



LINGUA SINICA POLICY BRIEF NO. 1

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PROPAGANDA, THERE'S AN APP FOR THAT

From Greece to Portugal, diaspora Chinese outlets — some with decades-old histories — are outsourcing their digital identities to Beijing.

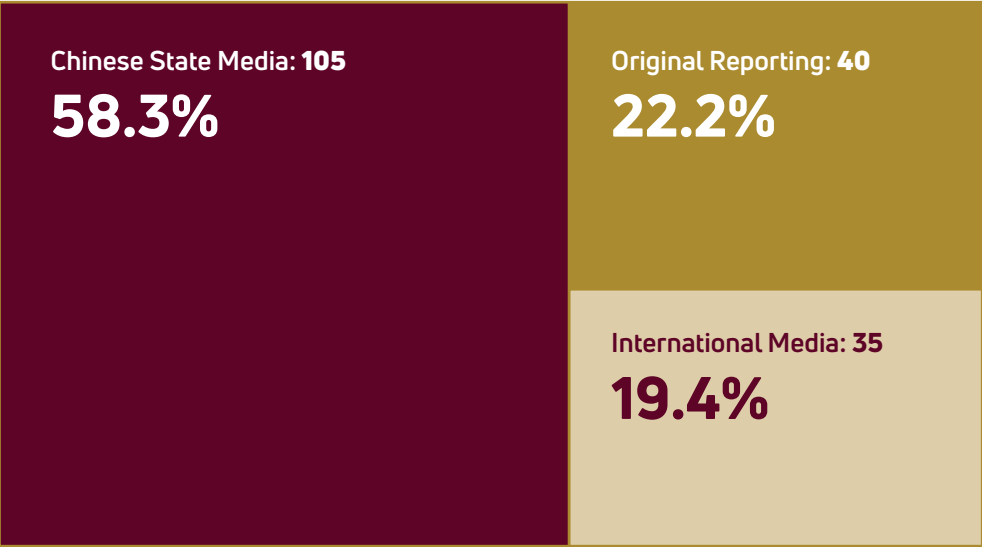
- In order to expand its global network of proxy media that can “tell China’s story well” and advance PRC state narratives, China is offering an extensive slate of digitization tools and app creation services to diaspora news outlets. Several such tools are offered through China News Service (CNS), under the Chinese Communist Party’s United Front Work Department. This is a previously under-documented facet of China’s “borrowed boat” strategy. The same strategy applies to other outlets not covered in this study.
- Our study, based on the European Chinese digital news outlets Jornal Puxin and China Greece Times, shows that nearly 60 percent of content for these locally-branded outlets comes directly from CNS and other Chinese state media — without meaningful context or reporting.
- These strategies not only create channels for various forms of FIMI, but also suggest potential Chinese state pressure on diaspora journalists and communities. As such, policymakers, CSOs and others must remain alert to these risks and consider alternative media support approaches.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SUMMARY	3
WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW	4
CASE STUDIES	6
China Greece Times (中希時報): “Building Boats to Go to Sea” (造船出海)	6
Jornal Puxin (葡新報): “Borrowing Boats to Go to Sea” (借船出海)	7
WHY IT MATTERS	8
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS	9

SUMMARY

In an effort to better influence public opinion globally and thereby support its international goals, China has long sought to exploit existing foreign media and communication channels — known by the phrase “*borrowing boats to go to sea*” (借船出海). The idea is that such channels, like the well-documented inserts of the government-run *China Daily* in international outlets like *Foreign Policy* and the *Financial Times*, can put Chinese state narratives directly before existing global audiences. Against the backdrop of a global transformation of media toward mobile digital formats, a less-documented aspect of this “borrowing boats” strategy has been China’s active co-opting of diaspora Chinese news outlets abroad with the promise that it can help them adapt to a newly digital world. With a slate of user-friendly digital services that assist with website building, app creation, and content dissemination, China News Service (CNS), China’s diaspora-facing official newswire, is also flooding these digital products with syndicated news and video content from China’s state-backed media outlets, creating an image of a unified, positive narrative on China across overseas Chinese media. We looked into two mobile apps and websites created in partnership with CNS — the *China Greece Times* (中希時報) based in Athens, and Jornal Puxin (葡新報) based in Portugal — and found that nearly 60 percent of the content on their websites was syndicated from Chinese party-state media while only 22 percent of reports were produced in-house; nearly all reports about China in each outlet were produced by Chinese state media.



Lingua Sinica examined **2 Chinese digital media outlets** tied to CNS email addresses, and reviewed **180 total articles** between both (90 each).

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

“Discourse power” 話語權

“Discourse power,” or the capacity to shape global views in Beijing’s favor, has been a guiding framework for China’s external communication strategies since the rise of Xi Jinping. China’s leaders see the country’s ability to shape global narratives on the international stage as essential to its national survival and its ability to meet its policy agendas. Unlike in liberal democracies, journalism and media in China work to project the views of the Party and “guide public opinion” to its benefit, domestically as well as internationally. The leadership has thus dedicated substantial resources to “telling China’s story well” abroad by establishing thousands of media cooperation partnerships with foreign-language and Chinese overseas media — known as “borrowing boats to go to sea” (借船出海) — and by establishing its own veiled network of digital outlets aimed at overseas audiences, or “building boats to sail the seas” (造船出海).

Media convergence 媒體融合

The CCP is now in the midst of a broad transformation of China’s domestic media landscape to meet the needs of the 21st-century information environment while ensuring that the Party’s interests and priorities take precedence. In the 2010s, as the Party sought to rein in a freewheeling internet, Xi Jinping re-organized the media apparatus in the Party’s image, moving major outward-facing media institutions under the Party’s control. The consolidation of media under Party guidance was also an important step toward “media convergence” (媒體融合), which seeks to integrate traditional and media technologies toward the goal of a unified media system that allows for easier and more coordinated dissemination of Party narratives. To achieve this, China has established “*media convergence centers*” and *international communication centers* that consolidate regional and national media resources.

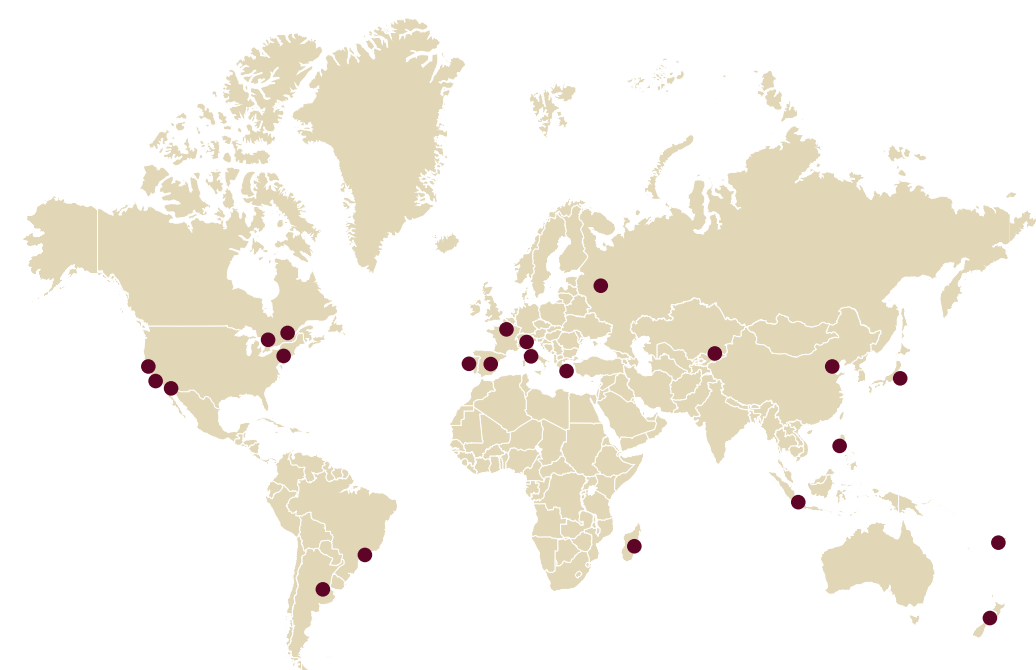
Converging the diaspora

Xi’s media reorganization drive included the China News Service and its parent, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, which was moved from the State Council to the United Front Work Department of the CCP, the office charged with building influence and support for China’s objectives overseas. In 2019, CNS began releasing digital tools to advance the digital “convergence” of diaspora media with Chinese state media. News coverage of its annual World Media Forum in 2019 focused on the financial and technological issues faced by overseas Chinese media struggling to adapt to the digital age, and the new, state media-produced antidotes. By 2020, CNS had provided “over 100,000 products and services to Chinese-language online new media in the US, Europe, Russia, Japan, and Australia,” according to CNS editor-in-chief Wang Xiaohui (王曉暉). These included collaborative reporting and resource-sharing platforms, a “one-click conversion” (一鍵轉換) platform to assist with website and app creation, and a platform built to help overseas outlets clear technical barriers to going digital called “New Shoots” (新萌).

“Technological deficiencies have also hindered Chinese-language media from developing new media platforms. The high cost of developing and maintaining mobile applications has prevented many Chinese-language media from even considering it. ‘China News Service has provided us with a lot of help in this regard,’ said Sun Jifei. He added that the newly released ‘New Shoots System’ will be even more helpful in solving major problems.”

- China News Service report on the 2019 annual World Media Forum, hosted by CNS.

Sun Jifei (孫繼飛) is deputy editor-in-chief of Shangbao Indonesia (印尼商報), a Chinese-language newspaper in Jakarta established in 2000.



Lingua Sinica has documented 30 news apps tied to CNS email addresses spanning overseas Chinese media outlets across the globe.



Interactive version of the map available
Get there via QR code

CASE STUDIES

We examined two overseas Chinese media outlets cooperating with CNS on digital integration: China Greece Times (中希時報) and Jornal Puxin (葡新報). Of the 180 total articles we examined from both outlets, 58 percent of content in these publications was provided by state media, while about 20 percent was translated from local Greek and Portuguese press or from international newswires. Only 22 percent of stories were original staff reports. An article’s origins in both cases were highly dependent on the topic: virtually all articles about China were produced by Chinese state media, while international or domestic topics were covered by international media or in-house reporting.

China Greece Times (中希時報): “Building Boats to Go to Sea” (造船出海)

The *China Greece Times* (中希時報), established in January 2005, is a weekly Chinese community newspaper in Athens with a circulation of 3,000 free copies distributed primarily in Athens’ Chinatown area. The bilingual publication includes 24 Chinese pages and 8 Greek pages, serving Greece’s overseas Chinese community and Greek-language readers with the goal of “showing Greek society a constantly changing China.”

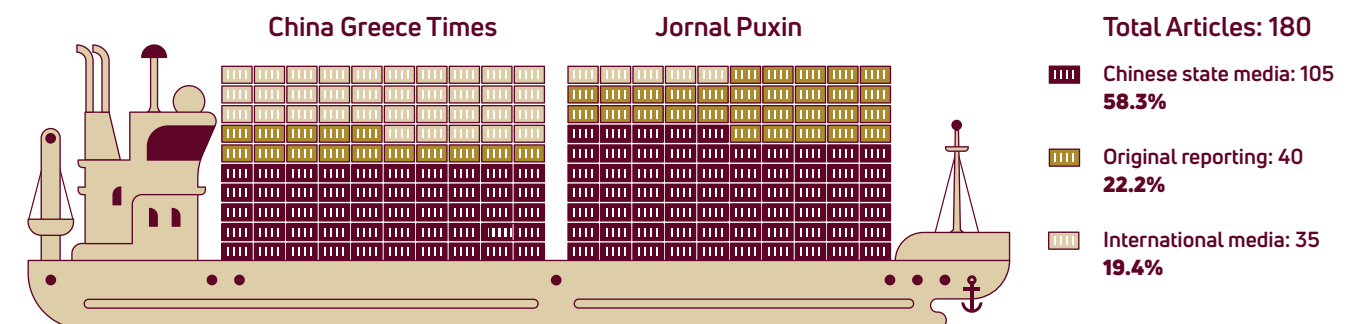
The *China Greece Times*’ extensive connections with CCP and government entities suggest it is a local front for Chinese state media in Greece. Co-founder Wang Peng (汪鵬) holds posts as the deputy secretary general of the Greek Overseas Chinese Association and the chairman of the Greece-China Alliance for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification (希臘中國和平統一促進會), both linked to the United Front Work Department. The paper also claims support from the Chinese embassy in Greece and, since its inception, has maintained extensive content-sharing agreements with Chinese state media outlets including Xinhua News Agency (2005), People’s Daily (2009), CNS (2011), Wen Wei Po (2011) and more.

Our analysis of the *China Greece Times*’ digital products found that content on its website and in its physical newspaper differed significantly from that in its mobile app, which was developed with CNS. The overwhelming majority of web app content (14/15 sections, or more than 93 percent) was CNS-syndicated, with just one section, “Important News” (要聞), produced by staff reporters. On both the China Greece Times website and app, nearly all of the content about China that we analyzed was produced by official state media, while reports on Greek or international news were produced by staff reporters or with a broader variety of international news sources such as Politico and the Associated Press.

Jornal Puxin (葡新報): “Borrowing Boats to Go to Sea” (借船出海)

Jornal Puxin (葡新報) was founded in 2005 by Ma Limei (馬麗梅), a Guangdong immigrant who initially worked in the service industry. *Jornal Puxin* initially focused on notices from the embassy, legal advice for Chinese immigrants, and local news. The paper has since gone bilingual, publishing in both Chinese and Portuguese, and has a wide digital presence across WeChat, Weibo, Facebook, Instagram, and X. According to recent profiles of Ma, Jornal Puxin’s turning point came in 2012 when she began participating in the United Front Work Department’s sponsored trips to China, particularly to Qinghai and Tibet. In 2014, emerging from a hiatus caused by financial struggles, the paper was “infused with new blood”: it hired new talent and established a Portuguese-language section, and its mission became “telling China’s story well.” According to *Xinmin Evening News*, the Portuguese edition of Jornal Puxin has “helped foreigners understand the true history and situation of Tibet and Xinjiang” by distributing materials and participating in exchange events with Portuguese journalists.

Our findings for *Jornal Puxin* largely mirrored those for the *China Greece Times*. Its app had a similar layout (mirroring the sections on its website), with only two sections, “Portuguese News” (葡萄牙新聞) and “Portuguese Chinese News” (葡萄牙僑訊), containing original in-house reports. Five other sections — all news about China, including a Portuguese-language section — contained almost exclusively syndicated content from state-affiliated media partners, including *CNS*, *CCTV*, *Xinhua*, *Qingdao Today* (今日青島), and others.



A random sample of **180 total articles** from the *Jornal Puxin* and *China Greece Times* website (60 each) and app (30 each) spanning Chinese, international, and domestic news found that the majority of the content across these outlets’ digital presence came from Chinese state media.



Interactive version of the graphic available
Get there via QR code

WHY IT MATTERS

CNS is just one piece in the larger puzzle of China's global campaign to influence Chinese-language diaspora media, which the leadership views as a gateway to wider foreign audiences. This expansion of “discourse power” through diaspora engagement is also pushed through outlets like *Xinhua*, *Ta Kung Pao*, *Xinmin Evening News*, and the *People's Daily Overseas Edition*, which are creating similar networks and digital tools to help overseas media outlets adapt to the digital age while filling their apps and websites with state narratives. Oftentimes, these partnerships work both ways: an overseas outlet can reproduce Chinese state media content, while Chinese state media can use diaspora media reporting in its international coverage. Such agreements have a well-documented history of creating an invisible editorial overhead within partner newsrooms that discourages journalists from deviating from China's official line in their reporting, or simply an over-reliance on free content due to a lack of resources.

But the influence of digital media like *China Greece Times* and *Jornal Puxin* should not be overstated. Many of the old diaspora Chinese newspapers that struggled to adapt to the digital world have been left behind by readers for digital-first media, even if they were offered resource support from Chinese state media like CNS. Their failure to reach a new generation of overseas Chinese is evident in the apps' download statistics: despite their visibility as major Chinese news media in their respective countries, *China Greece Times*' and *Jornal Puxin*'s apps collectively have fewer than 100 downloads. Who exactly benefits from this mass outpouring of resources is a question the Party continues to ask itself as it continuously adapts and remakes its foreign propaganda strategy.

Journalism is not a profitable endeavor, and survival in the digital age is difficult enough without added transnational state pressure. For those Chinese journalists abroad who are continuing the tradition of enterprising Chinese journalism through independent outlets with growing Chinese-speaking audiences, a deeper understanding of the space and alternative means of support for this work can build the foundations of a more supportive and holistic media environment while countering FIMI globally.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Create more means of support for independent Chinese diaspora media:

Chinese journalists abroad face growing risks of transnational repression, pressures only further exacerbated by ongoing financial struggles of the media globally. As the space for independent investigative journalism shrinks within China, these factors are also minimizing Chinese journalists' ability to freely report on issues considered sensitive to the Chinese state, even beyond China's national borders. Overseas Chinese media often turn to cooperation with official Chinese media like CNS affiliates or the *People's Daily Overseas Edition* under economic pressure, displacing reports written by local Chinese journalists with state-sponsored content, a trend occurring for nearly two decades. New independent digital-first Chinese media initiatives founded by overseas Chinese have filled this gap, though they still lack adequate resources and support. Existing initiatives and funds are limited, providing support and training to those considered “exiles,” encouraging integration into local media using local languages, or posing strict requirements for specific projects. Nations that are host to Chinese diaspora journalists and media initiatives should create more accessible pathways to professional journalistic training, digitization tools, and general support funding for Chinese journalists who choose to write and report in their own language and about their own communities, while improving the effectiveness of protective systems and reporting mechanisms for those facing threats or harassment from state actors.

Build media systems that support journalists while demanding transparency:

Journalism thrives best in countries with media liability and self-regulatory structures that are recognized by law yet maintain strict autonomy and political independence. These entities — such as Denmark and Sweden — require media organizations to abide by strict journalistic professional and ethical standards and enforce penalties when they act irresponsibly. However, many countries still lack systems that can help improve transparency of media ownership and funding needed to inform effective policy, as well as clear pathways for diaspora and foreign-language media participation. Implementing these measures can help curb FIMI while also taking into consideration the real needs of diaspora journalists, and build a more sustainable foundation in which independent Chinese-language journalism can thrive.

Dedicate more resources to understanding the Chinese diaspora media

environment. Those seeking to create informed policy or resources to support Chinese journalists abroad must first deeply understand their local diaspora media environment, including what Chinese people actually read and which media have influence. Diaspora newspapers that receive substantial support from official Chinese media or Party-state organizations may have the highest public profile, but may yet still be struggling to reach wider audiences compared to WeChat accounts, influencers, and digital-first media; likewise, the coverage priorities of independent Chinese media may not always be in perfect alignment with those of preexisting funds. Understanding these nuances can also help supporters and stakeholders make more informed decisions on which media activities constitute legitimate FIMI threats and determine where support is most needed.

NOTES





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