



CENTRALIZATION+

Understanding China's Transforming Strategy for Global Information Influence

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For European and other actors seeking to understand and address foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), it is essential to grasp the nature of China's evolving domestic propaganda architecture and its impact on the country's conduct of international communication. Organizational changes in the country directly shape the capabilities, methods, and scale of influence activities that societies in Europe and beyond now confront. Since 2018, building on changes introduced early in Xi Jinping's first term, China has fundamentally restructured its external propaganda apparatus. Beijing has moved beyond the "mega external propaganda" model of centralized state media that dominated during the Hu Jintao era and before. In its place, the leadership has developed what this report terms "Centralization+" – a coordinated, multi-tiered system deploying provincial, city, and county-level actors in information operations worldwide. International Communication Centers (ICCs) stand at the heart of this transformation. Operating under local and regional propaganda office leadership, these centers coordinate state messaging through distributed networks even as they maintain centralized Party control.



Produced by the Henan International Communication Center, the propaganda film "Maiwulanjiang: Life is Hopeful" is a positive account of life in Xinjiang, where China has faced accusations of serious human rights abuses. SOURCE: All-China Journalists Association.

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) first conceived a program of soft power development nearly two decades ago, articulated in a dedicated section of Hu Jintao's political report to the 17th National Congress of the CCP in 2007, China's leadership has obsessed over the question of how to achieve greater influence over global agendas.¹ Central to this effort is achieving a level of "discourse power," (话语权) or *huayuquan*, that the country's leadership sees as commensurate with the country's comprehensive national power (CNP),² understood as the resources possessed by a state to ensure both its survival and its development, as well as that state's capability to use its resources to achieve strategic objectives.³

The soft power push, which initially took shape as an effort largely to fund overseas state media platforms, has intensified dramatically under Xi Jinping, who portrays it as an existential necessity for the Party. Framing Western information

prejudice as responsible for China's continued global marginalization, Xi has defined discourse power construction as essential to overcoming what he has called the “third affliction” — the “suffering of criticism” from Western discourse hegemony, following Mao's defeat of foreign aggression through the founding of the PRC, and Deng's besting of hunger and poverty through economic reforms.⁴

In Xi's first policy address to top propaganda officials in August 2013, he combined the prerogative of external propaganda, or *waixuan*, with the softer-sounding notion of “telling China's story well” on the international stage. But he struck a much harsher tone in language that only weeks later was publicly reported,⁵ referring in terms redolent of the Cultural Revolution to a global “public opinion struggle.”⁶ This “struggle” embodies the conviction, now at the heart of China's external communication and media outreach strategy, that the CCP's legitimacy cannot be secured at home without the assurance provided by global dominance in the information space. More recently, in May 2021, speaking at a collective study session of the CCP's Politburo on international communication strategy, Xi said clearly that international discourse power was essential to creating “a favorable external public opinion environment for our country's reform, development, and stability.”⁷

What happens in the information space outside China is now core, in the leadership's view, to the most pressing issue facing the CCP inside China.

What happens in the information space outside China is now core, in the leadership's view, to the most pressing issues facing the CCP inside China — from economic development to political, ideological and regime stability. The objective is to neutralize criticism of Chinese policies while reshaping global narratives in China's favor, supporting the country's development goals and its ascent to greater international influence.

This strategic imperative naturally projects beyond China's borders, challenging media and information integrity worldwide. European Union member states have developed a general understanding of China's role as a determined actor in global information influence and manipulation, largely through mapping digital operations and analyzing how narratives and disinformation are deployed across social media platforms and other channels.⁸ The EU's Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) framework offers a strong working definition of threats to information integrity as they emerge in our global, regional, national and community information spaces. FIMI defines these threats as an intentional and coordinated pattern by state or non-state actors of “behavior that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures, and political processes,” and which acknowledges the role of proxies both “inside and outside of their own territory”.

Much of the West's understanding of China's external propaganda apparatus remains anchored to an outdated model from the era of what scholars and ers of PRC communication and disinformation have termed “mega external propaganda” (大外宣), or *da waixuan*⁹ — essentially the structure of central state-run media such as Xinhua News Agency, *China Daily*, and CGTN that was bolstered from the late 2000s under Hu Jintao, and which has been amplified with mixed success through global social media platforms. Since 2013, however, Xi Jinping has

led a sweeping restructuring that has moved beyond this centralized model. The restructuring responds both to growing media dissent in the decade before he took power and to the perceived ineffectiveness of the top-down central approach to global communication.¹⁰ The result is what we term “Centralization+” — a multi-tiered system that deploys provincial, city, and county-level media organizations and government resources as frontline actors in information operations. While maintaining centralized control over messaging, this approach distributes operational capacity across a broad network of local and regional actors, all charged with external communication work. The system combines traditional top-down propaganda with dispersed operations capable of targeting specific regions like Southeast Asia, Africa, and Europe, and is designed to evade detection and flood information spaces with state messaging across regions and languages.

The “Centralization+” approach responds to technological and market changes in media production and consumption, as well as to the leadership’s renewed conviction that information dominance is essential to achieving China’s geopolitical objectives. At the heart of this system are International Communication Centers (ICCs) — local and regional bodies under propaganda office leadership that leverage existing domestic media capacity and build partnerships with international organizations to advance China’s bid for global “discourse power.” Together with International Communication Alliances (ICAs) — city and county-level bodies proliferating across China that integrate local media, businesses, universities, and civil organizations to coordinate external messaging¹² — these centers form partnerships with organizations in media, business, and academia to maximize reach through what the leadership calls an “all-of-society” approach to propaganda dissemination. ICCs and ICAs launch their own media and related social media brands, opening accounts on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, X and other platforms through which digital content can be disseminated, generally with zero visibility about the state-run identity of the source. In many cases, too, ICC and ICA content generation happens through local and regional “media convergence centers” that have proliferated across China as part of Xi’s effort to remodel the media system.¹¹

Xi Jinping’s re-envisioned system remains in its infancy. China inaugurated its first International Communication Center (ICC) in Chongqing in 2018, a pilot effort responding to Xi Jinping’s call earlier that year to “innovate” foreign-directed propaganda.¹³ The integration of ICCs with state media, enterprises, academia, and foreign partners abroad has since become the core of China’s global media and influence strategy. The PRC now operates, according to some estimates, more than 200 ICCs, including 29 at the provincial level. So far, there are reports of nine ICC branch locations overseas, in locations from Nigeria to Italy.

Beyond the growing ICC system, this horizontal integration across sectors — operating under vertical coordination from Beijing — is exemplified in the Institute for Community with Shared Future (ICSF), a research institute established by the Communication University of China, which has opened 22 satellite research centers in partnership with institutions around the world.¹² Its stated goal is to embed Xi’s foreign policy and global governance vision into international discourse with the help of Party media — a clear demonstration once again of China’s all-of-society communication approach in action.

As the cases examined in this report will demonstrate, “Centralization+” represents a coordinated, multi-platform approach to external communication that presents itself as localized media and exchange activity while advancing the

strategic objectives of the CCP leadership. By distributing operational capacity across multiple administrative levels, this model facilitates information manipulation that frequently operates beneath the detection threshold of monitoring systems designed primarily to track more traditional, centralized state media channels. The leadership's hope is that the approach will also enable deeper engagement with concrete global audiences, enabling what Xi Jinping in May 2021 called “an image of China with credit, love and respect.”¹⁵

In a systematic examination of China's emerging operational architecture for external propaganda, this report identifies four distinct components, all coordinated in various ways with existing central CCP and government structures, including state-run media groups and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

Provincial-Level International Communication Centers — Operating at China's highest administrative level below the center, provincial ICCs serve as flagship institutions in the “Centralization+” framework, coordinating external communication strategies across entire regions while maintaining direct links to central propaganda authorities.

Region-Targeted International Communication Centers — Strategically designed ICCs that focus external communication efforts on specific geographic audiences, these centers tailor content and partnerships to regions of strategic importance, from Southeast Asia to Africa to Europe.

City and County-Level International Communication Centers — Operating at lower administrative levels, these ICCs extend the reach of China's external communication system to grassroots levels while establishing broad International Communication Alliances (ICAs) that integrate local media, businesses, universities, and civil organizations with international partners.

The Institute for Community with Shared Future — A research network with 22 global satellite centers, this think-tank cooperates directly with ICCs and ICAs to embed Party ideology into international academic and policy discourse through partnerships with universities and research institutions worldwide.

The Euro Chinese Daily, a Chinese-language outlet in Romania linked to the PRC state, reports in 2024 on the launch of Zhejiang province's international communication center.



Adding to the context and case analysis, this report includes a database documenting most of the known active ICC entities across regions, detailing their administrative level, identified social media accounts, partner organizations, and documented activities. Additionally, researchers will find a detection tipsheet featuring investigative resources and techniques for identifying ICC-origin content, together with a curated compilation of research key terms in both English and Chinese to aid in ongoing monitoring and analysis. The insights in this report hopefully provide researchers, policymakers and others with a framework for identifying and understanding FIMI operations emerging from the “Centralization+” model. Additionally, the report identifies several limitations to the “Centralization+” framework.

BACKGROUND

Five Phases of International Communication Development

A full understanding of the current “Centralization+” model requires more complete context on the strategies and environment that preceded it in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Massacre of June 4, 1989, and China's subsequent rethink of its international relations and communication. From 1989 through 2013, China's international communication progressed through three distinct phases, briefly outlined here before moving on to phases four and five, corresponding to the Xi era.

In the early 1990s, as China began to emerge from a period of relative international isolation after June Fourth,¹⁴ the leadership sought to soften certain aspects of its external communication. In January 1991, still under sanctions from the United States and the European Union stemming from the tragedy, China established the State Council Information Office (SCIO), a government office whose primary role was to “explain China to foreign countries.”¹⁵ Chinese experts have regarded this institutional change as marking a move away from external propaganda toward a “concept of modern public diplomacy,” responding to a clear global image crisis.¹⁶ It was during this period that the CCP also moved to formally rename in English and other foreign languages the “Central Propaganda Department” as the “Central Publicity Department,” noting the negative connotations of the former. (NOTE: This paper persists in the use of “propaganda” for this critical CCP office, as its role is clearly defined in official sources as broad political control of the information space.)

This period, from 1989 through to 2001, can be seen as Phase One in the post-Tiananmen development of China's external communication, a reflection of the idiom popularized by Deng Xiaoping: “Hiding one's talents and biding one's time” (韬光养晦).¹⁷ The focus during this period, following Deng's re-invigoration of economic reforms in 1992,¹⁸ was on economic development. Despite the CCP's insistence on media controls at this time, under the regime of “public opinion guidance,”¹⁹ the media industry (a new term at the time) developed rapidly, eventually spawning a new generation of commercial newspapers and magazines that brought fresh vibrancy to Chinese journalism, including even such trends as investigative reporting.²⁰

Phase Two in the development of China's international communication, from 2002 to 2007, was marked by the dramatic development of China's media space internally, alongside a new sense of professionalism among Chinese journalists,

who often strategically disregarded propaganda directives to do more in-depth and critical reporting. Crucial, too, was the emergence of the internet as a tool for communication and self-expression.²¹ Internationally during this period, China pursued the “Going Out” strategy outlined in 2001 by Xu Guangchun, the director of the CCP’s broadcast body, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT)²² — today called the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA). The “Going Out” strategy sought to gain greater control of the country’s image abroad, but focused on greater visibility for state-run broadcasters.²³ During this period, China sought to secure broadcast access for outlets such as CCTV-9 (CCTV International) in Europe and the United States, and to pay for drop-in inserts of propaganda, such as those from *China Daily*, in foreign newspapers — a tactic that has been referred to as “borrowing boats to go to sea.”²⁴

Phase Three of China’s international communication development took shape after Hu Jintao’s first high-level mention of “soft power” in his October 2007 political report to the National Congress of the CCP. It was marked most keenly, however, by the events of 2008. These included international coverage of protests in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa, critical coverage of China’s hosting of the Olympic Games,²⁵ hard-hitting coverage of the Sichuan earthquake,²⁶ and the tainted milk scandal that closely followed the Summer Olympics²⁷ — which the leadership had counted on as a massive publicity boost for China. These stories underscored not only China’s loss of the agenda in the face of “negative” foreign media coverage, but also the growing problem (for that is how the leadership viewed the question) of the freewheeling domestic press.

PHASE ONE: HIDING STRENGTHS AND BIDDING TIME	PHASE TWO: GOING OUT	PHASE THREE: SEEKING SOFT POWER
韬光养晦 (1989-2001)	走出去 (2002-2007)	文化软实力 (2007-2012)
Emerging from international isolation after June Fourth, China established the State Council Information Office (SCIO) in January 1991 to “explain China to foreign countries” marking a move toward public diplomacy. Following Deng’s re-invigoration of economic reforms in 1992, the focus was economic development. Despite media controls, the industry developed rapidly, spawning commercial newspapers and even investigative reporting.	Marked by dramatic development of China’s media space internally and emergence of the internet. The “Going Out” strategy, outlined in 2001, sought greater control of China’s image abroad through state-run broadcasters. China secured broadcast access for CCTV-9 in Europe and the US and paid for propaganda inserts in foreign newspapers — a tactic called “borrowing boats.”	Following Hu Jintao’s October 2007 mention of “soft power,” this phase was defined by 2008 events: Tibet protests, critical Olympic coverage, the Sichuan earthquake, and the tainted milk scandal. These exposed China’s loss of agenda control and the problem of a freewheeling domestic press. The frustrations — domestic media disobedience and global discourse power deficit — set the stage for Xi Jinping’s changes.

The frustrations experienced by the CCP leadership in Phase Three (2007-2012) — in which domestic media disobedience and a global discourse power deficit were opposite sides of the same coin — set the stage for the changes to come under Xi Jinping. Those changes would necessarily involve, for Xi, wresting back control of the domestic information space and framing a more robust external communication strategy built on the foundation of that control.

Phase Four: Remaking Domestic Media in the Party's Image

By 2008, China's expansion of its “cultural soft power,” directed by Hu Jintao in his political report to the CCP's national congress the previous year, was happening with an estimated annual expenditure of 10 billion dollars, according to scholar David Shambaugh.²⁸ To put this spending in perspective, total official development aid (ODA) support to media from OECD countries over this same period, from around 2008 to 2012, rose and fell between 400 million dollars and 500 million dollars annually.²⁹ By the time Xi Jinping came to power, the expansion of central state media capacity through Hu's second term had created a massive media apparatus fueling “mega external propaganda”.

Already by late 2012, however, a consensus was emerging that this centralized model of external propaganda was not paying dividends. A key problem was the failure to properly differentiate between communication intended for foreign audiences and domestic propaganda. This, in fact, was an issue that had haunted external propaganda efforts, and exercised officials, since the “Going Out” strategy of the early 2000s. General Secretary Jiang Zemin, for example, had acknowledged that while internal and external propaganda should be consistent in their general policy, “because the propaganda targets are different, there are great differences between them, so external propaganda has its own particularities.” More pointedly, Politburo Standing Committee member Li Ruihuan had warned that mechanically copying internal propaganda methods in external communication would result in “much effort, much money spent, [yet] poor results.”³⁰

In the Xi era, scholars close to the leadership tend to agree that “despite leapfrog progress in scale, channels, and technology, China has [still] not achieved international discourse power commensurate with its comprehensive national power and international status.”³¹ Chu Yin, a professor at Beijing University of International Relations, has spoken of the “snare” of “external propaganda becoming internalized” — by which he means that messaging intended for global audiences often simply echoes CCP propaganda at home, without consideration for how it is received.³²

The frustrations experienced by the CCP leadership in Phase Three, from 2007 to 2012 — particularly the loss of agenda control both internationally and at the hands of an increasingly restive domestic press — set the stage for the dramatic changes to come under Xi Jinping. One of Xi's primary concerns as he came to power was resolving once and for all what he termed the “third affliction” — the “suffering of criticism” from Western discourse hegemony, which he framed as the last challenge to national rejuvenation following Mao's defeat of foreign aggression and Deng's defeat of hunger and poverty through economic reforms.³³ Xi was determined to accomplish this through a two-pronged approach: first, by decisively tightening the Party's control over media and information at home, wresting back control of the domestic information space; and second, by reenvisioning, on this foundation of renewed Party control, how external propaganda could be conducted far more effectively.

In his first policy address to top propaganda officials in August 2013, Xi combined the prerogative of “external propaganda,” or *waixuan*, with the softer-sounding notion of “telling China's story well” on the international stage. But he struck a much harsher tone in language that only weeks later was publicly reported, referring in terms redolent of the Cultural Revolution to a global “public opinion struggle.” For the Party to effectively carry out its goals, Xi said, the world must

have “a more comprehensive and objective” understanding of China’s development path — “objective” in this context meaning that views of the country’s actions should be more positive. Reaching this goal necessitated the creation of “new concepts, categories, and expressions that integrate Chinese and foreign audiences.”³⁴

Nowhere was the imperative of “discourse power” more apparent than in Xi’s use of the phrase “public opinion struggle,” or *yulun douzheng*, in his August 2013 speech — language that signaled the leadership’s view of information control, both domestically and internationally, as existential to regime survival.³⁵ Three months later, the communiqué of the CCP’s Third Plenary Session urged the need to “strengthen international communication capacity and external discourse system construction.” During a Politburo study session just weeks later, Xi again emphasized the need to “strengthen the capacity for international communication and carefully construct an external discourse system,” and to enhance the creativity, appeal, and credibility of China’s messaging abroad.

The first major institutional restructuring toward these ends came in March 2014, as the Office of External Propaganda (OEP), which had operated under the nameplate of the State Council Information Office (SCIO), was absorbed by the Central Propaganda Department. This helped ensure more unified coordination and messaging, eliminating bureaucratic overlaps that had complicated external communication efforts. Parallel to this restructuring, the establishment of the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) in 2014 centralized oversight of what had previously been a more fragmented system of online censorship.

These institutional changes came amid a broader campaign to tighten ideological control and restructure China’s media system to reassert CCP dominance. Earlier in 2013, months before Xi’s major speech on external propaganda, the Party leadership had circulated Document 9, an internal directive that drew a hard line against liberal concepts that had gained limited traction in Chinese discourse during previous years. Known unofficially as the “Seven Unspeakables,” the document identified forbidden topics that included “universal values,” “civil society,” “civil rights,” and “constitutionalism” — concepts the Party viewed as threatening to its monopoly on political power.³⁶ Among the taboos was “promoting the West’s idea of journalism,” which the directive explicitly equated with challenging the Party’s control over the media. The document made clear that Western notions of press freedom and editorial independence were incompatible with the Party’s requirements for media work. This ideological offensive provided the foundation for the institutional restructuring that would follow.

From 2013 onward, China’s top leadership initiated a sweeping restructuring of state media infrastructure aimed at consolidating Party control over content production and distribution. The institutional centerpiece of this transformation was the development of “media convergence centers” (融媒体中心), which marked what one media analyst characterized as the point when “broadcasting and television as a whole entered the stage of integrated development.”³⁷ In early 2013, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television issued guidelines “elevating online broadcasting and television stations to a position of equal importance with radio and television stations, promoting platform-network interaction and deep integration.”³⁸ This was followed in March 2013 by the central government’s merger of the General Administration of Press and Publication with the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television to form the combined State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television — a consolidation

explicitly designed to “promote functional transformation and resource integration.”³⁹

The stated objective was nothing less than the creation of what authorities termed “new-type mainstream media” (新型主流媒体) — a complete reimagining of Party-run media as modern digital platforms capable of stepping in and providing content for increasingly dominant social media platforms while maintaining rigid ideological control.⁴⁰ Xi conveyed that rigidity forcefully in his first full-fledged media policy address in February 2016, declaring that all media must be “surnamed Party” — meaning that obedience to the goals and positions of the CCP defined their very identity.⁴¹

Phase Five: Centralization+ Takes Shape

In March 2018, months after the 19th National Congress of the CCP, China’s National People’s Congress consolidated Xi’s political position with the removal of presidential term limits.⁴² Less than two weeks later, the Central Committee enacted sweeping institutional changes through the *Plan for Deepening Party and State Institutional Reform*.⁴³ The transformation of China’s media and information system, including the apparatus for conducting external propaganda, were a major component of this reform. As part of the restructuring that followed, the Central Propaganda Department (CPD) assumed the functions of the former SARFT (the same department that from 2001 had pushed the “Going Out” strategy). At the same time, already sizable state-run media conglomerates, including China Central Television (CCTV), China National Radio (CNR), and China Radio International (CRI), were consolidated into a single mega-conglomerate directly under CPD control. This was the China Media Group (CMG), also referred to in its external dimension as “Voice of China.”⁴⁴

CMG directly oversees the China Global Television Network (CGTN), formerly CCTV’s English channel, and has established overseas headquarters in London, Nairobi, and Washington, D.C.,⁴⁵ hired local reporters, and signed dozens of media agreements with government and non-government media organizations to disseminate Chinese content and messaging globally in dozens of languages.⁴⁶ This demonstrates China’s continued commitment to a strong and centralized CCP-led global media network, also including Xinhua News Agency and the United Front Work Department-backed China News Service, to communicate internationally. But bigger changes would soon be underway to dramatically change the nature of international communication work, setting the stage for “Centralization+.”

Building on the changes in Phase Four, the convergence initiative, which was already transforming the Party-led media system from the ground up, accelerated dramatically in August 2018, when Xi Jinping told the National Propaganda and Ideological Work Conference that authorities must “solidly advance the construction of county-level media convergence centers.”⁴⁷ This directive pushed restructuring to China’s most grassroots media operations, transforming county and township broadcasters into multimedia platforms directly responsive to Party messaging priorities, and working more closely with cities and provinces. By 2022, the model would evolve into coordinated “media clusters” (融媒集群) designed to ensure that propaganda directives could flow seamlessly from central authorities through provincial and municipal media down to the county level, creating what officials described as a system of “coordinated voice and synchronized frequency” across all levels of China’s media hierarchy.⁴⁸

A chart in the city of Pucheng, Fujian province,⁴⁶ shows the process of the “central kitchen” model of content production and distribution at the local “media convergence center.”



But beyond this grassroots restructuring, Xi's directive to propaganda officials in August 2018 encouraged the further development of external propaganda infrastructure, calling on authorities to “improve the international communication work structure” and to “pool more resources and strength” for telling China's story abroad. This mandate set in motion the establishment of provincial and municipal international communication centers (国际传播中心) across China, extending the Party's external messaging apparatus beyond central state media to regional operations.⁴⁹ The result was China's first International Communications Center (ICC) based out of Chongqing in 2018 and launched at a ceremony at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, where it announced its English-language website “iChongqing” and a network of overseas social media accounts across platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube that have since collectively amassed millions of followers.⁵⁰

From the perspective of media ecosystem development, although Beijing had already identified “promoting international communication” as a policy priority in 2013, it was not until 2018 that the top leadership launched a nationwide, top-down strategy to overhaul the external communication system. The core of this strategy was to mobilize provincial and municipal-level media conglomerates as force multipliers in advancing China's global messaging, which would serve both national and local propaganda goals and extend China's reach beyond the bounds of traditional central media.

While the Chongqing center remained the only of its kind through 2018 and 2019, there were hints by May 2021, when Xi Jinping led a collective study session of the Politburo on external propaganda, that the building of the nationwide system had already been underway. Addressing the event, Xi said that China had “initially constructed a comprehensive external propaganda framework involving multiple

actors at multiple levels,” and he urged that “all regions and departments must leverage their own characteristics and advantages to carry out work” in international communication.⁵¹ From that time, the number of ICCs continued to multiply across China, with 7 provincial-level centers launched in 2021, and a further 15 in 2022. In 2023, 15 ICCs across administrative levels convened a conference on international communication at which they signed a document called the “Malanshan Declaration” alongside big-name central media brands including Xinhua News Agency, the *People’s Daily*, and CGTN. The declaration called on “all journalists across the country working in international communications” to communicate China’s voice to the world and steadily raise its “international communication impact.”⁵²

The 2023 “Malanshan Declaration” was one of the earliest illustrations that the “comprehensive external propaganda framework” Xi Jinping had referenced in his May 2021 speech was about leveraging local and regional media capabilities to complement and amplify the external propaganda efforts of the center — what we have termed “Centralization+.” *China Daily*, the government-run newspaper which participated in the Malanshan event and reported on the declaration,⁵³ has announced formal cooperation with several ICCs since. When Guangxi province launched its provincial-level ICC in September 2024, its partners were *China Daily* and China News Service, establishing strategic cooperation to build an international communication system focused on ASEAN, leveraging Guangxi’s geographic proximity and cultural connections with Southeast Asian nations.⁵⁴ More recently, in October 2025, *China Daily* struck a deal with the ICC at Xi’an Foreign Languages University to leverage the university’s expertise in foreign languages and regional studies while “relying on *China Daily*’s global communication network [to] serve the national international communication strategy.”⁵⁵

This growing system of “Centralization+” is now a key component of China’s overall communication and foreign policy strategy. On July 1, 2023, just weeks ahead of the Malanshan conference, China took its commitment to international communication a step further by enshrining “the state’s advancement of international communication capacity building” as a legal safeguard for developing foreign relations under the *Foreign Relations Law of the People’s Republic of China*.⁵⁶ One year later, the Central Committee of the CCP doubled down on its commitment to “building a more effective international communication system,” to further restructure China’s international communication architecture, and establish a mechanism to implement the Global Civilization Initiative.⁵⁷ According to a recent report by the Central Propaganda Department’s Media Regulation Bureau — which has played an important role since 2019 in the media restructuring effort⁵⁸ — provincial media have increasingly outshone central media when it comes to “innovative” communication approaches. The report documented 46 “innovative development cases” on the local level versus just 14 at the central level in 2025.⁵⁹

The history and context above provide the structural foundation for understanding China’s “Centralization+” model, but the operational dynamics of this system are best understood through concrete examples. The following four case studies examine how ICCs function across different administrative levels and strategic contexts, revealing the mechanisms through which they operate. These cases explore provincial centers, including those targeting specific regions — like the Guangxi ICC mentioned briefly above — and look at grassroots municipal networks with cross-sector alliances, as well as the Institute for a Community with Shared

Future (ICSF), an academic institute operating 22 research centers globally. Together, the cases illustrate the full operational spectrum of China’s distributed propaganda architecture.

CASE I: Provincial-Level International Communication Centers

Since China established its first provincial international communication center in 2018, dozens of similar centers have emerged across the country, expanding from provincial to municipal and county levels.⁶⁰ Together, they form a multi-tiered national structure for international communication, designed to strengthen China’s international discourse power through institutionalized capacity building. The provincial level is the highest tier in China’s CCP-led administrative hierarchy below the central government, and there are 34 provincial-level jurisdictions in all — comprising 23 provinces, 4 municipalities directly under central government control, 5 autonomous regions, and 2 special administrative regions.⁶¹

Sources: Bi Yantao, CWB Communication (HK) Co., Limited; China Media Project

CHINA'S ICCs			
LEVEL	NUMBER	Bi Yantao's count (August 2025)	CMP's count (November 2025)
Provincial Level		40	40
Sub-provincial Level		7	9
Municipal, county/district, and township/village levels		165	90
Overseas & Others		9	10
TOTAL		221	149

According to CTR Market Research, a research and consulting firm majority owned by the state-run China Central Television under CMG,⁶² 40 provincial-level ICCs had been established across 29 provincial-level regions as of May 2025, with some provinces operating two or more centers. Nearly all of China’s 23 provinces, four municipalities, five autonomous regions, and two special administrative regions have now established such institutions⁶³ — what Xinhua has described as “near-complete coverage.”⁶⁴

Chinese authorities have not publicly released comprehensive data on the total number of ICCs established within and outside China. Hainan University professor Bi Yantao claims that 221 centers had been officially established across China as of August 2025, with another nine under construction.⁶⁵ However, CMP researchers identified 40 provincial-level centers, 90 at the city, district, and county level, and an additional 10 specialized centers including overseas ICCs, research centers, and “liaison centers,” bringing the documented total to 149.

These provincial-level ICCs operate under the supervision of their respective provincial propaganda departments and are institutionally affiliated with

provincial newspapers or broadcasting groups.⁶⁶ While many organizations representing varying administrative levels and sectors have founded their own ICCs since 2018, provincial-level centers remain the backbone of China's external communication strategy. Within China's vertically aligned administrative hierarchy and its horizontal networks connecting enterprises, think tanks, universities, and multi-channel networks, these centers form the core structure of China's international communication matrix.

The Zhejiang Model

When the Zhejiang ICC launched in May 2024, it aimed to create a “central kitchen” for comprehensive international communication efforts by integrating resources from across Zhejiang Province.⁶⁷ The “central kitchen” concept refers to the integrated production of multimedia content — ready for distribution across various channels, including international platforms like Facebook, YouTube, X and Instagram that are not legally accessible inside China. Within six months, seven additional municipal-level ICCs and seven district and county-level ICCs were established — including in Hangzhou, Ningbo, Wenzhou, Huzhou, Jinhua, and Anji — bringing the total to 15 ICCs in Zhejiang Province and forming a three-tiered, integrated provincial international communication system.⁶⁸



From the outset, the Zhejiang ICC signed cooperation agreements with central-level Chinese state media outlets, foreign media organizations, international communication groups, universities, and think tanks.⁶⁹ It appointed ten scholars as “distinguished experts of Zhejiang international communication” and twelve foreign individuals as “global ambassadors of Chinese culture.” The center simultaneously announced four communication projects at launch, including three news initiatives and one short video competition to encourage multimedia content creation “widely welcomed by international audiences”.⁷⁰

These “global ambassadors of Chinese culture” hail from various countries and backgrounds. Some are international students, others university professors, and some foreign spouses married to Chinese citizens, all sharing long-standing ties with China. José Medeiros da Silva, a professor in the Portuguese Department and director of the Brazil Research Center at Zhejiang International Studies University,⁷¹ began teaching at the university shortly after marrying a Chinese national in 2014.⁷² Another ambassador, Zaghloul Amro Elsaid Ibrahim from Egypt, is an alumnus of Zhejiang Normal University who has appeared in several Chinese short dramas and films.⁷³

The Zhejiang Provincial International Communication Center was officially inaugurated on May 31, 2024. Twelve foreign nationals were appointed as Global Ambassadors of Chinese Culture. SOURCE: Publicity Department of Zhejiang International Studies University.



Overseas Reach

A distinctive feature of these provincial-level centers is the establishment of overseas liaison offices (海外聯絡站) or the appointment of overseas liaison officers (海外聯絡官) designed to deepen overseas engagement. When the Zhejiang ICC was established, a delegation from *Zhejiang Daily* visited South Africa and Egypt, partnering with *The African Times* and the China-Egypt Entrepreneurs Association to set up the center's liaison offices in both countries.⁷⁴

Similarly, the Great Wall ICC — established in January 2024 under the Hebei Provincial Party Committee Propaganda Department — appointed its first cohort of six overseas communication officers (known as iHebei Overseas Communication Officers) from the United Kingdom, the United States, Russia, Brazil, Bulgaria, and Bangladesh, covering key target regions across Europe, the Americas, and Asia.⁷⁵ According to the magazine *China Cyberspace*, as of November 2024, the Great Wall ICC had built a network of over 100 overseas correspondents and communication officers in more than 20 countries and regions worldwide, consisting of both foreign nationals and members of the Chinese diaspora, combining localized perspectives with cross-cultural communication capabilities.⁷⁶

The Great Wall ICC has also established overseas liaison offices in Milan, Italy, and Goiás State, Brazil, to “leverage geographical advantages and pool resources from all sectors to expand communication platforms and amplify outreach.” Specifically, the center seeks to highlight Hebei's history, culture, and trade and industry to encourage further tourism and business exchanges with Europe and Latin America, while striving per Xi Jinping's 2021 instructions to communicate “a credible, lovable, and respectable China.”⁷⁷

This description captures the broader ambition of China's provincial-level ICCs: to integrate international and local narratives in a unified effort to improve global perceptions of China and enhance its international discourse power. The system represents not merely centralization of messaging control, but centralization paired with expanded operational capacity — a structure that extends Party-state

influence through vertically integrated institutions while simultaneously reaching outward through horizontal networks of ambassadors, liaison officers, and overseas offices.

It should be noted that beyond content distribution, a key function of these ICCs is media engagement – facilitating direct cooperation and exchange with foreign journalists and media. This cooperation is especially evident in the case of region-directed ICCs.

**CASE II:
Region-Targeted International Communication Centers**

Numerous ICCs are strategically positioned to target specific regional audiences. Notable cases include the Guangxi International Communication Center (GXICC), which engages with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Heilongjiang Northeast Asia International Communication Center (HNAICC), which focuses on Russia and South Korea.

Source: China Media Project research

REGION-TARGETED ICCs - as of 2025			
REGION		DATE	TARGET
Southeast Asia	Guangxi	09/06/2024	ASEAN
	Yunnan	05/31/2022	South and Southeast Asia
	Hainan	05/19/2022	South China Sea countries
Northeast Asia	Shandong	11/26/2023	Northeast Asia
	Heilongjiang	02/28/2024	Russia and South Korea
Central Asia	Shaanxi	12/10/2023	Central Asian and Silk Road countries
	Khorgos	03/03/2025	Central Asian countries
Arab World	Ningxia	10/24/2023	Arab radio and television
Africa	Changsha	07/26/2024	African media

While geographical proximity often determines which regions an ICC targets, other strategic considerations, such as trade or historical links, drive some partnerships. Hunan Province has emerged as China’s leading hub for trade and cooperation with Africa through initiatives like the “Pilot Zone for In-Depth China-Africa Economic and Trade Cooperation.”⁷⁸ Its provincial ICC thus targets Africa, focusing on positive narratives about China-Africa relations. Through cooperation with foreign media and journalists in these regions, these ICCs seek to cultivate relationships it can use to influence coverage and push more favorable narratives about China.

Guangxi ICC: Engaging ASEAN

Serving as China's principal gateway to the Indochina Peninsula, Guangxi holds a crucial position in China's external communication strategy toward Southeast Asia. The Guangxi ICC, inaugurated in September 2024, was established by *Guangxi Daily*, the official mouthpiece of the provincial CCP leadership, and Guangxi Radio and Television, the provincial state broadcaster. At launch, the Guangxi Propaganda Office, which directly oversees the center's activities, signed cooperation agreements with central media organizations like *China Daily* and China News Service, while the center signed memorandums of cooperation with foreign media organizations.

According to its official description, the center aims to take advantage of its geographical proximity to ASEAN countries and make optimal use of its resources to “tell the story of China and Guangxi to the outside world, and serve to build a closer China-ASEAN community with a shared future”⁷⁹ — this being a reference to one of Xi Jinping's key foreign policy frames.

The center's activities exemplify the dual function of Chinese foreign propaganda: disseminating positive narratives about China and advancing diplomatic and economic engagement with partner countries. The center has proactively engaged foreign media organizations by inviting them on guided tours of Guangxi to conduct field visits and interviews.⁸⁰ Its communication objectives emphasize promoting Guangxi's economic and social development achievements and highlighting its development trajectory. The “Economy in China & ASEAN” section on its website further demonstrates its role in advancing China-ASEAN economic cooperation and exchange, spotlighting positive stories about mutual development and cooperation in both English and Chinese disseminated across its platforms.

In alignment with its regional orientation, the center provides multilingual online access in Khmer, Vietnamese, Thai, Malay, and Lao. Recognizing the importance of localized communication channels, the center has amassed significant followings on major international social media platforms, including Facebook (18M followers), X (6K followers), Instagram (18K followers), and TikTok (81K followers).

Cultural exchange constitutes another major pillar of the center's operations. The center engages in dubbing, translation, and co-production of Chinese television dramas and documentaries, facilitating their dissemination across ASEAN countries through the China-ASEAN Translation and Dubbing Center, inaugurated two years earlier in 2022.⁸¹ Its workstations have been established in Laos and Myanmar, while television programs such as China Theater and China Animation are regularly broadcast on various ASEAN networks.⁸²

In November 2025, Guangxi Radio and Television hosted the Lancang-Mekong Media Event in Nanning, where participating media from China, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam announced more than 10 collaborative projects. These joint productions — all led by China — included the documentary “Home Among Green Mountains and Waters — Lancang-Mekong in Bloom,” the multimedia program “Agricultural AI+,” the documentary “Li River,” the radio drama “Romance of the Three Kingdoms,” and a series of China-Thailand micro-dramas and micro-documentaries. The framing of these various media productions consistently supports the idea that China is a responsible partner in Southeast Asia and a steward of the Mekong River basin, even as China's upstream hydropower projects have caused significant downstream environmental damage.⁸³

Heilongjiang Northeast Asia ICC: Targeting Russia and South Korea

Established in February 2024, the Heilongjiang Northeast Asia International Communication Center demonstrates China's tailored approach to external communication in the Northeast Asian context. As its name suggests, the center targets Russian and Korean audiences through bilingual media channels. The center has established a media cooperation mechanism, mainly with Russian and South Korean media outlets, to “organically link it with cross-border overseas activities.”⁸⁴

The center's transnational collaborations have allowed it to produce Korean-language adaptations of Chinese programs and introduce tourism information about Heilongjiang in collaboration with the Korean Broadcasting System, a leading government-run broadcaster. It also develops multilingual video products for Russian audiences, including “Different Harbin” and “Russians in Heilongjiang.”

Like other ICCs, the Heilongjiang center makes use of foreign influencers to expand reach.⁸⁵ A representative case is the “Wula Erya” (乌拉二丫) project, a social media initiative designed to enhance people-to-people exchanges between China and Russia. Launched from the personal social media accounts of two Russian-language editors at Heilongjiang Daily Newspaper Group — the leading institution behind the center — “Wula Erya” content highlights topics Beijing hopes will appeal to Russian audiences, including Heilongjiang specialty products, Harbin's cultural landmarks, and the experiences of Russians living in China. The campaign's origins on the Russian social media site VKontakte, or VK, display the tailored nature of information campaigns launched by regionally focused ICCs.⁸⁶

The Wula Erya project team articulates its guiding philosophy as follows: “Make friends widely, spread goodwill, and guide public opinion. Enhance influence, appeal, affinity, persuasiveness, and leadership. Tell good stories about China and spread China's voice.”⁸⁷ Drawing lessons from Wula Erya, the Heilongjiang Daily Newspaper Group has identified the cultivation of overseas-oriented personal social media accounts as a key strategic priority.⁸⁸ The group aims to foster a cohort of international social media influencers capable of strengthening China's narrative presence abroad.

These region-targeted ICCs illustrate how centralization of messaging control operates alongside geographic and linguistic specialization. Rather than a monolithic approach, the system achieves coordinated messaging through specialized nodes — each center tailored to specific audiences while advancing unified strategic objectives. The Guangxi and Heilongjiang centers demonstrate this model: centrally coordinated yet regionally adapted, combining Party-directed narratives with localized delivery mechanisms designed to maximize influence within distinct target markets.

CASE III: Municipal ICCs and International Communication Alliances

Nearly three-quarters of all ICCs are located at lower administrative levels, including municipal, county, and district units. To broaden their reach, this organizational structure has further expanded as localities build “international communication alliances” (国际传播联盟), or ICAs, as an extension of ICCs.⁸⁹ Unlike ICCs, which are embedded in established administrative systems and local legacy media, ICAs are horizontally organized communication networks.⁹⁰ Usually

anchored by a lead ICC, these alliances seek collaboration with a diverse set of societal actors — local media outlets, universities, think tanks, tourism companies, and overseas media — to form cross-sector coalitions focused on international communication.

While the complex of internet controls generally referred to collectively as China's "Great Firewall" blocks ordinary citizens from accessing foreign social media platforms, ICCs and state media operate with special exemptions that allow them to engage directly on Facebook, X, Instagram, and other overseas platforms. However, state-run accounts often struggle to build authentic audiences beyond an echo chamber of other official accounts and pro-China networks. Incorporating foreign institutions, diaspora organizations, and foreign nationals into these alliances has therefore become crucial for expanding genuine reach to overseas audiences and lending credibility to China's messaging through seemingly independent voices. A crucial role in alliance structures is that of "international communication ambassadors," who leverage their personal networks and local knowledge to tell China's story abroad.

Local Implementation: Ningxiang and Luoyang

One case that illustrates this strategy is Ningxiang, a county-level city in Hunan Province, which launched the Ningxiang International Communication Alliance in September 2025. Centered on the local ICC, the alliance integrates ten member institutions and has appointed ten international communication ambassadors to amplify narratives about Ningxiang. Members span media organizations, enterprises, culture and tourism bodies, and local associations.

According to official accounts, Ningxiang organized foreigners, foreign language guides, and bloggers to help the city attract international tourists during its annual tourism events. The team has released 20 videos in six languages, including English, French, and Ukrainian. This multilingual approach represents a significant expansion of the city's international outreach.⁹¹

Another example is Luoyang, an ancient capital in Henan Province, where the Luoyang ICC and the "Luoyang International Communication Alliance" were inaugurated simultaneously in March 2025. Managed by the Luoyang Daily Group, the center collaborates with multiple academic institutions — including Henan University of Science and Technology, Luoyang Normal University, Luoyang Institute of Technology, and Luoyang Vocational College — to pool resources and enhance communication capacity. At the launch event, "Luoyang International Ambassadors" from the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, Belarus, South Korea, and Morocco were tasked with "showcasing Luoyang to the world."⁹²

Among the ambassadors is Navina Heyden (海雯娜), a German influencer who has sparked controversy for her CCP-aligned stances — for example, denying Taiwan's right to self-determination⁹³ and defending human rights abuses in Xinjiang.⁹⁴ Heyden has worked with state media outlets like the *People's Daily* and CGTN. According to the official *Beijing Daily*, published by the municipal CCP Committee of China's capital city, she is "loved" by Chinese and foreigners alike, and a perfect template of what the Party-state asks of foreigners who "tell China's story well."⁹⁵ Beyond foreign nationals, the Luoyang alliance has recruited more than 100 Chinese professionals with study or work experience in Europe, the United States, Japan, and South Korea, aiming to leverage their cross-cultural communication skills and overseas networks to present Luoyang's narratives in a more vivid and engaging manner.⁹⁶



Ukrainian national, identified as a scholar, narrates a promotional video for the Changsha International Communication Center (CICC), in cooperation with the propaganda office of Ningxiang County. SOURCE: Screenshot of CICC video.

A Large-Scale Transnational Alliance

The “China–Africa International Media Alliance” (中非国际传播媒体联盟) is notable for its ambitious scope and its independence from any single ICC. Launched on July 15, 2025, at an “Integrated Voice Initiative” (融声行动) event, the alliance falls under the direct guidance of the Changsha Municipal Propaganda Office and the Changsha Media Group. The Changsha Evening News International Communication Center is listed as a founding member of the alliance, alongside a wide range of Chinese and African groups, including a provincial art museum in Hunan, the African Chamber of Commerce, and the Communication University of China’s Institute for a Community with a Shared Future — discussed in the next section.

The alliance’s Integrated Voice Initiative is structured around three pillars — media, universities, and enterprises — and aims to integrate both official and non-governmental communication resources to establish a “multi-faceted, collaborative” mechanism operating across sectors. According to a Xinhua report, the alliance has already established media cooperation bases in six countries, brings together more than 63 founding member organizations, includes over 100 African communication officers, and has produced more than 500 videos.⁹⁷

At the launch event, Peng Yong, the editor-in-chief of Changsha Media Group, stated that the alliance will, together with its partners, “jointly embark on a new journey in the field of international communication.” Peng spoke of “[transforming] the ‘hard results’ of China–Africa cooperation into communication ‘soft power,’ so that every ‘Hunan connection’ . . . consolidates a consensus for development.”

These international communication alliances represent a further extension of the Centralization+ model. While ICCs operate within vertical Party-state hierarchies, ICAs add horizontal networks that mobilize non-state actors — universities, enterprises, foreign nationals — under coordinated messaging frameworks. For an understanding of just how massive these ICA networks are currently and are likely

YUHUA DISTRICT INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY ALLIANCE

First Batch of Member Organizations (Changsha, Hunan)

MEDIA & COMMUNICATION CENTERS

Changsha Evening News International Communication Center
Changsha Radio and Television International Communication Center
Yuhua District Convergence Media Center
Changsha Yuhua District New Media Association

UNIVERSITIES & SCHOOLS

Central South University School of Foreign Languages
Changjun Yuhua Foreign Language School

STATE-OWNED ENTERPRISES

China Construction Fifth Engineering Bureau Co., Ltd.
Hongxing Industrial Group Co., Ltd.

PRIVATE ENTERPRISES

Changsha BYD Auto Co., Ltd.
Cofee Medical Technology Co., Ltd.
Hunan Mingming Hen Mang Commercial Chain Co., Ltd.
Hunan Yunda Trading Co., Ltd.
Hunan Yufei Industrial Investment Co., Ltd.

CULTURAL & TOURISM

Hunan Province Acrobatic Arts Theater Co., Ltd.
Hunan Yuhua Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum
Hunan Gaoqiao Market

GOVERNMENT & RESEARCH

Yuhua Management Committee (China-Hunan Pilot Free Trade Zone)
China-Africa Economic and Trade In-Depth Cooperation Research Center

TOTAL: 18 FUNDING MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS

to become as the national restructuring of international communication moves ahead, we can look at the case of the Yuhua District ICA in the city of Changsha, which has six districts in all.

The system achieves two objectives simultaneously: maintaining centralized ideological control through Party oversight of alliance activities, while expanding operational capacity through decentralized networks of ambassadors and partner organizations. The recruitment of controversial figures like Navina Heyden alongside diaspora professionals demonstrates how these alliances prioritize reach over credibility, leveraging any available voice willing to amplify approved narratives. This structure — centralized direction combined with distributed implementation — allows the Party-state to project influence through seemingly diverse channels while maintaining general control over messaging and strategic direction, particularly on issues of core interest such as Taiwan and Xinjiang.

CASE IV: Institute for a Community with a Shared Future

The Institute for a Community with a Shared Future (人类命运共同体研究院), or ICSF, is a think tank founded by the Communication University of China (CUC), regarded generally as one of China's top institutions for cultivating media talent. Established in 2019, the institute's stated purpose is to promote international acceptance of the “community of shared future for mankind,”⁹⁸ Xi Jinping's foreign policy and global governance concept, through global academic channels and exchanges.⁹⁹

The ICSF outsources research and execution of local communication strategies to international partners by opening Research Centers for Community with a Shared Future (RCCSFs) in partnership with overseas think tanks, universities, and national media authorities. As of December 2025, 23 RCCSFs have been established across five continents, with the most active in Belt and Road countries such as Pakistan, Venezuela, Ethiopia, and Malaysia.



While there is at least one RCCSF on every continent except Australia, the centers are more prominent in global south countries.

Source: China Media Project.

Most RCCSFs are located within the media and communication studies or China studies departments of universities and headed by a single local faculty member. In some cases — such as Ethiopia and South Korea — the center is established with a state media authority, providing a more direct channel to international media cooperation.

Unlike ICCs — which are generally led by provincial or local propaganda offices — the ICSF falls under the direction of the Ministry of Education (MOE). The institute's communication goals, diplomatic activities, and cooperation with state media bodies such as the China Media Group and local and regional ICCs demonstrate China's all-of-society approach to media diplomacy and the interconnectedness of its influence initiatives.¹⁰⁰

The RCCSF Model

The ICSF/RCCSF model is reminiscent of Confucius Institutes, Mandarin language schools at overseas universities funded by the Ministry of Education, whose teachers are encouraged to “tell China’s story well.”¹⁰¹ The ICSF, however, seeks to transcend the Confucius Institute’s “one-way” communication model by inviting local stakeholders to generate knowledge outputs best suited to their own environments, similar to ICC “global communication ambassadors”.

For example, in Mexico and Pakistan, local RCCSF directors have published books about Xi’s vision for a community of shared future.¹⁰² Venezuela’s RCCSF runs a Spanish-language podcast titled “A Look Towards a Shared Future,” which discusses the two countries’ shared history, culture, and the fight against COVID-19.¹⁰³ RCCSF directors also publish op-eds in their countries’ local media that praise the accomplishments of the BRI, promote Xi’s concept of a community with a shared future, and are regularly invited to contribute to Chinese media.¹⁰⁴ While these efforts may appear spontaneous to outside observers, ICSF leadership provides scholars with the resources to produce knowledge outputs.¹⁰⁵ The institute partners with the Central Compilation and Translation Press (a subsidiary body of the CCP’s Central Institute of Party History and Literature) to publish translated editions of Xi Jinping’s book on a community with a shared future for distribution at RCCSFs around the world.

This localized strategy is particularly important in developing regions, where China seeks to counter critical narratives about “debt-trap diplomacy” and the “China threat” by promoting positive stories about China’s contributions to regional development and prosperity. By integrating China’s global governance concepts into regional discourses, RCCSFs help to enhance the PRC’s global discourse power and, as ICSF director Li Huailiang writes, transform local scholars into “‘participants in Chinese knowledge’ and even ‘disseminators of Chinese knowledge’” while providing continuous feedback on successful regional communication approaches through the RCCSFs’ interconnected structure.¹⁰⁶

ICSF Activity in Africa

RCCSFs have achieved their greatest success in Africa. Chinese media is already deeply intertwined with development initiatives like journalist training programs through the China-Africa Press Center (CAPC),¹⁰⁷ low-cost smartphones pre-installed with Chinese news aggregation apps,¹⁰⁸ and campaigns to bring cable connectivity to rural villages operated via a state media proxy,¹⁰⁹ StarTimes, a Chinese electronics and media company founded in 1988.¹¹⁰

When the ICSF was founded in November 2019, it announced the joint founding of the African Media Research Center (AMRC) in cooperation with StarTimes. The AMRC, led by ICSF Vice Director Zhang Yanqiu, provides research support to enhance China-Africa communication strategies, identifies media cooperation opportunities, and offers media services to Chinese enterprises operating in Africa.¹¹¹ In addition to the AMRC, the continent now has five country-level RCCSFs — in Ethiopia, Tanzania, Angola, Nigeria, and Egypt — which cooperate with the AMRC and regional media authorities to organize collaborative academic forums.¹¹² In August 2025, a group of doctoral students from the Communication University of China visited Ethiopia on a trip led by Zhang Yanqiu and the ICSF. They visited the Ethiopian Media Authority (which hosts the RCCSF), the Ethiopian News Agency and Fana Media Corporation (state news organizations

which have a media cooperation agreement with the China Media Group), Chinese businesses in Addis Ababa, and the Chinese embassy. During the visit, Dr. Samson Mekonnen, director general of the Ethiopian Media Authority, stressed that Ethiopian journalism students who had trained at the CUC played an important role in shaping Ethiopian media practices.¹¹⁵

The student delegation led by Zhang also attended a conference on “constructive journalism,” alongside 50 other media practitioners from Africa and China. Zhang has promoted the concept in other forums with RCCSF leaders across Africa as well. At the 2024 East African Communication Association Annual Conference, Zhang engaged in a dialogue with David Mrisho of the Tanzanian RCCSF on “media cooperation and development under the framework of building a high-level China-Africa community with a shared future.”¹¹⁴ Mrisho clarified the meaning of “constructive journalism” and the benefits it could bring to Tanzania through deeper cooperation with China: “African media scholars and journalists need to understand China and recognize that the media is not just a disseminator of information, but also a force for development,” he said. “In the past, the media has failed to fully play its positive role, primarily due to a lack of effective integration of news reporting with national development agendas.”¹¹⁵ China’s push for “constructive journalism,” constantly forefronted at China-sponsored media exchange events globally, is fundamentally about support for its explicit foreign policy objectives.

In July 2025, the AMRC and ICSF became founding members of the “China-Africa International Media Alliance” (中非国际传播媒体聯盟), which is led by the Changsha Municipal Propaganda Office. This is the first documented case of overlap between ICC and ICSF activities, though the partnership is not surprising given China’s all-of-society approach to diplomatic engagement, communication, and soft power. The ICSF functions as one of many horizontal partners to consolidate resources and maximize coverage, tied together by international media alliances.

Beyond Africa, the “community of shared future for mankind” has become the primary frame for diplomatic cooperation between China and developing nations. The ICSF has begun to play a more active role in these diplomatic developments. The Cuban RCCSF, for example, jointly signed the “Media Action Plan for Jointly Building a Sino-Cuban Community with a Shared Future” with Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel and the Chinese embassy in Havana.¹¹⁶ The plan promises to provide “customized training programs” for journalists and expand media exchanges already established through the Belt and Road News Network.¹¹⁷ The inauguration of Malaysia’s RCCSF in July 2025, which targets all ASEAN countries, was widely publicized by regional RCCSF directors in their respective national media outlets, as well as in Malaysian media, which has continued to publish regular columns and articles by Chinese and Malaysian¹¹⁸ scholars promoting the “community of shared future” concept¹¹⁹— again illustrating how China pushes foreign policy goals through ostensible media exchanges.

The ICSF/RCCSF system exemplifies Centralization+ in the academic and diplomatic spheres. While the Ministry of Education provides overall direction and the ICSF coordinates strategy, the broader international communication network operates through decentralized local nodes — university departments, media authorities, individual scholars — that generate seemingly independent content aligned with Party objectives. The overlap with ICCs through the China-Africa International Media Alliance reveals how different strands of China’s influence infrastructure increasingly intersect and reinforce one another.

This structure achieves multiple objectives. It maintains ideological coherence through central coordination, but at the same time leverages local voices that can lend credibility. It expands operational reach through academic partnerships while keeping ultimate control within Party-state institutions. The system integrates diplomatic, educational, and media initiatives into a unified framework that presents Chinese governance concepts as organic products of international scholarly consensus rather than top-down propaganda. The transformation of local scholars into “disseminators of Chinese knowledge” — as acknowledged openly by the ICSF director — demonstrates how the system prioritizes co-option, seeking to reshape global discourse by cultivating sympathetic voices within the academic and media establishments of target countries.

CONCLUSION

China's growing system of ICCs and ICAs, along with initiatives like the Institute for a Community with a Shared Future, show how institutions across sectors have responded to Xi Jinping's call to reinvigorate external propaganda. From media to business to higher education, Chinese entities at every level are now engaged in this work, enacting Xi's words to the Second Plenary Session of the Fourth Plenum of the 18th CCP Central Committee in October 2014: “In telling China's story well, it is not only comrades at the central level who must speak, but leading cadres at all levels; not only propaganda departments and the media must speak, but all practical work departments and all sectors must speak.”¹²⁰

Zhang Yanqiu (third from left) and other ICSF representatives meet with the Ethiopian Media Authority in September 2025.



The scale of the CCP's deployment for external propaganda and media exchange can certainly be said to match the sense of existential urgency Xi has invested in the effort, as a means of resolving once and for all China's “third affliction,” its perceived gap with the West in terms of discourse power. The establishment of more than 200 ICCs since 2018,¹²¹ alongside proliferating international communication alliances and academic networks like the Institute for a Community with a Shared Future, suggest both scale and seriousness in this undertaking by the CCP.

The ground-level reality of this engagement becomes clear when examining recent developments in Southeast Asia. The region has faced dramatic reductions in international support over the past year, beginning with the abrupt termination of USAID operations¹²² and extending to cutbacks from other donors, such as Sweden's SIDA, which plans to end its Asia-Pacific strategy by June 30, 2026.¹²³ With USAID alone having provided 860 million dollars in 2024, observers noted in early 2025 that such withdrawals “may create vacuums that China can fill.” In media development specifically, Chinese actors are already moving to occupy this space — and ICCs stand at the forefront of this effort.

In Case II, this report examined region-directed efforts undertaken by the ICC in Guangxi province, which shares a significant border with Vietnam. But the standout in terms of engagement with Southeast Asia may in fact be Yunnan province, which shares borders with Vietnam, Myanmar and Laos. Between July and November 2025, Yunnan province alone orchestrated at least eight media exchanges with Southeast Asian counterparts. Several of these gatherings extended beyond Southeast Asia itself, framed as Global South media events. Building on the region's post-colonial legacy and appeals for “a more representative and equitable international order,”¹²⁴ the Global South concept provides China a framework to emphasize foreign policy themes of peace and mutual development at the expense of media independence values.

Central to Yunnan's activism is its South and Southeast Asia Regional International Communication Center, established in May 2022 under the provincial CCP propaganda department. In August 2025, the center ran a five-day training program for over 20 journalists and social media influencers from China, Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar, Cambodia, Malaysia and Indonesia, blending instruction on video production and AI tools with ideologically inflected tours emphasizing China's historical contributions to the region.¹²⁵

The following month, the Yunnan ICC partnered with Xinhua News Agency and the provincial party committee to convene the 2025 Global South Media and Think Tank Forum in Kunming, drawing more than 500 participants from 260 media organizations across 110 countries. The gathering provided a stage for Hu Heping, a senior Central Propaganda Department official, to promote Xi Jinping's Global Civilization Initiative as “important guidance” for reforming global governance structures.¹²⁶ In a video address to the forum, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications Melissa Fleming — a veteran journalist appointed to the position in 2019 — appeared to validate Beijing's critique of global media imbalances, reportedly urging attendees to “restore balance to the global information ecosystem.”¹²⁷

The forum resulted in the release of the “Yunnan Declaration,” which casts media outlets and think tanks as the “main force” for constructing independent discourse systems to challenge Western narrative hegemony, explicitly tasking them with amplifying Xi's four global initiatives as models for development and governance across the Global South. The declaration exemplifies a core aim of China's external propaganda through such media engagement activities: reframing journalism itself as an instrument of diplomacy. By asserting that “the most effective way to transmit this information [about Xi's initiatives] is precisely through trustworthy media,” the text appropriates the language of media credibility to advance the notion that news organizations should evaluate their work primarily through the lens of bilateral relationship-building and what the declaration terms “constructive narratives” — privileging diplomatic fairness between states over journalistic principles of independence and accountability. “Telling China's story

well,” then, through ICC-led exchanges like this one is not simply about projecting Chinese state narratives abroad, but about reshaping how foreign media organizations understand their fundamental role and obligations.

September also saw Yunnan's propaganda apparatus and ICC host the 2025 South and Southeast Asian Media Network Annual Meeting, assembling representatives from 11 countries including China, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, India and Sri Lanka.¹²⁸ The event advanced collaboration within the South and Southeast Asian Media Network, a CCP-backed consortium of 40 foreign and 50 domestic media entities launched in January 2024 by the Yunnan ICC in coordination with the central government's *China Daily* — demonstrating how ostensibly regional engagement operates under direct guidance from Beijing.

Understanding the Challenges

Not all ICCs and ICAs are as active or impactful as those in Yunnan and Guangxi, or in wealthy neighboring Guangdong, where ties with Southeast Asia run deep. But the scale of China's efforts demands that global stakeholders recognize the foundational changes in how the country engages on media and messaging. With more than 200 ICCs established since 2018, alongside proliferating international communication alliances and academic networks, this “Centralization+” model poses serious challenges to information integrity in democratic societies.

The threat operates on multiple levels. First, **direct engagement activities** — journalist training programs, media forums, study tours — appear to be legitimate forms of professional exchange rather than instruments of external propaganda. Their subnational character (provincial rather than central) enhances this perception. At a recent FIMI event in Brussels, one of this report's authors heard an EU official describe the impact of hosting a single group of non-EU journalists for a study tour of European institutions, noting that it helped them understand EU values. If a single such exchange can shape understanding effectively for the EU, China's systematic deployment of hundreds of similar engagements annually — often targeting journalists from regions with limited exposure to independent media models — merits serious concern about cumulative influence, particularly when those engagements promote “constructive narratives” and perceived diplomatic fairness over journalistic independence.

Second, **the distributed network of accounts** dramatically expands pro-China content across global platforms while evading detection. Content from provincial and local ICCs appears as regional media activity rather than state propaganda, often escaping platform labeling requirements for state-affiliated media. The distributed nature makes systematic monitoring extremely difficult — OSINT investigation is frequently required to establish links to ICCs or state entities. These accounts typically cultivate audiences through culture, lifestyle and tourism content, building followings that can later be leveraged for more direct propaganda on core political issues. Even when individual posts generate minimal engagement, the sheer volume across platforms ensures persistent visibility in search results and feeds.

Third, **partnerships blur lines of attribution and accountability**. Academic initiatives like the Institute for a Community with a Shared Future embed CCP ideology into ostensibly scholarly frameworks. Media cooperation agreements position Chinese state outlets as equal partners with independent news organizations. International communication alliances create formal structures that appear to be industry associations but serve state objectives. These institutional relationships make it difficult for audiences to assess whether content reflects independent analysis or state-sponsored messaging.

Understanding the Limitations

Yet we need not despair overly if we remain alert and responsive. Evidence suggests significant structural limitations constrain China's ability to achieve genuine influence through the “Centralization+” model.

A fundamental weakness lies in the nature of the strategy itself. The rapid proliferation of ICCs represents what some scholars have termed “movement-style governance” — a pattern familiar from China's political past, where leaders at the top declare that something must be done and officials at every level rush to comply to win political points and demonstrate activity.¹²⁹ This approach has emerged more as a political campaign than as a coherent, coordinated strategy. While economic development initiatives often benefit from sustained planning and clear metrics, external propaganda under “Centralization+” appears driven primarily by the imperative to be seen responding to Xi Jinping's call. Officials establish centers, organize events, and generate content volumes — not necessarily because they have developed smart, effective policies, but because they must show action. The result is hugely uneven outcomes, with some provinces like Yunnan demonstrating sophisticated regional engagement while others merely go through the motions.

The launch in 2025 of four separate platforms for international communication in Guangdong province, meant to achieve what the province's leadership called “everyone does external propaganda” (人人外宣), with the idea that all citizens can promote China and the province through dedicated channels, begs the persisting question of whether this is not more internally directed.¹³⁰ There is a fundamental contradiction — one the CCP seems unable to escape — between the individual seen as a source of discourse power, and the insistence on highly consolidated Party control of media and information.

Chinese researchers and officials themselves acknowledge fundamental challenges with the system's effectiveness. A report by the Media Regulation Bureau, an entity established under the Central Propaganda Department in 2019 following institutional media reforms,¹³¹ praises the Chongqing International Communication Center — the first ICC, established in 2018 — for reaching 15.48 million overseas users and generating 2.85 billion exposures through its iChongqing and Bridging News brands.¹³² The city has enjoyed a significant public relations boost since reopening after COVID-19, attracting influencers and travel bloggers like the popular American vlogging team “The Nelk Boys,” whose viral content has been repackaged and reposted across ICC accounts.¹³³ Yet closer examination reveals the gap between capacity and impact. Despite iChongqing's 10 million Facebook followers and five posts daily in October 2025, only 63 of 166 posts that month received more than 100 likes.¹³⁴ On YouTube, with over 60,000 subscribers, video view counts vary widely, with many under 1,000 views. Similar patterns appear across other ICCs — iHebei's Instagram account claims 1.4 million followers but shows comparatively low view counts and interactions, raising questions about whether follower counts reflect authentic engagement or artificial inflation.

An additional weakness lies in the “international communication ambassadors” who work with ICAs to produce content for foreign audiences. In several cases examined for this report, these foreign content creators posted exclusively on Chinese platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu, or only in Mandarin. Nordic Daughter-in-Law (北歐媳婦), a Swedish influencer who posts Mandarin-language patriotic and lifestyle content on Douyin and Bilibili, created a Facebook page

shortly before the inauguration of the Luoyang International Communication Center, having been mentioned even in the CCP's flagship *People's Daily* newspaper in conjunction with external propaganda activities and cultural outreach in the city.¹³⁵ As of December 2025, however, that account had just four followers and merely reposted Chinese-language content from Nordic Daughter-in-Law.¹³⁶ While foreign influencers and “friends of China” have long been useful for legitimizing the state in domestic Chinese media, ICCs should be positioning — at least according to their stated goal — to genuinely reach foreign audiences abroad. In cases like this one, quite to the contrary, foreign influencers are being recruited by ICCs to post exclusively in Mandarin on Chinese platforms, suggesting they are targeting domestic Chinese audiences rather than the foreign populations ICCs ostensibly seek to influence. This is a familiar echo of the warning nearly three decades ago by Politburo Standing Committee member Li Ruihuan — that copying internal propaganda methods in external communication will result in “much effort, much money spent, [yet] poor results.”¹³⁷

This gap between stated purpose and actual implementation of the “Centralization+” strategy raises serious questions about whether officials, particularly outside savvier regions like Shanghai and Yunnan, understand the objective. The Media Regulation Bureau report itself acknowledged in October 2025 that China's preferred narrative style — typically macro-level and policy-oriented — conflicts with international audiences' preference for “personalized, story-based, and emotional” storytelling. Despite Xi's command to “tell China's story well,” cultural and language barriers have resulted in rigid and formulaic outputs that lead to “ambiguity or even misunderstanding” and fail to elicit emotional or value resonance.¹³⁸ A 2025 study by Zhejiang Communication Institute professor Guo Xuan raised similar concerns about ICC content, charging that it frequently reproduced domestic propaganda rather than creating content tailored to global audiences. This, Guo wrote, led to production that “lacks depth” and shows weak sensitivity to international events.¹³⁹

Beyond these content quality issues lies another fundamental constraint to the effectiveness of ICCs and other outreach efforts. Despite the rapid expansion of ICCs, finding staff with the necessary overseas experience and native-level foreign language skills has proven a challenge. Even cosmopolitan Shanghai has struggled to fill ICC positions, with employees citing costs and unspecified “policies” surrounding foreigners as obstacles.¹⁴⁰ After COVID-19, one ICC staffer told *Young Journalist* magazine that “there has been a huge loss in overseas talents, and everyone's difficulties are similar.”¹⁴¹ To fill gaps, some centers have resorted to recruiting international students as “communication officers”¹⁴² or deploying AI-generated virtual anchors, quick fixes failing to address the fundamental problem of effective international communication requiring people who genuinely understand foreign audiences.

Despite these significant limitations, the “Centralization+” model demands serious attention from European and global stakeholders. The CCP leadership's determination to resolve China's perceived discourse power deficit, combined with massive institutional restructuring and resource deployment across more than 200 ICCs, represents a sustained strategic commitment that will continue to evolve and adapt. Understanding how this distributed apparatus translates into actual impact on information environments — particularly in regions where China enjoys strategic advantages — remains essential for developing effective responses. Several priorities emerge for addressing this challenge.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For European and global stakeholders seeking to respond to China's expanded domestic infrastructure for external propaganda and its implications for FIMI capabilities, a comprehensive strategy must address both the technical challenge of detecting distributed operations and the broader challenge of building resilience in target regions. The “Centralization+” model's integration of provincial entities, academic partnerships, and seemingly independent voices demands responses that go beyond traditional monitoring of actors in China's central state media, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and so on. The following priorities offer a framework for action:

Enhanced Monitoring. Detection frameworks must adapt to the distributed nature of “Centralization+” operations. This requires:

- Incorporating provincial and municipal-level Chinese media entities into monitoring systems
- Tracking establishment of overseas ICC liaison offices and branch locations
- Mapping partnerships between ICCs and foreign organizations
- Identifying content originating from ICA-affiliated accounts on global platforms

The basic detection resources accompanying this report provide a starting point for monitoring, but sustained observation is required to understand the challenges as China's multi-tiered and horizontally integrated system continues to develop.

Greater Awareness and Transparency. Transparency mechanisms should extend beyond traditional state media disclosure. Organizations entering partnerships with ICCs or ICAs — whether media outlets, universities, think tanks, or civil society groups — often operate without full understanding of the Party-state structures behind these entities. The case of the Institute for a Community with a Shared Future demonstrates how academic partnerships can serve as vectors for embedding Party ideology into international discourse while maintaining the appearance of independent scholarship. Initiatives like the China Media Project's *Lingua Sinica* database, which tracks PRC media engagements globally including local partners and their vertical relationships to the Chinese state, represent important steps toward creating greater awareness about these networks. Greater scrutiny of funding sources, partnership terms, and content obligations would help audiences assess the credibility of information that may originate from these networks.

Capacity-Building in Target Regions. China's relative success in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America reflects not just the volume of content it produces but also the comparative absence of alternative information sources and frameworks for critical media consumption. Supporting independent journalism, strengthening media institutions, and investing in public understanding of information manipulation tactics can help build resilience against foreign information interference.

Democratic Coordination. Coordination among democratic governments and international institutions should match the integrated nature of China's approach. The European Union's FIMI framework provides valuable conceptual tools, but implementation requires sustained intelligence sharing, joint attribution efforts, and coordinated responses when manipulation campaigns are detected. The

“Centralization+” model succeeds partly by exploiting gaps between national regulatory systems and the limited visibility of subnational Chinese actors to foreign monitoring.

Realistic Assessment. Response strategies should acknowledge both the genuine limitations of China's system and the serious challenge it poses. Evidence that ICCs struggle to generate authentic engagement, that content fails to resonate emotionally, and that financial sustainability remains elusive should inform realistic assessments of threat levels and resource allocation. At the same time, the distributed nature of operations, the integration of non-state actors, the targeting of developing regions where China enjoys advantages, and the sheer volume of content production create conditions for manipulation that can succeed even when individual campaigns fail.

Researchers and analysts will find additional support in the accompanying Detection Tipsheet and ICC Database, which provide practical tools for identifying and tracking these operations.

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