

# POWERFUL NARRATIVES

Weaponized Harmony and the Soft Power Tools  
of China's Rise to Global Primacy





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of China's Rise to Global Primacy



**A Threatcasting Technical Report by the Army Cyber Institute**

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The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not reflect the position of the United States Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or the Department of Defense.

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# Executive Summary



This project explores how the People’s Republic of China (PRC) might use information and other soft-power mechanisms to rise as the dominant hegemonic power by 2035.

We acknowledge that fourteen years is an ambitious timeframe within which to upset the balance of power across the globe without incurring the devastating results of a world war, but that is exactly the PRC’s ambition.

We use the Threatcasting foresight methodology to explore nearly two dozen possible and probable future scenarios that might appear should the PRC and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continue to seek a Chinese-dominated world order. Specifically, we attempt to answer the question, “How does China employ information

*during the competition phase to advance its position on the global stage as the preponderant world power?”*

These imagined futures are models of the complex interactions between geopolitical, economic, social, and natural systems, and provide a sophisticated and relatable nuance when seen through the eyes of a person, in a place, experiencing a threat. We provide observations and recommendations about how the United States and allies could disrupt, mitigate, or recover from these future threats.

*We acknowledge that fourteen years is an ambitious timeframe within which to upset the balance of power across the globe without incurring the devastating results of a world war, but that is exactly the PRC's ambition.*

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## **Finding 1: Controlling the Narrative**

Narratives can be designed to reject certain ideas and values or to embrace others; to repel or to attract. They can provide hope for the future through visions of prosperity, happiness, dignity, and unity. These visions become even more evocative when contrasted with bleak images of social dysfunction, divisiveness, and inequities. We expect Chinese state propaganda to attack the narrative identities of foreign audiences by exploiting several key themes, including:

- 1. Projection of Benevolence.** The CCP has long sought to assuage fears that China's rise poses a threat to international peace. In fact, the CCP projects an outward story of a peaceful yet irreversible rise to global leadership, in harmony in its relations to other powers and without pretense to global hegemony.
- 2. Legitimizing China's Development Model.** Chinese leadership has clearly stated that the Western form of liberal democracy is not the final form of government, and has used the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to convince other nations of China's alternative—and superior—developmental model.
- 3. Discrediting Western Political Norms and Institutions.** Closely tied to the “Legitimizing China's Development Model” theme, the CCP purposefully attempts to discredit Western (especially U.S.) political norms and institutions.
- 4. Harmonious Global Order.** An extension of the Projection of Benevolence theme, the world in harmony envisions a global community of nations that resembles the Chinese dream: a society that is equitable, peaceful, and just. At the core of this theme are cooperation, a peaceful coexistence, and a more multilateral international community.
- 5. Futuristic Wonderworld Today.** People-centric urbanization will address the challenges plaguing urban environments across the world: congestion, pollution, population density, crime. Rational approaches to public space management, combined with advanced technologies, a caring government, and centralized execution, vastly improve the lives of regular people in China, and soon the rest of the world can have this same wonderworld experience.
- 6. Creating a Climate of Acceptance.** A key component of China's successful economic narrative is making Chinese goods and investments appear not only acceptable but desirable to the alternatives.

*We are witnessing the BRI facilitating a creeping restructuring of the world order through dependencies on investments and vital projects, all under the name of a harmonious society.*

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## **Finding 2: Weaponizing the Harmony Narrative**

The idea of harmony is a Confucianist concept of being in balance with one's relationships and with all things. Wei and Li list harmony as the "dominant socio-economic vision of China."<sup>1</sup> The Harmonious Society Construction, developed by the PRC in 2004, is designed to "reduce social conflicts and build balance across social classes."<sup>2</sup> Achievement of harmony at both the individual and collective social levels is part of President Xi Jinping and the CCP's public-facing mantra.

As a part of the social context, harmony can also be thought of as driving the Party's value system. Individuals who strive to be in harmony with society should value traditions, benevolence, righteousness, cooperation, honesty, loyalty, obedience, and piety.<sup>3</sup> Those who value incorrect things (individual expression, debate, questioning of authority) therefore cannot support the Party's harmony and must be "re-educated."

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## **Finding 3: Creating Vital Dependencies**

With nearly 140 countries signing bilateral memorandums of understanding with China regarding their participation in the BRI, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the PRC's objective with respect to the BRI is not to leverage its infrastructure investments for tactical wins, but rather to deepen economic ties and dependencies strategically. The PRC's

goal is to reduce dependencies on old centers and institutional brokers of global political and economic power, meaning a largely U.S.-driven system. We are witnessing the BRI facilitating a creeping restructuring of the world order through dependencies on investments and vital projects, all under the name of a harmonious society.

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<sup>1</sup> Wei Xiaohong and Li Qingyuan, "The Confucian Value of Harmony and Its Influence on Chinese Social Interaction." *Cross-Cultural Communication* 9, no. 1 (2013): 60-66, <https://doi.org/10.3968/j.ccc.192367002013090112018>.

<sup>2</sup> Wei & Li, "The Confucian Value of Harmony."

<sup>3</sup> Zhang Lihua, "China's Traditional Cultural Values and National Identity," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 21, 2013, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2013/11/21/china-s-traditional-cultural-values-and-national-identity-pub-53613>.

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## Finding 4: Data and Surveillance as Intimidation

The “social credit score” is the CCP’s most powerful tactic of compliance through intimidation and coercion based on the fear that the government—or a neighbor, family member, or coworker—is looking over one’s shoulder. Perks are also extended to those fully complying with government rules. Having one’s life actions surveilled, quantified, and categorized into easily accessible metrics and mapped onto a trustworthiness scale that permits or restricts travel, employment, leisure activities, and so on, may sound preposterous to those in the West, but not to those accepting the CCP’s narrative of a harmonious society.

The “score” is neither numeric nor evenly applied in its various implementations. However, the idea is a natural extension of the confluence between the ubiquitous, always-on, digital exhaust each of us generates; machine learning and big data applications; and the trade-off between security,

privacy, and convenience. What is most alarming is the behavioral control that comes from “gamifying” complex social interactions and how this both feeds into addiction mechanisms and amplifies social control. This manipulation is clear in finding #2 (*Weaponizing the Harmony Narrative*), and includes self-censoring, policing thought, muting free expression of ideas, etc.

The other alarming consequence of constant surveillance is the direct threat to communities and *individuals*, rather than just to states. On a personal level, the constant vacuuming of personal data leads to microtargeting opportunities for a nefarious actor, such as locking or emptying a bank account, tanking an economic credit score, feeding personalized advertisements and dis/misinformation messages, blackmail, and possibly even directly damaging a connected home through hacking smart devices.



Financial district in Hangzhou.

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## Key Recommendations

**Fund research to study global information supply chains.** Policy makers should seek to identify the links in the global information markets that are susceptible to influence and that are actively leveraged for that influence. Influence may range from outright ownership of the links, economic or geopolitical incentives, or harder to quantify intangible factors such as emotional or intellectual affinity at the individual level developed from a pattern of positive interpersonal interactions. Further research into Chinese efforts to include local voices that amplify the CCP's narratives is necessary to develop a strategy to limit this “localization” effect.

**Fund research to understand China's unique narrative about harmony.** We recommend the U.S. government play a leadership role in funding international research to further understand how social groups leverage instruments for *narrative displacement*—the successful approaches to influence the adoption of new cultural narratives and the discarding of the old. We further recommend applying that research to investigate the means and ways the PRC employs to influence normative change, including outside China, especially with displaced Chinese diasporas.

**Offer alternatives to participation in the BRI movement.** The U.S. and its allies and partners should study the root causes of widening participation in the BRI and its investment projects. Rather than portraying the BRI as opportunistic land grabs and debt traps, the developed world should address the very real needs that are driving participation in the BRI through infrastructure development grants and investments. The U.S. response to the BRI should not be solely aimed at China's actions, or even directed to China, but must also consider development challenges and ambitions of current and future potential BRI participants. The U.S. and the European Union should develop a joint position, framework, and monitoring and enforcement mechanisms to regulate their corporations' and EU member states' engagement with the BRI. Such a framework would be effective only when accompanied with viable alternatives—such as the EU-China Connectivity Platform—to provide EU member states and U.S. and EU corporations access to development capital and logistics alternatives.

**Inhibit and delay the export of digital authoritarianism tools.** Actions the U.S. and allies might take include: 1) enacting a common privacy regulatory framework similar to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) on the federal level in the U.S.; 2) stricter application and imposition of data privacy regulations in their own jurisdictions to make it more difficult to obtain personal information in legal ways; 3) implementation of technology certification regimes that assess technology—including consumer technologies such as mobile devices and social engagement applications—for compliance with data privacy and security norms, standards, and international laws; 4) enhanced security protocols in handling sensitive financial and scientific knowledge generation, production, and dissemination; 5) increased operational tempo and elevated level of pressure against black market data platforms, vendors, and actors; and 6) implementation of a strategy to minimize and disrupt the mass collection of personal, sensitive, and proprietary information.



# Introduction



Lujiazui financial zone in Shanghai.

By 2035, China will have surpassed the U.S. as a world power.

As controversial as that sounds, Chinese leaders certainly think it is possible. Although China aims to ultimately achieve the “Chinese Dream” by the 100th anniversary in 2049 of the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the country would need to achieve its mid-range goals of 2035. These goals include modernizing the economy, achieving “major breakthroughs in core technologies,” increasing GDP for the middle class, and “dramatically strengthen[ing] China’s ‘cultural soft power.’”<sup>4</sup> If the PRC successfully meets its 2035 goals as stated, it is reasonable to believe that the balance of global power may truly favor China.

How does China get to the top of the stack? How does the PRC—and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in particular—take advantage of the information environment, exploit new technology and social values, and leverage economic enthusiasm for Chinese investments, goods, and services to become, in essence, a global hegemon?

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Cooper, *China’s 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) Report*, Beijing: Hill+Knowlton Strategies, 2021, <https://www.hkstrategies.com/en/chinas-14th-five-year-plan-2021-2025-report/>.

Much of China's rise to power will come through consensus rather than coercion.<sup>5</sup> The key to the PRC's strategy is convincing other nations, businesses, and individuals to agree with—and submit to—China's leadership while avoiding costly conflict with the U.S.

This report discusses how we envision China in this superior state and how it may get there. We use the Threatcasting method of inquiry, soft power frameworks, and evidence from narrative warfare research to organize our discussion. We acknowledge the tremendous complexity that exists in international politics and with a globalized and interconnected economy, and the difficulty of attributing the “butterfly effect” of a single event or technological advance to changes a decade or more down the road.

For instance, how can something so benevolent as the concept of “social harmony” be weaponized to attack U.S. and Western values? How will narratives shape the identities of individuals that eventually lead them to make choices favorable to Chinese aims? How can

the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and advances in digital currency technologies lead to vital dependencies on China's economy? These are some of the questions that we strive to answer in this report.

We admit that our research will not cover every viable path to a Chinese hegemony. Still, we offer this perspective to begin a discussion on the strategic implications of the Chinese government's use of information and soft power on their path to global leadership.

In this report, we explain the Threatcasting methodology and how we generated dozens of possible futures as examples of what life could look like in a Chinese-dominated world. Next, we explore the novel strategies that Chinese government, businesses, and individuals might use to achieve their goal of world leadership. Finally, we suggest planning considerations, actions, policies, and further research for academia, industry, and government stakeholders to pursue to possibly avoid, mitigate, or recover from these novel strategies.

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5 Brian C. Schmidt, “Hegemony: A Conceptual and Theoretical Analysis,” DOC Research Institute, August 15, 2018, <https://doc-research.org/2018/08/hegemony-conceptual-theoretical-analysis/>.

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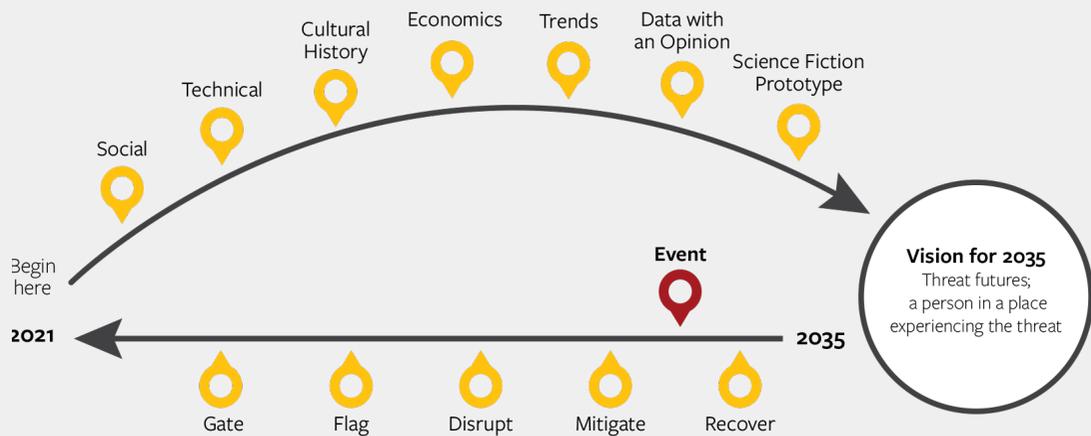
## What is Threatcasting?

Threatcasting provides a systematic and transparent method to model a range of possible futures and threats in a complex and uncertain environment. Working with organizations via subject matter expert interviews, participatory workshops, and operationalization exercises, it provides decision-makers specific indicators that one or more of the futures or threats are manifesting, with suggestions or possible actions that can be taken to disrupt the threat or pursue more desirable visions of the future.

Threatcasting is not designed to “predict” the future. Rather, the output of the methodology provides organizations and decision-makers a framework by which to plan, prepare, and make decisions using their own perspectives on how the threats affect them.

Threatcasting often guards against strategic surprise. When a crisis occurs or an opportunity presents itself, a decision-maker or a leader is not caught off guard. Rather, their reply is: “We have talked about this before. We know where to start.”

### Threatcasting Process



**Note:** The Threatcasting Process is adapted from Vanatta and Johnson.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Natalie Vanatta and Brian David Johnson, “Threatcasting: A Framework and Process to Model Future Operating Environments,” *Journal of Defense Modeling and Simulation* 16, no. 1 (2019): 79–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1548512918806385>.

Every threatcasting project starts by asking three foundational questions: 1) what is the general topic? 2) what specific research question do we want to ask? and 3) where or how would the answer apply? For this project, we ask the following:

## Threatcasting Foundation

<b>Topic</b>	China's employment of information in its rise to global hegemony
<b>Research Question</b>	How does China employ information during the competition phase to advance its position on the global stage as the preponderant world power?
<b>Application Areas</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Update the strategic mindset for diplomatic, informational, and economic policy makers</li><li>2. Rigorously identify new areas of research that capture events and/or decisions by China's leaders in pursuit of world power</li><li>3. Inform academic, military, government, and industry leaders about their role in understanding, mitigating, disrupting, or recovering from the threat of China's ascension to power</li></ol>

Threatcasting's primary data comes from two sources. First, experts provide their opinion on social, technical, cultural, economic, and other trends relevant to understanding how the future might appear. Second, participants and practitioners with varying points of view from government, industry, academia, and nonprofit organizations develop models of future threats by imagining a person, in a detailed setting, experiencing the threat.

In 2021, we conducted workshops in February and April to generate and model over twenty unique scenarios that describe what it might look like to live in 2035 with China as the leading world power. Participants included academic researchers, government practitioners, economists, authors, and other interested parties.

In addition to the future scenarios of a fictional person experiencing a specific threat, models include observations about what events need to occur (flags) for the threat to materialize and what actions responsible parties might take (gates) to avoid, disrupt, or mitigate these future threats.

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## Soft Power Framework

During our initial analysis, it became clear that we needed to categorize the types of influence the Chinese government, Chinese corporations, and other entities would exert across the information domain. Joseph Nye, Jr., outlined three types of power (military, economic, and soft power) in his book, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004). Nye explores each of these power types and builds a framework of behaviors, primary currencies, and associated policies that governments use to maximize the use of each. Our models clearly illustrate different types of "behaviors" rather than the currencies and policies of Nye's framework.

As we were interested in studying how Chinese entities affect the information domain, our project purposefully moved military power outside the boundary of study. This means our workshop models only contain examples of soft power and some economic behaviors closely related to soft power.

Below are the four behaviors found in our models with a short description of how they might appear in our data. They are not inclusive of all behaviors the Chinese government, the CCP, and corporations may exhibit in pursuit of nationalist goals. Furthermore, each of our finding sections will indicate the predominant behavior types that appear in the models that justify the finding.

### **Economic Power: Inducement**

Economic “carrots” such as loans, favored trade agreements, or job offers.

### **Economic Power: Coercion**

Economic “sticks” such as sanctions, negative social credit scores, or hostile takeovers.

### **Soft Power: Attraction**

A consistent “harmony” narrative, vilifying U.S. and Western narratives, or providing journalist training opportunities.

### **Soft Power: Agenda Setting**

Policies (especially internationally) favorable to the CCP, reducing choices and individual agency, or centralized monitoring of popular apps.

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## **Weaponized Narratives**

In this study, we identified that part of the PRC’s strategy to gain global primacy requires individuals to take actions favorable to Chinese ideas, values, and traditions. Implanting the ideas and thoughts about Chinese culture, the PRC’s superior economic model, and superior value system is the thrust of the CCP’s propaganda and public information programs. However, the idea itself does not drive action. According to Ajit Maan, “Ideas ... have no inherent strategy. Ideas alone do not mobilize action—not until they are narrated.”<sup>7</sup>

The idea of narration, or rather, how the Chinese government is weaponizing narratives in their climb to the top, implies more than crafting and repeating messages of China’s superiority or of the West’s failings. Narratives are much more than the stories that we tell each other, although stories are often the way we share the important stuff of narratives: culture, values, norms, and a sense of belonging. Narratives tell us who we are and how and where we fit into the larger world. Narratives are meaning-making stories that help us interpret the world.

<sup>7</sup> Ajit Maan, *Narrative Warfare* (Narrative Strategies Inc., 2018), 15.

Maan suggests that narratives are what influence us to take action. First, narratives, especially the deep cultural narratives that we are born into, shape and constrain our identities. Then, the symbiotic relationship between our narratives and identities strongly shape what we believe in and the ideas of who we are. Finally, it is our beliefs and ideas, rooted in the narratives of identity, that become the catalysts of action.<sup>8</sup>



“When I use the word narrative, I’m not using it as interchangeable with story, and I’m not using it simply as a description of a type of communication, which is how militaries often think of it...Narrative is a part of culture that we’re born into that we don’t have any choice about. And it influences us on a less than conscious level. That doesn’t mean an unconscious level. Part of what inculturation and socialization is, is the internalization of the cultural narrative that you were born into.”<sup>9</sup>



Propaganda coming out of the CCP is strongly wrapped around values-based stories. Seemingly benign and important values such as harmony, reverence for ancient wisdom, and benevolence that are at the center of CCP messages cleverly mask how deeply Chinese leaders understand the impact of narratives on identity and action.

As an example, Kai Strittmatter, an award-winning China journalist, suggests there are at least three narratives the CCP uses to frame the modern Chinese identity: a new and updated Confucianism that “inject[s] stability and morality into a directionless Chinese society” and acts as a key element of the “special characteristics” Chinese leaders often tout; a form of victimism that draws deeply on China’s nationalist ruling history being thwarted by a corrupted West; and a savior complex that promotes the Chinese form of Communism as the only way to prosperity and peace.<sup>10</sup>

By understanding how narratives shape identities and subsequently how Chinese officials are carefully crafting the new identity for the future China, we begin to see how dangerous narrative weaponization really is. In the sections that follow, we will see several tactics that the PRC uses to control their narrative and specifically how they weaponize the harmony narrative to motivate favorable action.

<sup>8</sup> Maan, *Narrative Warfare*, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Ajit Maan, as quoted in Jason C. Brown, Renny Gleeson, and Josh Massad, *The Future of Extremism and Extremist Narratives in America* (Arizona State University, 2021), 60.

<sup>10</sup> Kai Strittmatter, *We Have Been Harmonized: Life in China’s Surveillance State* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2020), 156.

## FINDING 1

# Controlling the Narrative

## POWER BEHAVIORS

**Soft Power:** Agenda Setting



**SAY NO MORE!** Malia reached for the source of the ringing in her dream. This time it wasn't her alarm. A quick look at her phone showed a Chicago number. It was 1 a.m., but Malia was looking forward to the first good night's sleep in two weeks. Ugh!

The voice on the phone told her to start packing and report to the Chicago HQ office next Monday. In the two years since her assignment to the Tribune's office in Cairo covering economics and trade, Malia had covered the Israel-Egypt Economic Forum and exposed corruption in both city and national politics.

Malia recently found a juicy lead about Chinese-sponsored journalist training programs in Africa and the Middle East that made her simply giddy. Just yesterday she pitched a story to her editor on the discernible influence this training is having on the East African newswire content. "Raw" news about regional affairs was being rapidly shared and recycled by thousands of newspapers and broadcasters around the world. Their connection? The Chinese News Service appears to have created a new

peer-to-peer sharing platform. She was certain her application for assistant editor would get approved. Maybe this was an interview for the promotion!

And now she was being recalled—all hopes of sleep rapidly faded away.

It all became clear a few days later. After getting back to Illinois, she heard rumors from her colleagues about the Tribune’s parent company negotiating a significant investment from China News Service. The executive board had heard about Malia’s upcoming report and promptly shelved it; upon her protests, she was offered a choice: cover sports or resign. 📦

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## Acquiescence Without Coercion

A strong national economy fueled by innovation is fundamental to a nation’s ability to contest the existing world order. To contest with competence, however, governments, companies, and the public of other nations must become willing and active participants in that economy. Convincing publics abroad to choose to purchase foreign-made products requires a significant investment in the psychological incentives necessary to motivate behavior change and fuel economic growth. The PRC uses a keen understanding of narratives as one of these psychological incentives.

Well-constructed, tailored to specific audiences, and executed with a tireless persistence, narratives create unambiguous cognitive and

normative coordinates that enable ordinary people to navigate through what is right and what is wrong—for themselves, their communities, and the world at large. In essence, narratives strongly shape a person’s identity.

Narratives can be designed to reject certain ideas and values or to embrace others; to repel or to attract. They can provide hope for the future through visions of prosperity, happiness, dignity, and unity. These visions become even more evocative when contrasted with bleak images of social dysfunction, divisiveness, and inequities. We expect Chinese state propaganda to attack the narrative identities of foreign audiences by exploiting several key themes.

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## What Are the Themes?

Thematic analysis of the pre-workshop inputs and the participatory models identified several themes that shed light on the CCP’s use of narratives to influence foreign audiences. We purposefully attribute the coordinated use of narratives to the CCP instead of to “China” more broadly, even though application of narrative warfare is filtered through businesses, individual interaction, and state-sponsored rhetoric and propaganda. In instances where execution is decentralized or not clearly directed by the CCP, we use the more general term, PRC. This separates the identities of Chinese leadership, either within the Party or not, from the identities of individual Chinese citizens.

Below, we identify six recurring themes from our models that are connected by a broader narrative that the Chinese culture and way of governance have special attributes that are beneficial to worldwide stability and harmony. We report on the observations from our models and acknowledge there may be other themes that make up the CCP’s foreign-facing identity that we did not capture in this study.

## 1. Projection of Benevolence

The CCP has long sought to assuage fears that China’s rise poses a threat to international peace.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the CCP projects an outward story of a peaceful rise, in harmony in its relations to other powers, and without pretense to global hegemony. PRC officials continually repeat an image of benevolence that reinforces China’s responsible and cooperative membership in the international community.



“Throughout our history of thousands of years, benevolence and harmony are at the heart of our political and cultural tradition, which values harmony, good-neighborliness and friendship with all.”<sup>12</sup>

– Former PRC State Councilor Dai Bingguo, 2010.



## 2. Legitimizing China’s Development Model

Chinese leadership has clearly stated that the Western form of liberal democracy is not the final form of government. Under this theme, legitimacy is derived by the government when it pursues greater social good, as opposed to representation of constituent interests.<sup>13</sup> The Chinese model of centralized leadership has stood strong for thousands of years and in the end is better for all. The policies pursued under the Chinese model—led, of course, by the venerable wisdom of the Party—have resulted in equitable and peaceful growth, dramatic reduction of poverty, and an eightfold increase in China’s GDP in the last 20 years.

The success of China’s BRI will showcase its superior development model. China’s outward foreign direct investments, including BRI projects, are frequently portrayed as philanthropic. These investments pursue a universal good rather than profits: investments create sustainable opportunities for local populations, push the boundaries of innovation, and increase both the tax base for foreign governments and the quality of life of its citizens.

<sup>11</sup> Dai Bingguo, “Adhere to the Path of Peaceful Development,” USC US-China Institute, December 6, 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20131004214141/http://china.usc.edu/ShowArticle.aspx?articleID=2325&AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1>.

<sup>12</sup> Dai, “Adhere to the Path.”

<sup>13</sup> Martin Jacques, “Why Chinese System Can Offer More Choices than Western Democracy,” *Global Times*, May 10, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202105/1223046.shtml>.



### 3. Discrediting Western Political Norms and Institutions

Closely tied to the “Legitimizing China’s Development Model” theme, the CCP purposefully attempts to discredit Western (especially U.S.) political norms and institutions. This presents the negative side of the coin to non-Western audiences. To the CCP, the Western model is fragmented by trying to meet the fleeting wishes of its constituents and special interest groups. Ultimately, it is unable to serve any of them. A 2017 Xinhua News Agency op-ed titled “Enlightened Chinese Democracy Puts the West in the Shade” presents one of the many variations of this theme:

*As parties in the West increasingly represent special interest groups and social strata, capitalist democracy becomes more oligarchic in nature. The cracks are beginning to show, with many eccentric or unexpected results in recent plebiscites... After several hundred years, the Western model is showing its age. It is high time for profound reflection on the ills of a doddering democracy which has precipitated so many of the world’s ills and solved so few. If Western democracy is not to collapse completely it must be revitalized, reappraised and rebooted.<sup>14</sup>*

### 4. Harmonious Global Order

An extension of benevolent intentions, the world in harmony is a global community of nations that resembles the Chinese dream—a society that is equitable, peaceful, and just. At the core of this theme are multilateralism, cooperation, and peaceful coexistence.<sup>15</sup> One of the special attributes of the harmony narrative is the voracious consumption of President Xi Jinping’s enlightened wisdom, as evidenced by a 2017 modification to China’s constitution. This change acknowledges Xi’s influence on Communism and is called “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” or more commonly, Xi Jinping Thought.<sup>16</sup>

From our models, *Group Feb-5* imagines the threat of bioenhanced harmony. The newest health craze is a mood-enhancing chip (with a compromised supply chain, of course) with malware that stimulates the brain to be more susceptible to pro-China messaging, or at least to remain politically indifferent. U.S. soldiers in Korea are implanting the chip for its other benefits relating to mental alertness and increased stamina that improve performance during military operations.

Harmony is the subject of a deeper look in section two of this report.

14 Li Laifang, “Commentary: Enlightened Chinese Democracy Puts the West in the Shade,” *Xinhua*, October 17, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/17/c\\_136685546.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/17/c_136685546.htm).

15 Orazio Coco, “Contemporary China and the ‘Harmonious’ World Order in the Age of Globalization,” *The Chinese Journal of Global Governance* 6, no. 1 (2020): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1163/23525207-12340044>.

16 Chris Buckley, “China Enshrines ‘Xi Jinping Thought,’ Elevating Leader to Mao-like Status,” *The New York Times*, September 24, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/24/world/asia/china-xi-jinping-communist-party.html>.

## 5. Futuristic Wonderworld Today

People-centric urbanization will address the challenges plaguing urban environments across the world: congestion, pollution, population density, crime. Rational approaches to public space management, combined with advanced technologies, a caring government, and centralized execution, vastly improve the lives of regular people in the PRC. The theme of a futuristic wonderworld leans heavily on the CCP’s strategy to be a technology leader by 2035. Better work-life balance and tranquility, green nature in harmony with smart streets and buildings, sustainability, autonomous transportation without traffic—this is the stuff dreams are made of, and these places already exist in China. A recent user comment on a YouTube video about the future “Net City” being built by Tencent in Shenzhen summarizes this idea: “It looks very promising as a way to integrate all aspects of life!!!! Hopefully the rest of the world can follow, collaborate, and improve on this template.”<sup>17</sup>

## 6. Creating a Climate of Acceptance

A key component of China’s successful economic narrative is making Chinese goods and investments appear not only acceptable but desirable to the alternatives. Marketing of Chinese high-tech products, particularly those related to telecommunications and mobility, leans heavily into futurism—they are the products of tomorrow, available today, and for cheap. OPPO’s new phones, for example, do more than provide value to end users; they “empower people to ... unleash their imagination of the future; thereby helping everyone get the best out of life.”<sup>18</sup>



Beijing Central Business District.

17 Tech Vision, “China Is Building the World’s Most Futuristic City,” educational video, 4:53, June 23, 2020, <https://youtu.be/pseJeiwFMjQ>.

18 Tony Chen, as quoted in OPPO Global, “OPPO INNO DAY 2020 - Leap into the Future,” 2020, <https://events.oppo.com/en/innoday2020/>.

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## How Are the Narratives Propagated?

Several patterns emerged as workshop participants envisioned the methods used by the PRC in 2035 to limit undesirable information and propagate favorable narratives both at home and abroad.

**Self-censorship** occurs when both individuals and corporate entities (media and otherwise) filter their external communications for self-interested reasons: financial gain or stability, social acceptance, or even continued access to Chinese and BRI markets. **Digitally enabled censorship** uses technology such as artificial intelligence and custom-built algorithms to monitor and analyze communications or to filter search results, and includes the proliferation of self-policing handheld devices.

Either form of censorship is not an end in and of itself. Instead, censorship creates conditions in which narratives favorable to the identity of the CCP can take root. As the CCP's narratives become more outward facing, objects of censorship will be more outside of direct governmental control and the CCP will spend more effort on fostering incentives for self-censorship.

From our models, *Group 5-1* describes Sophia breaking up with her boyfriend and ensuring her family makes appropriately benign social media posts so she can be considered for an engineering position at a Chinese company-controlled factory in Texas. *Group 1-4* describes Billy, an NBA all-star, being kidnapped and forced to recant his previous public criticism of the CCP, Chinese politics, and human rights.

By 2035, the U.S. television and film studios operating in China will continue to engage in self-censorship to maintain market access. Eventually, the CCP will seek to create conditions for influential media outlets around the world to self-censor their messages to their own domestic audiences, not only to Chinese consumers.

As the CCP tries to limit negative coverage of its activities, it will continue to actively **impart its agenda** into the minds of foreign audiences. Direct messaging, however, is a tricky business. Influence will occur through indirect, although not necessarily covert, messaging. While the use of overt, official media channels to propagate favorable views and information in foreign languages will continue, the CCP will also increase the use of local media outlets and employment of local individual influencers to get its messages across.

The PRC will cultivate relationships with **local media outlets** through acquisitions, news sharing partnership agreements, and joint ventures.<sup>19</sup> Investments into digital media, such as the purchase of a minority stake in Reddit by Tencent, is another approach that in time may be leveraged for content moderation.<sup>20</sup> This multipronged approach will create a structure of incentives that will provide the PRC with access to trusted local news personalities who will then amplify the Party's narratives indirectly.

Providing foreign journalists with a convincing alternative world view—a prism through which to process and present information—through journalism training programs and subsequent career opportunities diversifies the range of sources for stories favorable to the Party's "special characteristics" narrative.

19 "Chinese, Italian Media Pledge to Forge Closer Ties," *Xinhua*, 2019, [http://english.scio.gov.cn/scionews/2019-03/22/content\\_74600417.htm](http://english.scio.gov.cn/scionews/2019-03/22/content_74600417.htm).

20 Shannon Liao, "Reddit Gets a \$150 Million Investment from Tencent and Users Are Posting Memes to Mock the Deal," *The Verge*, February 11, 2019, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/2/11/18216134/reddit-tencent-investment-deal-memes-amount-winnie-the-pooh-tank-man-china>.



Properly trained journalists will impact more than the minds of their local readers. With thousands of news media outlets globally reporting or broadcasting verbatim their purchases from newswires, and wire brokers in turn purchasing that content from local reporters,<sup>21</sup> ideologically accredited local journalists will reach global audiences.

While state-owned broadcasters such as Chinese Radio International (CRI) and GBTimes already distribute content in most languages (with CRI broadcasting in more than 30 outlets in the U.S. alone),<sup>22</sup> the PRC will continue to refine its approaches to influence foreign audiences. The next phase of evolution will show **heavier reliance on local voices** across regions of strategic importance to the PRC, and an effort toward nonattribution to the Chinese state apparatus of that indigenous reporting.

**Over-the-air broadcasting** and other means to deliver the ideas directly to foreign consumers will grow in importance. Gradual expansion of ownership of broadcasting infrastructure in major U.S. cities will allow the distribution of free content over the air directly to living rooms across the U.S.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, **advertising in Western outlets** will serve two purposes. Paid inserts such as “China Watch” will continue to attract the attention of sophisticated—and influential—American readership. Elsewhere, advertising of Chinese goods and services will bring in crucial revenue. Influencers on YouTube, TikTok, and other social media will receive sponsorship incentives to favorably market Chinese products. In those instances, advertising revenue will be leveraged to control the editorial direction of the outlet.

21 M. Bunce, “International News and the Image of Africa: New Storytellers, New Narratives?” In *Images of Africa: Creation, Negotiation and Subversion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 42–62, <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/3768/>.

22 Louisa Lim and Julia Bergin, “Inside China’s Audacious Global Propaganda Campaign,” *The Guardian*, December 7, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/dec/07/china-plan-for-global-media-dominance-propaganda-xi-jinping>.

23 CMMB Vision, “Business Areas,” 2019, <https://cmmbvision.com/business-areas>.

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## Recommendations for Action

As the PRC begins to diversify from overtly state-sponsored messaging to a greater reliance on trusted local voices, it becomes imperative to understand global information supply chains and mitigate how the PRC may exploit weak links in those chains.

Some of the information supply chain “attacks” include joint media ventures, investments into and acquisition of media assets, ownership of over-the-air broadcasting infrastructure, advertising censorship (including self-censorship), and foreign journalist training. A better understanding of the information supply chain should seek to identify the means of recruiting, influencing, and supporting local voices that amplify the CCP’s narratives.

Policy makers should seek to identify the links in the global information markets that are susceptible to influence and that are actively leveraged for that influence. Influence may range from outright ownership of the links, economic or geopolitical incentives, or harder to quantify intangible factors such as emotional or intellectual affinity at the individual level developed from a pattern of positive interpersonal interactions.

Understanding the vulnerabilities in the information supply chain should be accompanied by transparent and public reporting, as well as engagement with media outlets most impacted by—or implicated in—witting or unwitting participation in the PRC’s propaganda efforts.

## FINDING 2

# Weaponizing the Harmony Narrative

## POWER BEHAVIORS

**Soft Power:** Agenda Setting

**Soft Power:** Attraction

**Economic Power:** Inducement

**DEATH BY A THOUSAND BLISSES** “Welcome to Victoria, the capital of British Columbia. This idyllic town nestled along the water on the south side of Victoria Island is a short 25 minutes from Washington state. The capital is regarded for its great accessibility, the Royal British Columbia Museum, and the second oldest Chinatown in North America after San Francisco.<sup>24</sup>

Locals fondly call Victoria the ‘city of the newlywed and nearly dead.’<sup>25</sup> This small town of 85,000 boasts great tourist attractions bringing in over four million visitors a year. Despite a modest population growth, tourism to Victoria has surged in the past decade, and not everyone is happy about it. Residents’ frustrations have reached a boiling point as critical infrastructure is no longer meeting their expectations, while taxes continue to rise. City activists have begun a petition to recall the mayor and seek new leadership.”

Kate Regan clicks off the television and puts her head in her hands. As Victoria’s mayor for the past eight years, she felt she was making progress by bringing in more tourism and focusing on stimulating a lagging economy. Apparently, Arnold Jackman’s platform of “Victorians First” shows him leading in next year’s mayoral election.

Desperate for any type of leverage, Kate drafts an email to Gao “Eddy” Xiang, the mayor of Suzhou, China—Victoria’s twin city<sup>26</sup>—asking for advice. Kate met Eddy on a technical exchange program 18 months ago. Eddy quite proudly described how the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) helped him manage Suzhou’s explosive growth to become one of China’s premier waterfront cities in the south. He offered to set up Victoria with a free pilot project to help modernize the transportation system and reduce citizens’ headaches in the downtown corridor. A similar pilot worked well in Suzhou<sup>27</sup> and has been in operation for the last few years, reducing commute times by more than 75 percent and dropping traffic fatalities to zero.

Before its own growth, the burgeoning Chinese city had a similar idyllic charm, not to mention the collegial catchphrase, “Heaven above, Suzhou and Hangzhou below.”<sup>28</sup> That “heaven on earth” feeling would be great to have in British Columbia’s capital as it grappled with an ever-aging population with more and more digital natives

24 Visitor in Victoria, “Chinatown,” accessed October 28, 2021, <https://visitorin victoria.ca/chinatown-in-victoria-bc/>.

25 Kristin Jackson, “Destination: Northwest Booming Victoria Has Small-City Charm,” *The Orlando Sentinel*, July 22, 1990, <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/os-xpm-1990-07-22-9007060938-story.html>.

26 City of Victoria, “Twin Cities,” accessed October 28, 2021, <https://www.victoria.ca/EN/main/residents/about/twin-cities.html>.

27 Suzhou, “No More Flashes, Ultra-Lowlight AI Traffic Cameras in Operation,” August 11, 2021, [http://m.isuzhou.me/Mobile/NewsView\\_En.aspx?id=25349](http://m.isuzhou.me/Mobile/NewsView_En.aspx?id=25349).

28 Baidu, “上有天堂, 下有苏杭\_百度百科,” accessed October 28, 2021, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/上有天堂,下有苏杭/1452012>.

moving in. With nearly 20 percent of the population over age 65<sup>29</sup> and its technology sector becoming its largest revenue-generating private industry,<sup>30</sup> Kate knew she needed a way to satisfy everyone.

The following week, Kate proposes a bold, expensive, and thoroughly futuristic city where efficiency and citizen happiness are prioritized. Luckily, the expensive part is something Kate can wave aside; via a WeChat Live session, Eddy assures Kate and the city council that the Chinese government will happily donate the equipment, installation, and technical training as a demonstration of China's tremendous technological advances in the past decade. "All free of charge in the name of harmonious interests to a fellow twin city," says Eddy.

The initial pilot project, dubbed Project Harmonious Interest, will start small with next-generation traffic cameras at one of Victoria's busiest intersections, Douglas Street at Government Street. Located a few short blocks from the Gate of Harmonious Interest, City Hall, and Victoria's historic Chinatown, the intersection is home to one of the highest numbers of traffic accidents and fatalities.<sup>31</sup>

The pitch to city leaders is about simplicity and harmony. By removing traditional headaches, such as commuting frustrations or going to the doctor, citizens will be able to focus on what matters—a life worth living. The city council approves the pilot, seven votes to two. "Get offline and to the shoreline" becomes Kate's new political pitch heading into the next election season.

After a successful first pilot, the program expands to several additional projects that show the full value

of technology modernization for cities. The first five secondary projects would align to Suzhou Research Institute's target areas for technology innovation: high-end equipment manufacturing, new-generation information technology, biomedicine, nanotechnology, and artificial intelligence.<sup>32</sup> The only thing these projects need to be successful is data. Lots of data—all of it gathered with individual consent, of course.

Each project's intended goal is to help alleviate citizen concerns while modernizing the aging city. Some of the updates include facial recognition templates for rapid identification at banks, stores, and the airport; robust gigabit fiber connections to all homes, businesses, and schools; and two cutting-edge robotic surgery bays at the BC Children's and Royal Jubilee hospitals. Self-driving vehicles and new roads to support them crisscross the city. Advanced agrivoltaic structures increase local farm productivity, and automated grocery delivery includes organic, locally grown produce.

Just by monitoring people's activities, the type of food they eat, their health trends, or their academic progress, city leadership can fine-tune budget expenditures, civic programs, and even the length of the work week. Soon, the city will know more about you than you know yourself. Harmony is achieved.<sup>33,34</sup>

The "free" projects are approved and the mayor and city council members rush to take credit. As the success of the projects appears in the press, Kate quickly ensures that the people know she is responsible for setting up the programs. Soon, she sees the gap between Jackman and herself shrink and eventually reverse. The election is a landslide! 🗳️

29 CTV News, "Victoria, B.C. a Mecca for Elderly: Census," May 18, 2018, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/victoria-b-c-a-mecca-for-elderly-census-1.248988>.

30 Brigitte Gemme, "Economic Impact of the Greater Victoria Technology Sector," Victoria Advanced Technology Council, November 2009, [https://web.archive.org/web/20141129042811/http://www.viatec.ca/sites/default/files/documents/VictoriaTechSector\\_EconImpact\\_Report\\_Final.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20141129042811/http://www.viatec.ca/sites/default/files/documents/VictoriaTechSector_EconImpact_Report_Final.pdf).

31 CTV News, "Vancouver Island's Most Dangerous Intersections: ICBC Releases Years of Crash Data," July 30, 2020, <https://vancouverisland.ctvnews.ca/vancouver-island-s-most-dangerous-intersections-icbc-releases-years-of-crash-data-1.5045336>.

32 Zhang Linwan, "Industrial Park Takes Lead in Tech Innovation," *China Daily*, January 3, 2020, <http://epaper.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202001/03/WS5e0e76f4a210fb3de82eb3f4.html>.

33 Galit Shmueli and Ali Tafti, "How to 'Improve' Prediction Using Behavior Modification," arXiv, 2021, <https://arxiv.org/abs/2008.12138v2>.

34 Kai Strittmatter, *We Have Been Harmonized: Life in China's Surveillance State* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2020).



Temple of Confucius in Beijing

**The idea of harmony is a Confucianist concept of being in balance with one’s relationships and with all things.** Wei and Li list harmony as the “dominant socio-economic vision of China.”<sup>35</sup>

To President Xi, the idea of harmony describes a greater social order with China at the core. The U.S. Department of State argues, “Xi’s community of common destiny for mankind would replace the established international order grounded in free and sovereign nation-states with a unity of nations in shared deference to the CCP’s conception of international order.”<sup>36</sup>

The Harmonious Society Construction, developed by the PRC in 2004, is designed to “reduce social conflicts and build balance across social classes.” Achievement of harmony at both the individual and collective social levels is part of President Xi and the CCP’s public-facing mantra. Harmonious society, according to the CCP, is one where economic opportunities are equitable across the social strata, and all enjoy unity, justice, fairness, and peace—in essence, the Chinese Dream.<sup>37</sup>

As a part of the social context, harmony can also be thought of as driving the Party’s value system. Individuals who strive to be in harmony with society should value traditions, benevolence, righteousness, cooperation, honesty, loyalty, obedience, and piety.<sup>38</sup> Social harmony can be juxtaposed with the Western liberal value system that prizes individuality, freedom of expression, debate, irreverence, competition, and progress.

35 Wei Xiaohong and Li Qingyuan, “The Confucian Value of Harmony and Its Influence on Chinese Social Interaction,” *Cross-Cultural Communication* 9, no. 1 (2013): 60–66, <https://doi.org/10.3968/j.ccc.1922367002013090112018>.

36 Office of Policy Planning - U.S. Department of State, “The Elements of the China Challenge,” 2020, 38, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/20-02832-Elements-of-China-Challenge-508.pdf>.

37 JUCCEE, “China Dream,” accessed October 28, 2021, <https://www.juccee.org/chinadream>.

38 Zhang Lihua, “China’s Traditional Cultural Values and National Identity,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 21, 2013, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2013/11/21/china-s-traditional-cultural-values-and-national-identity-pub-52613>.

*As a part of the social context, harmony can also be thought of as driving the Party’s value system. Individuals who strive to be in harmony with society should value traditions, benevolence, righteousness, cooperation, honesty, loyalty, obedience, and piety.*



Xi’s vision of harmony is to remove tumult and unpredictability to ensure Party control of the population and its interactions. As the CSIS notes, “China’s internal risks are far more acute than external risks at this point, even though China faces a far more hostile external environment.”<sup>39</sup> Therefore, removing and controlling potential internal risks is the first important milestone in the CCP’s harmony narrative.

Domestically, harmony is weaponized when it attempts to produce **control over cultural patterns**. The CCP’s efforts to vilify counter-values, such as “acting like America,” relying on—and sometimes creating—scandals, or emphasizing individuality over the common good, suggest that Chinese leadership is fearful of others gaining control over cultural stereotypes where Chinese icons and values are seen as desirable and superior. Finally, the harmony narrative **reduces choices** to ensure the Party’s version of human existence is viewed internally as the superior way of living life.

The same control over cultural patterns appears in international rhetoric as well. In the context of international relations, the CCP defines harmony as a global community of nations, sharing in equitable prosperity, cooperating on global issues with equal voice, nonaggression and noninterference, multilateralism, and cultural coexistence.<sup>40</sup> It is a reflection of the values around which the CCP is building its society domestically. The “Chinese dream of a harmonious world” begins with China in the role of an international mediator, but eventually as the world’s supreme leader.<sup>41</sup>

*China’s political role and economic relevance are strongly linked to the achievement of the “harmonious” and peaceful global order. The fact that the entire idea of a “Great China” is built on the fundamental assumption that only a world at peace can bring prosperity for the Chinese nation and give recognition to China as an important power in international society should not be underestimated.*<sup>42</sup>

39 Logan Wright, Lauren Gloudeman, and Daniel H. Rosen, *The China Economic Risk Matrix* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2020), 5, [https://rhg.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/200921\\_RiskMatrix\\_FullReport\\_o.pdf](https://rhg.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/200921_RiskMatrix_FullReport_o.pdf). CSIS.

40 Coco, “Contemporary China.”

41 William A. Callahan, “Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-Hegemonic or a New Hegemony?” *International Studies Review* 10 (2008): 749–61, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2486.2008.00830.x>.

42 Coco, “Contemporary China.”

“Global harmony” is weaponized when it is placed into direct ideological contrast with Western imperialism. This is a contest for the moral high ground; a struggle of one ideology over another. There is only one nation and one leader equipped to lead the world to this wonderful future. By extension—if harmony at home can be accomplished with oppression of all things unharmonious—the CCP clearly envisions a harmonious world where capitalist globalism, Western liberal institutions, and advancement of democratic principles is also oppressed. It follows that a harmonious world can only be composed of harmonious nations.

We suggest that the PRC will export “harmony” through one of two forms:

### **1. Export to the Masses**

The PRC will use the media—both traditional and digital—to make the harmony value system attractive to foreign audiences. We discussed some of the means the PRC will use to exploit vulnerabilities in the global information supply chains to export its narratives. One of the most direct ways, and one that is already occurring, is using the power of Hollywood. The PRC will use access to the Chinese market as leverage to ensure that only images of China favorable to the CCP are portrayed in films and television shows aimed at non-Chinese audiences. This mimics the way American values may have spread around the world through movies and television shows during the 1950s–1970s.

This bottom-up approach is a dangerous possibility as the Western world is eager to trade off personal safety and security for ease-of-life benefits. This is already evident with the plethora of smart devices in millions of homes. Terms and Conditions are rarely read and enable a witting compliance to ubiquitous surveillance. We explore this possibility in our vignette “Death by a Thousand Blisses.”

### **2. Export to the Leaders**

Authoritarian and authoritarian-ambitious leaders of other nations make easy targets for harmony narratives, and will become happy customers of harmony-inducing technologies. Social discord will be defeated and unity achieved through harmonious behavior resulting from collection and analysis of data that will either confirm or deny every individual’s compliance with the laws of harmony. The top-down approach is similar to the one the CCP has implemented throughout China, including the sudden national security law for Hong Kong that went into effect in June 2020.<sup>43</sup> Countries with similar strongman leadership will likely seek to involuntarily “harmonize” their populations to remove internal challenges to their rule.



*“Global harmony” is weaponized when it is placed into direct ideological contrast with Western imperialism. This is a contest for the moral high ground; a struggle of one ideology over another.*

43 Susan V. Lawrence and Michael F. Martin, “China’s National Security Law for Hong Kong: Issues for Congress,” Congressional Research Service no. R46473, August 3, 2020, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46473>.



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## Recommendations for Action

Fund research to understand China's unique narrative about harmony.

Increasing acceptance by, and submission of, the global community to China's leadership role will require dramatic shifts in value systems—from liberal to harmonious—by individuals and entire societies. The source of legitimacy of the PRC's leadership role will be rooted in its moral and ethical superiority over Western powers and Western international institutions. While the authors do not underestimate the complexity of factors at play in influencing populations to adopt and internalize foreign normative narratives, it is a process that has been successfully managed by social groups throughout history.

We recommend the U.S. government play a leadership role in funding international research to further understand how social groups leverage instruments for **narrative displacement**—the successful approaches to influence the adoption of new cultural narratives and the discarding of the old. We further recommend applying that research to investigate the means and ways the PRC employs to influence normative change.

Some of the topics for future research may include the following questions:

1. How are the harmony narratives tailored to audiences in Western nations vis-a-vis other regions? How do these narratives mutate upon contact and interaction with the Western value system?
2. Specifically, which vulnerable links in the global information supply chain are exploited to propagate weaponized harmony narratives?
3. How do we measure whether the actions undertaken to exploit the information supply chain are having desired outcomes?
4. What are the psychological processes that drive value shifts at an individual level and the internalization of a once foreign cultural narrative, and what are social processes that influence these shifts at the national level? How are these processes exploited by the PRC? Consider how values shift away from capitalism or democracy towards autocracy. Also consider how the values of basic human rights and human dignity would be supported (or not) by a Chinese-centric leadership.

## FINDING 3

# Creating Vital Dependencies

## POWER BEHAVIORS

**Economic Power:** Coercion



**METASPHERE DOWN THE RIVER** The hostess at Waku, one of Singapore’s top restaurants, showed Nolan Tusk to the table. Tony Lin was already making arrangements with the waiter.

“Hello, Mr. Tusk. Please, please sit. Forgive my liberty, but their 10-course tasting menu is certainly the way to go here. And it will give us plenty of time to discuss any number of subjects. Pierre will take care of the pairings. Is that ok with you, Mr. Tusk?”

“Sure.” Nolan was impatient to get to the point.

“How are you finding your stay in Singapore...”

“Listen, we both know why we’re here. Let’s dive in.” Nolan was nervously tapping on the table.

“I appreciate your pragmatism, Mr. Tusk. Let me start by asking why you accepted this meeting.”

Suspecting but not knowing for sure if Tony Lin was aware of all the issues Nolan’s company was facing in Tanzania, Nolan recounted the recent events. While the primary business of Nolan’s company

has always been space exploration, MetaSphere has been aggressively trying to gain control of its semiconductor supply chain. That meant running mining operations in Tanzania and factories in China—a concession for mining licenses.

Three months ago, one of China's rare earths mining giants got Tanzania's government to agree on exclusive extraction rights. MetaSphere's operations were shut down. Nolan received and rejected several proposals to sell MetaSphere's mining operations. His rejections were followed up by a public information campaign against MetaSphere—CGTN Africa has been running reports alleging MetaSphere's pollutive and abusive labor practices in Tanzania.

"So what's your plan now?" asked Tony empathetically.

"The U.S. is lodging a complaint with the WTO. I can wait it out."

"Are you sure it's a good idea? It will drag on for a decade. All we're asking is that you consider contracting with Deep Blue to build your thrusters. It will be a very easy sell at home for you; it just makes business sense..." 🟩

As of January 2021, 140 countries have signed a BRI Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).<sup>44</sup> While each bilateral agreement between the PRC and the signatory state may differ on specifics, both signing pirates agree to five general principles: 1) policy coordination, 2) facilities connectivity, 3) unimpeded trade, 4) financial integration, and 5) people-to-people bonds.<sup>45</sup> Due to the large number of signatories, the initiative can no longer be described as a regional 21st century Silk Road and Maritime Belt. Rather, it should be thought of as a global cultural, diplomatic, and economic integration initiative underwritten by the PRC's political will and investments.

The PRC's earlier infrastructure investments in developing countries were characterized as debt traps and received negative coverage in the West.<sup>46</sup> *Group 5-3* imagines MetaSphere, an electronics company and space exploration company with its own rare earth extraction operation in Tanzania, threatened by the PRC to pass tech information about its space exploration research to Chinese firms. Then the PRC pressures Tanzanian officials to put a crimp in MetaSphere's rare earth extraction operations until the company complies (see vignette "MetaSphere Down the River").

44 Christoph Nedopil, "Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)," Shanghai: Green Finance & Development Center, 2021, <https://greenfdc.org/countries-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/>.

45 Sebastian Ibold, "Cooperation Agreements and MOUs under the Belt and Road Initiative," Belt and Road Initiative, November 18, 2018, <https://www.beltroad-initiative.com/memorandum-of-understanding-belt-and-road-initiative/>.

46 John Hurley, Scott Morris, and Gailyn Portelance, "Examining the Debt Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative from a Policy Perspective," CGD Policy Paper 121, March 2018, <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/examining-debt-implications-belt-and-road-initiative-policy-perspective.pdf>.



Analyst commentary from recipient countries, however, suggests broad economic benefits growing from these investments. Gyude Moore, Liberia’s former minister of Public Works, is one such credible voice. In his 2019 presentation at the Paulson Institute titled “China in Africa: An African Perspective,” Moore highlights some of the reasons behind the warm reception of African governments to Chinese infrastructure investments:

*...it was the suitability of China as a partner. Because Africa had a huge infrastructure need, and China had great capacity in providing that need. Most African countries had been cut off from the international financial markets. China provided the financing to be able to do this. And the average African citizen, for the first time in a very long time, could see a direct connection between resources leaving the country, and personal benefit. Whether that was power, an airport, or a road available to you.<sup>47</sup>*

In response to the debt trap concerns, BRI created a Debt Sustainability Framework, virtually identical to the one employed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.<sup>48</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an overall decline in BRI investments. The PRC used a slowing pace of investments as an opportunity to become more judicious in selecting investment projects, focusing on those that would demonstrate a benign, if not humanitarian, intent of the BRI. While investments in energy remained by far the largest part of the BRI portfolio in 2020, renewable energy projects comprised 56 percent of those investments, as opposed to 35 percent just three years earlier in 2017.<sup>49</sup>

In future years, the BRI’s investments will likely strive to be more economically and socially sustainable. One way to achieve that is to expand the equities represented in the projects through international collaborative investments. Baker McKenzie estimates that within the next 10 years, the BRI’s investments that are multilateral, cooperative, and focused on green energy would be funded at rates well above those under politicized competition scenarios.<sup>50</sup>

47 Paulson Institute, “Gyude Moore: ‘China in Africa: An African Perspective,’” educational video, 25 March 2019, 58:36, <https://youtu.be/PsuzxV8ubgk>.

48 Scott Morris and Mark Plant, “China’s New Debt Sustainability Framework Is Largely Borrowed from the World Bank and IMF. Here’s Why That Could Be a Problem,” Center for Global Development, July 19, 2019, <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/chinas-new-debt-sustainability-framework-largely-borrowed-world-bank-and-imf-heres-why-could>.

49 Christoph Nedopil, “China’s Investments in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2020,” Beijing: International Institute of Green Finance, January 2021, 9, <https://greenfdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/China-BRI-Investment-Report-2020.pdf>.

50 Baker McKenzie, “BRI & Beyond Forecast,” September 2019, [https://www.bakermckenzie.com/-/media/files/insight/publications/2019/09/bm\\_bri\\_infographic\\_m.pdf?la=en](https://www.bakermckenzie.com/-/media/files/insight/publications/2019/09/bm_bri_infographic_m.pdf?la=en).

The BRI fulfills a critical need in infrastructure investments—not only in developing countries, but even in the developed world. This is illustrated by the participation in the BRI of 18 European Union states. Notable BRI investments in Europe include ports and energy projects in Greece and Portugal, and the Budapest-Belgrade railroad in Hungary.<sup>51</sup>



“All together, these investments reflect China’s desire to tie itself to Europe through the expansion of railroads, airport hubs, and ports. Thanks to these investments, and European demand for medical supplies, in 2020, trade in goods between China and Europe was larger than trade in goods between Europe and the United States for the first time.”<sup>52</sup>

– Jennifer Hillman & Alex Tippet



It is becoming increasingly apparent that the PRC’s objective with respect to the BRI is not to leverage its infrastructure investments opportunistically for tactical wins, but rather to deepen economic ties and dependencies strategically. The PRC’s goal is to maintain links to the old centers of power (e.g., U.S. and Europe) for the time being, while shifting the balance of power and leadership of global political and economic systems in China’s favor.

While the BRI MOUs between China and participating states are nonbinding, they represent bilateral commitments to not only general principles of economic, cultural, and political cooperation, but specific development objectives unique to each signatory. For instance, in the MOU signed in 2016 between China and Latvia, Latvia agrees in principle to leverage its geographic location as a Baltic Sea transportation hub to “developing integrated industrial assembling, e-commerce and consulting service centers in Latvia for promotion and easier access of Chinese exports to the EU market” and to “facilitate participation of Chinese financial companies in financing private, governmental and regional projects in Baltic and Nordic countries by expanding cooperation between their state-owned and commercial financial institutions.”<sup>53</sup>

51 Jennifer Hillman and Alex Tippet, “The Belt and Road Initiative: Forcing Europe to Reckon with China?” Council on Foreign Relations, April 27, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/belt-and-road-initiative-forcing-europe-reckon-china>.

52 Hillman and Tippet, “The Belt and Road Initiative.”

53 “Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of Latvia and the Government of the People’s Republic of China on Cooperation within the Framework of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative,” 2016, [http://tap.mk.gov.lv/doc/2016\\_11/AM\\_MoU\\_EN\\_20161024.2386.docx](http://tap.mk.gov.lv/doc/2016_11/AM_MoU_EN_20161024.2386.docx).

We are witnessing the BRI facilitating a creeping restructuring of the world order, one MOU at a time. These MOUs are formalizing the dependencies on investments and vital projects that tie recipient countries to the core of the CCP's community and the “common destiny” the two countries would now share.

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## Illustrative Models

*Group 5-2* imagines Intan, the founder of a Jakarta-based IT company. Intan realizes that his government is noncompetitively giving a massive IT contract to Huawei, even though Intan's company is capable of doing the work. He later discovers that Beijing learned of Intan's contract through digital espionage and applied pressure on the Indonesian government to give the contract to Huawei.

*Group 3-4* considers the situation of a unique Zika virus epidemic where Chinese advances in immunology become available to countries within the BRI but not to the West. Internal tensions in the U.S. are exacerbated by political tribalism and finger pointing, whereas countries that get their medicine from Chinese companies are not suffering as much.

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## Recommendation for Action

The U.S. and its allies and partners should study root causes of widening participation in the BRI and its investment projects. Rather than portraying the BRI as opportunistic land grabs and debt traps, the developed world should address the very real development needs that are driving participation of countries in the BRI. The response of the U.S. to the BRI should not be solely to China or about China but must also consider the MOU signatories and their development challenges.

The EU should engage directly with the BRI rather than continue raising concerns or proposing to block Chinese investments. The U.S. and the EU should develop a joint position, framework, and monitoring and enforcement mechanisms to regulate its corporations' and EU member states' engagement with the BRI. Such a framework would be effective only when accompanied with viable alternatives, such as the EU-China Connectivity Platform, to provide EU member states and U.S. and EU corporations access to development capital and logistics alternatives.





## FINDING 4

# Data and Surveillance as Intimidation

## POWER BEHAVIORS

**Soft Power:** Agenda Setting

**ANTISOCIAL CREDIT** *By 9:10 in the morning, Erica, a promising manager at one of the new multinationals, had been waiting over an hour for the minibus to pick her up along its route and take her to the office at the other end of Brooklyn. Erica watches her number in the pickup queue drop from number two at 8:00 a.m., to eight, to 10, and just now to 13. Erica’s stomach churns as she digs into her app settings to confirm a vague suspicion. She is right: her social credit score plummeted from “trustworthy” to “neutral” since last night because her estranged sister had posted a video critical of the Party Chairman.*

*It didn’t matter that she didn’t talk to her sister—the familial tie was enough to get Erica punished. Erica closes the app and gets on her bike, but not before she sees a message pop up on her phone: “Has your social credit score dropped? Speak to one of our agents today for suggestions on how to recover!”*

*It will take her at least another 45 minutes to get to work. By that time she will have missed a series of meetings with executives visiting from Beijing. She will arrive out of breath, drenched in sweat. She knows she will not be invited to meet with them again—the global social credit score is transmitted instantaneously to everyone in Erica’s network. 📡*



We all see the elephant in the room: the “social credit score” is scaring everyone in the world who values privacy and personal information. Having one’s life actions summed into a score that permits or restricts travel, employment, leisure activities, and so on, is dime-store science fiction to those in the West. However, the idea is a natural extension of the confluence between the ubiquitous, always-on, digital exhaust each of us generates; machine learning and big data applications; and the trade-off between security, privacy, and convenience. While the idea may be preposterous to privacy-thinking individuals and countries, it is less so to those who buy in to the CCP’s narrative of a harmonious society, and that is precisely what the CCP desires. What is most alarming is the behavioral control that comes from “gamifying” complex social interactions. This manipulation is clear in finding #2 (*Weaponizing the Harmony Narrative*), and includes self-censoring, policing thought, muting free expression of ideas, etc.

The other alarming consequence of constant surveillance is the direct threat to communities and *individuals*, rather than just to states. On a personal level, the constant vacuuming of personal data leads to microtargeting opportunities for a nefarious actor, such as locking or emptying a bank account, tanking an economic credit score, feeding personalized advertisements and dis/misinformation messages, blackmail, and possibly even directly damaging a connected home through hacking smart devices (ovens, thermostats, water regulators, etc.).

In the past several years, the U.S. and scores of other states have witnessed an unparalleled spike in a Chinese state-sponsored globally concerted effort to obtain massive amounts of individual data via legal and illegal means.<sup>54</sup> The incessant drive for structured and unstructured data acquisition via

multiple channels and avenues signals the onset of a qualitatively new level of Chinese ambitions and capabilities.

Early signals of the PRC’s ambitions are evidenced by the massive breaches of databases containing sensitive personnel,<sup>55</sup> health,<sup>56</sup> travel, and credit score details of American citizens.<sup>57</sup> One of the best illustrations of these state-backed operations is the one conducted against the Office of Personnel Management that most likely began in 2013.<sup>58</sup> The “OPM breach” targeted highly sensitive security clearance information,<sup>59</sup> fingerprints, and other personal details of U.S. government employees.

Not satisfied with detailed history and personal contact information, the Chinese government next sponsored a 2014 intrusion into Anthem’s health care and insurance data that has affected

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54 “Significant Cyber Incidents,” CSIS, <https://www.csis.org/programs/strategic-technologies-program/significant-cyber-incidents>.

55 Michael Adams, “Why the OPM Hack Is Far Worse Than You Can Imagine,” *Lawfare*, March 11, 2016, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/why-opm-hack-far-worse-you-imagine>.

56 Dana Elfin, “Massive Anthem Hack Engineered by China-Based Group, Grand Jury Says,” *Healthcare Dive*, May 10, 2019, <https://www.healthcaredive.com/news/massive-anthem-hack-engineered-by-china-based-group-grand-jury-says/554528/>.

57 Catherine Stupp, “Equifax, Marriott Hacks Formally Linked to China’s Military,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 11, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/equifax-marriott-hacks-formally-linked-to-chinas-military-11581417002>.

58 Josh Fruhlinger, “The OPM Hack Explained: Bad Security Practices Meet China’s Captain America,” *CSO*, February 12, 2020, <https://www.csoonline.com/article/3318238/the-opm-hack-explained-bad-security-practices-meet-chinas-captain-america.html>.

59 Garrett M. Graff, “China’s Hacking Spree Will Have a Decades-Long Fallout,” *Wired*, February 11, 2020, <https://www.wired.com/story/china-equifax-anthem-marriott-opm-hacks-data/>.

over 78 million people.<sup>60</sup> Attacks against Equifax in 2017 scooped up data on nearly 150 million people and a hack against Marriott International Inc. in 2018 compromised information on over 500 million people.

Along with other broader and more ambitious Chinese offensive cyber operations,<sup>61</sup> 2014 became a watershed year in a series of operations suggesting that the Chinese government and its military are attempting to create, maintain, and constantly augment ever-expanding “targeted individuals” databases. These databases may contain full individual profiles suggesting weaknesses for exploitation (e.g., criminal, financial, travel, and health records) and avenues for influence (e.g., social media profiles and activity).

The scope and the breadth of these operations illustrate the PRC’s desire to create a global “individual mapping”<sup>62</sup> and near-real-time surveillance capability<sup>63</sup> that could microtarget individuals worldwide. By exploiting their genetic, psychological, fitness, employer, financial, or leisure details, the PRC is gearing up to spread its influence around the globe, one individual at a time.

We are witnessing a rapid evolution of practices regarding the development of the Chinese global collection network. This process involves a shift from purely state-owned collection enterprises to privately owned data mining and manipulation operators under the guidance of the CCP and its security apparatus. These state-private partnerships are seen as more flexible and agile and may have farther reach than the government by itself.

Within China, this state-private dynamic is supported and supplemented by the pursuit of internal<sup>64</sup> and external “tightening the screws” and “streamlining”<sup>65</sup> of data collection, handling, and manipulation for the purposes of centralized state control. Internally, this advances the so-called “Digital China” plan, which aims to strengthen personal privacy and national security elements of China’s growing digital economy.<sup>66</sup>

To support China’s global collection network, the PRC has approved aggressive commercial export of natural language processing (NLP), facial, voice, and lip-reading recognition instrumentation to foreign partners, in order to access and collect

60 Department of Justice, “Member of Sophisticated China-Based Hacking Group Indicted for Series of Computer Intrusions, Including 2015 Data Breach of Health Insurer Anthem Inc. Affecting Over 78 Million People,” May 9, 2019, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/member-sophisticated-china-based-hacking-group-indicted-series-computer-intrusions-including>; Eric Geller, “Chinese nationals charged for Anthem hack, ‘one of the worst data breaches in history,’” *Politico*, May 9, 2015, <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/05/09/chinese-hackers-anthem-data-breach-1421341>.

61 Lily Hay Newman, “If China Hacked Marriott, 2014 Marked a Full-On Assault,” *Wired*, December 12, 2018, <https://www.wired.com/story/marriott-hack-china-2014-opm-anthem/>.

62 Daniel Hurst, Lily Kuo, and Charlotte Graham-McLay, “Zhenhua Data Leak: personal details of millions around the world gathered by China tech company,” *The Guardian*, September 14, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/14/zhenhua-data-full-list-leak-database-personal-details-millions-china-tech-company>.

63 Adrianna Zhang, “China Data Leak Points to Massive Global Collection Effort,” *VOA China News*, September 17, 2020, [https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific-voa-news-china\\_china-data-leak-points-massive-global-collection-effort/6196030.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific-voa-news-china_china-data-leak-points-massive-global-collection-effort/6196030.html).

64 Masha Borak, “Chinese Police Bust Ring Selling Children’s Private Data to Online Educational Centres,” *South China Morning Post*, March 19, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/tech/policy/article/3125966/chinese-police-bust-ring-selling-childrens-private-data-online?module=inline&pgtype=article>.

65 Yi Shu Ng, “You Can Track Someone’s Live Location and Where They Live for Just a Couple of Dollars,” *Mashable*, February 17, 2017, <https://mashable.com/article/personal-data-black-market-china>.

66 Iris Deng and Xinmei Sheng, “China’s ‘Two Sessions’ 2021: Plans for ‘Digital China’ Transformation Come with Increased Regulation for Personal Data,” *South China Morning Post*, March 6, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/tech/big-tech/article/3124305/chinas-two-sessions-2021-plans-digital-china-transformation-come?module=inline&pgtype=article>.



bulk data from a global population sample. As Samantha Hoffman aptly points out, the CCP's data-driven expansion aims to “shape, manage and control its global operating environment so that public sentiment is favorable to its own interests.”<sup>67</sup>

The CCP puts a premium and a special focus on interaction with repressive authoritarian regimes in need of their own regime stability and control (so-called “fellow travelers”) that can utilize such technologies. Simultaneously, other authoritarian regimes are additional sources of raw input data and training sets with foreign origin and real-time testing grounds for further development of various surveillance and control technologies.

Such focus has a twofold justification, namely: 1) additional avenues to “harmonize” global lifestyles with Chinese models, thus creating enhanced “compatibilities” and potential conflict reduction; and 2) means for the gradual adoption and approval of these models in a “dual harmony” manner. Dual harmony encompasses compliance and obedience of the local regime while simultaneously providing compliance and compatibility with the rising emphasis on Chinese hegemony.

The voracious appetite for relentless unstructured data mining and collating from multiple sources and in multiple languages will continually train artificial intelligence algorithms that further support microtargeting on a massive scale and will improve multiple surveillance and population control applications.

To illustrate how massive data collection furthers the CCP's objectives and policy agendas, consider how *Group 4-3* describes Park Jongyoon's effort to take advantage of the power of data to intimidate opponents.

Park, a South Korean politician, is a rising power broker in one of Korea's progressive political parties. Before running for office, Park ran a business connected with a Korean-Chinese telecom. Chinese intelligence has tapped Park as a potential key person to influence the Korean domestic political agenda to favor Chinese-made hardware and software in the rollout of 6G services.

<sup>67</sup> Samantha Hoffman, “Engineering Global Consent: The Chinese Communist Party's Data-Driven Power Expansion,” International Cyber Policy Centre Policy Brief 21, 2019.

Park also has spent considerable time establishing contacts—and of note, good friends—in the upper ranks of the CCP. His telecom venture has prospered financially and he publicly attributes much of his financial success to China’s superior economic and social policies. He has a favorable view of Chinese authoritarian governance and economics and sincerely believes this is the future model for his personal success and Korea’s economic success.

As part of the insider deal for 6G infrastructure, Park promises political information in exchange for China to manipulate Korean search engine results that increase the number of views of ads and political announcements favorable to Park’s political party and the CCP. In addition to positive coverage, the CCP also ensures that a disinformation campaign smears conservative party advertisements opposed to China’s involvement in the 6G rollout. Excellent strategy and tactics honed over years of practice make China’s involvement in messaging undetectable by citizens at large. Park strongly believes that his rise to power will drive Korea ever closer to China economically and away from the finicky U.S. investors that wield a choke hold over parts of the South Korean economy.

In order to augment the PRC’s stated goals to improve artificial intelligence technologies for economic and national security,<sup>68</sup> we can expect the PRC to emphasize new data specifications for surveillance technologies used for intimidation and population control products exported abroad.<sup>69</sup> These data standards would be designed to suit the CCP’s security objectives and foreign policy agendas and would simplify their own measures necessary for global operational control of the “social harmony” narrative or to stamp down on unsavory domestic populations.<sup>70</sup>

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## Contra Indicators

As the global public interest in “biased algorithms” grows and the demand rises for transparency regarding the nature and the harmful effects potential of Chinese developed and exported technology abroad, the appetite for importing and indiscriminately distributing these products might decline, especially in the post-industrial West. Regardless of the adoption practices, recent high profile cases have captured the global public attention and have certainly triggered “alarms” at legislative and executive levels of various governments. The level and scope of China’s intrusive technological “push” abroad and widening the scope of the Chinese collection network have increased the level of suspicion and resistance against the mass implementation and utilization of such products among multiple social strata in Western and non-Western societies.

68 Gregory C. Allen, “Understanding China’s AI Strategy,” Center for a New American Security, February 6, 2019, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/understanding-chinas-ai-strategy>.

69 Dan Breznitz and Michael Murphree, *The Rise of China in Technology Standards: New Norms in Old Institutions* (Washington, D.C.: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2013).

70 Geoffrey Cain, *The Perfect Police State* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2021).

In addition, the omnipotence of the ubiquitous surveillance and control technologies and their global reach might be inhibited by so-called “data shifts.” Data shifts occur when the models are trained and tested on different data sets from the ones they encounter in live applications.<sup>71</sup> Authoritarian regimes that think they are purchasing an off-the-shelf solution to population control may be disappointed when the facial recognition algorithms or DNA matching systems perform at a less-than-advertised level. This is why it is imperative to consider where population control technologies are spreading and what kind of data is coming back to China for further analysis.

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## Recommendations for Action

### Inhibit and delay the export of digital authoritarianism tools

The United States government and its allies could explore several possible avenues for policy actions. These include but are not limited to:

1. Stricter application and imposition of data privacy laws in their own jurisdictions to make it more difficult to obtain personal information in legal ways.
2. Enhanced security protocols in handling sensitive financial and scientific knowledge generation, production, and dissemination.
3. Increased operational tempo and elevated level of pressure against black data market platforms, vendors, and actors.
4. Implementation of a strategy to minimize and disrupt the aggregation of sensitive mass data collection.
5. Perform a national audit of Chinese machine-learning efforts based on data procured from U.S. sources and establish economic and political “red lines” that could slow China’s intellectual and commercial growth.
6. Implement technology certification regimes that assess technology—including consumer technologies such as mobile devices and social engagement applications—for compliance with data privacy and security norms, standards, and international laws.
7. Adopt robust laws requiring transparency for overseas investment that include national security considerations, such as dual-use computing technologies, artificial intelligence start-ups, or sale and transfer of mass databases for marketing purposes.
8. Identify universities and specific research programs sustained by PRC research grants. Expand funding eligibility for foreign research institutions. Establish multinational sponsoring organizations to encourage international collaboration and lower reliance on PRC research funding.

<sup>71</sup> Will Douglas Heaven, “The Way We Train AI is Fundamentally Flawed,” *MIT Technology Review*, November 18, 2020, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/11/18/1012234/training-machine-learning-broken-real-world-health-nlp-computer-vision/>.

# Final Thoughts

## Outliers from Our Data

Our four major findings tell the story of a concerted strategy to exploit narratives and identity using the essence of harmony as a narrative motivator, creating vital dependencies on Chinese economic investments, and the combination of massive data and advanced artificial intelligence methods for individualized intimidation and reward. Our data also suggests the Chinese government will attempt to augment these tactics with additional soft power behaviors. In this section, we briefly discuss an outlier trend that nominally appears in our data but is worth acknowledging.

Group 5-4 discussed China's goal of replacing the dollar in the world markets. A major aim in Chinese economic policy is making the *renminbi* (RMB) the dominant global reserve currency, replacing the dollar globally within the next 15 years.<sup>72</sup> Morgan Stanley predicts that this dominance may not be as impactful as President Xi anticipates, but instead suggests the Chinese yuan may achieve a 5 to 10 percent share of the global reserve holdings by 2030.<sup>73</sup> One form of RMB may be a centrally backed cryptocurrency.

Group 5-4 imagines Cheyenne, a recent college graduate from the University of Montana, who takes an entry-level job as a social media manager at Huawei-LG. The company requires Cheyenne to receive her salary in the form of DigiRMB, the cryptocurrency developed by the Chinese government. DigiRMB has recently replaced the U.S. dollar as a world reserve currency. Signing up to DigiRMB requires Cheyenne to reveal personal data and to consent to surveillance in order to participate in the new digital economy. The surveillance system extends to a “social credit” score that joins her account with actions she takes in the world (e.g., social media posts). This serves to chill speech against Chinese national interests.

Despite indicators that a Chinese digital currency might catalyze the world's confidence in China's growing economic stability, experts generally agree that the RMB is currently not a viable candidate to displace the USD as an international reserve currency.<sup>74</sup> Although there are many systemic changes to

72 Abdi Latif Dahir, “There Is Growing Momentum to Adopt China's Yuan as a Reserve Currency in Africa,” Quartz Africa, September 5, 2018, <https://qz.com/africa/1291372/chinas-yuan-gets-support-from-africa-central-banks-to-replace-us-dollar-reserve/>; Anneken Tappe, “Could China's Yuan Replace the Dollar as a Reserve Currency?” MarketWatch, January 18, 2018, <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/could-chinas-yuan-replace-the-dollar-as-a-reserve-currency-2018-01-17>.

73 Evelyn Cheng, “China's Yuan Could Become the World's Third Largest Reserve Currency in 10 Years, Morgan Stanley Predicts,” CNBC, September 4, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/09/04/chinas-yuan-rmb-to-become-third-largest-reserve-currency-by-2030-morgan-stanley.html>.

74 “An Assessment of the CCP's Economic Ambitions, Plans, and Metrics of Success: Hearing Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission,” 117th Cong. (April 15, 2021) (testimony of Martin Chorzempa), <https://www.uscc.gov/hearings/assessment-ccps-economic-ambitions-plans-and-metrics-success>.



the international economy that must change in order for the RMB to rise in power, and those changes are outside the scope of this report, two observations from our data should be highlighted. First is that while the RMB accounts for less than 3 percent of foreign exchange reserves, its role as an international settlement currency has grown significantly in the last five years.<sup>75</sup> The second is the increasing adoption of Chinese virtual payment systems like those developed by Alipay and WeChat, and the role of mobile apps in the emergence of a cashless society. These two factors are unlikely to provide the critical mass for the adoption of the RMB by central banks as the reserve currency of significance, but are worth watching out for.

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## Conclusion

The contest for the future of global leadership is in significant respects a contest for identity at the individual level. In this report, we tried to demonstrate that for China's leadership role to become a reality, individuals must acquiesce to the PRC's constant push for narrative shift. The mechanical prerequisite for the rise to preponderance is the global participation in China's economy. We highlighted the BRI as the PRC's strategic vehicle to achieve such participation. The fact that so many nations—including some in the EU—have signed BRI participation agreements suggests that the leading nations of the Western liberal world are becoming perceived as less relevant in the face of the development challenges and ambitions of the global community. The U.S. and its allies, however, should continue seeking opportunities to expand economic engagement with BRI

participants, with a goal of slowing these trends if unable to completely stop them.

However, even were the prerequisites of economic participation to be achieved, the PRC's rise will not be realized without a shift in the value system of individuals outside of China—a shift that facilitates wide embrace of China's governance and development models, and the harmony narrative. This is precisely where the narratives reflecting Western liberal values—individual rights and political freedoms—continue to hold their sway with populations around the world, despite increasing attempts to discredit them by revisionist powers. Evidence of erosion within the U.S. and its allied nations, however, suggests that should the enduring power of this value system be taken for granted, narrative displacement may occur.

<sup>75</sup> Rachel King, "Five Years of the Renminbi in SDR and Its Adoption in Central Bank Portfolios, Central Banking, July 29, 2021, <https://www.centralbanking.com/central-banks/currency/7856311/five-years-of-the-renminbi-in-sdr-and-its-adoption-in-central-bank-portfolios>.

# Appendix A:

## Further Reading

We present the following list of additional readings as a compilation of suggestions by our subject matter experts and workshop participants. This list may not contain material from every section of our report, nor is it an exhaustive summary of every entity tracking China's growing influence in the world. Inclusion of an item does not imply endorsement from the authors, the Army Cyber Institute, or the United States government.

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### Research Organizations, Think Tanks, and Government Commissions

AidData China Research (<https://www.aiddata.org/china>)

American Enterprise Institute (<https://www.aei.org/asia/>)

Australian Strategic Policy Institute (<https://www.aspi.org.au>)

China Brief, The Jamestown Foundation (<https://jamestown.org/programs/cb/>)

The China Challenge, Center for a New American Security (CNAS)  
(<https://www.cnas.org/research/indo-pacific-security/china>)

China Global Sharp Power Project, Hoover Institution (<https://www.hoover.org/cgsp>)

China Power Project, Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS)  
(<https://www.csis.org/programs/china-power-project>)

Congressional-Executive Commission on China (<https://www.cecc.gov/>)

Foundation for Defense of Democracies (<https://www.fdd.org/issue/china/>)

Mercator Institute for China Studies (<https://merics.org/en>)

The National Bureau of Asian Research (<https://www.nbr.org/>)

TriviumChina.com (<https://triviumchina.com/>)

U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission (<https://www.uscc.gov/>)

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# Appendix B:

## Bibliography of Inputs & Synthesis Workbooks

This appendix lists the written articles and videos participants read and watched prior to the threatcasting workshops in February and April, 2021. These inputs provided a common starting context for all participants, who then summarized and synthesized their various understanding of the problem landscape prior to developing threat models. The synthesis workbooks of these data points are included after the bibliographic listings of input sources.

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# Appendix C:

## Raw Data and Workbooks

The raw data and workbooks that comprise our models of the future are available by contacting the Army Cyber Institute at [aci.contact@westpoint.edu](mailto:aci.contact@westpoint.edu).

**A Threatcasting Technical Report by the Army Cyber Institute**

Jason C. Brown, Maxim Kovalsky, Kiril Avramov, and Shannon Vaughn

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