

Beyond Propaganda: An Institutional Analysis of China's International Communication in Southeast Asia and the Global South

Bukan Propaganda: Analisis Institusi terhadap Komunikasi Antarabangsa China di Asia Tenggara dan Selatan Global

YANQIU ZHANG* & HUOJIAN FANG

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ABSTRACT

Against an imbalanced global communication order and persistent misperceptions of China, this study aims to examine the institutional composition, operational logic, and major practices of China's international communication, with particular attention to Southeast Asia and the wider Global South. It adopts a qualitative and interpretive policy analysis of policy documents, institutional materials, official media content, academic studies, and illustrative cases. The study argues that China's international communication extends beyond propaganda and constitutes a layered, systemic practice rooted in China's media system, integrating national governance, digital platforms, cultural industries, and diplomatic objectives. Focusing on Southeast Asia, it identifies four core practices: national image building, public engagement, agenda setting, and win-win development and cultural dialogue. Findings show that institutional coordination enables outreach, while effectiveness depends on adaptation to local contexts. Such communication strengthens China's neighborhood diplomacy, fosters regional trust, and contributes to a more pluralistic global communication order.

Keywords: China's international communication; China's media system; Southeast Asia; public diplomacy; global communication contra-flow

ABSTRAK

Dalam susunan komunikasi global yang tidak seimbang dan wujudnya salah faham yang berterusan terhadap China, kajian ini secara sistematik meneliti komunikasi antarabangsa China dari perspektif institusi. Kajian ini mendapati bahawa komunikasi antarabangsa China bukan propaganda semata-mata, tetapi satu amalan sistemik berlapis yang berakar dalam sistem media China serta menggabungkan pentadbiran negara, platform digital, industri budaya dan matlamat diplomatik. Sebagai aliran kontra utama dalam komunikasi global, ia memajukan visi komuniti berkongsi nasib sesama insan dan mempelbagaikan naratif global yang utama. Menerusi fokus terhadap Asia Tenggara, kajian ini mengenal pasti empat amalan utama, iaitu pembinaan imej negara, penglibatan awam, penetapan agenda, pembangunan menang-menang dan dialog budaya. Dapatan ini menunjukkan bahawa penyelarasan institusi menyokong jangkauan komunikasi, manakala keberkesanannya bergantung pada penyesuaian wilayah kepada konteks tempatan. Komunikasi ini mengukuhkan diplomasi kejiranan China, memupuk kepercayaan serantau dan menyumbang kepada Selatan Global untuk membina sistem komunikasi global yang lebih adil dan pluralistik.

Kata Kunci: Komunikasi antarabangsa China; sistem media China; Asia Tenggara; diplomasi awam; aliran balas komunikasi global

INTRODUCTION

China's international communication practices have been a growing area of scholarly interest in a global communication landscape that is becoming increasingly skewed towards Western media discourses, as Chinese media outlets aim to counter the discursive hegemony of Western media outlets (Thussu et al., 2017). Recent research also reveals that the Chinese diplomatic and media elites are increasingly leveraging mainstream global social media platforms to engage with this structurally imbalanced communication landscape (Qaisar et al., 2025).

But today's research mostly sees China's international communication as a question of state governance, propaganda production or dissemination of ideological speech (Zou, 2023). These studies are important but they cannot account for the institutional logic of the Chinese media in the overall governance and public communication system in China. The study of Chinese media presence in Africa also warns against simple models and proposes other models like constructive journalism (Zhang & Matingwina, 2016). Hence, the Chinese media system needs to be examined to grasp the organization and contextualization of the international communication.

Southeast Asia is one of the important regional lenses through which such dynamics can be examined, and global stories can be understood in terms of local complexities. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) illustrates how China's development narratives are translated into regional infrastructure projects, such as the China-Laos Railway and the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway. The BRI's image in the Chinese international media contributes to the image of China in the region and internationally and facilitates the overall bilateral cooperation and political trust building. But Southeast Asia is not a homogeneous region. Political institutions, media landscape, historical experiences, and public opinion towards China differ greatly among countries, and are shaped by ASEAN-centric regionalism, domestic agendas, and great power competition (Ji, 2024; Kuik, 2021; Ho & Lee, 2025). In this regard, Southeast Asia is a complex communicative environment, which shows the opportunities and challenges of China's international communication efforts. Grasping these dynamics demands close scrutiny of the media system underpinning China's external outreach.

Hence, this study will attempt to answer four interrelated questions. What is the systemic composition, operational logic and core characteristics of China's international communication from an institutional perspective, and what are the differences between China's international communication and the mainstream Western media models? What are the key aspects, practical routes and typical forms of China's international communication at the global and Southeast Asian regional levels in the context of an imbalanced global communication system? What opportunities, challenges and constraints are there for China's international communication in Southeast Asia as a diverse and politically sensitive regional ecology, and how can localized effectiveness be achieved? Moreover, what are the Southeast Asian, Global South and global communication perspectives on China's international communication?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent research has moved beyond treating China's international communication primarily through the conventional categories of propaganda and soft power. Increasing attention has instead been directed to the construction of strategic narratives, the management of international controversies, and the adaptation of communication to differentiated audiences. From this

perspective, international communication involves not only the articulation of national positions, but also the framing of international issues and the negotiation of differing interpretations of China's role in global affairs. Research on strategic narratives has shown how external communication contributes to the articulation of national positions and the shaping of international debates, while studies of audience reception indicate that communicative effects are conditioned by pre-existing perceptions and broader political contexts rather than by message design alone (Davies et al., 2025; Song et al., 2025). This body of work has substantially advanced understanding of the content, strategies, and reception of China's international communication. Its principal emphasis, however, remains on narratives and audience effects, with less sustained attention to the institutional arrangements through which such practices are produced and coordinated.

This limitation is particularly apparent in studies of Southeast Asia and the Global South, where China's international communication is embedded in development cooperation, digital infrastructure, diplomatic engagement, and local political conditions. China's presence in these regions is communicated not only through media content, but also through infrastructure projects, digital platforms, investment, technology transfer, and development partnerships (Heeks et al., 2024). Communication is therefore situated within broader economic, technological, and institutional relationships that shape how China is encountered and interpreted. These practices do not, however, generate uniform responses. Their reception is mediated by domestic political dynamics, levels of public trust, and existing attitudes toward both China and local governments, as demonstrated by the uneven outcomes of China's health diplomacy in Thailand and the Philippines (Li et al., 2025). Southeast Asia and the Global South thus constitute active sites of interpretation and negotiation rather than passive destinations for Chinese messages.

Recent institutional approaches provide a useful basis for examining the policy and organizational foundations of these practices. Studies of public diplomacy institutions emphasize the interaction of policy discourse, historical development, political actors, and organizational routines in shaping international communication (Huang, 2022). Research on China's institutionalized people-to-people diplomacy likewise illustrates how sustained diplomatic platforms combine political engagement, identity construction, and the circulation of policy narratives (Ni, 2025). Taken together, these studies suggest that China's international communication is constituted through the coordination of government agencies, media organizations, diplomatic platforms, and regional cooperation mechanisms. Yet the institutional dimensions of China's engagement with Southeast Asia and the wider Global South remain insufficiently integrated within the existing literature. This study addresses that gap by examining China's international communication as a policy-embedded and organizationally coordinated practice, thereby extending analysis beyond reductionist propaganda-centered interpretations.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive policy analysis to examine China's international communication as an institutionally embedded practice. Rather than measuring communication effects or testing causal relationships, it focuses on how policy objectives, institutional arrangements, media actors, and regional cooperation mechanisms shape China's international communication. The analysis draws on relevant policy documents, institutional materials, official media content, academic studies, and illustrative cases of China's communication practices, with

particular attention to Southeast Asia and the wider Global South. These materials are interpreted in relation to four analytical dimensions: national image building, public engagement, agenda setting and narrative construction, and development-oriented communication and cultural dialogue. Informed by an institutional approach to public diplomacy (Huang, 2022), the analysis examines the interaction between policy discourse, organizational coordination, communication platforms, and regional contexts. This approach is appropriate for the article's conceptual and interpretive purpose, as it enables an integrated examination of the institutional logic and practical forms of China's international communication.

MEDIA SYSTEM IN CHINA AND THE OPERATIONAL LOGIC OF ITS INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION

China's remarkable achievements in economic and social development have established a robust image of hard power internationally. But the world is still not fully familiar with China's history, culture, political system and values. Therefore, the construction of soft power image based on Chinese culture and values has become the core of China's national image construction. In order to understand China's international communication, it is necessary to first clarify the role of China's international communication in China's media system, and to understand China's international communication in the context of China's media development philosophy, external cooperation and international communication.

INSTITUTIONAL LOGIC AND COMPOSITIONAL STRUCTURE OF CHINA'S MEDIA SYSTEM

The media system in China has its own unique institutional logic. It encompasses traditional media like Xinhua News Agency, China Central Television (CCTV), China Daily, and China Radio International (CRI), as well as new media and social media, including TikTok, WeChat, and Xiaohongshu (also known as RED) (Zhou & Wu, 2017). China's media system is not one that is primarily commercial and market-oriented, but is tightly connected to the broader national governance and public communication system. In addition to its basic tasks of news production and information dissemination, it performs several missions, including policy interpretation, coordination of social consensus, cultural outreach, shaping the national image and international engagement.

This institutional feature is particularly important in the field of China's international communication. State media play an important role in presenting China's positions, explaining national policies, and shaping international perceptions of China. They aim to portray China in a more nuanced and multifaceted manner in international communication, and to address the misconceptions and stereotypes prevalent in the global media landscape (Chen, 2024). This perspective does not regard the international communication of China as a political message, but as a communication in the media, which is closely related to national development, cultural identity, public communication and international communication.

This does not mean that China's media system is limited to central state media or formal political communication. Instead, it has been increasingly turning to cultural industries, digital platforms and popular media forms as an overall strategy of national presentation and international communication. Films, documentaries, short videos, online games, livestreaming and platform-based cultural content introduce China to the world. For example, the Chinese films blend history,

myth and aesthetics into a narrative that is accessible to the world, like *The Wandering Earth II* and *Ne Zha*. Digital cultural products like *Genshin Impact* also boost China's international exposure by offering interactive entertainment and global fan communities, while content creators like Li Ziqi showcase rural life, food culture, and traditional craftsmanship in an appealing way. As the above examples illustrate, China's media system is not solely state media. Instead, China's media system now operates through a broader communication ecology, in which state media, cultural industries, digital platforms, and popular cultural actors all play a role in shaping China's international image.

RESOURCE INTEGRATION AND COORDINATED COMMUNICATION

The second characteristic of China's media system is its ability to integrate resources and coordinate communication. In the major international communication projects, China's media system can gather the media institutions, communication platforms, cultural industry and policy resources around the common national narratives, public communication goals and international communication tasks. This ability is especially manifested in large-scale international events and projects, such as the Olympic Games, the World Expo and the BRI. By coordinated reporting, multilingual production, visual storytelling, and cross-platform dissemination, Chinese media can establish a multi-level communication network to present the image of China, the development story of China, and the cultural connotations of China to the world. For instance, in CGTN's outbound media narrative on BRI, infrastructure cooperation, development opportunities, and China's evolving role are woven into a narrative of international leadership and shared development (Zhang & Shaw, 2023).

Policy orientation and institutional organization support this capacity for coordination. Central media organizations have been supported to develop overseas and new media platforms and more diverse international communication strategies have been experimented with. As a result, China's international communication is becoming more a combination of authoritative state media, digital platforms and cultural production. Central media outlets offer authoritative coverage, and digital media and cultural products make China-related stories more accessible and engaging to diverse audiences, while explaining policy. This coordination enables China to integrate official communication with more flexible cultural and platform-based communication.

There is also integration of resources at the regional and local levels. Over the past few years, several provincial-level media outlets have established international communication centers to promote local culture, economic development, tourism and regional cooperation. This local dimension is important because the media and internet system in China has never been organized at the national level only; provincial and regional media actors have always been involved in the process of localized information production and online content regionalization (Wu & Li, 2022). International communication centers in Sichuan, Zhejiang and Guangdong, for instance, have promoted regional cultures and local development stories through short videos, multilingual content, overseas social media and cooperation with foreign media outlets to boost their international exposure. The activities show that China's international communication is gradually developing into a multi-layered structure, in which the central, provincial, local and platform-based actors all have their roles to play in the task of introducing China to international audiences.

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION AS AN EXTENSION OF THE MEDIA SYSTEM

In this sense, China's international communication can be seen as an extension of its domestic media system to the world. Based on the above institutional logic and collaborative governance capacity, China has developed a media Going Global strategy to strengthen its participation in global communicative affairs.

This strategic move involves establishing international offices, launching international editions and multilingual services, forming partnerships with foreign media outlets and using digital tools to reach international audiences. In this process, the Chinese media industry converts its communicative power into influence in the global communication field. At the same time, its digital platforms and technological infrastructures have become more important in helping to spread China-related narratives across borders (He, 2022).

Among the most important actors in this process are Xinhua News Agency and China Global Television Network (CGTN). China's national news agency, Xinhua has a broad network overseas and has set up multilingual news services and digital platforms to enhance China's international media influence. CGTN is an important international communication platform that broadcasts in various languages and channels to the world. Through news reporting, documentaries, interviews, live broadcasting and digital content, these institutions share China's policy concepts, development results and cultural stories, and convey China's views on global issues.

This outward extension, however, is not restricted to the traditional international broadcasting. The significance of new media platforms, short videos, livestreaming, online games and storytelling via social media has grown. China can be seen in more dynamic and daily aspects through platforms such as Red, and cultural products that are circulated internationally. Such communications are not so much about language as about the visual experience, entertainment, lifestyle, cultural curiosity and emotional connection. They thus complement the work of the state media and enrich China's international communication in a diversified and accessible way.

In general, China's international communication is not just one dissemination channel or external propaganda mechanism, but a comprehensive communication system based on its own media system. It integrates state media, policy endorsement, digital platforms, cultural sectors, regional communication nodes and international media collaborations. This is the solid institutional basis for its multi-layered activities in national image shaping, overseas public interaction, cultural dialogue and building global discourse.

DIMENSIONS AND PRACTICES OF CHINA'S INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

China's media system is manifested in various international communication practices in global and Southeast Asian contexts. These practices can be explained by four interrelated dimensions: image building and national presentation, public engagement and social connection, agenda setting and narrative construction, and development-oriented communication and cultural resonance. These dimensions illustrate China's self-presentation, the sharing of development experiences, the communication with international audiences, and the involvement in the production of global and regional narratives. Southeast Asia is a regional communication ecology where these practices are made real and China-related narratives meet local media, cultural and political contexts.

BUILDING NATIONAL IMAGE AND ADVANCING NATION BRANDING

Building national image is one of the main activities through which China presents itself to the world. This is not limited to reputation management and positive publicity. More generally, it focuses on China's attempt to re-establish its national brand by showcasing its development model, values, political system and foreign policy in international affairs around the world. This process is significant in international communication as the image of a country affects the understanding of its development experience, cooperation offers and global role by other countries. This is especially significant for China, where its rise and international activities are frequently interpreted within the prism of outside frameworks that are constructed by dominant media institutions and geopolitical discourses. Recent studies also show that the image construction of China is closely related to public diplomacy, including the image of China as a responsible international player (Gong, 2021). China's international communication thus aims to convey a more contextualized and multidimensional picture of China, to make its development experience, policy ideas and role in global affairs more comprehensible from a wider perspective.

On the international level, China's media has tried to project a national image that is linked to development, modernization, cultural continuity and international responsibility. This image is created in part by the major international media outlets like CGTN, Xinhua News Agency, China Daily and China Radio International, which frequently report on China's technological advances, poverty alleviation, infrastructure construction, ecological civilization and involvement in global governance. These themes are not just descriptions of domestic achievements, but also representational resources through which China explains its development capacity and governance experience to international audiences. Various forms of reporting lead to various aspects of national presentation. High-speed rail, space exploration, poverty alleviation, and green development, for instance, link China to modernization, technological capacity, and development-oriented governance. By contrast, BRI coverage is associated with China's national image, shared development, infrastructure connectivity and international cooperation. This process is further supported by multilingual and multi-platform communication. Chinese international media translate China's domestic achievements and policy ideas through news reports, documentaries, interviews, cultural programs, and digital content for various linguistic and regional audiences.

Cultural communication, apart from news communication, also widens the means of China's image to be spread to the exterior. They introduce China's image to the international audience, making it closer, more visual and emotional, and connect China's history, aesthetics, values, creativity and daily life. It conveys ideas through more vivid, intuitive and emotionally engaging approaches. Cultural communication is an integral part of national soft power and an irreplaceable part of public diplomacy, which is the basis for re-branding China. This cultural dimension is manifested in documentaries, films, television programs, online literature, games and short videos, which show Chinese history, aesthetics, values and daily life in more popular and experiential ways. Each of the cultural forms contributes to this process in a different way. The *Wandering Earth II* and *Ne Zha* demonstrate how Chinese cultural imagination, mythology, and contemporary creativity can enter international popular culture. International audiences are captivated by interactive entertainment experiences such as the popular game *Genshin Impact*, and by the visual narratives of prominent social media personalities like Li Ziqi, who shares fascinating stories about rural life, cuisine, and traditional crafts. These practices provide a more nuanced national image projection, more independent of official discourse and more sensitive to visuality, emotionality and everyday cultural experiences.

These types of image construction are more localized and regionally embedded in Southeast Asia. China is not only represented by the central state media or by general national development narratives, but also by border and regional media institutions, digital media platforms, and cultural products that are geographically, culturally, and socially closer to the audiences in Southeast Asia. Local media in provinces like Yunnan and Guangxi are thus significant in the process of translating China's national image into more local and accessible forms. For instance, Yunnan Daily Press Group has created communication platforms and publications for Southeast Asian readers, such as Burmese, Thai, Lao and Khmer language newspapers. Yunnan's audiovisual and digital projects, which are oriented towards the Lancang-Mekong region, also demonstrate the regionalization, multilingualism and platformization of China's international communication in Southeast Asia.

This cultural dimension is also reflected in digital cultural products that flow through youth cultures in Southeast Asia. These products are not just formal messages, but informal and participatory. China-related cultural production can be integrated into Southeast Asian popular culture through interactive entertainment, online communities, and platform-based participation, as seen in games like *Genshin Impact*, *PUBG MOBILE*, and *Mobile Legends*. *Genshin Impact* brings Chinese cultural imagination through visual design, music, and mythology; *PUBG MOBILE* has a wider audience through competitive play and relatively low language barriers; and *Mobile Legends* shows the importance of localization by using the Filipino historical figure Lapu-Lapu. These examples indicate that China's image in Southeast Asia is not only influenced by media narratives, but also by daily entertainment, cultural familiarity, youth involvement, and localized design.

This regional-localized image building is further developed through cooperative storytelling in the ASEAN-oriented reporting of China News Service Guangxi Provincial Branch, which transforms the general themes of economic cooperation, cultural mutual learning, and local development into specific human stories. For instance, a report on June 28, 2025, by Liuzhou, Guangxi, China News Service highlighted the graduation of ASEAN students from Guangxi University of Science and Technology (China News Service, 2025). The report highlighted a Lao student who studied medicine in China and Indonesian students who intended to return home to become entrepreneurs after their studies and thus viewed China-ASEAN cooperation from the perspective of education, mobility, personal aspiration and future development. This kind of reporting does not aim to make cooperation an abstract policy concept, but rather to make it more visible and emotionally accessible through the everyday experiences of Southeast Asian students in China. In this way, China is re-branded not as a faraway major power, but as a neighbor, partner and participant in shared regional development. Thus, image building helps to communicate China's presence in Southeast Asia in terms of cooperation, mutual learning and community instead of distance, hierarchy and geopolitical competition.

ENGAGING INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC AND BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

The difference between image building and public engagement is that the former is about how China is represented to the world, and the latter is about how communication, exchange and interaction establish relationships with publics in other societies. This dimension is closely related to public diplomacy but not restricted to official communication. Public diplomacy in the digital age is no longer confined to institutional space, but also platform space, and communication is no longer just about the delivery of messages, but also about interaction, participation, and

relationship-building (Manor & Huang, 2022). In this respect, China's international communication involves not only the creation and dissemination of information by state media, but also media cooperation, cultural exchanges, educational exchanges, youth exchanges, tourism exchanges and grassroots exchanges between people. These activities are conducted at the relational level, not only to promote China's international presence, but also to improve its international accessibility, promote mutual understanding and strengthen ties with foreign societies.

Media cooperation is an important means of building communication links with the international public and professional circles of China's international public affairs. For example, the China-Africa Media Cooperation Forum has brought together media organizations and government officials, think tanks and international institutions to share their opinions on news cooperation, modernization stories and people-to-people understanding. This type of media cooperation has also been observed in exchanges between China and Latin America, where Chinese and Latin American media institutions have talked about joint reporting, cooperation and learning in new media. These forums are not only professional communications among media actors, but also networks to disseminate China-related development, cooperation and modernization stories among journalists, scholars and policy communities.

Beyond media collaboration, educational and cultural activities provide more sustainable opportunities for public engagement and relationship-building. Through long-term contact and interpersonal exchange, programs like Confucius Institutes, Chinese-language learning programs and the “Chinese Bridge” Chinese Proficiency Competition bring Chinese language, culture and social life to the public in other societies. These activities help to build communities of students, teachers, cultural actors and youth that experience China not only through news or official narratives, but through learning and everyday experiences. These activities help to build a united community of teachers, students, culture lovers and young people, so that they can learn about China through the classroom and everyday communication, instead of news media reports. This relational logic has been further expanded to platform-based participation in the digital era. International bloggers, international students, tourists and content creators are more and more sharing their experience of China in short videos, livestreaming, travel stories and lifestyle content. These practices render China's international communication more mundane and intimate, as international audiences are not only exposed to China through official communication but also through food, travel, study, work, and social media interaction.

Public engagement and relationship building is important in Southeast Asia because communication between China and the region is not only about projecting cultural images, but also about reacting to shared histories, development needs, and everyday social issues. China's communication with Southeast Asia has thus gradually shifted from one-way cultural presentation to more cooperative and participatory communication. One example is cross-border documentary co-production. In January 2020, the documentary *Nanxi Riverside*, co-produced by Guangxi Radio and Television and Vietnam Television, was broadcast in both countries, which revisited the history of medical assistance provided by Guilin Nanxishan Hospital to Vietnamese wounded soldiers in the late 1960s. The documentary linked public communication with shared historical memory and emotionally accessible storytelling through oral history and the voices of both Chinese and Vietnamese participants.

This cooperative logic can also be seen in the wider China-ASEAN film and audiovisual exchanges. Film cooperation has evolved from screening exchange to forum, project matching, industrial cooperation and cultural co-production since the China-ASEAN Film Culture Week was

launched in Pingxiang, Guangxi, China in December 2013. This process was further extended through project signing, audiovisual promotion, AI training, talent development, and content cooperation during the 2025 China-ASEAN audiovisual industry cooperation meeting in Bangkok. These practices are important not only for the dissemination of Chinese cultural products, but also for the establishment of professional and cultural platforms for Chinese and Southeast Asian media actors to cooperate, negotiate common themes, and respond to the audience in the region.

In addition to institutionalized cultural cooperation, there are more everyday forms of social engagement that further link communication with lived experience. Regional cooperation is translated into experiences of medical support, mobility, sport and shared participation through programs like Yunnan's "Brightness Action" medical assistance initiative and cross-border events like the "One Marathon Across Two Countries". These practices are not merely the expression of the official concept of China-ASEAN friendship; they enable the public in the region to experience cooperation in a tangible way, through their bodies and through their interactions with one another. In this way, public engagement in Southeast Asia is not just image promotion. It facilitates the transformation of regional cooperation into social relations, emotional familiarity and lasting people-to-people contacts.

SETTING INTERNATIONAL AGENDAS AND FRAMING COOPERATIVE NARRATIVES

The third fundamental aspect of China's international communication is agenda-setting and narrative construction. Whereas national image shaping focuses on China's self-representation, and public engagement centers on its bond-building with overseas publics, this dimension highlights China's participation in the global public sphere through competing public attention, interpreting international affairs, and providing systematic interpretive frameworks. Chinese international media and related actors highlight issues like development cooperation, global governance, connectivity, modernization and mutual learning among civilizations through agenda setting. They use narrative construction to link these issues with China's development experience, policy ideas and cooperation narratives, and offer contextual explanations when China-related issues are interpreted in different or competing ways. This is significant in a global communication order in which perceptions of China are formed by a variety of media institutions, political contexts and narrative frameworks. In this way, agenda setting and narrative construction contribute to the transformation of China's media power into international communication power.

Agenda setting is most apparent at the global level when the Chinese international media set the agenda for major international events and global governance issues. At the 2023 Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, mainstream Chinese media outlets including CGTN and Xinhua News Agency prominently showcased the BRI's tangible achievements, future development prospects, infrastructure connectivity progress, trade facilitation outcomes, as well as its implications for the global economy and regional partnerships. In this way, these media activities positioned the project as a global public agenda on inclusive development and international cooperation, not a unilateral Chinese policy scheme. The same agenda-setting can be observed in the Chinese media reporting on global governance topics like the G20, climate change, sustainable development, cybersecurity, and the digital economy. Chinese media convey China's positions and proposals through multilingual reporting, expert interviews, special reports and explanatory columns, and place them in the context of the international debate. Launched by China News Service (CNS) in late 2020, W.E. Talk (Dong Xi Wen) is a high-end multilingual converged media dialogue platform. It includes in-depth expert discussions on climate change, global

governance, inter-civilization communication and China's role in global affairs. These practices demonstrate that agenda setting is a way to help China's international communication to focus on issues where China is not only a player, but also a provider of solutions and cooperation frameworks.

Narrative construction is another important global practice of China's international communication. As China-related issues are discussed in different and sometimes contradictory political discourses, Chinese media and actors attempt to provide explanations, clarify the official line, and provide alternative interpretations. This practice is manifested in two ways: media-based and platform-based. For example, China has expounded its security, development, ethnic and social stability policies on Xinjiang and Hong Kong via documentaries, special reports, interviews and multilingual platforms in the international media. As can be seen from CGTN's documentaries on Xinjiang, including *China's Xinjiang: Frontline of Terrorism Prevention* and *Beloved Land*, the visual narrative is employed to offer a specific interpretive lens to understand ethnic issues in Xinjiang. In the meantime, China's diplomatic officials have been using international social media, such as X, to express China's position on a range of issues, including China-U.S. trade conflicts and the South China Sea. These practices show that the production of narratives is not only a reaction to other narratives, but also a way to engage with the international public sphere, to give explanations and context, and to offer other perspectives on China-related topics.

In Southeast Asia, these agenda-setting practices manifest themselves in regional events, media cooperation, and multilingual digital platforms. China-ASEAN platforms like the China-ASEAN Expo and the China-ASEAN Business and Investment Summit are not just economic or institutional events, but also communicative occasions where attention is organized around cooperation, technological innovation, trade connectivity and shared regional opportunities. An illustrative case is provided by China News Service Guangxi Branch. It also held a nearly two-hour livestream during the opening of the 22nd China-ASEAN Expo, which took viewers through the exhibition and showcased the application and products of artificial intelligence from ASEAN countries, and ASEAN media also participated in the dissemination of related content.

In addition to event-based communication, the regional international communication practices in Yunnan demonstrate the possibility of making agenda setting more platform-based and continuous. For instance, the Yunnan South Asia and Southeast Asia Regional International Communication Center maintains overseas social media accounts in English, Thai, Burmese, Lao, Khmer, and other languages, and disseminates regional stories and China-related cooperation stories through Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram, Telegram, TikTok, and other platforms. In this way, China's communication with Southeast Asia is no longer reliant on one-off events, but is linked to ongoing digital circulation, regional visibility and daily access to cooperation-related content.

When these cooperation-oriented narratives become part of the regional public discourse, they will be understood in different ways. This is particularly evident when China-backed infrastructure initiatives are assessed through the lenses of potential risks, economic reliance, local welfare distribution and external geopolitical influence. The China-Laos Railway is a case in point. The railway has been hailed as a symbol of China-Laos connectivity and regional development, but also been the subject of some international and social media discussion regarding “debt trap” and “China threat.” The construction of the narrative in Southeast Asia thus needs more than official explanation, but also localized reporting, field-based storytelling, and cooperation with local media. For example, Qijing Media Convergence Center's “Charming Qijing: Belt and Road Partner Journey” project sent reporting teams to places such as the China-Laos Railway and the

China-Myanmar oil and gas pipelines to record the progress of the projects and the stories of the builders. Selected works were shared via Twitter/X and Facebook and re-published in collaboration with mainstream media in Laos and Myanmar. These practices help to link infrastructure projects to stories of regional connectivity, local engagement, and shared growth.

PURSuing WIN-WIN COOPERATION AND FACILITATING CULTURAL DIALOGUE

The fourth aspect of China's international communication is to achieve win-win cooperation and cultural resonance through participatory interactive exchanges. Rather than focusing solely on national image, public engagement, or agenda setting, this dimension concerns the translation of development narratives into inclusive and socially relevant communication practices.

It is concerned not only with economic growth, infrastructure development, and policy achievements, but also with educational cooperation, digital innovation and everyday cross-cultural encounters.

The 2024 ASEAN-China Year of People-to-People Exchanges stands as a typical case in point. *People's Daily*, China's official newspaper, emphasized cultural and creative performances and the involvement of young people in the opening ceremony coverage, showcasing the joint singing of the official theme song by young people from China and ASEAN countries (People's Daily Online, 2024). These events are a testament to the potential of regional communication to link cooperation agendas with concrete, participatory and emotionally charged cultural encounters.

Development-oriented communication can be linked to capacity building and youth interaction at the regional level, such as education cooperation. The 2024 China-ASEAN Education Cooperation Week in Guizhou, China, has provided a platform for educational exchange, vocational cooperation, and talent cultivation. In 2023, the number of Chinese students studying in ASEAN countries and students from ASEAN countries studying in China surpassed 175,000 (Xinhua, 2024). This mobility in education is not only an institutional slogan, but a connection between development and young people's training, professional aspirations and everyday intercultural experience. Thus, education is a communicative practice where development is experienced, understood and situated by students and educational communities.

Audiovisual cooperation is another example of how cultural resonance can be created through joint production and professional collaboration. The ASEAN-China Audio-visual Industry Cooperation Conference 2025 in Bangkok featured project cooperation, audiovisual promotion, AI media innovation training, talent development, and content collaboration (The Nation, 2025). These practices indicate that China's communication with Southeast Asia is not only to spread Chinese content, but also to establish platforms for joint production, professional training, and regional cultural industries. Cultural resonance is created here not so much by one-way cultural presentation, but by co-production, technical exchange and the development of regionally relevant media content.

Development is also linked to everyday experience through cultural tourism and cross-border cultural activities. The 2024 ASEAN-oriented Cultural Exchange and Cooperation Forum in Nanning initiated a joint cultural and tourism development project between China and ASEAN countries, connecting communication with travel, local culture, creative industries, and interpersonal exchanges (China Daily, 2024). These practices help to make regional cooperation more tangible by making development and cultural exchange visible, visit-able, learn-able and participative. They also argue that Southeast Asian publics are not only recipients of China-related narratives, but also actors in the circulation, interpretation, and localization of these narratives. In

this sense, development-oriented communication and cultural resonance contribute to the shift of China's international communication from national self-presentation to more participatory and regionally embedded communication.

Communication contra-flow places China's international communication in the evolving global media order, while Southeast Asia provides a tangible regional space where this communication is localized, negotiated, and experimented. China's relations with Southeast Asian countries are closely connected with infrastructure connectivity, development cooperation, cultural exchange, digital transformation, and people-to-people communication. In this area, China's international communication is not only to introduce China to the countries in Southeast Asia, but also to tell the story of regional development, to communicate and to negotiate the common concerns.

DISCUSSION

To view China's international communication from a Cold War prism and to label it as propaganda is a limiting and a limited analytical perspective. This is too simplistic a view to reflect the complexity of communicative practices, and it does not consider the institutional context, multi-actor nature, and different functional objectives of China's outreach. As Huang (2022) indicates, public diplomacy institutions are shaped by the interaction of policy discourse, political actors, historical development, and organizational practices. While China's international communication is indeed led and coordinated by the government, this governmental leadership does not equate to propaganda. China's international communication is not a one-sided, ideologically based propaganda communication with indoctrination as the main purpose, but a multilayered, multipurpose communication system based on national governance, media institutions, digital platforms, and cultural industries. It involves policy narration, national image projection, cultural exchange, public engagement, development cooperation narration, and people-to-people connectivity, aiming at promoting mutual understanding, sharing development experiences, and building inclusive global partnerships. To simplify this multidimensional practice to propaganda is to overlook its constructive, dialogic nature and to neglect the fact that it has developed different approaches to different audiences in the region and around the world, depending on the context.

The interpretation of China's international communication should go beyond the scope of national interests and practical needs. It is based on the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind, and it takes on the mission of spreading inclusive global values and promoting international solidarity. Its main activities include national image and nation branding, international public engagement and bilateral relations. On the other hand, China's international communication is to promote the influence of Chinese civilization, improve the international communication capacity, tell the true story of China, and present a true, friendly and dignified image of China. Conversely, it uses all-media strengths to build partnerships with regional media alliances and more than 130 overseas mainstream media outlets and encourages various people-to-people exchanges. Such institutionalized people-to-people exchanges provide sustained platforms for strengthening relational ties, promoting mutual understanding, and communicating shared principles of peace, inclusivity, and development (Ni, 2025). Such communication is in line with the goal of China's public diplomacy, which is to encounter the negative narratives, to build an objective image of the country and to dispel biased discourses like the "China threat theory."

China's international communication has regional characteristics, and Southeast Asia is one of its main areas. It follows two main directions: setting international agendas and framing

cooperative narratives and pursuing win-win development and facilitating cultural dialogue. Research on China's engagement with Southeast Asia similarly indicates that regional cooperation combines development initiatives with efforts to build trust and attraction, although its reception varies across national contexts (Dinh et al., 2024). Communication with Southeast Asian countries is an important part of China's neighborhood diplomacy, which is conducive to peace and common development of Asia-Pacific countries. In regional exchanges, it helps to explain China's diplomatic stance, enrich cultural exchanges, exchange development experiences, and enhance political trust between countries, embodying China's basic diplomatic principles and providing a solid foundation for multidimensional regional cooperation.

China's international communication is a counter-current in the global information flow, historically dominated by western media and narratives (Boyd-Barrett & Thussu, 1992; Thussu, 2018). It is not just about national image improvement, but also about diversifying the space of global narratives, providing alternative views on development, governance and international cooperation and engaging with the Global South's struggle to challenge Western-centered narratives (Marsh et al., 2023). The unique institutional communication system in China, which relies on the interaction between national governance, media institutions, digital platforms and cultural industries, makes this contra-flow possible. This system is not driven primarily by commercial interests in the same way as many Western media systems but is a media that is coordinated in layers between state media, digital media and cultural media (Xu & Yu, 2022). Official media, such as CGTN, link infrastructure cooperation and development opportunities to the larger story of global leadership (Zhang & Shaw, 2023), and digital platforms are infrastructural actors that go beyond content to technology and services. This integrated system not only regards China's international communication as external publicity, but also as a comprehensive mechanism for organizing national narratives, diplomatic ideas, and global governance visions.

But Southeast Asia is a complex and sensitive communication landscape, where China's outreach is more difficult. Narratives are heard and challenged within the context of the multiple political systems, media, religious and ethnic environments, historical memories, and different perceptions of China. The credibility of "China's story" varies significantly from country to country and from social group to social group, while the Chinese embassies interact with local media through events, articles and briefings. There are still regional issues, including the South China Sea disputes, economic influence, and diaspora politics (Wang, 2022). Likewise, the socio-political context in the country influences the acceptance of BRI projects, which results in different risk profiles in Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore (Wang & Fu, 2022). The results show that communication is not just about getting more media coverage or one official line. Rather, it depends on regional adaptation, that is, making narratives locally intelligible, culturally appropriate and socially credible. The problem is not just "speaking out" but making messages understood, negotiated and accepted in specific regional contexts.

International communication is an important way to promote the community with a shared future vision and is an important tool for China's external communication. Comprehensive improvements are needed to maximize public diplomatic results: improving the overall communication capacity, establishing influential communication platforms overseas, and improving the quality of communication content. In addition, innovative, media-based approaches and region-specific strategies must be used to ensure that diplomatic messages are heard locally and are comprehensible to a broad audience. This will help enhance the effectiveness of cross-border communication and increase the international acceptance of China's narratives.

CONCLUSION

This study offers an institutional analysis of China's international communication, moving beyond simplistic labels of propaganda to examine it as a comprehensive, governance-embedded system. Grounded in China's media architecture and shaped by national governance, digital platforms, cultural industries and diplomatic priorities, this system generates layered communication practices that contribute to a more pluralistic global information landscape. Taking Southeast Asia as a pivotal case and extending the analysis to the Global South, the research identifies four core practices—national image building, public engagement, agenda setting, and development-oriented dialogue—that frame China's global and regional outreach.

Findings reveal that while institutional coordination enables cross-border communication capacity, effectiveness hinges on contextual adaptation to Southeast Asia's diverse media ecologies, political sensitivities and cultural dynamics. Heterogeneous regional conditions demand localized strategies rather than uniform official narratives, underscoring the limits of one-size-fits-all approaches. By advancing alternative narratives of development, connectivity and cooperation, China's international communication functions as a significant global contra-flow, resonating with Global South aspirations for a more equitable communication order. To enhance its reach and credibility, China must further strengthen institutional capacity, innovate localized digital content, and align narratives with regional priorities. Ultimately, this institutional understanding illuminates how China's communication advances neighborhood diplomacy, fosters regional trust, and contributes to a community with a shared future for both Southeast Asia and the broader Global South.

Future research could explore collaborative possibilities and feasible pathways for Southeast Asian and Global South countries to jointly shape a more equitable global information and communication order, moving beyond unilateral narratives toward inclusive, multi-centered discourse construction. Additionally, amid the evolving international communication landscape driven by AI and emerging media technologies, further comparative studies are needed to examine how Global South nations can proactively construct their national images and enhance discursive power, offering valuable insights for both regional and global communication governance.

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BIODATA OF AUTHORS:

YANQIU ZHANG (Corresponding Author)

Institute for a Community with Shared Future,
Communication University of China,
Beijing, China

&

Academy of International and Regional Communication Studies,
Communication University of China,
Beijing, China

Email: yqzhang@cuc.edu.cn

HUOJIAN FANG

State Key Laboratory of Media Convergence and Communication,
Communication University of China,
Beijing, China

Email: alexrocket@163.com