



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **Microblogging and Media Policy in China: Xinhua's Strategic Communication on the Belt and Road Initiative**

Nie, Y.

### **Citation**

Nie, Y. (2019, October 15). *Microblogging and Media Policy in China: Xinhua's Strategic Communication on the Belt and Road Initiative*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/79516>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/79516>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/79516> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

**Author:** Nie, Y.

**Title:** Microblogging and Media Policy in China: Xinhua's Strategic Communication on the Belt and Road Initiative

**Issue Date:** 2019-10-15

# **Chapter One**

## **A New Phase of China's Communication**

### **1.1 Introduction**

Xinhua News Agency, under the supervision of the central government, is a major official news outlet in mainland China. However, its openness to free flows of information has not been keeping up with the country's fast economic growth after the opening-up policy in the 1980s. The acceleration of global communications by social media has given rise to a major transition in China's external communication strategies. To cultivate a national image, the Chinese government has embraced various digital-media-led communicative strategies, and has established, revised, and adjusted a series of media regulations. These encourage traditional mass media outlets, like Xinhua, to utilize various social media platforms under the central government's guidance, while also aiming to preserve their leading roles in both internal and external communication. This study aims to explore the interplay between digital media and government's policymaking under the leadership of President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang. By tying the research concerns of China's political communication and the empirical case of Xinhua's digitalization to broader conceptual issues, this study aims to provide a prism through which the intrinsic relations of the government's communicative strategies and media convergence can be seen.

In 1955, Mao Zedong, the first Chairman of People's Republic of China, demanded that Xinhua News Agency should take on the task of "managing the earth and letting the world hear China's voices" (Xinhua net, History). Since 1961, China has pursued a media policy that aims "to treat the external communication and internal communication differently" (Li, Yanbing, 2010). Since the 14<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in October 1992, when the leadership introduced a "market economy," they allowed major media outlets "greater freedoms" in economic reporting, though still restrained them "on matters which related to the aspects of CCP power" (Brady, 2008, p. 49). In 2001, China's broadcasting official Xu Guangchun initiated a new going-out policy that developed Chinese broadcasting in foreign languages (Nelson, 2013). At present, expanding their global media presence, major state media outlets in China, such as Xinhua News Agency (Xinhua), China Central Television (CCTV), and the

*People's Daily*, have all registered on social media, both national and international. The interplay between media and politics seems to be a symbiotic relationship. Political communication, geared for revolution and social transformation in the Mao era, now carries the tasks to maintain social stability internally and improve the national image externally.

The political system has influenced the relationship between the government and media in China, and my research will explore how this interaction works by looking at arguably the most influential of these major traditional media players: Xinhua. With a detailed study of Xinhua's communicative strategies online, this research aims to find out how the mass media outlet has integrated digital media forms into its reporting, and how it has done so within the overarching regulatory system. In order to explore this issue, I will examine the social media messaging of Xinhua and then compare it to Xinhua's traditional ways of communication. My project seeks to determine whether Xinhua's social messaging differs from one platform to another in content, subject matter, or tone. In other words, which separate domestic and international communicative strategies does Xinhua, describing itself as "the mouthpiece of the Party," display in the social media age? What message is Xinhua trying to send out? And how does Xinhua use social media platforms to showcase its news value?

### *1.1.1 Context for the Media Convergence -- Xinhua News Agency and Social Media*

Xinhua News Agency, China's major state media outlet, was founded in November 1931 in Ruijin, Jiangxi Province, as the Red China News Agency. It is the earliest news agency under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In October 1934, the agency relocated during the Long March of the Central Red Army. Later in Yan'an, Shaanxi Province, based on decisions from the central government, the agency's name changed to "Xinhua News Agency"<sup>1</sup> in January 1937 (Xinhua net, History).

At present, Xinhua has established 180 news bureaus overseas. In the context of global communications expedited by digital media, social media platforms are indispensable to news organizations. Twitter, founded in 2006, is an international social media platform and provides online news and social networking service. The length of tweets, messages posted by the users, was restricted to 140 characters until 7 November 2017, when the limit was doubled

---

<sup>1</sup> Xinhua (新华) in Chinese means "new China. "

to 280 characters for all languages except Japanese, Korean, and Chinese (Rosen, 2017). It is worth bearing in mind that Twitter is not widely accessible in China, due to the tightened censorship by the Chinese government since 2009. Its Chinese counterpart, Sina Weibo (Weibo, 新浪微博), launched by Sina Corporation in 2009, is now one of the most popular Chinese microblogging websites, in no small part due to the government's restrictive actions against foreign social media offers. In fact, Clay Shirky points out in *Little Rice* (xiaomi, 小米) that censorship in China also functions as a form of protectionism for home-grown alternatives with a recent commercial infrastructure (Shirky, 2015). From 28 January 2016, member users were allowed to write longer messages on Weibo, though the full text would not show immediately (BBC, 2016). Journalists use these social media platforms to follow developments in their fields of expertise and post quick updates of breaking news stories. Xinhua, for instance, often publicizes a fresh story by sending out a short, headline-style summary over a social network, along with a link to the online version of the article. By clicking the link, followers can go straight to the story on Xinhua's official websites, or to videos or news photographs that Xinhua publishes on other channels, including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram.

Xinhua's registration on Weibo and Twitter can be explained by the widespread use of social media platforms among domestic and international audiences. Its presence on social media connects to its news websites such as Xinhua.net and iCrossChina, Xinhua's first English language travel website (People.cn, 2013). It is worth noting that Xinhua's launch of its multilingual webpage on Xinhua.net is to reach international audiences. Xinhua's largest official accounts on Weibo in both Chinese and English languages link to Xinhua.net, and its most active account on Twitter links to iCrossChina. Inferred from the language, the intended audiences of Xinhua's Weibo accounts in Chinese and its Twitter account in English are domestic and international audiences, respectively. Xinhua has been through a transition from mass media to digital media. From releasing the news stories on CCTV's news program to the set-up of its official multilingual website and the opening of accounts on social media such as Weibo and Twitter, Xinhua is now trying to reach the broadest possible audience through all channels of communication.

According to the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC), there were 731 million internet users in China in December 2016; an increase of 42.99 million since 2015.

The number of internet users in China increased to 751 million by June 2017, with more than 90% of the users accessing the internet via smartphones. The internet penetration rate in 2017 reached 54.3%, up from 53.2% in 2016 (CNNIC, 2017). Echoing the trend of the thriving online industry, Weibo had 340 million active monthly users according to its first-quarter results on March 31<sup>st</sup> 2017, a 30% increase over 2016. There are around 154 million active daily users, 91% of whom access the site via mobile devices (People.cn, 2017b). Compared to Twitter, which had about 328 million active monthly users in 2017, the number of Weibo users outdid the number of Twitter users by 12 million worldwide (BBC, 2017). Since 2017, in partnership with the commercial video platform Miaopai.com and the subtitle service provider Easub.com, Weibo launched an online video editing program, Jian.weibo.com (*Weibo Yunjian*, 微博云剪). The use of video editing programs in China shows a growing trend among online users. Having a large pool of video clips, Weibo Yuanjian features video editing, releasing, and data analysis. Though presently, it is accessible only to media organizations and video production companies (Xinhua net, 2017b), offering an online video editing platform. This shows Weibo's intentions to continue expanding its market and commercial value. With the increasing options of editing, posting, and sharing video clips of daily events, the Chinese online users can obtain information from various sources.

In the context of media commercialization, the “formerly state-subsidized and closely state-controlled media” had to compete in the market, which encouraged the surge of social media presence (deLisle, Goldstein and Yang, 2016, p. 2). Xinhua initially had news websites for domestic and international audiences in different languages. With both audiences meriting social media presence, Xinhua pushed further for commercialization in order to also benefit from the use of social media platforms. Xinhua opened its first account on the Chinese Weibo service in June 2012. Four months earlier, in February, it created an account on the U.S.-based Twitter platform (Caijing Net, 2012). Xinhua first issued messages in Chinese on Weibo, and in English on Twitter, but soon enough Xinhua had registered more accounts on Weibo focusing on issues in different world regions in both Chinese and English. In response to the trend of media convergence, Xinhua rebranded its overseas accounts on various social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram. On March 1<sup>st</sup> 2017, Xinhua reset these accounts under one collective name “New China” with the logo “NC.” The letter “N” implies media innovation and the letter “C” symbolizes hope and vitality, according to the agency. The two letters are “reminiscent of a belt, alluding to the news agency's role as

a conduit of ideas that bring China and the world together” (Xinhua net, 2015a). This culminates in an “image-making” strategy that is essentially aimed at distinct domestic and international audiences.

Audiences often treat social media platforms as actual forums for a more open political discourse. However, whether this perceived role as open forum is recognized and utilized by the other end (i.e., the government) remains to be seen, and what the impact is on the government’s media policy, is worth evaluating in its own right. What the audiences want to achieve is not just to keep themselves informed through the state’s media, but also to develop a reciprocal relationship with the news organizations. Even though Xinhua has vigorously expanded on social media messaging and has a large number of Weibo and Twitter followers, the comments, reports, and retweets are still far from interactive.

As a state media outlet, Xinhua has now integrated digital media forms into its reporting within the overarching regulatory system, which tends to oscillate between de-regulation and over-regulation. The political system has influenced the relationship between the government and media in China. Regarding the current media regulations, on the one hand, scholars including Zhang Ximing (2001) and Yang Guobin (2009, p. 2) make the case that the mass media have been overly constrained, while digital media, where the most unorthodox, imaginative, and subversive ideas can be found, have been somewhat left free. On the other hand, Daniela Stockmann (2013) notes that the “online journalists” for official websites of CCTV or the *People’s Daily* could only copy news from official media rather than publish their own stories, and thus online news consumption in China is quite different from other places. “For extremely serious incidents, only Xinhua News Agency is allowed to report on them and all other Chinese media must use the Xinhua report word for word” (Brady, 2008, p. 157). Instead of challenging the political status quo, with increasing numbers of internet users each year, the Party-State proved “to be adept at adapting these technologies to its own uses” (Brady, 2008, p. 145). Therefore, internet users<sup>2</sup> in China often confront “contradictory, ever shifting regulations and ‘harmonizing’ state interventions that require constant choices, compromises, and great flexibility, in negotiating the boundaries of permissible online and

---

<sup>2</sup> Marolt uses the term “netizens” in the original text, which is defined as the people “who concurrently inhabit and perform” in both “cyber and physical place-worlds” (Marolt, 2015, pp.3-4). In their co-edited volume, Herold explains the connotations that the term “netizen” invokes, and chooses to use the term “users” instead (Herold, 2015). The term “netizen” is controversial as it connotes the “dichotomies of state versus netizens, censorship versus resistance” (Herold, 2015, pp.20-28).

offline behaviour and action” (Marolt, 2015, p. 4). As Herold states, Chinese internet users thus create “their own hybrid spaces out of a mix of online and offline settings that are largely free from government interference—not as sites of protest, but as sites for amusement that allow people to ignore (and forget) the government and its power over offline spaces” (Herold, 2015, p. 22).

Nevertheless, the convergence of mass media and digital media creates a far more complex mechanism in China. Actors from different social groups have begun to shape the online public discourse. Through managing their personal blogs and websites, many of the journalist bloggers who are affiliated with Chinese official media outlets provide in-depth event coverage, through digital communication tools. Scholars marked the year 2005 as “a year of blogging” due to increasing incorporation of blog service providers into mass media (Yu, Haiqing, 2011, p. 379; Nip, 2009). Unlike offline and/or online professional journalists, journalist bloggers enjoy the privilege of access to exclusive events and interviews (Yu, Haiqing, 2011). Encouraged by their affiliated mainstream media to set up their own websites as star bloggers to attract more online audiences, they tend to reinforce rather than challenge the dominant mainstream media.

From 2005 to 2012, Weibo provided an important platform where different influential Weibo users (often called “Big-V’s,” after the “V” that marks their accounts as “verified”) could collaborate and call out for the civic response from their followers. These Big-V’s are journalist bloggers, entrepreneurs, celebrities, intellectuals, and government officials. Examples include the fund-raising during the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008 and the campaign to “counter human trafficking” since 2010 (Shi, Zengzhi, and Yang, Guobin, 2016). The NGOs, activists, and celebrities in China have increasingly used social media to encourage “civic engagement” online and even to encourage “summoning ‘witnessing publics’ to create and circulate visual testimonies of injustices” (Svensson, 2016, p. 54). For instance, along with their civic volunteers, many NGOs used online tools to monitor the air pollution levels in China (Xu, Janice Hua, 2014). However, since 2013, many of the Big-V’s’ accounts have come under strict scrutiny by the authorities for their postings, and those whose “socially irresponsible” postings were transmitted by others for more than 500 times could face punishment (Buckley, 2013; Kaiman, 2013). Therefore, the complexity of the media regulations characterizes the Chinese online media culture, and Chinese policymakers regard

the mass media and digital media convergence as an opportunity to re-mediate mainstream media perspectives.

With the old forms of communication technology from the 1950s and 1960s still in use today, new forms of the information and communication technologies (ICTs) or transmission methods became integrated into an existing communication system (Brady, 2008, p. 74). In June 2017, the former State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT)<sup>3</sup> ordered Weibo, the news site Ifeng.com, and video platform ACFUN to halt their multi-media streaming service. The reasons were that these web portals did not hold an official license for video releasing and publicized programs that broke with state rules or presented negative remarks and opinions. In addition to publicly acknowledging the criticism and disabling the uploading of video clips longer than 15 minutes, Weibo announced to “further enhance cooperation with state media including CCTV and Xinhua News Agency to present the mainstream of public opinions” (Cai, Mengxiao, 2017). The interplay between digital media and policymaking displays a far more complex, multi-layered relationship compared to the ad hoc situation a decade ago. I concur with deLisle, Goldstein, and Yang who contend that “simple dichotomies of ‘freedom versus control’ or ‘promoting democracy versus strengthening authoritarianism’ do not suffice as frameworks” to grasp the role of digital media (deLisle, Goldstein, and Yang, 2016, p. 3).

### 1.1.2 Image Project

During the 19<sup>th</sup> CPC National Congress in October 2017, Chinese President Xi asserted the necessity of building “cultural confidence” (*wenhua zixin*, 文化自信) within the nation and the state and of constructing “Chinese cultural soft power” (*Zhongguo wenhua ruanshili*, 中国文化软实力) at an international level (Xinhua net, 2017a). In order to “tell good China stories,” the government leadership intends to strengthen Chinese soft power and use the media’s influence to persuade the audiences to follow the government’s policy.

---

<sup>3</sup> Since September 2018, the government leadership has set apart the former SAPPRFT as the State Administration of Radio and Television (SART), and the National Film Bureau, and the National Office of Press and Publication (NOPP) (Ma, Damien and Thomas, Neil, 2018). The official website of SAPPRFT is now renamed as National Radio and Television Administration (*Guojia guangbo dianshi zongju*, 国家广播电视总局) ([www.sapprft.gov.cn/sapprft/](http://www.sapprft.gov.cn/sapprft/)).

Soft power includes anything that makes societies “want what you want” (Nye, 2004, p. 5). While continuing to utilize the traditional methodology such as “using entertainment as a vehicle for political thought work,” the Chinese government leadership has adopted new methodologies and technologies, such as political PR and the internet (Brady, 2008, p. 87). China’s political PR work since 1989, according to Brady, has been relatively successful at the national level but “has had mixed results in terms of its impact and influence over the international community.” On the one hand, China’s political image has improved in spite of the government’s efforts to “reinvent political perceptions of it”; on the other hand, China’s image in economic terms “continues to maintain a highly positive international profile” (Brady, 2008, p. 170). According to Shambaugh, the official publicity system in China (*xuanchuan xitong*, 宣传系统) is a “sprawling bureaucratic establishment, extending into virtually every medium concerned with the dissemination of information” (Shambaugh, 2007, p. 27). Even with tremendous investments in all efforts since the shift of top leadership in 2012, the country still “suffers from a severe shortage of soft power” (Shambaugh, 2015, p. 99).

In the dynamics between Xinhua’s social media performance and the government’s communication policy, Xinhua deploys different resources in order to reach the target audiences. First, in terms of economic resources, China has put in far more investments in the media industry, compared to countries like the US and the UK. By 2011, the USA spent about US\$750 million annually on international broadcasting, and the UK provided just under US\$400 million funding for the BBC World Service (Midgley, 2011), whilst China has committed US\$6.5 billion for the overseas expansion of its major media outlets (Barr, 2011, p. 38). With projects that could expand the media’s reach and influence, Xinhua, CCTV, and the *People’s Daily* could receive up to RMB 15 billion (US\$2.19 billion) respectively (Lam, 2009). Xinhua’s annual total spending rose from 5.85 billion yuan (\$852 million) in 2015 to 5.99 billion yuan (\$873 million) in 2017 (Central Budget and Final Accounts Public Platform, 2018). Since China rolled out its “Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Road” initiative (Belt and Road Initiative, henceforth BRI) in September 2013, an estimated annual budget of US\$10 billion is put up to improve the external communication so as to enhance the country’s soft power through media and other domains (Shambaugh, 2015, p. 100).

Second, under the proactive media policies, starting in 2001, Chinese state media outlets launched their official news websites (Zhan, Xinhui and Yang, Chunlan, 2006). As a “key public diplomacy outlet,” Xinhua launched its website Xinhua.net, and to catch up with the communication technologies, it has since developed webpages in different languages (Zhang, Xiaoling, 2011, p. 108). The aim is to enable the mass media and the digital media to collaborate through sharing resources. Xinhua News Agency could use the online audience resources from Xinhua.net to reach out to more internet users, and Xinhua.net could use the agency’s information, brand and human resources to cover major media events (Peng, Lan, 2005, p. 210). In 2014, the Publicity Department launched its “China Civilization Website” (*Zhongguo wenming wang*, 中国文明网). Xinhua News Agency and its official website Xinhua.net both coordinate the website by setting up special portals such as the “Chinese Dream” (*Zhongguomeng*, 中国梦) and the “Core Socialist Values” (*shehui zhuyi hexin jiazhi guan*, 社会主义核心价值观). The website updates are mostly devoted to releasing policies and the government’s good deeds, that are usually reposted on Xinhua.net in the form of announcements by the authorities. However, the technological update does not mean that the way information is chosen and presented has changed. According to Zhang Xiaoling, this is how the Party has framed its ideological hegemony in terms of “civilization” (Zhang, Xiaoling, 2011, pp. 101-105). The government intends to demonstrate a transparent governing system, in order to attract overseas audiences. Scholars argue that as the actual working of the governing system remains opaque, the restricting conditions are causing challenges for the Chinese media to win over foreign audiences (Li, Xiguang and Zhou, Qingan, 2005, p. 34).

Third, Chinese cultural legacies provided additional resources for the media to create nationalistic narratives. For instance, stories on the ancient Silk Roads<sup>4</sup> caught attention from the Chinese media outlets. Since 2015, Xinhua, CCTV and *People’s Daily* all started frantic reporting on the topic, shown by news reports on historical sites, historical documentaries, regional development, and international events. Xinhua vigorously reported on cultural events

---

<sup>4</sup> The Silk Roads are an ancient network of caravan routes linking Xi’an, the ancient capital Chang’an, to the eastern Mediterranean cities; it was established during the period of Roman rule in Europe when silk was introduced to Europe from China. The name Silk Road was given by Ferdinand von Richthofen from Germany, who travelled to China seven times from 1868 to 1872. The German term *Seidenstraße* means Silk Road, implying the lucrative Chinese silk trade (Waugh 2007, p. 4.; Eliseeff 2000, pp. 1-2). Chinese silk trade led to cultural transmissions and economic relations between China, India, Persia, and Europe to the Horn of Africa and Arabia. Technologies, philosophies and religions travelled through the Eurasian network as well (Bentley, 1993, pp.32-33). The Chinese, Persians, Somalis, Greeks, Syrians, Romans, Armenians, Indians, and Bactrians were the main traders, and from the 5th to the 8th century the Sogdians. The debate among scholars is carried out on the development of the Silk Roads during the rise of Islamic empires in the 15th century. For instance, Keown argues that the route was cut off by the Islamic empires, but Bentley contends that during the age of Islam, Arab traders joined the Silk Road and became prominent (Keown, 2004; Bentley, 1993).

related to the Silk Road, such as the celebration of Marco Polo's new Silk Road during the Expo Milano (Xinhua net, 2015b), the English version of "I am from Xinjiang on the Silk Road" during the Book Expo America (Xinhua net, 2015c), and the documentary "The Silk Road in a New Century" (Xinhua net, 2015d). During the Chinese New Year Gala on CCTV in 2015, under the show's name "Silk Road Dance" (*silu nishang*, 丝路霓裳), traditional performances from different cultures in China, India, Persia, Russia, and Egypt were presented to Chinese audiences (CCTV, 2015). Remembering this part of history, according to Chinese scholars, "expresses a nostalgic sentiment as a corrective to Chinese post-socialism" (Yu, Haiqing, 2009, p. 51). The reasons that the media outlets openly cover nationalistic narratives may be twofold. On the one hand, "nationalist credentials," as "a key source of legitimacy" for the Chinese government, have impacts on foreign policy, which is increasingly influenced by public opinion (Jie, Dalei, 2016, pp. 151-152). On the other hand, the media commercialization has driven the media outlets to compete for audiences by tilting toward "sensational stories that appeal to a nationalistic readership" (Shirk, 2011; Stockmann, 2013; quoted in Jie, Dalei, 2016).

China's external communication policy relates closely to its foreign policy. "As China's involvement in world affairs grew, and its sensitivity to its image abroad increased," Shambaugh argues, China's external communication "became more important to the leadership and as a tool of foreign policy" (Shambaugh, 2007, p. 47). The targeted audiences of China's external communication were initially mainly Chinese people living abroad, who also provided the incentive for launching Xinhua's English website (Wang, Dongying, 2011). In July 2009, Xinhua launched an English-language television news program on international channels. The program broadcasted outside Chinese embassies across Europe. This move was to shift the target audiences from the peripheral group (overseas Chinese) to the mainstream social groups abroad (Zhang, Xiaoling, 2011, pp. 183-188).

The Chinese government's external communication policy is to influence public opinion in a target country in order to influence diplomacy with that target country. This is to avoid situations where other actors (most notably foreign media) set the political agenda in a way that negatively influences Chinese interests. Scholars from within and outside China have taken on different analytical perspectives on whether digital media have an influence on the government's communication strategies. Joseph Nye once noted that in an Information Age,

in which credibility is the scarcest resource, the best propaganda is no propaganda (Nye, 2012). Gabriel Almond (1996) argues that public opinion of foreign policy is formed by four types of audiences: the general public, people caring about current affairs, public opinion leaders, and elite policymakers. Wang (Wang, Dongying, 2011) emphasizes the importance of target audience analysis, mentioning that the latter two types of audiences Almond discusses—often from the middle class or important social strata—are significant in forming public opinion as they can greatly influence the general public. Media critic Guo Ke (Guo, Ke, 2003) agrees that the Chinese government should consequently consider external communication through “elite influence.” Thus, the target audiences of Chinese news outlets are the opinion leaders and policymakers in a foreign country, who are believed to eventually determine the whole society’s opinion of the Chinese government. Guo also suggests that elite influence is more applicable to the audience in developed countries, and that communication directed towards the general public is preferable for developing countries, as in these regions there is less bias towards Chinese media (Guo, Ke, 2003).

According to a BBC poll in 2014, positive views towards China had declined by 14 per cent and negative views had gone up 16 points to 90 per cent, which was at its highest since 2006 (BBC, 2014; also quoted by Shambaugh, 2015, p. 107). However, Shambaugh also points out that in a 2013 survey by the Pew Research Centre’s Global Attitudes Project, China’s soft-power deficit is equal in Africa and Latin America (Pew Research Centre, 2014; also quoted by Shambaugh, 2015, p. 107). The reason that Chinese state media outlets may have their greatest impact in developing countries deserves more attention in itself. First, a media outlet like Xinhua has a lower cost of news provision, compared to AP, Reuters, or AFP. Second, Xinhua has offered deals with free content, equipment, and technical support to buyers in the Middle East and Africa, “where Xinhua’s role as a government censor matters less” (Barr, 2011, p. 47).

With the acceleration of information technology, Xinhua tries to win over foreign audiences by changing the strategies on covering negative events or sensitive issues. However, it is not only strategies that need to be adapted: the tone and the topics of the reporting also need to be more in line with what non-Chinese audiences expect or want to see, hear, or read about. As media reception relates to the “politics of reception” (Chu, Yingchi, 2013, p. 3), credibility becomes a major concern in communicating with foreign audiences. Drawing on McQuire’s (1986) review and Draper’s (1991) case studies of US media advertising, Manuel Castells

concludes that regardless of the huge amount of financial input (US\$50 billion at the time), media advertising has a very limited effect on actual behaviour (Castells, 2010a, p. 334). As the communication process is based on the interaction between the sender and the receiver, the sender's message contains its own codes, "which coincided with those of the dominant ideology, while the addressees filled it with 'aberrant' meanings according to their particular cultural codes" (Eco, 1977, p. 90, quoted by Castells, 2010a, p. 335). In terms of readerships of Chinese official newspapers, this does not mean that the readers expect news credibility, but it does imply their intention to know the government's position on particular issues (Stockmann, 2013, p. 12). Therefore, it can be argued that the Chinese government's financial input for the state media outlets, such as Xinhua, mainly aims to clarify its position in the international arena through major events reporting, rather than merely providing news reports. This is what affects the credibility of Xinhua among audiences, and also what challenges Xinhua from gaining larger non-Chinese audiences.

In different social contexts, specific political strategies can also lead to differences between domestic and international audiences' reception. For instance, the reporting styles between the Chinese official broadcasting channel CCTV4 and Australia's Channel 10 differ markedly. For the news coverage of Beijing's heavy rainfall in 2012, CCTV4 adopted a positive reporting tone by showing citizens' good deeds, in contrast to Channel 10's display of disrupted city images during the natural disaster. The differences in the interpretation of this subject are embedded in two different social contexts: one appears to be more nationalistic, and the other sceptical. Without knowing what the audiences actually think about any of this, it nevertheless shows the different ideological choices made by the producers of the content, which are influenced by the set of norms, values, and beliefs that make up priori assumptions of the social context of the news story. This goes to show that the "horizon of expectations" from the audience has historical, social, and political dimensions (Chu, Yingchi, 2013, p. 7).

## **1.2 Controversy in China's Belt and Road Initiative**

By observing Xinhua's activity on different social media platforms, my research aims to find out how Chinese state media carry out their tasks of internal and external communication through social media. To create a discursive environment that is in favour of the Party and the state, Chinese official media outlets play an important role in forming the new diplomacy discourses under the leadership of Xi.

As an important part of the Chinese diplomacy, the BRI shows that the Chinese government is calling for a greater role in international relations on the one hand; on the other, its establishment has caused contentions from within and outside China. My research will explore how Xinhua has taken on the diplomatic task through a case study of China's current diplomacy of the "Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Road" initiative (BRI).

To back up this initiative, the Chinese government has put up a huge number of investments to attract global partnerships. President Xi promised a US\$40 billion fund for the Silk Road initiative, and a further US\$50 billion to establish two investment banks, the New Development Bank, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), to build roads, railways and other transport links to Central Asia. This is to open up markets for China and strengthen the value of the Chinese currency: the RMB or *yuan* (元). The government plans to invest US\$50 billion in infrastructure and energy deals in Central Asia (Chu, Ben, 2013), and to create a US\$16.3 billion fund to "build and expand railways, roads and pipelines in Chinese provinces" which are part of the planned Silk Road Economic Belt (*Bloomberg*, 2014). According to Lin Minwang, "the great economic vision of the Belt and Road is to make use of China's foreign exchange reserves—the world's largest—and of China's capability to promote neighbouring countries' infrastructure construction and development" (Lin, Minwang, 2015, pp. 16-17).

Media outlets from within and outside China have focused on the political and economic goals of the BRI and its influence on different geopolitical regions. The media debates between the English language media and Chinese state media outlets are over the comparison of China's BRI with America's Marshall Plan.<sup>5</sup> Together with social media, the reports, comments, and tweets from different media organizations have played out as a fierce debate over China's ambitions.

For instance, media from English speaking countries such as the BBC, the *Guardian*, CNN and the *New York Times* have compared the Silk Road initiative to America's post-war policy,

---

<sup>5</sup> The Marshall Plan was a strategy by the U.S. government after World War II to help European countries through its economic power, so as to achieve its own foreign-policy ambitions. Financial resources were provided to help rebuild Europe. The political motivation was to gain more allies to avoid the influence from the communist countries.

the Marshall Plan. In response to the criticism and analysis from American and British media, Chinese official media outlets such as Xinhua, CCTV and the *People's Daily* have responded to the comparison by listing the incomparable elements of the two policies. Xinhua defends the government's "harmonious rise" (*heping jueqi*, 和平崛起), by releasing news reports titled "China's silk road proposals not Marshall Plan" on its official website (Xinhua net, 2015a). Xinhua also further states that it is "inappropriate to draw an analogy" between the BRI and the Marshall Plan (Xinhua net, 2017c).

The following reports that are collected from different media outlets have their title either comparing the BRI directly to the Marshall Plan or implying a controversy in the BRI. The articles from several popular English media websites are titled "The New Silk Road: China's Marshall Plan?" (*The Diplomat*, Tiezzi, Shannon, 2014), "China's 'Marshall Plan'" (*Wall Street Journal*, 2014), "China's Ambitious 'Silk Road' Plan Faces Hurdles" (VOANews, Dasgupta, Saibal, 2015), "Where all Silk Roads lead" (*The Economist*, 2015), etc. Topical articles from several major Chinese media directly counter the comparisons to the Marshall Plan: they carry titles such as "China's silk road proposals not Marshall Plan" (Xinhua net, 2015e), "Closer Look: So China's Silk Road Fund Is Marshall Plan Redux? Not Really" (*Caixin*, Wang, Liwei, 2014),<sup>6</sup> "Silk Road initiatives not China's Marshall Plan: spokesman" (China Org.cn, Zhang, Lulu, 2015), etc.

In general, the controversy is shown from two perspectives. On one side,

Beijing is naturally trying to take advantage of its advantageous financial situation to boost foreign policy influence.... The Marshall Plan helped establish the U.S. as a bona fide super power; Beijing is betting its twin Silk Roads can do the same (*The Diplomat*, Tiezzi, Shannon, 2014).

Mr. Xi is rolling out a more audacious version of the Marshall Plan, America's post-war reconstruction effort. Back then, the United States extended vast amounts of aid to secure alliances in Europe. China is deploying hundreds of billions of dollars of state-backed loans in the hope of winning new friends around the world, this time without requiring military obligations (*New York Times*, Perlez, Jane, and Huang, Yufan, 2017).

---

<sup>6</sup> As part of China's financial media group, Caixin Media, Caixin Global is known to produce independent, investigative journalism in China, with information sources and analytical opinions from a wide range of social groups.

On the other side, the Chinese state media state that

[u]nlike the Marshall Plan, no political conditions have been imposed on participants in the Silk Road frameworks. China has always advocated that countries should respect each other's rights to independently choose their own social system and development path. The Marshall Plan helped establish the United States as a superpower, but China is not interested in doing the same (Xinhua net, 2015e).

While western European countries had little say in the implementation of the Marshall Plan, China is stepping up policy consultation with its partners (China Org.cn, Zhang, Lulu, 2015).

Facts speak louder than words. ... There is no guarantee that the modern Silk Road will be an easy success, but time will prove that it is much more than the Marshall Plan and that China's gain is not others' loss (Caixin, Wang, Liwei, 2014).

The different conceptions over the BRI form a dichotomy. The ongoing debate about China's current foreign policy may have started under the influence of the Cold War mentality, but the debate eventually leads to questions such as whether and how China will play a role in shaping the "new world order." The comparisons between the conceptions of the two policies are perhaps less about the "China threat" theory<sup>7</sup> launched a decade ago, and more about how other countries can play their parts in the changing world system.

The Chinese government leadership is well aware of the "China threat" theory and the "new world order." During the 19<sup>th</sup> CPC National Congress, Xi first underlined that by adhering to both the national defence policy and the opening-up policy, China "does not pose a threat to

---

<sup>7</sup> The "China threat" theory has taken ideological, economic and military forms (Broomfield, 2003) under the notion of a rising China. Since the opening-up policy and economic reform in 1978, China shows the highest GDP growth rate in the world with an average 9.4 percent annual GDP growth (Zheng, Bijian, 2005). Perceived by various policymakers and academics from mainly North America and Western Europe, China as a growing global power with increasing military might becomes "an indisputable challenge to America's security and the very survival of democracy throughout the world" (Broomfield, 2003, p.265). Broomfield provides an in-depth analysis of the perceived China threat through reviewing a variety of books and conservative publications such as The Washington Times, The American Spectator, National Review, The Weekly Standard, and the Heritage Foundation Reports (Broomfield, 2003, p.266). Furthermore, Callahan explains the two general trends in deeming China's burgeoning impact as an alternative to Western modernity, which are (1) a shift towards perceiving "China itself as the future" from exploring the future outside China, and (2) a shift to many more individuals "dreaming about many different futures" from officials' top-down planned future (Callahan, 2012b, pp.138-139). According to Callahan, while there are multiple modernities taking shape within China, the various conceptual practices such as socialism, capitalism, and world order in fact "shape discussions of politics, economics, culture, and society beyond China" (Callahan, 2012b, p.144). Callahan holds that with the tendency to "think beyond the current world system to craft post-American world orders," China strategic future could serve to delegitimize American-influenced global norms (Callahan, 2012a, p.620).

any other country” at any stage of its development and will “never seek hegemony.” Second, affirming that the BRI is to promote international cooperation, Xi stated that “as a major and responsible country,” China will play “an active part in reforming and developing the global governance system” (Xinhua net, 2017a, pp. 53-54). To examine the Chinese state media’s handling of the case, I will conduct a discourse analysis of how Xinhua promotes the BRI on its Weibo and Twitter accounts. This analysis will explore whether Xinhua adopts different communicative strategies on Weibo and Twitter, how Xinhua conceptualizes news values on social media platforms, and whether social media messaging differs from Xinhua’s traditional way of communication. By looking into how its messaging on social media fits with Xinhua’s overall performance, pertinent questions will be: what image is Xinhua trying to cultivate for the respective target audiences, what communicative choices do Xinhua media workers make and why, and does the government respond by making new media policies?

By studying Xinhua’s message distribution on Weibo and Twitter, this research project will explore China’s official news agency’s social media performance. It aims to clarify whether and how Xinhua employs certain communicative strategies in order to provide specific audiences with positive news about China’s relations with the rest of the world. Questions will inevitably arise regarding the extent to which Xinhua News Agency reports about events outside China and how it intends to inform the audiences by integrating social media. Issues such as Chinese image and publicity play an important role in China’s current media policy. Despite recent efforts to use social media and to provide quicker, more transparent coverage, there is still space to improve the system itself. On Weibo and Twitter, the news agency’s editorial choices show that maintaining China’s “face” is often contradictory with the country’s efforts of showing its openness. Adopting a policy of merely maintaining a positive image to the outside world can mislead both domestic and international audiences. Xinhua’s performance thus demonstrates the challenges that China faces in its internal and external communication endeavour in the transforming period led by digital media.

My project will draw attention to the importance of the discourse of political communication under the impact of digital media. China, with its transitional mass media system of the reform period, is now turning into a highly mediated society. My research will relate different media theories to the findings of case studies to examine trends in Chinese media, their influence on Xinhua’s communicative strategy, and even China’s image. It will open up avenues of future research into other news organizations’ performance on digital media platforms.

### **1.3 Research Questions and Aims**

This research project asks: What is the relationship between social media messaging and media policy in China? Under the new media regulations made by the government, what role does social media play in Chinese external and internal communication, specifically in the case of China's official news agency Xinhua? My project intends to find the answer by studying the interplay between Weibo, Twitter and the Chinese state-owned media outlet Xinhua News Agency, an active actor on both platforms.

My project aims to expand our understanding of how ICTs influence China's official news agency, Xinhua, in terms of the government's communicative strategy, and aims to develop theories as well as research methods that will contribute to contemporary Chinese media studies. Through the analysis of recent social phenomena in China regarding issues of new media regulations and Xinhua's communication strategies, my project is likely to raise pertinent questions as to how these regulations work on Weibo in terms of news information, political discourse in the public sphere, why it matters to the authorities to pass these regulations, whether the innovation of technology can be a reliable incentive for social change, and how the interplay between digital media and mass media will alter China's image in terms of the soft power in the years to come.

### **1.4 Structure of This Dissertation**

This dissertation consists of eight chapters. Chapter Two, the theoretical chapter, consists of five sections. The first section will provide a clear paradigm of the relationship between discourse and power. In order to do so, I will discuss the media's role in political communication, and review the literature on theories of power and discourse analysis. In the second section, I will review the literature on communication power within the Chinese context. I will provide a discussion on the convergence of mass media and digital media to present a picture of the Chinese media environment, and how ICTs in the media industry have given rise to a more dynamic environment for public discourse. In addition, I will review the ongoing scholarly debates on the role of the ICTs. In the third section, I will discuss the main literature with respect to soft power in China. Particularly, I will focus on the central government's scheme of soft power construction and media policy. The fourth section will

elaborate on China's internal communication power within the Party and the state, and the external communication power in international relations. In this section, I will discuss Xinhua's role in the government's policymaking. In the fifth and sixth sections, I will discuss Xinhua's integration into social media platforms and further elaborate on the sources, intentions, and functions of media production. This chapter also details the contributions of this research to the academic fields of discourse studies and political communication.

In Chapter Three, the methodology chapter, I will discuss the methods used in the two phases of my research. In the first phase, I collected and studied the legal and policy documents from the Chinese central government's websites as well as from the official website of Xinhua News Agency. I also conducted a series of qualitative semi-structured interviews with media practitioners, scholars as well as policymakers, during my fieldwork in 2016. The comparison between these policy papers and the interviews highlights the relations between policymaking and media changes. The aim of the first phase is to disentangle the political context for Chinese media production towards domestic and international audiences. In the second phase, through digital tools, I first carried out a broad analysis of the public discourse of the BRI on Weibo and Twitter. Having conducted the analysis on the performances of active players, I then adopted both quantitative and qualitative research methods to analyse in particular Xinhua's performance through its account on Weibo, called Xinhua net, and New China on Twitter. In addition, this chapter also explains relevant social media conventions, like the use of hashtags "#," links, and @ handles. Both the quantitative and qualitative analysis helped to produce knowledge about Xinhua's perspective in terms of soft power construction.

Chapter Four is titled "Policy Reviews and Fieldwork," and consists of two sections. In the first section, I will analyse the legal and policy documents from the Chinese central government's websites as well as the official website of Xinhua News Agency. I will look at the rules that might affect the interaction between the public and the government through social media messaging, and then in particular the legislation that applies to Xinhua. I will then examine the expressions and terms adopted in these documents, and then relate the official language to the discourse on the social media platforms. This is to explore how the official language influences social media language and vice versa. In the second section, I will provide the data from and analysis of the qualitative interviews from my fieldwork in 2016. Based on the interview results, I will discuss, in respective sub-sections, the role of digital media in external communication policy, national image construction, the position of the state

media, Xinhua's interpretation of government guidelines, and its performance on social media platforms. The goal of this combined approach of policy reviews and interviews is to examine the relations between policymaking and media changes.

In Chapter Five, titled "Online Players in the Belt and Road Discourse," I intend to identify the active players that shape the online discourse of this initiative on social media platforms. In order to achieve that goal, I collected social media messages related to the BRI from both Weibo and Twitter. I used two different digital methods of collection and conducted sentiment analyses for both social media platforms. The focus will be on finding out what role Xinhua News Agency is playing, by comparing it to the performance of a variety of other active accounts of organizations and individuals on Weibo and Twitter.

I used the software platform Founder to analyse data from Weibo and the programming language Python for the data from Twitter. Selecting two different digital methods enabled me to examine and compare two different research methods and environments, from within and outside China. As a methodological reflection, I will comment on both the advantages and disadvantages of conducting analyses with these two software tools.

Chapter Six, "Quantitative Outlook," focuses on Xinhua's message distribution on Weibo and Twitter. Here, I will discuss the results of a qualitative approach that I used to examine whether Xinhua performs different functions towards domestic and international audiences on different platforms, and where the strategic differences lie. These results take the form of a categorization of posts and tweets, collected from Weibo and Twitter, according to themes, timeline, and regions. I followed each step of categorization by discussing from which perspectives Xinhua tends to portray the initiative. Finally, through identifying the keywords of the messages from Xinhua's Weibo and Twitter accounts with the software tools Yoshikoder 6.5.0 and CNCorpus.org (*yuliaoku zaixian*, 语料库在线), I was able to make a comparison between Xinhua's activity on the two platforms.

Based on the empirical results from Chapter Six, Chapter Seven discusses the qualitative findings to further explore and compare Xinhua's communicative strategies on social media. This chapter consists of three sections. The first provides an analysis of the recurring linguistic features of Xinhua's messages. Based on the corpus analysis from Chapter Six, I

will discuss the similarities and differences in the meanings and usages of keywords in Chinese and English. Second, by examining and comparing the grammar features and rhetorical figures that have frequently appeared in the Chinese and English texts, I will further explore the intentions and functions of deploying certain expressions and literary features. The analysis in these two sections is to generate qualitative information and substantive explanations complementary to the findings from the quantitative research: why and how does Xinhua display different communication strategies towards domestic and international audiences, and what do these differences suggest about Xinhua's interpretation of geopolitics? Finally, I will provide a visual analysis of the images collected from the Weibo and Twitter messages. By analysing the compositions of the images, I will discuss what the visual elements symbolize and what effects the images from Xinhua may create for the audiences.

In the conclusion, I will review the entire research project and summarise the key findings from the two research phases—the policy reviews and interviews in the first phase and discourse analysis in the second phase. I will also report the strengths and limitations of this study, in addition to some reflections and indications for future research. Finally, I will utilise the findings to answer the main research question that motivates this dissertation. Based on the results, this chapter ends with implications related to the ICTs' influences on the state media outlets, suggesting that at this stage, the technological innovation cannot be seen as a reliable incentive for social change as China continues its opening-up policy.