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

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# Chapter Two
# Concepts and Relations on Media, Discourse and Power

In this chapter, I intend to clarify the main concepts and broader debates in communication studies, and then explain the relationships between these concepts in the Chinese context. Through comparing the overarching theories of scholars from within and outside China on power, soft power, and media discourse, I then ask how the ongoing debates reflect political communication in China, and what the communication environment in China can reversely tell us about the academic debates. Power theories play an important role here toward the understanding of intentions and functions of Chinese communication strategies. In order to analyse what interests the communication practices of the Chinese state media ultimately serve, and what its implications of communication choices are, I will then specify the conceptual issues, such as the role of media in power-making, internal and external communication, media production, resources, and the target audience.

## 2.1 Power and Discourse

Power, by definition, means the ability or capacity to do something or act in a particular way (Oxford Dictionary). Some of the most influential theories of power, although developed through different perspectives, have shown more similarities than differences. Power is based on control and is therefore never just one-sided. Max Weber (1925) conceptualized power (*Macht*) as the "possibility of imposing one's will upon the behaviour of other persons" (Bendix, 1962, p. 290).[8] Based on Weber's concept, Hanna Arendt (1958) indicated that the power to do something is actually the power do to something against someone or someone's values and interests. By presenting the strengths and weaknesses of three different views of power, Steven Lukes (1974) provides a conceptual analysis of power. According to Lukes, the one-dimensional view focuses on behavioural study, decision-making by political actors, and overt conflict; the two-dimensional view qualifies the critique of behavioural focus and looks into decision-making, nondecision-making, and overt or covert conflict; and the three-dimensional view of power focuses on decision-making, control over political agenda, and observable and latent conflict (1974, p. 25). Defining the concept of power by "saying that *A*

[8] Max Weber's original definition of power in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* is, "Macht bedeutet jede Chance, innerhalb einer sozialen Beziehung den eigenen Willen auch gegen Widerstreben durchzusetzen, gleichviel, worauf diese Chance beruht (1925, p.28)." The translated text is from Reinhard Bendix (1962, p.290).

exercises power over *B* when *A* affects *B* in a manner contrary to *B*'s interest," he contends that different views of power rely on "some normatively specific conception of interests" which associate with certain moral and political positions (Lukes, 1974, pp. 34-35). Michel Foucault compares disciplinary power to how power was exercised traditionally. He explains that traditionally, power was "what was seen" and paradoxically "found the principle of its force in the movement by which it deployed that force" (Foucault, 1977, p. 187). Thus, those on whom power was exercised "remain in shade." Compared to this, disciplinary power "is exercised through its invisibility" and "imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility" (Foucault, 1977, p. 187). The empowerment of social actors is founded upon their empowerment against other social actors (Castells, 2009, p. 13). Power, in the view of Castells, is relational, and to be more specific, power in modern society is generated through the control of communication and information. Furthermore, Castells holds that when there is power, there is counter-power, as the latter depends on breaking through the control of power (Castells, 2009, p. 3).

The theories of power associate with violence and discourse. In the 18$^{th}$ century, the philosopher Jeremy Bentham introduced the concept of the "Panopticon." The design of the Panopticon consists of an inspection house at the centre of a circular building. From this inspection house, the inmates can be watched everywhere around the perimeter. The Panopticon, as "a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind, in a quantity hitherto without example," assures the visibility of power (Bentham, 1843, p. 39). Acknowledging that power was traditionally what was seen and what was manifested, Foucault contests that disciplinary power is exercised through its invisibility and functions permanently and largely in silence, as "it is the apparatus as a whole that produces 'power' and distributes individuals" (Foucault, 1977, pp. 177-187). The process of power production and distribution relates to politics and the state. Max Weber regards this relation as "a relation of men dominating men," and "a relation supported by means of legitimate violence" (Weber, 1946 [1919], p. 78, p. 121). Domination and violence in this notion are not simply physical, as they are fundamentally exercised through control over mind. Communication scholars nowadays indicate that the source of power ultimately lies in knowledge and thoughts (Mulgan, 2007, 2009; Lakoff, 2008).

Based on Foucault's notion of "disciplinary power" and Weber's "legitimate violence," Castells suggests the fundamental source of power in the information age is symbolic power,

that is, the capacity to shape people's minds (Castells, 2010b, p. 396). Symbolic power, embedded in cultural expression, image-making and value-making, is mediated by electronic communication networks. According to Castells, in a network society, with information and communication coming into effect through media, leadership becomes personalized, and image-making is in fact power-making (Castells, 2010a, pp. 473-476). The rules, the language, and the interests of the media determine that they are neither neutral tools nor direct instruments of state power (Castells, 2009, p. 194). Castells contends that media are much more important than simply being the power-holders, as they provide space for politics and "constitute the main source of socialized communication" (Castells, 2009, p. 157). Therefore, "politics is fundamentally media politics" (Castells, 2009, p. 8). With his notion of "network society," Castells articulates the forms of power into "networking power; network power; networked power and network-making power." Suggesting that the network-making power has the most impact in a society, he calls the social actors with the ability to constitute network(s), and to program/reprogram the network(s) the programmers, and those who are able to connect networks and share recourses, the "switchers" (Castells, 2009, pp. 45-47). In the process of power-making, the media enable the power to program and switch through agenda-setting, priming, and framing (Castells, 2009; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). Power, as the relational capacity, is embedded in the institutions and exercised through "the construction of meaning on the basis of the discourses through which social actors guide their action" (Castells, 2009, p. 10).

If power is relational (Castells, 2009), then the discourses that power is exercised through, in the Foucauldian sense, represent the relationships among social actors (Foucault, 1984). Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu views discourse as "the political economy of communication" where relations of power are exercised and enacted (Bourdieu, 1991 [1988]). Composed of signs, discourse constructs our knowledge of society, and this is because discourse not only functions through the signs, but also has far more significant impacts than the signs (Foucault, 1972; quoted in Smith and Jenks, 2006, p. 145).

Expounding the critical theory from the Frankfurt School, Raymond Geuss holds that an ideology, in the descriptive sense, contains both discursive elements such as concepts, ideas, and beliefs, and non-discursive elements such as gestures, rituals, and attitudes (Geuss, 1981, pp. 5-6). Speaking of an ideology of a group, Geuss further explains that carrying a set of moral and normative beliefs, it refers to a world view or a world picture that comprises

coherent bundles of beliefs, attitudes and desires that are "widely shared among the agents in the group" (Geuss, 1981, p. 10). The more recent critical discourse analysis (CDA) aims to decipher ideologies within which symbolic forms are adopted (Thompson, 1990; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Addressing the discursive effects of ideology, Eagleton holds that ideology, as a matter of "discourse" rather than "language," functions through its relations to its social context (Eagleton, 1991, pp. 9, 223). Based on Foucault's framework of discourse, many CDA theorists relate discourse with knowledge. For instance, Siegfried Jaeger (1993, 1999) views discourse as "the flow of knowledge" that forms collective doing (quoted in Jaeger, 2001). Theo van Leeuwen further illustrates the different relations between discourses and social practices: one stems from Foucault's theory, that is, discourse as representation of social practices and a form of knowledge; the other one is discourse itself as social practice (van Leeuwen, 1993, p. 193). In the same vein, Wodak asserts that the production of discourse is in fact controlled and organized in every society (Wodak, 2008, p. 4). To that end, the procedure of discourse production already exercises power, during which it includes and also excludes certain social members. Political discourse, as Martin Reisigl delineates, is "a multifaceted bundle of semiotic social practices" which connects to a specific macro topic and to the validity claims such as "truth and normative validity" (Reisigl, 2008). Stemming from this point of view, discourse constructs knowledge and shapes social reality between the dominant and the dominated. Therefore, Teun A. van Dijk holds that critical discourse analysis exposes power abuse, but he also points out that as the CDA research contains "an attitude of opposition and dissent against those who abuse text and talk … CDA is biased—and proud of it" (van Dijk, 2001, p. 96). Notwithstanding, it is worth pointing out that the biased CDA narrative of the "underdog" against the "oppressor" somewhat contradicts the ethos of Foucault's work, who viewed power as fundamentally neutral.

In Foucault's words, one must cease to think of power in negative terms: it "excludes," "represses," and "censors," as power substantially produces reality (Foucault, 1977, p. 194). The relationship between discourse and power is interactive. Discourses express and enact power through knowledge, and eventually shape reality; reversely, the possession of power decides the dominant discourses that influence and control the mind (van Dijk, 2001; Jager, 2001).

## 2.2 Communication Power in the Chinese Context

Chinese media scholar Zhao Yuezhi argues that "there was never an essential 'Chinese culture' to begin with," since Chinese society has been shaped by foreign ideologies and communication technologies throughout its history, including Mao's period (Zhao, 2008, pp. 149-151). Scholars have linked the research on Chinese culture with the issues of national identity and ideology (Castells, 2010a; Barr, 2011; Callahan, 2010; Waldron, 1993). In a multi-faceted society, Chinese national identity today is composed by different social groups, including "fervent nationalists, disconnected urban workers, affluent business people, ageing retirees, vast numbers of rural poor, 'little emperors' (…) democrats, Marxists, and so on" (Barr, 2011, p. 129).

With an attempt to probe the construction of identity, Castells holds that identities are formed originally from dominant institutions, and more importantly, identity in the network society is different from social roles (Castells, 2010b, pp. 6-10). That is to say, among different social groups in modern China, it is the power holders who influence the national identity and reinforce the dominant social values. In China, these power holders, referred to as "programmers" and "switchers" by Castells (2009), are often the state and social actors who associate closely with the state. Nevertheless, there are occasionally scenarios where citizen journalists, dissidents or artists are not directly associated with the state programme public discourse in a significant way. Joel Mokyr (1990) also links the development of Chinese culture to the mechanism of the state. On the one hand, the Chinese social system is considered to have shifted successfully from statism towards more of a state-led capitalism than the "socialism with Chinese characteristics" advocated by the government (Castells, 2010a; Nolan and Furen, 1990; Hsing, 1996). Referring to China's entry into global capitalism and regarding socialism as "a viable alternative to capitalism," Dirlik describes Chinese socialism as "post-socialism" (Dirlik, 1989, p. 364; Yu, 2009, p. 6). Dirlik expounds the Chinese version of "socialism" as a successful model. On the other hand, David Harvey argues that China's socialism is not de facto socialism, but neoliberalism. As the Chinese economy is under stringent control of the authoritarian state, whereas it is also encouraged to incorporate neo-liberal elements such as privatization and free trade, Harvey proposes the term "neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics" (Harvey, 2005, p. 120). However, the system has also been criticized for lacking "the ideology of the present," except with nationalism and consumerism to be called upon as new ideologies (Waldron, 1993, p. 53).

According to William A. Joseph (2010), ideologies consist of a variety of social values and beliefs which could shape citizens' world view. As for *political* ideology, it influences the way that the decision-making elites distribute, organize, and use the ideas on power-making. The official ideology of the PRC is based on Marxism-Leninism, with the ruling party legitimizing its power as the "only rightful interpreter of the values and the beliefs" to guide the nation (Joseph, 2010, pp. 129-130). Under the communist leadership in the reform era, productivity has been highly emphasized and the social relations and the collective identity of labour in a production system are gradually blurred (Florence, 2009, p. 29; Castells, 2010a, pp. 473-476). Zhao argues that the Chinese state attempts to build a "socialist market economy," and it would be a mistake to regard China as "an openly committed neo-liberal capitalist social formation" (Zhao Yuezhi, 2008, pp. 5-8). Following the five generations of Chinese political leaders, the official ideologies stemming from Marxism-Leninism have influenced and also shown the transitions of the CCP and the PRC. In the fast-changing Chinese society, there are multiple ideologies, including patriotism, nationalism, neoliberalism, consumerism, and democracy, that are likely to play their roles in the Chinese politics (Joseph, 2010, pp. 159-162).

In this research, I delve into the concept of power in the Chinese context, looking at it from two aspects: internal communication power within the Party and the state; and external communication power in international relations. The internal communication power represents tension among different social actors in the state. First, based on the observation of central/provincial/local governance of the Chinese state, Castells holds that the power of the Party is balanced by "power-sharing and wealth distribution between national, provincial, and local elites" (Castells, 2010b, p. 336). Applying the notion of "technocracy" from Jean Meynaud (1969) in the Chinese context, Zheng Yongnian (2008) suggests that the Chinese political elites have realized the power of science and technology. The reform policy carried out by the central government has led to the technological empowerment to both the state and society. Both the state and commercial media outlets in China have embarked on technological innovation. However, Zheng adds that if the policy reforms are led by the CCP itself, then the political changes do not necessarily indicate the empowerment of society or the loosened control of the Party (Zheng, Yongnian, 2010). This means, for instance, that reforms of media organizations such as media commercialization and the going-out strategy do not entail the Party's weakening media control. The bargaining power of the media organizations,

in fact, hinges on the trust they get from the CCP, and to a large extent is determined by the nature of a media outlet (Zhang, Xiaoling, 2011, pp. 148-149). Parallel to Castells' argument that politics are eventually media politics, one can say that, in the Chinese context, media are also political media. For example, Daniela Stockmann points out that Chinese media practitioners tend to "keep discipline" and "stand behind China's foreign policy" (Stockmann, 2013, p. 95), and Hugo de Burgh expounds the close relationship between media personnel and the CCP, giving the example of two Chinese state media editors holding official ministerial ranks (De Burgh, 2003, p. 24). According to Michael Schoenhals, formalized language with its restricted code in vocabulary, style, syntax, and trope is a form of power "bearing upon all aspects of Chinese politics" (Schoenhals, 1992, pp. 1-3). Stating that ideological elements may indeed influence writers to "agree to calling leaders' utterances 'opinions' rather than 'instructions' and the year 1949 the 'founding of the nation' rather than 'liberation'," Schoenhals further argues that the CCP circulars and its various explicit instructions under the bureaucratic apparatus play a greater role in shaping the political discourse than ideology (Schoenhals, 1992, p. 51).

Second, external communication power in international relations takes form in two ways: the image of China that the government intends to present to other countries, and the image of China that is viewed by other countries. My research mainly focuses on the Chinese government's external communication with Western European and Northern American countries. The image of China thereby refers to the representation constructed by a mix of programmers and switchers, namely the government, the Party, the state media, academics, and other social actors. For instance, with the advent of the new communication technologies, agenda setting is "negotiated among various socio-political-economic powers" (Yu, Haiqing, 2011, p. 4). The making of China's image is not just to counter the "China threat" theory and the penetration of American soft power, but also to consolidate Chinese values, such as harmony between humans and nature (Zhao, 2008, p. 181; Needham and Wang, 2004).

The government's image-making integrates with China's own soft power construction, highlighting China's peaceful rise in the international environment. Chinese former President Hu Jintao adopted the term "peaceful rise" (*heping jueqi*, 和平崛起) in 2003 to promote the government's foreign policy. The term implies that "China has been pursuing the pathway of peaceful rise since the initiation of the reform and opening-up period, and will not change

course as it seeks to build a 'well-off society' by further integrating with the international community" (Glaser and Medeiros, 2007, p. 295). Concerning the terminology appropriateness and its implications for the Taiwan issue, the Chinese leadership eschewed "peaceful rise" and decided to favour "peaceful development" (*heping fazhan*, 和平发展) in 2004 (Glaser and Medeiros, 2007, pp. 302-309). Examining the evolution of the concept of peaceful rise, Glaser and Medeiros conclude that "the leadership's final decision to use the term 'peaceful development' reiterated the core goal of reassuring other nations that China is not a revisionist state that will destabilize the international system as it revitalizes itself" (Glaser and Medeiros, 2007, p. 309). However, as for the United States and Western European countries, the image of China, in terms of its political reform, economic rise, and military expenditure, is not merely reckoned as a peaceful rise. For example, American journalist David Brooks comments that the rise of China eventually is "a cultural one" that has the power to impact American society's very own identity (Brooks, 2008). With the global expansion of the Chinese official media outlets, the state-run China Radio International owns the majority share of more than 33 radio stations around the world, through which Beijing intends to send out China-friendly messages (Qing and Shiffman, 2015). Furthermore, untangling the intrinsic relations among various state and social actors, Dan Schiller suggests that China should neither be viewed as a developing country that attempts to change the global communication system nor as a threat to America's political discourse (Schiller, 2005, p. 79). Under the going-out policy, the central government intends to improve its discursive power and international influence by engaging in the global governance of cyberspace (CAC, 2016a). Therefore, Chinese external communication power is in a dynamic from both within and outside the state. The external communication strategies coincide with the government's foreign policy and are implemented through the state media outlets, such as Xinhua News Agency, CCTV, and the *People's Daily*.

Castells underlines that power is based on the control of communication, and the process of gaining power generates counter-power which attempts to break through such control (Castells, 2009). In China, though both internal and external communication power meet with their counter-power, eventually it is the dominant discourses that exercise power. The cultural values in China, as forms of expression of power, are decided by whoever holds that power. Media as communication tools are not neutral. Technologies, in Langdon Winner's words, are "ways of building order in our world" which contain deliberately or inadvertently intended

possibilities for "many different ways of ordering human activity" (Winner, 1980, p. 127). As Winner argues, "to say that some technologies are inherently political is to say that certain widely accepted reasons of practical necessity—especially the need to maintain crucial technological systems as smoothly working entities—have tended to eclipse other sorts of moral and political reasoning" (Winner, 1980, p. 133). As Evgeny Morozov contests, "the view that technology is neutral leaves policymakers with little to do but scrutinize the social forces around technologies, not technologies themselves" (Morozov, 2012, p. 297). As shown by Schoenhals' research on Chinese political discourse, official language in the Party circulars, as bureaucratic means of ensuring uniformity of expression, is more of "saying the right thing at the right time" (Schoenhals, 1992, pp. 51-52). According to Castells, media in fact are "direct instruments of state power" under authoritarian states, and even in other political systems that place an emphasis on the autonomy of the human mind media are not neutral (Castells, 2009, p. 94; 1997, p. 335).

Among media scholars, there have long been different discourses regarding the functions of media. In my research, media refers to the organizations that spread mediated information such as the Chinese state media outlets, rather than the container or carrier in which that information is transmitted, such as the medium of TV or newspaper. I will elaborate on these discourses by analysing the functions of mass media and digital media, and their convergence.

Marshall McLuhan distinguishes media between "hot media" like radio that is low in the audience participation and "cool media" like TV that needs to be completed by the audience, and he further argues that communication media function as "the motor of history," extending and individualizing the human sensorium, and consciousness (McLuhan, 1964). Mass media, such as newspapers, radio, and television, create linkages between the public and the policymakers by providing the main source of political information and public opinion (Lippmann, 1922; Castells, 2010b, p. 382). On the one hand, scholars underpin the media's functions as a forum for presenting ideas from all social groups and as a watchdog of the government. In this way, media carry social responsibilities and should be self-regulated while providing an open forum for the exchange of ideas (Blanchard, 1977). Some later theories stress media's responsibilities for national developments, cultural autonomy, and international relations (McBride et al., 1980; Altschull, 1984). On the other hand, scholars also criticize mass media for largely expressing the discourse of authority, or of the "governing class" (McQuail, 1994, p. 74; Siebert et al., 1956; Lippmann, 1922). For instance,

through the 1968 “Chapel Hill study” of the local public’s perception of the most important election issue, McCombs and Shaw point out the agenda-setting function of news media which have the capacity to influence the salience of issues in public opinion (McCombs, Shaw, 1972). Mass media have the capacity of “signalling the events” and organizing the audiences in accord to the authority (Lippmann, 2012).

Compared to mass media, digital media—in particular news websites, online blogs, and social media—carry multi-faceted functions. Scholars anticipated mass media and their “unifying cultural power” being gradually replaced by digital media, and the latter becoming the vehicle of political propaganda through their “socially stratified differentiation,” rather than just “sending a limited number of messages to a homogeneous mass audience” (Castells, 2010a, 2010b; Sabbah, 1985; Kamarck and Nye, 2002; Murphy and Fong, 2009). Digital media function through their multiplicity of sources, and individualize the relations between senders and receivers, which hereafter leads to the segmentation of the audiences (Sabbah, 1985, p. 219; Damm, 2009, pp. 83-95). Rephrasing McLuhan’s expression that “the medium is the message” (1964), Castells argues that in the information age, “the message is the medium” (Castells, 2010a, p. 340). That means the functions of a medium are shaped by the messages and sources it contains.

In China, the messages on the internet sent by the state media explicitly carry the government’s political agenda, which determines one of the major functions of the internet as an online platform or a tool for the central government to disseminate policies towards its target audience online (Castells, 2009, p. 281). In this respect, scholars regard the state media outlets as the “pedagogic media” (Murphy and Fong, 2009, p. 46).

Through technological innovation, mass media and digital media constantly interact by bringing together their information sources and their multiple functions, as well as their producers and consumers. Henry Jenkins describes these interactions as a “convergence culture” (Jenkins, 2006). “When old and new media collide,” media consumers can access information in a much broader context, and the power relations between the producers and the consumers create a new space (Jenkins, 2006, p. 270; Yu, Haiqing, 2009, p. 3). Scholar Yu Haiqing adopts historian Philip Huang’s (1993) concept of a “third realm” to describe the intermediated space and then applies this concept to the relations of state and society, the official and unofficial in China (Yu, 2009, pp. 34-35). Notwithstanding, it is worth

underscoring that mere technological achievement does not necessarily mean broader information access.

The media environment in China has also been shaped by cultural convergence. Chinese state media outlet Xinhua News Agency has cooperated with commercial websites and explored its commercial potential. The chair of Xinhua.net, Zhou Xisheng, said that this could be seen as a B2B (business to business) environment for internet news. Since Xinhua is not originally a business enterprise, Xinhua.net seems to be one step towards its commercialization. Chinese media scholar Peng Lan comments that "the old media are explorer, and the new media are advertiser" (Peng, Lan, 2005, p. 211), meaning that mass media could integrate with digital media technologies and expand their targeted audiences, and reversely, digital media could benefit from the connections introduced through mass media. With political institutions embracing the ICTs under the guidance of the central government (Hartford, 2005; Castells, 2009), the monopoly of Xinhua as information source has been challenged by social media such as the microblog Weibo (Stockmann, 2013, p. 79). Based on the comparison between official media outlets and non-official news websites, Stockmann argues that an official media outlet like Xinhua occasionally obtains political information from nonofficial news websites and newspapers (Stockmann, 2013, p. 144).

The state media outlet Xinhua is regarded as "pedagogic media," since the content and the messages are worked out and processed through top-down administrative fiat. Murphy and Fong argue that state media outlets are often neglected in Chinese communication studies. However, state media outlets reinforce the existing hierarchy in society, as the media production and distribution legitimize the authorities' decisions in the system, and also "discourage individuals and institutions from deviating from the ideology promoted by their superiors" (Murphy and Fong, 2009, pp. 46-48).

With state media outlets incorporating digital media technologies, led by the central government, discourses on ICTs in the academic sphere, especially in English-speaking countries, have changed from the earlier "liberation discourses" that so-called "China-watchers" deployed from the late 1990s to the "control discourses" popularized after 2000. In the liberation discourses, the internet is expected to bring technological freedom and democracy (Qiu, Jack Linchuan, 1999/2000; Damm and Thomas, 2006, pp. 1-11; Chase et al.

2006, pp. 64-101).[9] While the early liberalization discourses remain still very much alive, with the Chinese government's media reform, scholars also draw attention on the influence of the Chinese government. The control discourses regard the authorities influence as "censorship" or "control" (Tsui, Lokman, 2001; Hughes and Wacker, 2003, pp. 139-161).[10]

However, regarding the emancipation of the ICTs in developing countries, Arora (2012) criticizes the assumptions that users in emerging markets are "inherently different" from those in the developed countries. Arora attests that users' activities online from both developed and developing countries are largely "heavily leisure-oriented" (Arora, 2012, p. 94), as the ICTs as tools of empowerment for utilitarian causes may be "retooled for 'less noble' purposes" for pleasure (Arora, 2012, p. 99). Therefore, measuring the ICTs' usage in emerging markets merely from pragmatic ends would be "exoticizing" their users (Arora, 2012, p. 94). In a similar vein, Herold argues, "the Internet accessed and used by people living in the People's Republic of China is at least as rich and diversified as the Internet accessed by people elsewhere— and just as irreverent and apolitical" (Herold, 2015, p. 28). Using the term "netizens" to describe China's internet users implies that ICT usage is primarily political and "that online spaces serve the function of a public sphere making the emergence of a civil society in China possible" (Herold, 2015, p. 21). However, sinologist Manya Koetse argues that its equivalent term in Chinese "网民" (*wangmin*) tends to "lack the more political implications of the term 'netizen' in English," and Chinese organizations and individuals widely use it to describe the internet users (*What's on Weibo*, Koetse, 2018).

Chinese media scholars including Zheng Yongnian and Zhang Xiaoling argue that the focus on government control is too pessimistic and consequently ignores the technical ability from other social forces (Zheng, Yongnian, 2008; Zhang, Xiaoling, 2011). In other words, the

[9] These scholars critically discussed the implications of "e-governance" and social networks in China. According to Damm and Thomas, even though the state "wishes to exert control over internet use, it is attracted by the potential offered by the internet for economic gains and for government reform … Economic gains can accrue from the modernization of ICT, and government reforms can be achieved though the introduction of e-government, which is said to offer greater transparency" (2006, pp.6-7). According to Chase, Mulvenon and Hachigian, though technology alone is "unlikely to motivate political change in China," it can be "perhaps a catalyst, for political movements," and in the long term, it is possible "to imagine a situation in which the spread of information technology, … will contribute to gradual pluralization of the system" (Chase et. al, 2006, pp.93-94).

[10] Tsui holds that "China has the perfect ingredients ready for a digital Panopticon. There is a decentralized structure of self-censorship. There is a little public awareness or legal protection of privacy." (Tsui, Lokman, 2001, p.44) According to Hughes and Wacker, the development of the ICTs "urged the government to intensify control, examine and screen unhealthy contents, and promote national culture in the network environment …" (Hughes and Wacker, 2003, pp. 139-161).

earlier liberalization discourses are brought into sight. Zheng examines the political changes brought about by information technology from three perspectives: the impact of the internet on the state, the impact on society, and the impact on state-society relations. Zheng proposes that the internet empowers both the state and society with its effects of decentralization and that ICTs are more likely to promote "political liberalization" than "political democratization" (Zheng, Yongnian, 2008, p. 11). Political democratization requires no control over the flow of information, but political liberalization, consisting of political openness, transparency, and accountability, can be promoted by the internet-based collective actions. Nevertheless, with a touch of a neo-liberal perspective, Zheng's argument indicates that once the forces of domination take a step back and there is an absence of control over information, the political system will go through democratization. Zhang suggests that policymaking is affected reversely by the media outlets in terms of "representing their own economic interests in terms of general public interests" (Zhang, Xiaoling, 2011, p. 126). In addition, Chinese discourses also emphasize the internet's impact on China's economic development by networking among different social groups. However, it is worth noting that other scholars meanwhile contend the ICTs are eventually "toys for the middle class" and distinguish "the interacting and the interacted" (Damm and Thomas, 2006; Castells, 2010a, p. 371).

Discourses on Chinese media show the different perspectives from within and outside China. The heated academic debates about media organizations eventually revolve around the power of media. Media organizations provide "the space of power-making" where various political and social actors compete (Castells, 2009, p. 194). As Judy Polumbaum notes, the state media in China are in a "directive mode" following Party "propaganda" discipline (Polumbaum, 1990, p. 53), and voices of China are often expressed through and for the authorities. With an intention to expand its international presence, the Chinese government aims to cultivate a positive national image through the state media outlets. For instance, the official documents from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stress the importance to create "a favourable public opinion environment" for China (MFA, 2014a, 2016c). Whether China's efforts in soft power construction have been effective or not is a matter of ongoing debate among scholars.

### 2.3 The Notion of Soft Power

Joseph Nye refers to "soft power" as the capacity to "shape the preferences of others" and to make societies "want what you want" by cultural penetration and ideological persuasion (Nye,

2004, p. 5). David Shambaugh analyses how the Chinese government has been trying to increase its soft power (Shambaugh, 2013). To cultivate a national image through a cultural approach, the Chinese government has adopted a going-out strategy. Since 2002, the Report of the Party's 16th National Congress highlighted the importance of "soft power" in the global context (The 16th National Congress, 2002). The Chinese government has thereafter started a "cultural system reform" (*wenhua tizhi gaige*, 文化体制改革) to develop its "comprehensive national strength" (*zonghe guoli*, 综合国力).

Chinese foreign policy incorporated the concept of "peaceful rise" under Hu Jintao's leadership. For instance, the state media Xinhua News Agency, reportedly receiving up to RMB 15 billion (U.S. 2.19$ billion) from the government (Lam, 2009), has taken the initiative to report on political issues involving China's foreign affairs, with the ambition to "break the monopoly and verbal hegemony" of English media from more developed countries (Yu, Sophie, 2010, p. 1). Xinhua reports are encouraged to promote Chinese cultural values, such as the concepts of "harmonious society" and "well-off society." Xinhua has been tasked with organizing international conferences as well as launching websites for international organizations. For example, Xinhua.net played a leading part in reporting on international events such as the APEC Forum, the China-Russia Year, and the China-Africa Cooperation Forum Beijing Summit (Xinhua.net, 2011).

Nye points out that compared to democratic systems, the Chinese political system has made it easier for the government to exercise its soft power (Nye, 2004, p. 16). The reason is that the soft power resources in China are managed by the government whereas this is not the case in a democratic system. Some scholars consider China's soft power to have emerged with the symbolic Beijing Olympics in 2008 (Keane, 2011, p. 16), and that the government's efforts in harnessing communication technologies for the projection of soft power are remarkable (Li, Xiguang, Zhou, Qingan, 2005, p. 242). However, the effectiveness and improvements of Chinese soft power construction have received far more criticism than approval among scholars.

Scholars explain that Chinese soft power has not been as effective as it was expected to be (Li, Mingjiang, 2008; Huang, Chin-Hao, 2013; Chu, Yingchi, 2013), mainly due to the following reasons. First, the understanding of the term "soft power" often simply combines

any non-military elements, without a nuanced understanding of sources of power. According to Breslin, China's future rise has been "taken for granted by many," which led other countries, in Southeast Asia and Europe, to "develop policies based on an understanding of China's future power," an "imagined power" shaped by perceptions (Breslin, 2011, p. 14). Second, the Chinese government has held onto the traditional cultural legacies that have overly emphasized ideological persuasion (Xu, Yao, 2007, pp. 48-49; Barr, 2011, p. 86). Third, to construct a positive national image as a peacefully rising power, the government has focused on countering the "China threat" theory through the state media outlets. However, its very own state media outlook cannot be presented as open and transparent in spite of the going-out media policy. The monopoly of the state media was created deliberately, in order to provide a single version/interpretation of events (Zhao, Yuezhi, 2008, pp. 24-25). Therefore, the non-official media outlets in China, even though having proliferated in recent years, tend to embark on commercialization, so as to maintain their market share in order to generate operational funds. Consequently, this media mechanism affects the credibility of the central government and weakens its international influence (Sun, Wanning, 2010; Huang, Chin-Hao, 2013; Chu, Yingchi, 2014).

In China's soft power construction, the government continues to search for new concepts, values, and ideologies that could improve the national image and strengthen national identity. The Party has applied neo-liberal management strategies to the state media. According to Zhao Yuezhi, "the art of public relations and image making" that is borrowed from the American model has been incorporated as "the Party's propaganda objectives" (Zhao, Yuezhi, 2008, p. 39). For example, the government has started proactive news reporting especially when covering negative events such as SARS in 2003 and the Xinjiang riots in 2009. By adopting a "pro-people" media policy in 2004, the central government has also initiated news briefings and a spokesperson system in the foreign ministry, to project an image of people's government. However, by maintaining the nationalistic discourse that equates patriotism with supporting the Party, market reform in the Chinese media industry in fact reinforced the existing power structures rather than "democratizing" the society (Brady, 2008). In the examination of the media discourse of Sino-American relations, Stockmann observes that the state media have to keep a positive tone and avoid controversial topics as potential sources of domestic or international tension, thus "harmonizing bilateral relations" (Stockmann, 2013, p. 100).

According to Thompson (1990), ideologies can shape the ways that meaning is constructed. Opposed to confining the term ideology to dominant social thought, Eagleton defines ideology as "the general material process of production of ideas, beliefs and values in social life" that could challenge or confirm a particular social order (Eagleton, 1991, pp. 28-30 5-6). By deciphering the dominant ideologies, intellectuals can expose the symbolic violence and reveal the dominant discourses (Bourdieu, [1996]/1998). The discourses of the Chinese state media convey the dominant ideologies of the power holders. Yet, some scholars criticize that the study of official discourses and the state media are neglected in the academic discourses both within and outside China (Zhao, Yuezhi, 2008, p. 37; Murphy and Fong, 2009, p. 48).

Media discourse plays a crucial role in power-making. The media's language is scrutinized as "a site of power, of struggle and also as a site where language is apparently transparent" (Wodak and Meyer, 2001, p. 6). On the one hand, the state media outlets often act as pedagogic media, fulfilling the Party's expectation of "educating individuals about values and self-cultivation" (Murphy and Fong, 2009, pp. 46-48); On the other hand, through the communication networks, the media producers and consumers can create "counter-narratives that challenge, appropriate and accommodate the dominant ideology" (Yu, Haiqing, 2009, pp. 34-35). In the Chinese context, the authorities' political communication strategies have been applied to the digital networks. Through examining the cases of Chinese online discourses on Sino-Japan relations and the East China Sea conflict, Schneider explicates how "the CCP has been highly successful at integrating the web into its existing mass-communication paradigm" under "the cultural governance system" (Schneider, 2015a).

In the making of power, media discourses have two-way effects on both domestic and international politics. According to Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, through expressive forms of discourse, mass media can certainly strengthen the feeling of fellowship and connect social groups, by presenting moments of "mechanical solidarity." Internationally, media can provide new resources for diplomacy with the "personalization of power" during media events (Dayan & Katz, 1992, pp. 111, 192). The media agenda on public diplomacy in many ways overlap with China's soft power construction. Furthermore, Chinese media policies heavily coincide with the government's internal and external communication strategies.

## 2.4 Internal and External Communication

To improve its mass communication strategy, the Chinese government has renamed the previous CCP Propaganda Department into the Publicity Department (PD), and also switched to "public relations" (*gonggong guanxi*, 公共关系) rather than "propaganda" (*xuanchuan*, 宣传) in official discourse. As the actual administrative centre of the propaganda system, the PD changed its name in English so as to "avoid any negative connotations that the word 'propaganda' might have in foreign languages" (Schneider, 2016, p. 194). However, a change of nameplates does not necessarily imply a corresponding change in actual practice and thinking. The term "propaganda" (*xuanchuan*) does not carry a negative connotation for native Chinese speakers, as its meaning is similar to "persuasion" in English (Stockmann, 2013, p. 13).[11] To understand the reasons behind this change, scholar Chu Yongchi observes that the disadvantages of using the term "propaganda" lay in its association with dogmatism in the media system during the Mao period, instead of the diversity in today's Chinese media (Murphy & Fong, 2009, Chu, Yingchi, pp. 110-120). Switching to the term "publicity" rather than "propaganda" is considered by the government to be more modern in terms of political expression (Castells, 2009, p. 279). The Publicity Department processes information and connects with the state media, universities, as well as other cultural institutions, and is thus responsible for the government's internal and external communication. In my research, when referring to the government's policies on media, I use the term "internal/external communication" instead of propaganda or publicity, in order to avoid the ambiguous connotations of these other terms.

Based on Roland Barthes' (1978) theory that the process of communication involves the production and consumption of signs, Castells adds that symbolic communication, based on production, consumption, experience, and power, eventually generates cultures and collective identities (Castells, 2010a, pp. 15, 372). He further contends that reality is formed by symbols, and in the network society, the communication system generates "virtuality" (Castells, 2010a, pp. 372-373). Communication technologies can enhance the state apparatuses' ability to

[11] It is also worth noting that the term "education" and "commercial advertising" can also be referred to as "propaganda" in the Chinese contexts. In the interpretation of Western Europe and Northern America, propaganda holds its negative connotation through its origins among the Roman Catholic Jesuits. In academic journals within China, the terms "internal communication" and "external communication" are often applied to describe what appear in academic journals outside China as "internal propaganda" and "external propaganda."

exercise power and surveillance, and they can also empower social groups to counter such control (Anthes, 1993; Betts, 1995). It is also worth noting that there are cases where the relationship between the two is not antagonistic. In fact, the two sides could also collaborate to tackle various social issues (Svensson, 2016). Therefore, to analyse the mechanism of a communication system and to decode the signs in a communication process, it is indispensable to explore the roles which the actors in the system are playing. In Marxist theory, the nature of media is determined by ownership. Similarly, Bourdieu ([1996]/1998, p. 16) notes that "it's important to know that NBC is owned by General Electric, that CBS is owned by Westinghouse, and ABC by Disney … and that these facts lead to consequences through a whole series of mediations."

Communication in China after the late 1970s has gone through the stages known as marketization, conglomeration, and capitalization, initiated by Deng Xiaoping's sweeping reforms, which allowed marketization of the mass media. According to the media policy in 1978, the government withdrew direct subsidies and granted more operational freedoms to media organizations on the local level (Zhang, Xiaoling, 2011, p. 38). Chinese former President Hu Jintao emphasized the importance to ensure "an objective and friendly media environment" for China's economic developing period (Li, Mingjiang, 2008). Later in 2011, during the 6th Plenary Session of the CCP's Central Committee, Hu advocated that it was important to strengthen the Core Socialist Values within China, so as to counter the threat of being "westernized" by the media from abroad (Wong, Gillian, 2012). In 2012, Xi Jinping has led a major publicity campaign to disseminate the Core Socialist Values that "lays out the CCP's vision through four goals at each of the national, societal and citizenship levels" (Gow, 2017, p. 93). Through "increased state intervention in civil society," this campaign underlines "the primacy of cultural power over economic development, that is, of the superstructure over the economic base" (Gow, 2017, p. 109). The state-led media reform was launched as part of the government's progressing communication strategies. According to the state media outlet Xinhua, the objective of internal communication is to "guide" public opinion, consolidate Party leadership, and also to learn from "excellent foreign culture and advanced technology" (*guowai youxiu wenhua he xianjin jishu*, 国外优秀文化和先进技术), but meanwhile "resisting decadent culture" (*diyu fuxiu wenhua*, 抵御腐朽文化) (People.cn, 2002). In addition, the internal communication strategies were expanded into a five-year plan for "deepening" reform, including establishing domestic cultural production through media conglomeration and also

improving media organizations' operational system through continued capitalization and new communication technologies (Zhao, Yuezhi, 2008, pp. 101-103).

If internal communication shapes the view of China by those sharing the same language and culture, then external communication shapes the views of the country by "others." As Barr argues, the notion of imagined communities is formed in both ways (Barr, 2011, p. 38). Since 1961, China has pursued a media policy that aims "to treat the external communication and internal communication differently" (Li, Yanbing and Jing, Xuemin, 2010). Since 1998, the Chinese government started to enhance the capacity of media outlets in terms of external communication. As a response, the 24-hour satellite English Channel CCTV News, CCTV-9, and CCTV International were launched in 2000 (Zhang, Xiaoling, 2011, p. 108; Zhao, Yuezhi, 2008, p. 160). On the central level, during the 1990s, to improve its communication strategies abroad, the government upgraded the Foreign Propaganda Office, known as the State Council Information Office overseas, assigning it the task to "project China to the world in a positive light" (Shirk, 2007, p. 95). Former minister Zhao Qizheng, from the State Council Information Office, comments that China needs to counter the undesirable image of "an undemocratic society" (Xu, Yao, 2007, pp. 93-94). In 2009, the Chinese Foreign Ministry established a Public Diplomacy Office, aiming to "issue rebuttals to distorted overseas reports about China and influence the policy decisions of foreign countries" (Barr, 2011, p. 29). In terms of the external communication, Xinhua plays an important role in "equating Chinese people, the state, and the nation as a whole," in order to support the government's position (Stockmann, 2013, p. 92).

The media content reveals, to a large extent, the interests of those who finance them (Altschull, 1984). In this respect, the content of Xinhua News Agency reflects the communication strategies of the Chinese government. In this research, "content" refers to all forms of messages sent by the media that shape the construction of social reality, historical aspects, and social values. Content, including news narratives, policy reports, and images, as well as social media messaging, provides knowledge that can make up a kind of political consciousness among individuals. In discourse analysis, van Dijk (1983, 1985) and Bell (1991) developed the analysis of news content though empirical research on the syntax of narratives. According to Bell, a news report consists of an abstract, attribution, and a story that describes one or more media events with actors and actions (Bell, 1991, p. 169). Xinhua's content is under supervision of the Publicity Department and is often designed by the editorial board in

advance, in terms of the topics, the tones, and the "must-carry news" (Zhang, Xiaoling, 2011, p. 85; De Burgh, 2003; Stockmann, 2013, p. 79). Overall, the content from non-official media outlets in China tends to contain less political content compared to the official media outlets (Stockmann, 2013). When reporting on international issues or China's foreign affairs, Xinhua has a monopoly on providing news, and the journalists of non-official media outlets echo the Xinhua reports and support the position of the government by staying in line with the foreign policy (Stockmann, 2013, p. 79, p. 92). Based on the case study of Chinese media reports about the United States, Stockmann concludes that the news content between the official and non-official media outlets varies in tone (Stockmann, 2013, pp. 168-169). For example, Xinhua tends to adopt more emotional and positive expressions than the commercialized newspapers. In other words, Xinhua's content contains the ideological positions that serve the government's mass communication strategy.

If Xinhua's content reflects the interests of the government, then the production of its content shows the mechanism of PRC media policymaking. Noting that media policymaking is not transparent, scholars—including Zhang Xiaoling (2011), Stockmann (2013) and Brady (2008)—emphasize the factors that influence this production, such as an administrative framework, timing, media events, and shifts in leadership, as well as the personal decisions of the officials.

In 1983, the Chinese Ministry of Radio, Film, and Television issued an important media policy, Document No. 37, which initiated the four-tier (from central to local) media structure (Zhang, Xiaoling, 2011, p. 39). This state policy resulted in decentralized media control and also media marketization, in order to strengthen the Party's communication power. Thus, the four-tier media structure is applied through a top-down media system. Xinhua plays the role of the leading national media outlet, and its news production follows strict regulations. For instance, Xinhua is encouraged to avoid reporting on problems that cannot be solved or issues that could be attacked from media abroad (Yan, Lianjun, 1996, pp. 20-22, quoted in Zhang, Xiaoling, 2011, p. 180.), and this is the case particularly during national holidays like the Chinese Spring Festival, or during sessions of the National People's Congress and the National People's Political Consultative Conferences (the so called "two meetings," *liang hui*, 两会). In addition, when there is a shift of the political leadership, news content is more strictly controlled, and Xinhua reports become a reference for other media outlets to be "on

the safe side" (Brady, 2008, p. 96; Stockmann, 2013, p. 79). After the 1990s, media reform in China went through a transition in order to adapt to an environment in which both mass and digital media interacted. The production and distribution of news has been integrated with digital communication technologies. The 18th National Congress in 2012 and the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CCP Central Committee in 2013 demonstrated the importance of social media platforms for discussions on political and social issues. Political institutions at all levels of government have increased their internet presence, providing new opportunities for citizens to submit letters and petitions online (Hartford, 2005). Through observing the fundamental functioning of social media in Chinese local bureaucracy, Schlaeger and Jiang (2014) argue that official microblogging both shapes and reflects the e-government management of social tensions and conflicts, and identifies a fragmented political structure. Creating opportunities and challenges to Chinese local governments, microblogging could potentially be "a battering ram to spearhead reforms; a virus introducing unexpected consequences; and a reinforcer of authorities' existing power, that is, politics as usual" (Schlaeger and Jiang, 2014, pp. 190-191). Thus, official microblogs do not launch radical political changes in Chinese society, and they overall "reinforce existing power structures" (Schlaeger and Jiang, 2014, p. 206). In a similar vein, through researching online feedback from citizens, Goebel holds that the political risks are often exaggerated as the internet "offers more opportunities for autocrats than for opposition groups" (Goebel, 2015, p. 21). According to Stockmann's observation, websites of commercial entities such as Sina (*xinlang*, 新浪) and Tencent (*tengxun*, 腾讯) are less controlled than governmental websites such as Xinhua.net and *China Daily* that are sponsored by official media outlets. Xinhua.net is allowed to publish its own reports on major national events and tends to republish articles from commercial websites, to obtain information about politics (Stockmann, 2013, p. 144).

In Dayan and Katz's analysis on the nature of media events, what the audience receives is in fact "the end product of political, aesthetic, and financial bargaining," engaging in a "negotiation" process among the actors which are independent from one and another (Dayan and Katz, 1992, p. 55). The media production in China is also a process of negotiation, but the actors are not necessarily independent from each other. In fact, media production in China demonstrates the power relationships between the dominant and the dominated, in other words, between the interacting and the interacted-with. Media production carries a variety of socially determined goals, and "is organized in class relationships that define the process by

which some human subjects, on the basis of their position in the production process, decide the sharing and uses of the product in relationship to consumption and investment" (Castells, 2010a, p. 15).

## 2.5 Conclusion

Chinese media are characterized by complex dynamics. On the one hand, more operational freedom and financial rewards were given to the state media outlets. On the other hand, the media continue to convey the ideological messages of the government's image-making effort in the international arena. Under the influence of marketization, Xinhua, as part of the government's apparatus, has been operated through enterprise management to survive international competition. In the sense of embracing marketization on the one hand and consolidating the Party's political ideology on the other, Xinhua interacts with social media as a contingent communication strategy to fit in with "socialism with Chinese characteristics." Media scholar Zhao Yuezhi (2012) argues that under the influence of neoliberalism, Chinese external communication faces a system overhaul as part of the globalization process. Xin Xin (2012) analyses the transformation of Chinese media through the case of Xinhua and likewise finds that marketization inserts a significant change on Xinhua's interaction with local and global actors. Under the authoritarian political system, whether social media in China are becoming more reliable and information more accessible to the users than mass media is speculative. More importantly, as Weibo networks are increasingly regulated by government agencies, Weibo's role in Chinese political communication continues to alter. Thus, media policy in China is likely to play out at this intersection between political communication strategies and market dynamics.

In the culture of convergence, who has the switching power? Who are the ones being interacted with? The trajectory of theories on political communication from within and outside China shows the indispensable role of the media in power-making. With the shift of the Chinese central leadership led by President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang, new social values and ideologies are constructed and disseminated through both the state media outlets and the social media platforms. To further examine the mechanisms of the Chinese media system, in the following chapters I will conduct a case study on Xinhua News Agency's communicative agenda regarding China's BRI.