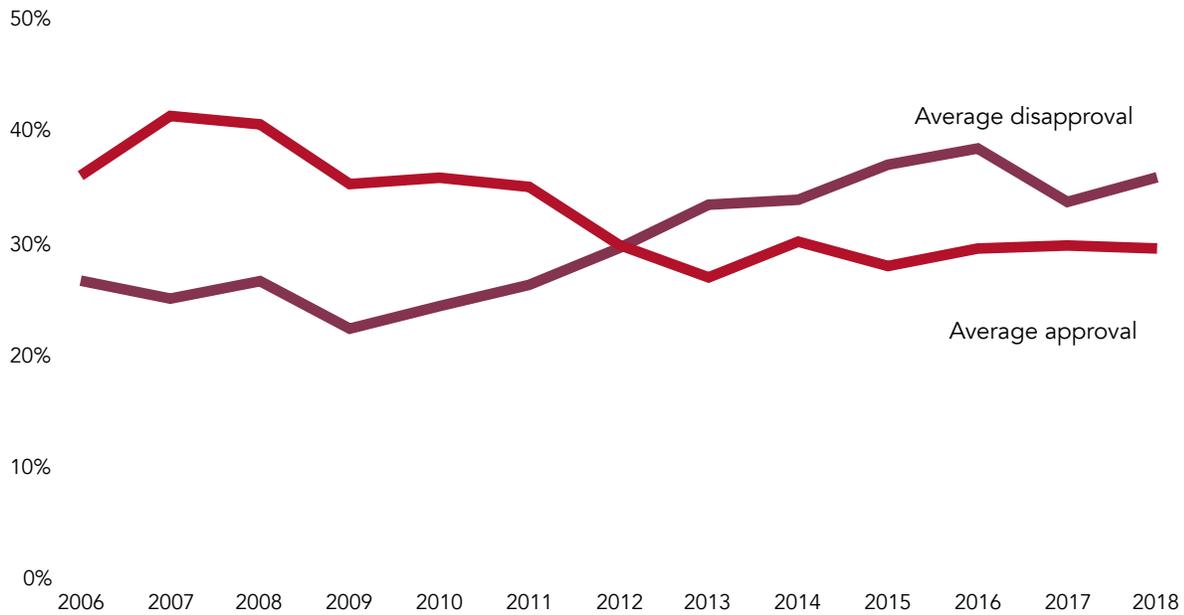
to “distance content from its...origins” through disseminating messages via trusted interlocutors without disclosing the original source. In this way, China is able to sidestep potential objections to its own international broadcasting among publics that will not be “attracted to or convinced by Chinese government propaganda” (ibid).

Ambassador op-eds and journalist exchanges were associated with higher likelihood of approval of Chinese leadership among EAP publics, as were inbound press visits to China. However, neither of these tools seem to be well positioned to win over skeptics in the same way that content-sharing partnerships do, for they were not associated with decreasing probability of disapproval of Chinese leaders. The role of China’s most senior leaders (e.g., President, Premier) appears to be more mixed: interviews with these leaders were associated with a lower approval *and* lower disapproval of Chinese leadership, but op-eds from this same group were correlated with lower approval and higher disapproval. Meanwhile, our index of other public

diplomacy tools (e.g., financial diplomacy, sister cities, elite-to-elite visits, Confucius Institutes) was associated with higher approval and a lower disapproval.

There may be a similar dynamic in play here to what we observed with regard to student exchange (Chapter 3), whereby favorability follows familiarity. EAP publics may be more receptive to Chinese officials they deem to be closer to, and more familiar with, their countries. While Chinese ambassadors may have once been known among only a small circle of policymakers in their assigned country, there are indications globally that these officials have played a more publicly visible role in recent years (Kuo 2019; Zhou, 2019). In this respect, an ambassador op-ed may hold greater credibility and sway with EAP citizens, at least in part because these individuals appear to be more knowledgeable and recognizable in the context of the countries they seek to influence. A similar explanation may be true for press trips to China, which are intended to increase familiarity of EAP journalists with their Chinese counterparts as well as China as a whole.

Figure 14: Average ratings of Chinese leadership in the Gallup World Poll, 2006-2018



Notes: This figure visualizes the average percentage of respondents surveyed across all EAP countries in the Gallup World Poll that approved or disapproved of Chinese leadership.

Source: Gallup World Poll (2006-2018).

Section 4.2

To what extent is China's informational diplomacy associated with EAP leaders being in closer foreign policy alignment with China?

Chinese leaders are clearly interested in how EAP publics perceive China: winning the world's admiration is prominent not only in the rhetoric, but also in the actions of Chinese leaders. Nonetheless, Beijing is equally, if not more, interested in the actions EAP leaders take that will advance its national interests.

There are methodological challenges to measuring whether and how China's informational diplomacy is associated with foreign policy returns. For example, Chinese leaders may achieve gains that are country- or time period-specific, such as convincing countries to ratify trade and security cooperation agreements

beneficial to China or to avoid censuring Beijing for controversial policies, both foreign (e.g., incursions in the South China Sea, One China policy) and domestic (e.g., unrest in Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong). However, these instances are too infrequent and sporadic to test systematically for all EAP countries over time. Moreover, it would be unrealistic to attempt to trace the relationship of informational diplomacy with foreign policy gains in isolation of other public diplomacy tools, which are often deployed in tandem.

Cognizant of these limitations, in this section we examine informational diplomacy alongside other public diplomacy tools to understand whether and how each is associated with closer alignment with China's preferred positions in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA).⁵⁵ We recognize that this proxy measure is imperfect; however, it offers the best coverage across the EAP region over time, which is why we employ it in this study. We selected content-sharing partnerships as a proxy for informational diplomacy for this comparative analysis, as it is the only informational diplomacy instrument that showed a strong association with both higher approval and reduced disapproval of Chinese leadership. **Table 5** further elaborates on the variables included in our statistical models.

Table 5: Modeling China's public diplomacy tools and alignment with China in international fora

Factor	Proxy measures used
Alignment with China in international fora	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voting alignment with Beijing in the United Nations General Assembly (2000-2018)
Chinese public diplomacy (inputs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of media content-sharing partnerships signed, cumulative (informational diplomacy) • Number of established Confucius Institutes, cumulative (cultural diplomacy) • Number of sister city agreements with China, cumulative (exchange diplomacy) • Number of civilian or military official visits between China and a given EAP country (elite diplomacy) • Chinese official finance dollars committed with diplomatic intent (financial diplomacy)
Individual-level socio-economic characteristics (controls)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender • Age • Education level • Income • Employment status • Resident in urban or rural area
Attributes of the countries in which an individual lives (controls)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GDP per capita • Electoral democracy • Major episodes of political violence

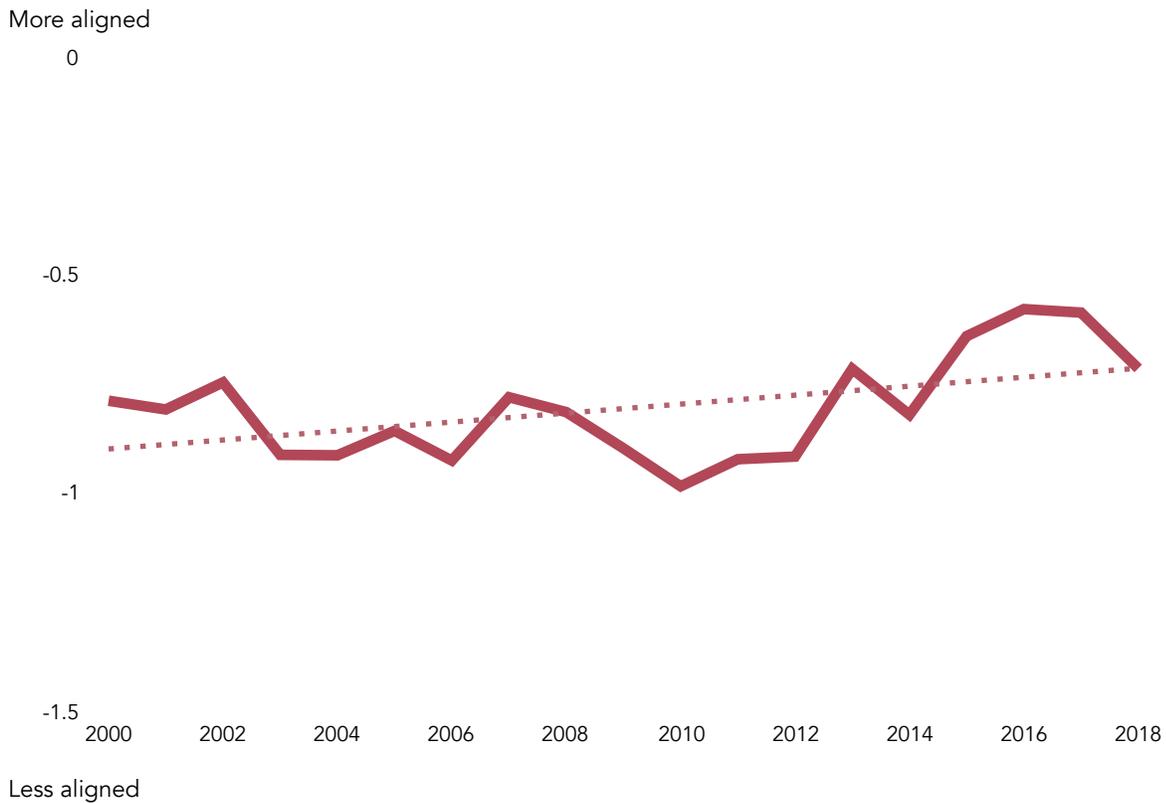
Notes: Please see the Annex for more information on the variables and model specification

4.2.1
In contrast to other public diplomacy tools, informational diplomacy does not appear to be associated with closer voting alignment with EAP leaders in the United Nations General Assembly

From 2000 to 2018, Beijing saw an increase on our measure of foreign policy alignment: leaders voted with China more often at UNGA (Figure 15). From this baseline, we then assessed whether our proxy measures for China’s five public diplomacy tools (Table 5) were correlated with UNGA voting (see Technical

Annex). Our measure of Chinese informational diplomacy (content-sharing partnerships) does not appear to be correlated with UNGA voting alignment between China and EAP countries. While the underlying data or the model could be obscuring a relationship that is actually there, the more plausible explanation is that we are seeing the limits of informational diplomacy. At its core, informational diplomacy’s emphasis on shaping the media and popular narrative about China in a broad-based way may simply be less well positioned than other tools to help Beijing achieve discrete foreign policy gains.

Figure 15: Average alignment of EAP countries in UNGA voting with China, 2000-2018



Notes: This figure visualizes the average distance in UNGA voting alignment with China for all EAP countries over the period of 2000-2018. Distances closer to 0, whether positive or negative values, indicate greater alignment with China. These distances are calculated by Bailey et. al. using a latent variable measurement model. We multiply the Bailey et al. measures by -1 for easier visual interpretation as alignment with China.

Source: Bailey et al. (2017).

Section 4.3

Concluding thoughts

Throughout this study, we have argued that Beijing deploys informational diplomacy (as part of a broader public diplomacy toolkit) to gain favorability with EAP publics and convince EAP leaders to align with its foreign policy interests. There were substantial methodological challenges to both quantifying how China uses various informational diplomacy tools over space and time, as well as assessing the effectiveness of these overtures in helping Beijing realize the gains it seeks.

Amidst these constraints, we have been able to derive three valuable insights about Chinese informational diplomacy. First, we do see a relationship between several of China's informational diplomacy activities and popular perceptions of Chinese leadership in EAP

countries. Second, China's content-sharing partnerships with EAP media outlets may be best positioned to win over skeptics, as this was the only informational diplomacy tool that was associated with a greater likelihood of both increased approval and decreased disapproval of Chinese leadership. Third, despite China's broader aspirations for its public diplomacy overtures to realize longer-term foreign policy gains, we did not find any evidence of a systematic relationship between content-sharing partnerships (our measure of informational diplomacy) and the voting behavior of EAP leaders in the UN General Assembly.

To this point, we have limited ourselves to looking back to assess China's historical approaches to informational diplomacy and student exchange and the response from EAP leaders and publics. In Chapter 5, we shift from this retrospective view to a forward-looking prognosis for the future trajectory of China's efforts to leverage these tools to advance its interests in the region and around the world.

⁵³ The Gallup World Poll provides public opinion data from 2006 to 2018 on a variety of topics. For this analysis, we utilized respondent-level data in response to the question: "Do you approve of Chinese leadership?" (Q151). Respondents could select "Approve," "Disapprove," "Don't know," or "Refuse to answer." From these responses, we constructed two dependent variables: (1) a binary for "Approve" responses, and (2) a binary for "Disapprove" responses. We coded all "Don't know" answers as 0 and dropped all "Refuse to answer" response. It is important to note that, although we view the respondents' answers to this question as an acceptable proxy measure for favorability toward Beijing, this does not necessarily speak to whether they explicitly view China positively.

⁵⁴ We have attempted to control for various confounding factors, but we cannot rule out the possibility that our results are affected by omitted variable bias (i.e., factors which are unaccounted for and can affect citizens' perceptions or leader voting patterns).

⁵⁵ Not only is UNGA voting data available for all countries over time, it tends to have a higher level of variance than other foreign policy decisions. Moreover, since many of the UNGA resolutions are symbolic in nature, they contain more information on a nation's foreign policy interests on a range of security, humanitarian, and political issues. Finally, there is a broad range of academic literature that has affirmed the value of UNGA voting to study foreign policy change and similarity (e.g., Dreher et al, 2018; Bailey et al., 2017; and Struver, 2012).

CHAPTER FIVE

Implications of Beijing's informational diplomacy and student exchange overtures for China, for EAP countries, and the world

Beijing's desire to expand its sphere of influence and challenge the current world order is seen by some scholars an inevitable byproduct of China's growing wealth and power as an economic superpower (Friedberg, 2019; Kania, 2018). Imbued with newfound confidence, Chinese leaders like President Xi Jinping and his predecessor Hu Jintao have embraced a more assertive role for Beijing in shaping global norms, values, and attitudes in line with China's preferred narrative (Guo, 2018; Zhao, 2016). They have matched this rhetoric with action, mobilizing a vast government bureaucracy and an extended network of journalists, students, educational institutions, and media companies at home and abroad in service of promoting China as a "responsible power" (Hu, 2012) ready to take on the mantle of a "global leader" (Xi, 2017).

We have presented evidence in this study that Beijing has doubled down on its efforts to win favor with citizens and leaders in the East Asia and Pacific region over the last two decades. While focused on one region, this report sheds light on the means and possible responses to China's informational diplomacy and student exchange overtures on a global stage. In this concluding chapter, we reflect on what all of this means for three audiences. First, we pose two lessons learned for Chinese leaders regarding the effectiveness of their informational diplomacy and student exchange efforts (Section 5.1). Second, we present two recommendations for leaders in countries on the receiving end of Beijing's overtures (Section 5.2). Finally, we offer two recommendations for Beijing's strategic competitors as they seek to contest or curb China's growing influence (Section 5.3).

Section 5.1

Lessons learned for China on its informational diplomacy and student exchange activities

Chinese leaders have invested substantial amounts of senior-level attention, as well as financial and human resources to carry out informational diplomacy and student exchange activities at scale. However, Beijing's activities may not be equally well positioned to realize the gains it hopes for with foreign publics and leaders. Reflecting on the evidence presented in this report, we pose two lessons learned for Chinese leaders as they

refine their public diplomacy playbook in the coming years.

5.1.1

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

For example, EAP publics better received op-eds penned by Chinese ambassadors than those written by other senior Chinese leaders. In a similar vein, content-sharing partnerships that enable Chinese media to localize and disseminate their preferred messages via local EAP media outlets were uniquely associated with both higher approval and lower disapproval ratings of Chinese leadership.

5.1.2

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

For example, journalist exchanges were associated with higher approval ratings of Chinese leadership, and foreign students on Chinese government scholarships reportedly viewed China more positively after they completed their studies than before (Myungsik and Elaine, 2018).

Section 5.2

Implications for countries on the receiving end of Beijing's overtures to media and students

Beijing's informational diplomacy overtures—from international broadcasting and journalist exchanges, to content-sharing partnerships, op-eds, and interviews with foreign media outlets—have become more sophisticated over time. While informational diplomacy activities can promote mutual understanding, these mechanisms could easily be used for multiple purposes, both benign and malign. Reflecting on the evidence presented in this report, we pose two recommendations for countries on the receiving end of Beijing's overtures to media.

5.2.1

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

Beijing's demonstrated enthusiasm for brokering content-sharing partnerships implies that foreign publics will likely consume more Chinese messaging in future. Such content-sharing partnerships are associated with more favorable views among foreign publics in two respects: higher approval and lower disapproval of Chinese leadership. However, Beijing's limited transparency on its activities increases the risk that media consumers may not be able to responsibly consume content if they cannot readily identify the source.

5.2.2

Recipient countries should invest in increasing the investigative journalism capacity of their media as one of the best protections from co-option.

Beijing's willingness to treat sympathetic journalists to all-expenses-paid trips to China on the one hand and restrict access to visas and media-worthy events for those hostile to its preferred narrative on the other hand has provoked concerns that Chinese leaders have undue influence over the substance and tone of reporting of interest to China. We do see some evidence that criticism of Beijing has become more muted and the tone of media coverage less volatile over the past two decades. Moreover, journalist exchanges were associated with higher levels of approval of Chinese leadership. Ultimately, journalists need to determine for themselves how they will report on China, but countries on the receiving end of Beijing's overtures can decrease the risk of co-option of their media coverage through encouraging greater investigative journalism capacity.

Section 5.3

Considerations for China's strategic competitors in view of Beijing's growing influence

In its bid to win over foreign publics and leaders, China has two formidable advantages over its potential strategic competitors: vast foreign currency reserves and centralized control over its domestic media. Beijing has clearly demonstrated its willingness to deploy the power of its purse to bankroll the education of international students via scholarships, invest in relationships with foreign journalists via exchanges, and expand the reach of its international broadcasting efforts via partnerships with local media outlets. The proliferation of Chinese state-owned media outlets and relatively lower levels of media freedom in China more

generally mean that Beijing can exercise a higher degree of message discipline than would be possible in more democratic countries with robust media freedom protections. As a result, China's strategic competitors are cognizant that Beijing's influence with foreign publics could eclipse their own in future. Reflecting on the evidence in this report, we put forth two recommendations for China's strategic competitors as they consider how best to respond to Beijing's informational diplomacy and student exchange overtures.

5.3.1

Beijing's strategic competitors would do well to take a page out of China's playbook by proactively competing to attract top talent from the countries they seek to influence to study abroad.

Beijing liberally uses scholarships, cooperative agreements, and Chinese language learning and testing opportunities to stoke demand for students (particularly from poorer and less politically free countries) to pursue higher education in China. Moreover, China's reputation for generous scholarship support has reinforced in the mind of foreign students that China is a good value-for-money alternative to studying in their home countries or other top-tier study abroad destinations.

5.3.2

Beijing's strategic competitors should explore ways to localize their messages in partnership with local media outlets, while also increasing the resilience of recipient countries to co-option.

China has invested in content-sharing partnerships, interviews and op-eds, journalist exchanges, and subsidized study abroad opportunities at scale with the countries it seeks to influence. By contrast, the public diplomacy budgets of many of Beijing's competitors have seen a decline in recent years amidst pressures to reduce public spending and greater interest in cultivating hard over soft power capabilities. To maintain their competitive edge in light of China's growing soft power influence, Beijing's strategic competitors should better resource efforts to facilitate exchange programs for influential foreign journalists, broker content-sharing partnerships with local media outlets, and invest in training programs to promote responsible investigative journalism.

Section 5.4

Concluding thoughts

In this report, we sought to better understand which informational diplomacy and student exchange tools Beijing has used, with which countries, and to what effect in the East Asia and Pacific region. This study broke new ground in several respects. We developed a taxonomy of activities with the potential to scale to

additional regions and donors for comparative analysis in future. We collected the best available data with

which to approximate the volume and distribution of China's overtures in the EAP region. Despite substantial data limitations, we also analyzed the extent to which Beijing's informational diplomacy and student exchange activities were associated with more

favorable popular perceptions of Chinese leadership and closer alignment of EAP leaders with China's preferred foreign policy positions in UNGA. We hope that future studies will continue to build upon this work to increase the availability of data and analysis on China's efforts to mobilize media and students to tell its story.

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