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## Chinese State Media English Language Discourse in the Arctic Region (2016-2021)

Matthew P. Stepien  
Undergraduate Research Intern at NAADSN

### Executive Summary

This Policy Primer examines English language Chinese state media narratives about the Arctic from 2016-2021 to improve our understanding of Chinese priorities in the North and how these are presented to the world. Chinese state media is represented here by *Xinhua*, *China Daily*, and *People's Daily*; *Xinhua* is the largest media agency in China, *China Daily* stands as the Chinese state's official English language national paper, while *People's Daily* is the official paper of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. Taken together, these three state media agencies offer a comprehensive view into the Chinese English language state media narratives due to their size, role, and affiliations to the Communist Party of China.

Recent research has shown a growing Chinese interest in pairing its media outlets with foreign partners to spread state narratives more broadly.<sup>1</sup> This survey looked for relationships between Chinese media and Canadian media and found that few clear connections existed, other than a link in ownership between *Sing Tao Media Group* and *Torstar*, elaborated upon below. Concerning American media organizations, the only connection of note was Chinese media paying for inserts into large American newspapers such as the *Washington Post*. Notably absent are any direct connections, such as ties in ownership or paid inserts in the media organizations of the European Arctic states like the ones superficially evident in American, Canadian, or even Russian media.

### Methodology

China's role in the global media environment has been expanding in recent years. A May 2021 article in *The New York Times* reported that China has come into increasingly direct contact with local media organizations in various states around the globe. Through formal links such as journalist signing agreements with their Chinese

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<sup>1</sup> Louisa Lim et.al. "The Covid-19 Story: Unmasking China's Global Strategy," International Federation of Journalists (2021).

counterparts to media organizations raising needed funds from Chinese investors, China appears ready to leverage these connections to induce foreign media organizations to change narratives in its favour.<sup>2</sup> Since China is using these formal and informal links to affect narratives in other regions it suggests the need for an investigation into whether it is doing the same in the Arctic region. To explore any connections between the Chinese government and media organizations in Arctic states, such as journalist content agreements and investments, this study examines a collection of Arctic state news media and their ownership structures. This information is necessarily limited but publicly available material offers indications of potential connections.

The second component of this project is to identify Chinese state-media narratives about the Arctic in English language publications by media agencies *Xinhua*, *China Daily*, and *People's Daily*. The Chinese government has used these media organizations to influence narratives before. A clear example came from the 2020 Taiwanese Presidential election, when a 'self-declared' Chinese spy emerged with claims of fabricated social media accounts being used to influence media narratives during the election.<sup>3</sup> What is significant to note here is not the defection but the response of the Chinese state. Once news of the story broke, China worked hard to change the narrative from serious defection to a joke. "Chinese state media such as *Xinhua*, *China Daily*, *CCTV*, and *Global Times* [beginning] to disparage Wang and his claims," Hoover Institute analysts observed. "An article in *Xinhua* stated that Wang had faked his story, that his identification documents were fake, and that he had in fact been unemployed in China; the article appeared verbatim in *China Daily* and on *CCTV* as well."<sup>4</sup> Understanding that China has used this strategy of manipulating media narratives to achieve its goals in other environments suggests that it may use it in other regions, including the Arctic. That is why this study finds it prudent to probe the larger Chinese state English language media agencies for signs that China is employing a similar strategy in the Arctic.

To understand the general narratives from these news sources, a relatively simple investigative method was employed. This involved conducting searches for key terms (Arctic, Polar, Canada, Alaska, Greenland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia) on the websites of the English language Chinese state media websites. The resulting articles were then recorded and categorized according to subject. This categorization is meant to be illustrative and – given its inherent limitations – should not be taken as a comprehensive.

## Part I: Chinese State Connections to Arctic Media Organizations

This section examines Chinese state relations, both formal and informal, with circumpolar Arctic media organizations. The purpose is to identify ways in which China may exert influence on the media in Arctic states to manipulate the information environment in the Arctic region.

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<sup>2</sup> Ben Smith, "When Covid Hit, China was Ready to Tell Its Version of the Story," *New York Times* (May 10, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/09/business/media/china-beijing-coronavirus-media.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Renee Diresta et al, "Telling China's Story: The Chinese Communist Party's Campaign to Shape Global Narratives," Hoover Institute, 2020, pg 27.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

## China-Russia:

Large sections of the media in Russia are controlled by the government through direct ownership or close relationships between the owners and the Russian government. A March 2021 report by the US Department of State found that “more than 80 percent of [Russia’s] mass media was funded by the government or progovernment actors. Government-friendly oligarchs owned most other outlets, which are permitted to determine what they publish within formal or informal boundaries set by the government.”<sup>5</sup>

With the United States taking a more confrontational approach to both Beijing and Moscow, China and Russia have sought to increase cooperation in the information environment. For example, the Russian news agency *Sputnik*, and the Chinese state media agency *The Global Times* signed a cooperation agreement in 2017 that “will exchange news and analytics in Chinese and English to provide their readers with a fuller picture of the Russian and Chinese domestic and international agenda.”<sup>6</sup> The coming together of these two large state-funded news agencies suggests that the two states are coordinating their narrative campaigns. Through the cooperation of the media agencies, both regimes are better able to spread their respective messaging. Publishing the narratives, the Chinese state seeks to spread benefits their own messaging efforts by cloaking them in an illusion of reputability. This is concerning for Arctic states since this increases the effectiveness of Chinese state propaganda by having it appear in multiple sources and in international outlets. This may lead Russian readers to accept Chinese state media messaging without realizing the origin of the narrative.

The closer linking of Chinese and Russian state media is not limited to *The Global Times-Sputnik* partnership. The collaboration of Chinese and Russian state media agencies goes further back to an earlier cooperation between Russian state media outlet *TASS* and its Chinese counterpart *Xinhua*. In 2013, the Director General of *TASS*, Sergei Mikhailov and then Director General of China’s *Xinhua* news agency, Li Congjun, discussed “the possibilities for further deepening of partnership between the two news agencies [...] The negotiators also discussed cooperation in information support for major interstate and international events...”<sup>7</sup> The continuing, long lasting relationship between Chinese and Russian state media agencies shows that, while not an Arctic state, China is positioning itself to disseminate its messaging by leveraging its relationship with the Russian state and its media agencies.

## China-Nordic States:

With respect to the Nordic states (Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark (Greenland), and Iceland) there is no clear indication in the open literature of direct Chinese influence. This includes partnerships with smaller regional or community news agencies, or involvement in the ownership structure of national news outlets. This

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<sup>5</sup> US Department of State, “2020 Country Reports on Human Rights and Practices: Russia” (March 30, 2021), <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/russia/>.

<sup>6</sup> *Global Times*, “Global Times begins cooperation with Sputnik,” (May 19, 2017), <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1043165.shtml>.

<sup>7</sup> TASS, “TASS and Xinhua intend to build up partnership online,” (November 27, 2013), <https://tass.com/non-political/709262>.

is not necessarily surprising given Nordic states' exceptional reputation for media freedom and literacy. The relatively close proximity to Russia has also created a situation whereby Nordic states like Finland have "faced down Kremlin-backed propaganda campaigns ever since it declared independence from Russia 101 years ago."<sup>8</sup> This has entrenched a strong desire to remain vigilant for disinformation campaigns, likely making the Nordic states a difficult target for Chinese or any state media subversion.

## China-Canada:

Official Chinese state involvement with Canadian media is limited. One public example is the partnership between one of Canada's largest media enterprises, *Torstar*, and *Sing Tao*. *Torstar* is reported to own 50% of *Sing Tao's* Canadian media group which includes online, print media, websites, radio, magazines, and publishing.<sup>9</sup> The connection to the Chinese state comes from through *Sing Tao's* other parent company, *Sing Tao Media Group*.<sup>10</sup> *Sing Tao Media Group* is owned by Charles Ho, who is a member of the Standing Committee of the Chinese Peoples Political Consultative Conference.<sup>11</sup>

Less direct media involvement can also come in the form of bots or paid individuals working to comment through social media or on existing media stories to shape opinion indirectly.<sup>12</sup> While social media is out of the scope of this study, there is little evidence that Chinese actors are posting in the comment sections of northern Canadian media. The search for attempts by pro-China actors to influence residents of the Canadian Arctic through media commentary in the three territories includes media from *Northern News Services* (*The Yellowknifer* and *News North*) and *Nunatsiaq News*, and *Yukon News*. These papers were selected for investigation because they possess a comment section below articles and cross the three territories.

There is little evidence of pro-Chinese comments in the comment section of northern Canadian media, even in areas where China has an interest. That said, one possible reason China may be interested in using the comment section below news articles would be to try and win support for Chinese initiatives in the region. This could include resources developments like Shandong Gold Mining Co. Ltd.'s attempted acquisition of TMAC Resources Inc. Garnering the support of the local people would ease the way for the accomplishing any such initiatives but, to this point, there is no strong evidence of this taking place.

An interesting exception, however, appeared in the comment section of an article on the Hope Bay project in the *Nunatsiaq News* concerning Shandong's offer to purchase TMAC. Although ultimately unsuccessful, there are signs of Chinese attempts to distort narratives of the project in the eyes of the local communities using the

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<sup>8</sup> Eliza Mackintosh, "Finland is winning the War on fake news. What it's learned may be crucial to western democracy," CNN, <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2019/05/europe/finland-fake-news-intl/>.

<sup>9</sup> Toronto Star (Torstar), "City News Brands," <https://www.torstar.com/business/daily-news-brands>.

<sup>10</sup> Sing Tao News Corporation Limited, "Profile of Group's Chairman,"

[https://www.singtaonewscorp.com/english/corporate\\_info\\_chairman.html](https://www.singtaonewscorp.com/english/corporate_info_chairman.html)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Neil MacFarquhar, "Inside the Russian Troll Factory: Zombies and a Breakneck Pace," *New York Times* (February 18, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/18/world/europe/russia-troll-factory.html>

comment sections in the local online newspaper. Out of the 73 comments on this story, one promotes a hardline, pro-China message, and is written by an individual calling themselves Roger Donaldson. What stands out about this particular comment is not only its length, but also its tone. The author, 'Mr. Donaldson', is attempting to pacify local hesitancy to the Chinese acquisition of TMAC Resources Inc., and by extension, Chinese ownership of the Hope Bay project.

*“Great plan to have this new company buy the project We are so lucky to have such an opportunity to be able to attract[sic] this kind of investment in our mining sector. I think no other company will look after the environment, the local population, Canadian interest as well as SD Gold will. No other other[sic] company will do the job as well as SD Gold will. Plus a 4% over the current price is a very good deal for SD Gold. We should all be thankful and hope that there will be more projects in Canada that can and will be sold to companies such as SD Gold. With this trend we as Canadians will no longer have to even worry about extractive industries and let our minds be at peace that some other country and their companies are taking care of this for us.”<sup>13</sup>*

While there is no clear evidence of Chinese involvement with this post, Canadian readers' responses indicate strong media awareness and resilience to what appears to be textbook state messaging. The comments following the one written by 'Mr. Donaldson' are dismissive and many outright call his words out as being written by a “foreign national,” or emanating from the “Chinese propaganda machine.”

## China-United States:

The most significant connection between media organizations in the United States and Chinese state-run media is a recent deal between the *Washington Post* and *China Daily's - US edition*. Under this deal, the *Washington Post* adds a *China Daily's US Edition* as a “separate advertising supplement to the printed paper”<sup>14</sup> and added a section to its online operations titled '*China Watch*'. Together, this demonstrates an attempted by the Chinese state media to begin disseminating its message directly to US readers under the branding of the one of its largest domestic media providers. Still, this is an exception as there is little clear information of direct, wide-spread Chinese involvement in US media. With respect to local Arctic media within the American state of Alaska, there were no overt signs of Chinese state media intervention, either directly or indirectly.

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<sup>13</sup> Jane George, “Nunavut’s Hope Bay Gold Fields to be bought by China’s SD Gold,” *Nunatsiaq News*, comment below article posted under the name “Roger Donaldson,” May 9<sup>th</sup> 2020, <https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/chinese-gold-miner-hopes-to-buy-western-nunavut-gold-mine/>.

<sup>14</sup> James Fallows “Official Chinese Propaganda: Now Online from the WaPo!,” *The Atlantic*, 2011, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/02/official-chinese-propaganda-now-online-from-the-wapo/70690/>.

## Part II: Themes in Chinese English Language State Media

The following section reveals the most prominent themes uncovered during the investigation into the Chinese English language media, represented by *Xinhua*, *China Daily*, and *Peoples Daily*. These themes are indicative of the issues that Chinese media, and by loose extension the Chinese state, consider important. The manner in which they are covered also provides insight into Chinese messaging and intent for the region.

### 1) Icebreakers / Scientific Research:

The development of Chinese Arctic capabilities features regularly across its English language state media. For example, in *Xinhua* alone, the topic of icebreakers is mentioned 39 times in 2019 and 16 times in 2020. The sustained and highly repetitive coverage of the Chinese icebreaker fleet demonstrates, at the very least, China's desire to make Arctic states aware of its desire to participate more directly in the region while also demonstrating its growing capacity to do so.<sup>15</sup>

### 2) Cooperation:

Cooperation in the Arctic region appears to be a serious objective of the Chinese government. In its 2018 white paper on Arctic Policy, the Chinese state emphasized this repeatedly, outlining how China is “committed to improving and complementing the Arctic governance regime.”<sup>16</sup> The Chinese state uses its English language media to further disseminate its interest in cooperating with other Arctic states by publishing complete copies of their Arctic policy (such as *People's Daily*). Furthermore, articles call for continuing or greater cooperation between China and Arctic states were particularly pronounced in 2018, the year that Beijing released its white paper. The theme of cooperation occurs in four articles in *China Daily* and in five articles in *People's Daily*. The number of mentions involving greater cooperation occur at roughly the same number as the mentions of shipping in the polar region during the same period.

### 3) Shipping:

The transportation of goods through the Arctic region naturally appeals to the Chinese state. The route most talked about in China's state media is the Northern Sea Route (NSR), which runs through the Russian Arctic and cuts thousands of kilometers off existing shipping routes, such as the Panama or Suez Canals. This makes the NSR faster and potentially cheaper than competing options. A 2019 article in the Chinese state media organization *China Daily* emphasized that “a ship that plans a trip from China to Europe through the conventional sea route takes around 40 days of navigation. The possibility to navigate through the polar region along the Russian coast can save up to two weeks of navigation.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Xinhua* records at the time of conducting this research extend back only to June 2019.

<sup>16</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, “China's Arctic Policy” (January 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Matteo Giovannini, “China and Russia strengthen strategic partnership along ‘Polar Silk Road’,” *China Daily*, 2019, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201912/06/WS5dea1a00a310cf3e3557c7db.html>.

## 4) Arctic Ocean Railway:

This theme was only mentioned twice in *People's Daily* and five times in *Xinhua*. However, it is connected to the theme of increasing interest in shipping routes through the Arctic. The proposed Arctic Ocean Railway would see rail construction between the Arctic Ocean and the Baltic Sea. Figure 1<sup>18</sup> (right) shows the proposed routes for the rail link. *People's Daily* states that “the construction of an Arctic Corridor may become the shortest, most direct route for goods between Asian and Europe”<sup>19</sup> which would benefit China in further reducing shipping times, and possibly even costs, for its goods destined for European markets.



The five alternative routes for the Arctic Ocean Railway. Photo by Finnish Transport Agency

Figure 1 Taken from a *People's Daily* Article depicting the possible proposed routes for the Arctic Ocean Railway.

## 5) Defence/Security:

Notably absent from discourse in the Chinese state media was much mention of security- or defence-related issues. *Xinhua* only noted these twice: once in 2019 and again in 2020. The lack of significant attention to these themes may indicate a desire by the Chinese state to avoid militarization of the region, consistent with its white paper desire to work within the existing regional governance structure which has remained peaceful to date. It is equally possible that these themes are omitted so that China can conceal its strategic intentions while continuing to push a disingenuous narrative centered around cooperation. Deng Xiaoping's famous dictum of “hide your strength, bide your time” may come into play here.

## Conclusions

This investigation explored two key areas: first, formal and informal connections between the Chinese state and media organizations in Arctic states; and second, themes that the Chinese state sought to tell using its English language state media.

This research found limited connections detected between Chinese and Arctic states media. The links between them range from none being detected in the Nordic states to the signing of partnership and distribution of content agreements with the media in Russia. With respect to uncovering a larger, coordinated effort to infiltrate the media of the Arctic as a whole, no evidence was found. In arriving at this conclusion, this investigation did not find any links between the Chinese state and media in Nordic states. One possible reason for this was these countries' prior experience in dealing with influence from Russia. With respect to the United

<sup>18</sup> Kou Jie, “Breaking the ice: China's entry in the Arctic region,” *People's Daily*, 2018, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2018/0402/c90000-9444831.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

States and Canada, connections were formal rather than informal and did not appear to be a part of a larger influence campaign.

When searching for Chinese state policy objectives, this investigation found that Beijing seeks to advance and promote a gradual but persistent entrance into the Arctic environment given its understanding that the region is opening for development (and that this has heightened its geopolitical importance). Increasing levels of media attention that the Chinese state paid to Arctic matters, especially prior to the launch of its Arctic Policy, is important to note. The table below shows growing Chinese state interest in shipping/polar silk road, regional cooperation, and icebreakers. Expanding icebreaker capabilities permit greater scientific access and support to maritime activities in the region, as well as providing a foundation for further activities.<sup>20</sup> Connections to the Northern Sea Route and themes of cooperation may also point to converging interests with Russia- something indicated by growing relationships between the Russian news agencies *TASS* and *Sputnik* and their Chinese counterparts *Xinhua* and *Global Times*.

While this investigation has not detected a Chinese influence campaign in the Arctic media environment, it has shown that China does frame and promote its regional interests and objectives through English language state media. Accordingly, as the Arctic region continues to change, these media sources should provide relevant insights into evolving Chinese interests in the region.

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<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Bryan Millard and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, "Trojan Dragons? Normalizing China's Presence in the Arctic," Canadian Global Affairs Institute *Policy Paper*, June 2021, [https://www.cgai.ca/trojan\\_dragons\\_normalizing\\_chinas\\_presence\\_in\\_the\\_arctic](https://www.cgai.ca/trojan_dragons_normalizing_chinas_presence_in_the_arctic).



# POLICY PRIMER



Media Agency	Topic	Total Instances	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
<b>Xinhua</b>	Icebreakers	55	N/A	N/A	N/A	39	16	
	Arctic Council	3	N/A	N/A	N/A		1	2
	Defence	2	N/A	N/A	N/A	1	1	
	Environment	9	N/A	N/A	N/A	9		
	Fishing / Seafood	6	N/A	N/A	N/A	3	2	1
	Polar Silk Road / Shipping	0	N/A	N/A	N/A			
	Free Trade	4	N/A	N/A	N/A		3	1
	Arctic Rail Link	5	N/A	N/A	N/A	2	3	
	Mining	1	N/A	N/A	N/A	1		
	Cooperation	1	N/A	N/A	N/A	1		
<b>China Daily</b>	Resources	3	1	2				
	Environment	6	3		2		1	
	Cooperation	6		1	4	1		
	Polar Silk Road / Shipping	9		2	3	3		1
	Laws of the Seas	3			3			
	Indigenous	1			1			
	Icebreakers	4			1		2	1
<b>People's Daily</b>	Polar Silk Road / Shipping	22	3	7	6	4		2
	Cooperation	36	3	19	5	6		3
	Icebreakers	29	9	11	5	3		1
	Rail Link	1			1			
	Free trade	2				1	1	
	Resources	8	2	2	3	1		
	Arctic Council	4		1		3		
	Development	1			1			

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