



## China's Efforts to Shape the Information Environment in Thailand

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## Abstract

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has embarked on a campaign to shape what audiences around the world read, hear, and watch about China. This report is part of a series that examines Beijing's efforts to influence the media environment in the neighboring Mekong countries—Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand. This report focuses on China's efforts to shape the information environment of its neighbor, Thailand. In order to place China's efforts into context, this report begins by providing an overview of Thailand's information environment—the aggregate of individuals, organizations, and systems that play a key role in shaping opinions through the dissemination of news and information. Next, we examine each of the ways that China is shaping the information environment in Thailand in order to promote its preferred narratives. The report concludes with a brief discussion of issues to consider as Thailand's information environment—and China's footprint there—evolves.

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# Executive Summary

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## Introduction

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has embarked on a campaign to shape what audiences around the world read, hear, and watch about China. This report examines China's efforts to shape the information environment of its neighbor, Thailand. It is part of a series that examines Beijing's efforts to influence the media environment in the neighboring Mekong countries.

## Key findings

***Thai officials and media professionals have opened the door to China's presence in Thailand's information environment.***

- Thai officials have publicly welcomed content-sharing agreements between People's Republic of China (PRC) state-run news agencies and Thai state-run outlets, contending that PRC media offers an alternative perspective to that offered by Western media.
- According to local media experts, many Thai media professionals also welcome China's presence as a balance to Western media.

***China has sought to leverage this opening in the following ways:***

- ***Chinese state-run media outlets produce Thai-language news and share it with Thai media outlets, reaching a wide audience in Thailand.*** China's official Xinhua News Agency, for instance, has signed more than a dozen content-sharing agreements with news outlets ranging from the government-run public broadcasting service to the traditionally independent publications owned by Matichon.
- ***The PRC Embassy in Bangkok funds Thai journalist associations in order to seek influence with local media professionals.*** The Thai Journalist Association and the Thai-Chinese Journalists Association both reportedly receive significant shares of their funding from the Chinese Embassy. In addition, China has sponsored Thai media professionals' participation in training programs and cultural trips to China.
- ***PRC companies have secured a foothold in Thailand's ICT infrastructure.*** PRC-based Huawei has been active in Thailand for well over a decade. In early 2019, the Thai government decided to partner with Huawei to build the nation's 5G network.

***Chinese companies have also created a new opening for expanding China's presence by circumventing Thai laws to secure ownership of local media outlets.***

- The most concerning aspect of China's efforts to shape the media environment in Thailand is that Chinese companies have found ways to circumvent Thai laws that limit foreign ownership of media outlets based in Thailand.
- Chinese companies such as Tencent and PRC state-owned Global CAMG have been able to establish de facto ownership of local Thai media outlets by registering subsidiaries in Thailand, with Thai nationals as local subsidiary owners.
- According to local media experts, the public is not necessarily aware that Chinese companies have acquired popular online or FM radio outlets like Sanook or 103 Like FM.

***China uses its presence in Thailand's information environment to promote narratives that further its strategic interests. Key narratives that Beijing promotes to audiences in Thailand include the following:***

- Western media's portrayal of China's actions and intentions is inaccurate.
- Cooperation with China benefits Thailand.
- China is a responsible member of the international community.

***Several factors complicate China's efforts to promote these narratives to Thai audiences:***

- ***Popular distrust in the public benefit of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).*** There is skepticism in Thailand about the benefits of BRI. For instance, Thailand's government has taken the lead in creating a regional infrastructure development fund aimed at lessening reliance on Chinese investment. Domestic media reporting on BRI projects in Thailand has also openly questioned whether they actually benefit Thais.
- ***A surge in popular expressions of anti-Chinese sentiment online.*** In the first half of 2020, two trends emerged that will likely complicate Beijing's efforts to woo Thai audiences: (1) The rise of online anti-Beijing/antiauthoritarian "hashtag" movements such as the #MilkTeaAlliance and, (2) a surge in online expressions of anti-Chinese sentiment in response to the outbreak of the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

## Issues to watch

*As China's footprint in Thailand's information environment continues to evolve, key issues to watch include the following:*

- ***Signs that Thailand's media industry is in financial distress.*** According to experts, many Thai media outlets have been struggling financially in recent years. The global economic downturn triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to exacerbate the financial pressures that local media outlets already face, creating more opportunities for PRC investment.
- ***Continued PRC efforts to circumvent Thai law to acquire more local media outlets.*** This issue requires especially careful monitoring because Thai citizens may be unwittingly consuming pro-PRC propaganda. Observers should watch for signs that PRC entities have acquired ownership stakes in local media outlets, such as the appearance of the logos of PRC state-run media outlets at the bottom of Thai news outlets' webpages.
- ***Indications that Xinhua's Thai news coverage is becoming more popular among local audiences.*** Xinhua Thai is intended to serve as an alternative to Western media—including Western wire services—as a source of international news content. Some local outlets reportedly regard this content as “filler” because it is relatively inexpensive or free and is comparatively low quality. If Xinhua Thai content begins showing up on the front pages of key local outlets, this would indicate the quality and appeal to local audiences are increasing.
- ***Increasing PRC media reporting on local events in Thailand.*** PRC media's Thai-language reporting tends to be Sino-centric, focusing on China's activities abroad rather than domestic events in Thailand. This limits its appeal to Thai audiences, who are more interested in local news. PRC media outlets, including Xinhua Thai, may begin to report on local events—even those that do not involve China—in order to increase their appeal to Thai audiences.
- ***Greater PRC efforts to penetrate Thailand's entertainment market.*** To date, Chinese-produced entertainment directed toward Thailand appears to have gained less traction than it has in other Southeast Asian countries, which Beijing may see as a shortcoming in its effort to bolster its “soft power” in Thailand. If PRC entertainment companies engage in more joint productions with local Thai media companies, this could suggest that China is actively seeking to remedy this shortcoming and increase its footprint in Thailand's entertainment market.

## Recommendations from experts & media professionals in the region

During our discussions with Thai media professionals and experts, they identified ways that the international community could help to support the integrity of Thailand’s information environment. These include the following:

- ***Provide financial support to independent media outlets.*** Local independent media outlets—especially those outside of Bangkok—struggled to survive financially even before the COVID-19–induced economic downturn. Now, local media experts express concern that the compounded financial pressures will make Chinese funding even more attractive, and suggested that the international community could provide alternative sources of funding. Reports by the Center for International Media Assistance provide useful resources for international donors looking for effective strategies for supporting independent media.<sup>1</sup>
- ***Develop and implement media literacy programs for the general public.*** Providing consumers with the skills to find, identify, evaluate, and use information, especially on social media, will empower audiences to form views and opinions based on truthful information.
- ***Provide technical skills training for media professionals.*** Technical skills to improve digital security, data visualization, and web scraping are increasingly necessary to be an effective independent journalist in Thailand’s information environment.

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<sup>1</sup> The Center for International Media Assistance has published several reports exploring strategies for how to provide effective support for media development, see: <https://www.cima.ned.org/publications/>.

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# 1. Overview of Thailand's Information Environment

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## Quick Country Facts

- Literacy rate (2018): 92.9%<sup>1</sup>
- Internet penetration (2019): 82%<sup>2</sup>
- Mobile phone subscriptions (per 100 people in 2018): 180.18<sup>3</sup>
- Total population (2018): 66,410,000<sup>4</sup>
- Languages: Thai (official);<sup>5</sup> English (secondary language spoken by over 25% of the population)<sup>6</sup>

## 1.1 Introduction

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has embarked on a campaign to shape what audiences around the world read, hear, and watch about China.<sup>7</sup> In a report to the 19th Party Congress, Chinese president and CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping voiced the aspirations of this campaign, stating, “We will improve our capacity for international communication so as to tell China’s stories well, present a true, multi-dimensional, and panoramic view of China, and enhance our country’s cultural soft power.”<sup>8</sup> This report is part of a series that examines Beijing’s efforts to influence the media environment in the neighboring Mekong countries—Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand.

This report focuses on China’s efforts to shape the information environment of Thailand. In order to place China’s efforts into context, this report begins by providing an overview of Thailand’s information environment—the aggregate of individuals, organizations, and systems that play a key role in shaping opinions through the dissemination of news and information. Next, we examine each of the ways that China is shaping the information environment in Thailand in order to promote its preferred narratives. The report concludes with a brief

discussion of issues to consider as Thailand's information environment—and China's footprint there—evolves.

## 1.2 Background & key developments

***Since Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha came to power in 2014, the government has maintained tight control over the Thai information environment.*** The government runs many key media networks, including terrestrial TV and radio stations.<sup>9</sup> However, private actors—particularly Thai financial tycoons—have become increasingly prominent players in the media landscape. For instance, the three most popular television channels in Thailand are run by some of the country's wealthiest citizens.

- Thailand's 11th wealthiest individual, Krit Ratanarak, controls the Bangkok Broadcasting and Television Company, which operates the country's market leader, Channel 7.<sup>10</sup>
- The Maleenont family operates runner-up Channel 3 through its controlling stake in BEC World (Bangkok Entertainment Co. Ltd.).<sup>11</sup>
- Pete Bodharamik, who chairs Mono Group, runs the third most popular channel, Mono29.<sup>12</sup>

***Foreign media has a robust presence in Thailand.*** The Associated Press (AP), Agence France-Presse (AFP), Xinhua, and other news agencies have offices in Bangkok and produce reporting for Thai audiences. Even the *New York Times'* Southeast Asia bureau is based in the Thai capital.<sup>13</sup> China, in particular, has a sizable footprint in the media and related sectors and its presence in the information environment—especially through state-led content-sharing agreements—appears to reflect an intentional decision by the Thai government to include an alternative perspective to that offered by Western media. China's role in the Thai information environment is discussed in sections 2 and 3 of this report. Of note, despite their sizable footprint in the Thai media environment, foreign media outlets are closely regulated—and occasionally restricted—by Thailand's government.

***Thailand has a high rate of internet penetration.*** According to We Are Social's *Global Digital Report 2019*, some 55 million Thai citizens are active mobile internet users.<sup>14</sup> As a result, digital media is supplanting print and broadcast media in Thailand.

### ***Popularity of various types of media in Thailand***

- **Internet and social media:** Online content is even more popular in Thailand than in any of its Southeast Asian neighbors. According to the Thai Electronic Transactions Development Agency's (EDTA) 2018 survey on internet users in Thailand, Thais spend

9 hours and 48 minutes surfing the internet during workdays or school days and spend an average of 10 hours and 54 minutes during the weekends and holidays.<sup>15</sup>

- **Television:** According to Thai media conglomerate BEC World, 85 percent of media content consumed in Thailand is local and on TV.<sup>16</sup> A 2019 report by the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC), the body that regulates broadcast TV and radio in Thailand, showed that about half the Thai population, particularly the elderly, watch TV.<sup>17</sup> A 2018 NBTC report showed that 89.4 percent of television viewership is terrestrial TV, while 10.6 percent is satellite and cable TV.<sup>18</sup> Thailand has 27 free-to-air channels.<sup>19</sup>
- **Radio:** Radio listenership has remained flat over the past three years. More than 10 million people (more than 15 percent of the population) in Thailand listen to the radio, according to 2018 Nielsen data.<sup>20</sup> The NBTC controls administrative, legal, technical, and programming aspects of radio broadcasting in Thailand.<sup>21</sup>
- **Print:** Print news has seen significant decreases in daily circulation in recent years. Indicative of the impact of changing consumer behavior is *Thairath*, Thailand’s longtime, most widely circulated newspaper, which cut its daily print circulation in 2018 from 1 million to 850,000.<sup>22</sup>

## 1.3 Key domestic media outlets

All Thai terrestrial television channels and radio frequencies are owned by a government or military department or ministry, each of which has the option to franchise its assigned channels to a private-sector content provider or create content itself.<sup>23</sup> The three most popular television stations according to 2019 Nielsen data are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Top television outlets by daily reach according to 2019 Nielsen data

Name	Type of media	Description	Ownership	Reach
CH7	TV, free-to-air	Broadcasts news, popular TV, and sports	Bangkok Broadcasting and Television concession with Royal Thai Army <sup>24</sup>	18,300,629 avg. daily reach <sup>25</sup>
CH3	TV, free-to-air	Broadcasts news, popular TV, and sports. Initiated partnership with Chinese state-run Xinhua News Agency in January 2020 to broadcast Xinhua coverage on the Coronavirus outbreak. <sup>26</sup>	Joint venture of BEC-TERO Entertainment Public Co. Ltd. and Thai public broadcast company Mass Communication Organization of Thailand (MCOT) <sup>27</sup>	14,470,253 avg. daily reach <sup>28</sup>
MONO 29	TV, free-to-air	Foreign TV series and films	Government dept. unknown, content produced by Mono Group <sup>29</sup>	11,674,442 avg. daily reach <sup>30</sup>

Source: CNA.

In Thailand, radio is consumed increasingly via online streaming, as opposed to AM/FM broadcast. According to data from the country’s most popular radio station, “Cool Fahrenheit,” the station had 49 million users online each month in 2019, 35 million of whom visited the station via its website, 11 million on iOS, and 3 million via Android.<sup>31</sup> The three most popular radio stations according to 2019 Nielsen data are listed in Table 2.

**Table 2. Top radio outlets by daily listeners according to 2019 Nielsen data**

Name	Type of media	Description	Ownership	Reach
FM 93.0 (“Cool Fahrenheit”)	Radio, online streaming	Adult contemporary music and lifestyle, voted Asia’s #1 online streaming station in both 2018 and 2019 <sup>32</sup>	RS Public Company Limited <sup>33</sup>	283,000 daily listeners <sup>34</sup>
FM 95.0 (LTM FM)	Radio, online streaming	Music, lifestyle, and news	State-owned public broadcaster, Mass Communication Organization of Thailand (MCOT) <sup>35</sup>	214,000 daily listeners <sup>36</sup>
FM 105.5 (“Eazy FM”)	Radio, online streaming	International pop music	BEC-TERO Entertainment Public Co. Ltd. <sup>37</sup>	106,000 daily listeners <sup>38</sup>

Source: CNA.

Thailand has more than 20 newspapers—five in English and the rest in Thai—with a daily print circulation that exceeds 100,000. However, the popularity of print media has waned in Thailand, just as it has elsewhere in the world. According to a 2019 NBTC study, only 33.7 percent of survey respondents get their news and information from hard-copy print media. As consumers have turned to digital media as their main source of news, many of Thailand’s newspapers have established websites and a presence on social media to maintain their popularity. For instance, the Facebook accounts of two major newspapers, *Khaosod* and *Thairath*, have the first and sixth most popular Facebook pages in the country (over 22 million followers combined), underscoring the dramatic shift to digital media.<sup>39</sup> Of note, five of the top ten most popular websites in Thailand are news websites, according to Thai internet traffic monitoring company True Hits.<sup>40</sup> Table 3 summarizes some key local print and online media outlets by circulation and online presence (where data are available).

**Table 3. Top print outlets (hard copy and digital) by circulation**

Name	Type of media	Description	Ownership	Reach
<i>Khaosod</i>	Daily Newspaper, Online	Thai-language news; presents general news about politics, economy, international affairs, sports, entertainment, and education	<i>Khaosod</i> is managed by a subsidiary of Matichon Plc, which produces and publishes print media	754,975 avg. daily online; <sup>41</sup> 950,000 daily circulation <sup>42</sup>
<i>Matichon</i>	Daily Newspaper, Online	Thai-language news; presents news about politics, entertainment, culture, sports, economy, lifestyle, and international affairs	Matichon Plc, which produces and publishes print media.	290,576 avg. daily online; <sup>43</sup> 950,000 daily Circulation <sup>44</sup>
<i>Daily News</i>	Daily Newspaper, Online	Thai-language news; covers politics, crime, sports, IT, entertainment, and international affairs	Si-Phaya Publishing Co., Ltd.	279,610 avg. daily online; <sup>45</sup> 950,000 daily circulation <sup>46</sup>
<i>Thairath</i>	Daily Newspaper, Online	Thai-language news; reports news in every category	Vacharaphol Co., Ltd.	830,820 avg. daily online; <sup>47</sup> 810,000 daily circulation <sup>48</sup>
<i>Thai Post</i>	Daily Newspaper	Thai-language news; covers general topics with a strong focus on politics	Thai Journal Group Co. <sup>49</sup>	150,000 daily circulation <sup>50</sup>
<i>Bangkok Post</i>	Daily Newspaper	English-language news	Post Publishing PCL <sup>51</sup>	110,000 daily circulation <sup>52</sup>
MGROnline	Digital news	Thai-language news and lifestyle content	Unclear based on available data	1.3 million Facebook followers

Source: CNA.

## 1.4 Key factors that shape Thailand’s information environment

Several factors play a key role in shaping Thailand’s information environment. They include the following:

- Regulations on press or individual freedoms of speech
- Regulations on foreign actors in the domestic information environment
- Foreign media presence and availability
- Diversity of foreign partners that can assist with deficits in media content, training, or infrastructure

## 1.4.1 Regulations on press or individual freedoms of speech

Thailand's 2017 Constitution indicates that press and individual freedoms of speech are respected by the state. Individuals have the liberty to "express opinions, make speeches, write, print, publicize, and express by other means." The government can, however, take action when it deems it necessary "to protect national security, the rights of other Thai citizens, or to maintain public order and good morals."<sup>53</sup> Similarly, individuals are guaranteed the right to "enjoy the liberty of communication by any means." Under the constitution, it is illegal to infringe upon the freedom of the press or freedom of speech unless required by a court warrant or "other grounds as prescribed by law."<sup>54</sup>

The 2017 Constitution also grants the government a high degree of control over the media. The constitution grants a range of rights and responsibilities to the state, including managing transmission frequencies and access to satellite orbits, both of which are identified as national treasures.<sup>55</sup> According to US-based Freedom House, the Thai government uses a variety of levers, including legal instruments, to restrict freedom of expression.<sup>56</sup>

- Thailand ranked 136th out of 180 for freedom of expression in 2019 by Reporters sans Frontières (RSF).<sup>57</sup>
- Freedom House scores freedom of expression in Thailand at 6/16.<sup>58</sup>

The Thai government controls major TV and radio channels, as well as online traffic. The National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC), which is responsible for allocating licenses and regulating media, operates as part of the government.<sup>59</sup> The government also has the ability to control access to internet content through the National Broadband Network Co. Ltd. and the National Gateway and Data Centre Co. Ltd., which the government established in 2018 to provide and manage internet access and related equipment.<sup>60</sup> The government has ordered internet service providers to censor any information deemed provocative, causing public disturbance, containing official secrets, detrimental to national security, or defamatory to the ruling government. According to a report by Germany-based governance NGO Bertelsmann Stiftung, more than 100 websites have been shuttered as a result.<sup>61</sup> The government restricts critical content by blocking webpages and VPNs, and compelling search engines (Google) and social media (Facebook, YouTube) to remove selected content.<sup>62</sup>

The NBTC's "must carry" rule places regulations on content broadcast on radio and TV. Under the "must carry" rule, Thai citizens are guaranteed access to all free-to-air TV content via any platform such as TV antennas cable, and satellite receiver.<sup>63</sup> This requirement means that free-to-air TV broadcasters must pass all of their content to operators on all other media platforms without any conditions.<sup>64</sup> The effect of this rule may result in broadcasters' opting not to carry content that could trigger political sensitivities, which may result in censorship and legal action.

## Efforts to clamp down on “fake news”

Thailand is taking steps to clamp down on “fake news” among its rapidly growing online population. The Thai government, under the Digital Economy and Society Minister Buddhipongse Punnakanta, opened an “Anti-Fake News Centre” in November 2019 to combat disinformation. The center uses artificial intelligence and trained monitors to flag questionable posts. The center has a Facebook page, LINE messaging group, and website where examples of its findings are posted and users can submit notices of fake news.<sup>65</sup>

**Table 4. Key laws and regulations**

Law or regulation	Description
National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) Announcement No. 97/2014	Prohibits the media from presenting information that “threatens national security or instigates disorder or conflicts.” <sup>66</sup>
NCPO Announcement No. 103/2014	Bans criticism of the NCPO that is made in a “dishonest way or aims to discredit it.”
NCPO Order No. 3/2015	Authorizes military officers to enforce bans on media outlets if their content “instigates public fear or causes misunderstanding through distortion which could affect national security or lead to social disorder.”
NCPO Order No 41/2016	Empowers the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission to fine or suspend licenses to those in violation of the above decrees. <sup>67</sup>
Computer Crimes Act (CCA)	Imposes a 100,000 baht (US\$3,000) fine and up to five years in prison for posting false content on the internet “found to undermine public security, cause public panic, or harm others.” The CCA allows government authorities to request the removal of online content deemed morally offensive or threatening to national security without court approval. <sup>68</sup>
Lèse-majesté law	Stipulates that anyone who “defames insults or threatens the king, the queen, the heir-apparent or the regent” will be punished with a jail term of 3 to 15 years. <sup>69</sup> Peace TV and programming on Voice TV have been temporarily shut down for failing to comply with related government regulations. <sup>70</sup>

Source: CNA.

### 1.4.2 Regulatory framework for managing foreign media actors

Although foreign media content is readily available in Thailand, the government requires that foreign media follow all laws pertinent to domestic actors and places additional restrictions on

the activities of foreign actors in the information environment. This includes regulations on ownership, licensing, and content.

The Broadcasting and Television Business Act of 2008 restricts foreign ownership of broadcast media companies to 25 percent.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, for print media, according to the 2017 Constitution, foreigners cannot own newspapers and other forms of mass media. The constitution states that “[t]he owner of a newspaper or other mass media shall be a Thai national.”<sup>72</sup>

Since 2010, Thailand has required all foreign members of the media residing in or visiting Thailand to submit an application through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to cover important meetings, conferences, or other events.<sup>73</sup> In February 2016, the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued guidelines for media visas that permitted authorities to reject applications from reporters whose work or behavior constituted a threat to “public order or to the security of the kingdom.”<sup>74</sup> According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), foreign media members are reportedly asked in mandatory visa interviews to state their personal opinions of the Thai government, monarchy, and other in-country foreign reporters.<sup>75</sup> The Thai government has denied that these efforts are intended to restrict foreign media.<sup>76</sup>

Thailand does not have regulations on broadcast of foreign-produced programs or the proportionality of foreign and local content. However, radio and television broadcasting companies are required to broadcast news or content that is useful to the public as determined by the NBTC, and foreign content is subject to this regulation.<sup>77</sup>

Although foreigners are not permitted to hold controlling stakes in Thai media, it is possible for foreign nationals to become Thai citizens—and, subsequently, qualify to own mass media outlets. For instance, one can “buy” residency in Thailand with a minimal capital requirement of US\$15,902.<sup>78</sup> Permanent residence can be obtained after an individual has had a Thai non-immigrant visa for three years; and foreign nationals can apply for citizenship after holding permanent residence status in Thailand for 10 consecutive years.<sup>79</sup>

### 1.4.3 Foreign media presence and access to foreign media

There is robust foreign media presence in Thailand, based primarily in the capital, Bangkok. The AP, AFP, Xinhua, China Radio International (CRI), *People’s Daily*, and others have a physical presence in Thailand. Of note, the BBC Thai service officially ended shortwave radio transmissions from Thailand in March 2017 after 20 years of operation.<sup>80</sup>

In addition to news agencies, foreign entertainment platforms have entered the market, producing Thai-language content and technology for Thai consumers. Examples include the following:

- US-based Netflix introduced original Thai-language content in 2019.<sup>81</sup>



- Another popular internet-based video streaming company with Thai-language content is Tokyo-based LINE TV. As of February 2019, the number of users had passed 33 million.<sup>82</sup> LINE TV appears to be one of the most popular video platforms in Thailand, with Thais spending an average of 176 minutes per day—or two-thirds of total time spent watching TV—on LINE TV.<sup>83</sup>

Selected foreign media actors are described in Table 5.

**Table 5. Foreign media in Thailand**

Name	Type of media	Description	Ownership
China Global Television Network (CGTN)	Television, paid subscription	CGTN and CCTV-4 are available through most TV packages from True Visions, one of the leading satellite TV (paid TV) providers in Thailand <sup>84</sup>	PRC government
China Radio International (CRI) Thailand	Radio, website, Facebook page	Two hours of Thai radio broadcast/day, Thai webcast, Thai print online <sup>85</sup>	PRC government
NHK–Thai	Online streaming, website	Thai-language news and information 15 min. per day <sup>86</sup>	Japanese government
<i>People’s Daily</i>	Online	Six <i>People’s Daily</i> journalists based in Thailand to cover China-Thai news in Chinese <sup>87</sup>	PRC government
SBS Radio Australia–Thai	Online streaming, website	Two hours of Thai radio broadcast per week streaming online <sup>88</sup>	Australian government
Voice of America–Thailand	Radio, website, Facebook page	Six hours of Thai radio broadcast per week, 5.5 hours of Thai Facebook Live broadcast per week <sup>89</sup>	United States government
Xinhua News Agency	Online	Thai-language reporting on China, international events, and bilateral Sino-Thai relations	PRC government

Source: CNA.

#### 1.4.4 Diversity of foreign partners

Economic development and security partnerships with multiple countries help Thailand keep from being over-reliant on any one partner. Key partners include the following:

- **United States.** The US government recognizes Thailand as a major non-NATO ally and the two countries have a US-Thai Defense Alliance that has been in effect for 65 years.<sup>90</sup>
- **Japan.** Japan is Thailand’s second largest export partner and third largest trading partner overall.<sup>91</sup> Japan has also historically been Thailand’s top source of overseas development assistance.<sup>92</sup>

- **Other Mekong countries.** Since 2019, the Thai government has spearheaded the management of a fund with the other Mekong countries. The fund is part of the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) and is explicitly aimed at lessening reliance on China and other regional powers.<sup>93</sup> In addition to the Mekong countries, the fund's contributors include the US, Australia, Japan, and South Korea.<sup>94</sup>

### **China as an increasingly important partner**

China is also a key regional partner to Thailand, and there is increasing trade and cooperation between the two in several areas. According to 2018 World Bank statistics, China is now Thailand's largest import and export partner, surpassing exports to the US and Japan by a narrow margin of 2 percent.<sup>95</sup> Thailand and China engage in annual cooperation under the Lancang-Mekong Cooperative (LMC) framework. The LMC was formed in March 2016 as a subregional cooperation mechanism connecting the six countries along the Mekong River. The framework, spearheaded by China, seeks to promote more effective cooperation in three main issue-areas: political and security, socio-cultural, and economic development.<sup>96</sup> The LMC framework extends to media cooperation, where training and key actor engagement with Mekong countries' media is led by China's *People's Daily* through annual LMC media summits (discussed in detail in section 2.4).<sup>97</sup>

### **Foreign sources of media assistance**

Several foreign NGOs with media development lines of effort operate in Thailand. The UN Economic, Social, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Bangkok office publishes regular reports on media development in Thailand as well as in the Asia-Pacific region. FHI 360 and Internews, both based in the US, are active in local media capacity building. Between 2015 and 2017, the FOJO Media Institute of Sweden established a network of institutes in Thailand for the training of journalists in Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.<sup>98</sup>

## 2. China's Efforts to Shape Thailand's Media Environment

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The Chinese Party-state has developed an extensive and wide-ranging array of tactics, techniques, and tools for shaping narratives in the international media, including the following:


- Tailoring the content produced by China's state-run media outlets so that it is more accessible, credible, and compelling to foreign audiences
- Maximizing channels for distributing Chinese-produced media content in order to reach as broad an audience as possible
- Influencing foreign media outlets and journalists to promote China-friendly narratives and suppress narratives that China finds objectionable
- Using entertainment as a means of promoting China's narratives to global audiences beyond the news media

This section focuses on China's employment of these tactics, techniques, and tools to shape the media environment in Thailand. Key among these are its efforts to maximize the distribution of PRC media content to Thai audiences via content-sharing agreements with major Thai media outlets and the launch of Xinhua's Thai News Service. Perhaps most significant, however, is that Chinese companies have circumvented Thai law to acquire media outlets in Thailand. Key examples of this include Global CAMG's acquisition of the popular Bangkok station 103 Like FM and Chinese tech giant Tencent's acquisition of Thailand's largest online news outlet Sanook. Of particular concern, Thai media experts suggested that many media consumers who look to Sanook and 103 Like FM for news and information are likely unaware that they have been acquired by Chinese entities.<sup>99</sup>

Of note, however, PRC media's attempts to tailor content to appeal to audiences in Thailand appear to be lacking. Although China's major news outlets publish in Thai, they produce very little reporting on local events in Thailand. In addition, Chinese-produced films do not appear to have attained the same level of popularity that they have in other countries in the region.

The checklist in Table 6 offers a framework that can be used to take stock of China's efforts to shape the media environment in Thailand. The checkmarks indicate tools currently employed by China in the Thai information environment; question marks indicate tactics for which we have not yet observed evidence of their use in Thailand, but are areas that warrant continued monitoring.

Table 6. Checklist: China’s Playbook for Shaping the Information Environment in Thailand

 <b>China’s Playbook for Shaping the Information Environment in Thailand</b>	
<b>Tailoring PRC media content to appeal to Thai audiences</b>	
✓	Producing Thai-language content
?	Reporting on local events that do not necessarily involve China
✓	Recruiting Thai voices
<b>Maximizing channels for distribution of China’s narratives</b>	
✓	Selling or providing content for free to Thai media
?	Jointly producing content with Thai media outlets
✓	Authoring opinion pieces for Thai media outlets
?	Buying space in Thai media
✓	Establishing a presence on Thai social media
✓	Investing in Thai media outlets
✓	Investing in Thai telecommunications infrastructure
<b>Influencing foreign media to promote only China-friendly narratives</b>	
?	Promoting self-censorship among Thai journalists and scholars
✓	Purchasing a right to shape content
✓	Hosting international media forums and conferences
✓	Hosting education and training programs
<b>Using entertainment to promote Chinese narratives</b>	
✓	Exporting Chinese-produced entertainment
✓	Investing in the Thai film industry
?	Promoting PRC-controlled social media platforms

### **Chinese academics advocate strategy for tailoring content to Southeast Asian audiences**

In a 2019 article in the Chinese journal *International Communications*, published by the China International Publishing Group under State Council Information Office guidance (SCIO), Chinese academics advocated the development of a long-term strategy for strategic communications targeted at Southeast Asia. The objective of doing so would be to promote Chinese messages, as well as counter US strategic communications aimed at the region. Elements of the proposed strategy include the following:

- **Precise communication** tailored to each country, with a unique communication strategy designed to meet audience needs.
- **Increased Chinese language teaching** in order to “tell China’s story to the target country in a subtle way.”
- **An emphasis on economic, social, and environmental issues**, which the US “tries to wield to serve its political purposes,” but are issues on which “China has become closer and closer to Southeast Asian countries.”

Source: Chen Jingjing (陈静静), “A Comparative Study of US and Chinese International Broadcasting For/To Southeast Asian Countries,” (*Zhong Mei dui Dangya Guojia Guoji Zhuangbo de Bijiao Yanjiu*; 中美对东亚国家国际转播的比较研究, *International Communications (Duiwai Zhuanbo*; 对外转播), no. 9 (2019), accessed Jan. 17, 2020, <http://mall.cnki.net/magazine/Article/DWDC201909006.htm>.

## **2.1 PRC narratives targeted at audiences in Thailand**

China promotes narratives that it wants conveyed by the international media. It does this to (1) promote a positive image of China, (2) counter Beijing’s critics, and (3) support China’s national objectives. (See Appendix C for China’s global narratives.) Key narratives that China promotes to audiences in Thailand include the following:

- **Western media’s portrayal of China’s actions and intentions is inaccurate.** Chinese media targeted at audiences in Thailand portrays Western media as biased and asserts that it has misrepresented China. Chinese media is held up as a more accurate source of news and information about China and the rest of the world.
- **Cooperation with China benefits Thailand.** Chinese media targeted at audiences in Thailand promotes the narrative that cooperation with China produces tangible

economic benefits for Thailand. In particular, PRC media reports highlight the potential benefits of various Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects.

- ***China is a responsible member of the international community.*** Chinese media targeted at audiences in Thailand portrays China as an upholder of the international system that provides public goods, such as assistance to foreign countries combating the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, and abides by international agreements, including the South China Sea Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC).

The following sections offer examples of how China promotes these narratives using the various tactics, techniques, and tools in its playbook.

## 2.2 Tailoring PRC media content

China's state-directed media outlets tailor content in a variety of ways in order to make it accessible, credible, and compelling to audiences in Thailand. The tools that China uses to achieve this include the following:

- Producing content—print, broadcast, and online—in languages spoken in Thailand
- Reporting on local events
- Recruiting local voices



### 2.2.1 Producing content in Thai

China's state-run media outlets have been producing content in Thai since CRI Thailand began broadcasting in the 1950s.<sup>100</sup> According to local media experts however, CRI's Thai publications and broadcasts are not a popular source of news and information.<sup>101</sup> Currently, four Chinese state-run media outlets—Xinhua, CGTN, *People's Daily Overseas Edition*, and China Radio International (CRI)—produce content in Thai (See Table 7). All of the major Chinese state-run media outlets also produce content in English, which is spoken by over a quarter of the Thai population.<sup>102</sup>

**Table 7. Thai Chinese state-run media outlets producing local language content in Thailand**

Media outlet	Thai	English
Xinhua News Agency (新华社)	✓	✓
China Global Television Network (CGTN)	✓	✓
China Radio International (CRI; 中国国际广播电台)	✓	✓
<i>People's Daily</i> (人民日报·海外版泰国月刊)	✓	✓
China News Service (中国新闻社)	✗	✓
<i>China Daily</i>	✗	✓
<i>Global Times</i> (环球时报)	✗	✓

Source: Data compiled by CNA from the websites of each state-run media outlet.

Of note, China’s *People’s Daily* has a team of 11 journalists based in Thailand in a bureau that functions as the paper’s Asia-Pacific Center (*Yatai Zhongxin Fenshe*; 亚太中心分社).<sup>103</sup> In 2012, the *People’s Daily Overseas Edition* began publishing a *Thailand Monthly* periodical in both Thai and Chinese. According to *People’s Daily*, the magazine covers Thai politics, business, and culture and was the “first time in history” that *People’s Daily* published a specialized periodical in a Southeast Asian country.<sup>104</sup>

**Low & inauthentic engagement with PRC media outlet’s Thai Facebook posts**

On social media, audience engagement with PRC media outlets’ Thai-language posts is relatively low (i.e., few likes, shares, or comments). Moreover, according to local media experts, the comments that are posted on PRC media outlets’ Thai-language pages are often pro-China and appear to be made by inauthentic users or “bots.” For example, CRI Thailand’s Facebook page registers more than 2.5 million followers, but the average number of likes per post in July 2020 was just 36, yielding an engagement rate of only 0.0017%. This is significantly below the median engagement rate for Facebook posts across all industries, which was 0.09% in 2019.<sup>105</sup>



**2.2.2 Reporting on local events that involve China**

PRC media’s Thai-language reporting tends to be Sino-centric, focusing on China’s activities abroad rather than domestic events in Thailand. Coverage of domestic events in Thailand tends to be limited to reporting on Sino-Thai bilateral relations. Xinhua and CRI Thai News Service websites, for instance, have news sections focused on Sino-Thai relations. Content within these sections does not appear to be updated as regularly as the general news

sections, which feature stories highlighting China’s international activities.<sup>106</sup> We noted only a few articles that discussed local events in Thailand without mentioning China.<sup>107</sup>

Despite the general lack of reporting on local events, both CRI and Xinhua Thai News Service websites carried reports promoting the narrative that cooperation with China benefits Thailand. For example, a CRI Thai article described a Thai-Chinese Strategic Research Center Eastern Economic Corridor seminar that urged Thai policymakers to take advantage of the opportunity to link the BRI to the Thai Eastern Economic Corridor plan.<sup>108</sup>

Figure 1. Thai-Chinese relations sections on Xinhua and CRI Thai news service websites



Source: Xinhua, “Chinese-Thai Leaders,” Xinhua Thai News Service, accessed Feb. 13, 2020, <https://www.xinhua.com/category/high/chi-th-high>; “Thai-Chinese Relations,” CRI Online (Thai), Oct. 29, 2019, <http://thai.cri.cn/20181001/3bd7aac7-8459-c659-d907-b0832a3861b6.html>.

Launched in 2016, Xinhua’s Thai News Service also runs the Chinese-language Xinhua Online Thailand Channel (*Xinhua Wang Taiguo Pindao*; 新华网泰国频道).<sup>109</sup> This site provides news and information in Chinese regarding Thailand on the following: “Current Politics,” “Finance and Economics,” “Culture,” “Chinese in Thailand,” “China-Thailand Exchanges,” “Chinese Companies in Thailand,” “One Belt One Road [BRI],” and the “Rayong Industrial Zone,” an industrial park in Eastern Thailand established in 2013 as a base for Chinese manufacturing in Thailand. This site also carries reports promoting the narrative that cooperation with China benefits Thailand. For instance, one recent article on the site highlighted an agreement in which China would “fund the Thai side to conduct research on cooperation mechanisms for climate change and hydropower development projects.” According to the article, the China-led Lancang-Mekong Framework has improved water resource management among the countries that rely on the Mekong River. The article promotes the narrative that cooperation with China is beneficial as a means of countering concerns over the impact of Chinese water diversion and hydropower projects on downriver Mekong countries.<sup>110</sup>



Figure 2. Xinhua News Online Thailand Channel



Source: Xinhua, “Xinhua News Thailand Channel” (*Xinhua Wang Taiguo Pindao*; 新华网泰国频道), Xinhua Net, (*Xinhua Wang*; 新华网), 2020, accessed Feb. 13, 2020, <http://th.news.cn/>.



### 2.2.3 Recruiting Thai voices

PRC media often seeks to “borrow” foreign voices in order to amplify and lend credence to Chinese narratives by creating the appearance that they are espoused by others outside of China. PRC media routinely quotes Thai government officials, industry leaders, and average citizens, often in an effort to portray cooperation with China as beneficial.

China’s state-run media quotes local voices to bolster Thai support for BRI. For example, a Thai-language article published on Xinhua and CRI websites quotes retired army general and former Thailand National Defense University president General Surasit Thanadthang, saying, “One Belt One Road is a platform for all parties to jointly seek development.”<sup>111</sup> General Thanadthang, the current director of the Thailand-China Research Center of the Belt and Road Initiative, was quoted as also saying, “In recent years, the Thai government has considered connecting the ‘One Belt One Road’ initiative with the ‘Thailand 4.0’ development strategy.”<sup>112</sup>

Figure 3. CRI Thai reporting using local voices to bolster BRI cooperation



Source: “The Director of the Thai-Chinese Strategic Cooperation Research Center Stated that Thailand is Preparing to Promote Thai-Chinese Cooperation in the Framework of ‘One Belt One Road’,”

ผอ.ศูนย์วิจัยความร่วมมือยุทธศาสตร์ไทย-จีน ระบุ ไทยเตรียมส่งเสริมขยายความร่วมมือไทย-จีนในกรอบหนึ่งแถบหนึ่งเส้นทาง, CRI Thailand, Apr. 28, 2019, accessed Mar. 11, 2020, <http://thai.cri.cn/20190428/e90079ae-991f-57c3-a6e7-2795d8d5d27a.html>.

Chinese media also recruits foreign voices by hiring local journalists. However, it appears that PRC media outlets have not yet made significant use of this practice in Thailand. CRI, *People’s Daily*, *Guangming Daily*, and *Xinhua* all have offices in Thailand; however, it appears that they have hired very few local staff. According to CRI’s Thai-language website, there are 25 staff

members in the region; 23 are Chinese and 2 are Thai. Most of the staff is located in Bangkok.<sup>113</sup> According to the *Guangming Daily* website, there is one Chinese correspondent based in Bangkok.<sup>114</sup> According to a 2017 photo of the Xinhua Bangkok bureau staff, there were 8 journalists on staff.<sup>115</sup> *People's Daily* has a team of 11 journalists based in Bangkok in a bureau that functions as the paper's Asia-Pacific Center (亚太中心分社) and covers domestic and regional events.<sup>116</sup> It is unclear how many of the journalists employed by Xinhua and *People's Daily* are from Thailand.

## 2.2.4 Xinhua's Thai online news service: A case study in tailoring content

In November 2019, Xinhua launched its Thai news service (Xinhua Thai). According to its official website, Xinhua's Thai News Service publishes more than 2,000 Xinhua pieces translated into Thai per month, including video, print, and images.<sup>117</sup> Xinhua Thai functions as a subscription wire service that members can pay for different types of republication access/rights (see Figure 4). The articles cover a range of subjects, the vast majority of which are about China and its positive role on the international stage. Most articles appear to be original content; however, some bylines indicate that the website periodically reposts articles from *Bangkok Today* (บางกอกทูเดย์).<sup>118</sup>

Figure 4. Xinhua Thai service access levels (English translation on left, Thai page on right)

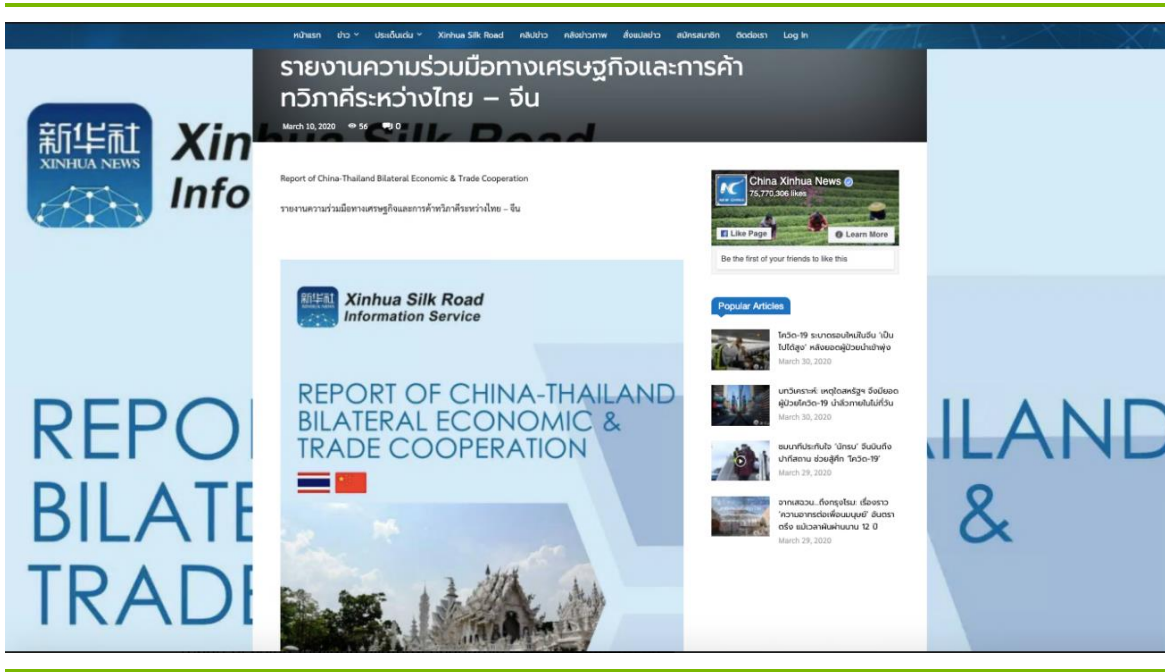
Source: "Access levels and benefits," accessed Aug. 10, 2020, <https://www.xinhua-thai.com/>.

According to one Thai media report, Kobkij Praditpolpanich runs the Xinhua Thai News page. From among the thousands of articles produced by Xinhua daily, Kobkij and his team select 60–100 articles per day that are “most aligned with the interests of Thai audiences.” They then translate these articles into Thai for publication. Kobkij reportedly stated, “We never get told what to translate, and we choose the stories ourselves.”<sup>119</sup> According to Thai media experts, the average Thai citizen is unlikely to get their news directly from Xinhua Thai’s webpage. Instead, Xinhua Thai’s content is far more likely to reach Thai audiences via the local media outlets that republish it.<sup>120</sup>

The new service represents a significant PRC investment aimed at shaping the Thai media environment. The content that it publishes promotes key Chinese narratives, often by borrowing local voices. Examples include the following:

- ***China is a more accurate source of information than the West.*** PRC media has touted Xinhua Thai News Service as necessary to “show the true China” and offer a perspective “unbiased” by Western media. One article quoted senior Thai media professionals echoing agreement, including the president of the state-owned public broadcaster Mass Communication Organization of Thailand (MCOT), Kematat Paladesh; Chaiwat Wanichwattana, the president of the Thai-Chinese Journalists Association and editor of the *Thansettakij* business newspaper; and an unnamed managing editor of *Bangkok Post*.<sup>121</sup>
- ***China is a responsible member of the international community.*** Xinhua’s Thai-language reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic highlights China’s efforts to help other countries, including Thailand, fight the virus. For example, the homepage featured an article with the headline, “Xi Jinping Reveals that China Will Send More Experts to Italy to Fight COVID-19.”<sup>122</sup>
- ***Cooperation with China benefits Thailand.*** Xinhua’s Thai News Service covered the publication of a report that portrayed BRI as complementary to Thailand’s plan to develop its Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC). The report highlighted examples of China’s efforts to develop infrastructure in Thailand, including the China-Thailand railway project and the expansion of the Suvarnabhumi Airport.<sup>123</sup>

Figure 5. Xinhua Thai News Service report on China-Thailand bilateral economic and trade cooperation



Source: "Report of China-Thailand Bilateral Economic & Trade Cooperation," รายงานความร่วมมือทางเศรษฐกิจและการค้าทวิภาคีระหว่างไทย - จีน, Xinhua Thai, Mar. 10, 2020, accessed Mar. 31, 2020, <https://www.xinhua.com/silkroad/%E0%B8%A3%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%A2%E0%B8%87%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%99%E0%B8%84%E0%B8%A7%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%A1%E0%B8%A3%E0%B9%88%E0%B8%A7%E0%B8%A1%E0%B8%A1%E0%B8%B7%E0%B8%AD%E0%B8%97%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%87%E0%B9%80%E0%B8%A8%20200310>.

## 2.3 Maximizing channels for distribution of China's narratives

In addition to tailoring content, China also seeks to maximize the number and types of channels that it uses to distribute PRC-produced media content in Thailand. China's efforts to do so include the following:

- Using Thai media outlets as channels for distributing Chinese-produced media content
- Establishing a presence on social media platforms popular in Thailand, especially Facebook
- Creating new channels for distribution by investing in the development of telecommunications infrastructure and Thai media outlets

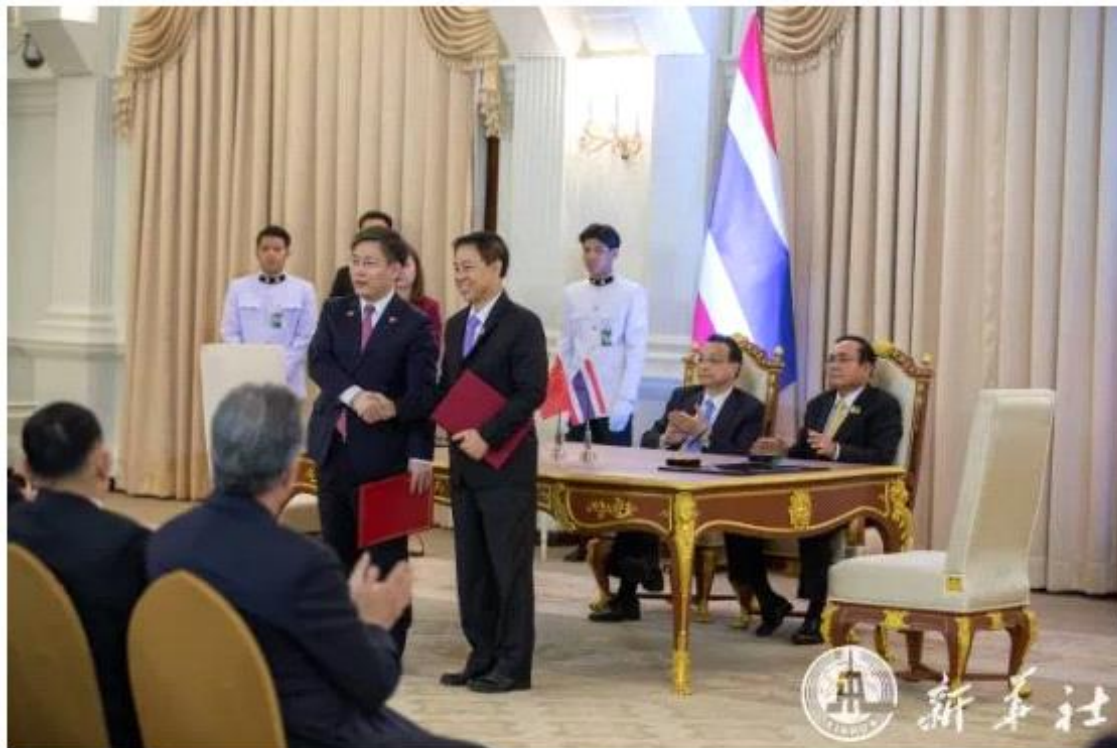


### 2.3.1 Providing content to Thai media

PRC media outlets actively seek to place their content in Thai media through content-sharing agreements. According to local media experts, content sharing is the China's most important tool for shaping the local media environment.<sup>124</sup> A key, high-level memorandum of understanding (MOU) for the exchange of news and information was signed on November 5, 2019, between Xinhua and the Thailand Government Public Relations Department (PRD) and presided over by the two country's prime ministers. According to the PRD website, in addition to its responsibility for conducting public relations campaigns on national agenda items for the Thai government, the PRD also operates the National Broadcasting Services of Thailand (NBT). In this role as NBT operator, the PRD manages NBT Radio nationwide, including "World Service" programming broadcast in 10 languages—Khmer, Burmese, Lao, Vietnamese, and Mandarin among them. PRD also operates NBT Television's 12 networks, which cover all regions of the country. PRD's interface with print media is primarily as arbiter of journalist press cards, which are required for both foreign and domestic journalists.<sup>125</sup>

Thailand's state-run broadcaster, MCOT, is also administered by the Office of the Prime Minister and receives Xinhua and CCTV content. MCOT runs seven national, one international, 52 provincial, and one district radio station, as well as two television channels (terrestrial free-to-air) and two satellite television channels. MCOT also houses the Thai News Agency, which functions as MCOT's center for production, collection, storage, and dissemination. Its coverage is broadcast through different media platforms operated by MCOT, including television and radio, online digital media, social media, and SMS via mobile phones. According to the MCOT website, the Thai News Agency sources international news from Xinhua and CCTV as well as other non-PRC international news agencies, including Agence France-Presse (AFP), Associated Press (AP), APTN (Associated Press Television News), SNTV (Sport News Television), Deutsche Welle (Germany), Korean Broadcasting System (KBS), Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK), Reuters, and Reuters TV.<sup>126</sup> News-sharing networks provide another potential avenue for content sharing between PRC and Thai media outlets. For example, *China Daily* and the English-language Thai publication *The Nation* both belong to the same news-sharing network, Asia News Network (ANN).<sup>127</sup>

Figure 6. Xinhua Thai News Service photo of Xinhua-Thai Government Public Relations Department MOU signing with Chinese and Thai prime ministers



กรุงเทพฯ, 5 พ.ย. (ซินหัว) — พลเอก ประยุทธ์ จันทร์โอชา นายกรัฐมนตรีไทย และหลี่เค่อเฉียง นายกรัฐมนตรีจีน ซึ่งอยู่ระหว่างการเยือนไทย ร่วมเป็นสักขีพยานการลงนามบันทึกความเข้าใจว่าด้วยการแลกเปลี่ยนข้อมูลข่าวสารระหว่างสำนักข่าวซินหัวของจีนและกรมประชาสัมพันธ์ของไทย ณ ทำเนียบรัฐบาล กรุงเทพมหานคร เมื่อวันที่อังคาร (5 พ.ย.)

Source: "Thai-China Join Hands to Exchange News Highlighting the Website 'Xinhua Thai,'" Xinhua Thai, Nov. 5, 2019, accessed Feb. 13, 2020,

<https://www.xinhua thai.com/high/%e0%b9%84%e0%b8%97%e0%b8%a2-%e0%b8%88%e0%b8%b5%e0%b8%99-%e0%b8%88%e0%b8%b1%e0%b8%9a%e0%b8%a1%e0%b8%b7%e0%b8%ad%e0%b9%81%e0%b8%a5%e0%b8%81%e0%b9%80%e0%b8%9b%e0%b8%a5%e0%b8%b5%e0%b9%88%e0%b8%a2%e0%b8%99 20191105>

In addition, China and Thailand signed at least 13 other content-sharing agreements between 2015 and 2019, according to the chief of news for *Khaosod English*. The 13 known signatories of Xinhua's news-sharing program in are listed in Table 8.

**Table 8. Media outlets known to have content-sharing agreements with Xinhua**

Thai outlet	Outlet description
MONO 29	Third most popular TV channel in Thailand, free-to-air <sup>128</sup>
TNN 24	Free-to-air satellite, cable, and terrestrial Thai news channel <sup>129</sup>
<i>Business Today</i>	Thai and English print and online business news platform <sup>130</sup>
Smart SME	Thai media production company focused on TV and online video content for business <sup>131</sup>
MThai Voice Online	Thai online news and entertainment content <sup>132</sup>
Manager Online	Online content for Thai daily newspaper ( <i>Manager Daily</i> ) with circulation of 300,000 (2016) <sup>133</sup>
Sanook	Thai online news and entertainment content with 3.4 million Facebook followers, now owned by Tencent <sup>134</sup>
Independent News Network (INN)	Thai 24-hour radio and online news and entertainment <sup>135</sup>
Thailand Today	English-language news portal <sup>136</sup>
Bangkok Wealth & Biz	Thai magazine and online content on economic and business news <sup>137</sup>
State broadcasters NBT and MCOT	National TV and Radio channels administered from the Office of the Prime Minister <sup>138</sup>
<i>Matichon</i>	Owned by Matichon Group <sup>139</sup>
<i>Khaosod</i>	Owned by Matichon Group <sup>140</sup>

Source: CNA.

Xinhua’s provision of content to Thai outlets can take several forms, including Thai-language content, or English or Chinese content that is then translated or dubbed into Thai by the recipient outlet. For example, CNC—the TV arm of Xinhua— signed a cooperation agreement with TNN24, a Thai news channel, to provide English-language news programming on China to TNN24, which would then dub and broadcast it in Thai.<sup>141</sup>

Xinhua also provides content to the Thai media conglomerate Matichon Group. In July 2019, *Khaosod*’s parent company signed an agreement for all of the Matichon Group to use Xinhua news. In addition to the daily newspaper *Matichon*, the content-sharing agreement also means that *Khaosod*, *Khaosod English*, *The Nation*, and *Matichon*’s millions of followers see Xinhua content as well.<sup>142</sup> According to *Khaosod English*’s news chief Teeranai Charuvastra, “Neither *Khaosod* nor Xinhua receives payment from each other,” nor has Xinhua ever “made any attempt to interfere with *Khaosod*’s internal operations.”<sup>143</sup> Of note, *Matichon* and *Khaosod* are regarded as sympathetic to those who oppose the Thailand’s current regime (i.e., “Red Shirts”) and have reportedly been harassed by the Thai government.<sup>144</sup> At least one media expert noted that *Matichon*’s signing of a content-sharing agreement with Xinhua was viewed as a surprise and disappointed many of its readers.<sup>145</sup>



### **Thai perspectives on content-sharing agreements with PRC media**

According to Thai media experts, local journalists have split opinions about Thai media partnerships with Chinese state-run media and China's presence in the media environment. Some say that partnerships with Xinhua are no different from the longstanding partnerships with Western news agencies, such as Reuters and AFP, while others worry about the affect Chinese media has on the integrity and independence of journalism in Thailand. Of note, some Thai media outlets, including the Thai Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), reportedly opt into agreements with Xinhua so that they can use the free or inexpensive content as "filler." This allows them to focus resources on investigative reporting.<sup>146</sup>

Xinhua content placed in Thai media appears to have broad reach. For instance, according to an editor at Sanook, between November and December 2019, 1.4 million readers saw Xinhua content on its site.<sup>147</sup> Of Note, Chinese company Tencent now owns Sanook through locally registered Tencent (Thailand).<sup>148</sup>

In January 2020, the Thailand's second most watched television channel according to Nielsen ratings, Channel 3, announced a partnership with Chinese state-run Xinhua News Agency to broadcast Xinhua coverage of the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan. According to Dr. Arm Tungnirun, former director of the Thai-Chinese Strategic Research Center, Chinese media "is interested in presenting positive narratives," and Xinhua coverage of the COVID-19 "has emphasized stories of bravery and playfulness among Chinese medics, hospital staff and even those quarantined within the city of Wuhan."<sup>149</sup>

### **2019: the "ASEAN-China Year of Media Exchanges"**

The government of Thailand, which chaired the annual Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in Bangkok in early 2019, deemed 2019 as the "ASEAN-China Year of Media Exchanges." This official determination set up Thailand to coordinate media exchanges with China at the highest official level.<sup>150</sup> According to *Khaosod English's* news chief, China's network of state-run news organizations pursued an unprecedented level of cooperation with domestic media agencies in Southeast Asian nations, including Thailand. He noted that, "Advocates of the initiatives say they are a necessary counterbalance to Western narratives about China."<sup>151</sup>



### **2.3.2 Jointly producing content with Thai media**

Chinese media outlets are actively engaged in joint production with Thai media outlets. So far, joint production between Chinese and Thai media outlets appears to be confined to the entertainment sector. The 2019 Hong Kong International Film and TV Market ("FilMart") saw the first significant move toward Thai-Chinese joint production of

TV and film. According to reports, a deal was struck at the 2019 FilMart show to establish a \$14.9 million coproduction fund between China and Thailand to help launch TV and film projects that will appeal to Chinese and Southeast Asian audiences.<sup>152</sup> According to reporters at the FilMart show, the deal was struck between China's Poly Film Investment Co., TW Capital from Thailand, and Thai Chi (Hainan) Culture and Media Co. with \$7.4 million in seed money.

President and CEO of TW Capital Tanawat Wansom said, "The fund will draw investments from other partners and aim to raise more than \$14.9 million in total." According to Wansom, the fund has more than 10 projects in the pipeline, including film projects for both theatrical releases and internet streaming platforms.<sup>153</sup> Of note, Tanawat Wansom was president of Thai state-run broadcaster MCOT from 2009 to 2011.<sup>154</sup>



### 2.3.3 Authoring opinion pieces for Thai media outlets

Several opinion pieces by PRC officials have appeared in Thai media. In June 2019, Chinese Ambassador to Thailand Lyu Jian, wrote an op-ed in *Khaosod* lamenting the effects of the United States' unilateral and protectionist economic and trade policies toward China, India, Thailand, and others. Ambassador Jian's op-ed contrasted US policy with China's approach to trade, invoking the Thai adage "Scratch my back and I will scratch yours" ("น้ำพึ่งเรือ เสือพึ่งป่า"), to describe China's "win-win" approach. He also invoked the Chinese saying that, "Neighbors are as closely related as lips and teeth" and reiterated Xi Jinping's statement that "China's door of opening up will not be closed and will only open even wider."<sup>155</sup> In a separate article, Ambassador Lyu reiterated the PRC stance on Xinjiang's "training and education centers" as being roundly positive and that any criticism has been "fake news" and "tricks to slander China."<sup>156</sup>

Ahead of the 35th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok in November of 2019, PRC Premier Li Keqiang authored a "Blueprint for East Asian Cooperation" that was published in the popular newspaper *Khaosod* in Thai. In the editorial, Li Keqiang asserted that BRI will bring greater connectivity—including a Kunming-to-Bangkok high-speed rail—and advocated strengthening bilateral cooperation in science and technology.<sup>157</sup> In the same editorial, Li also promoted the narrative that China is a responsible member of the international community. China, Li argued, abides by international agreements, including the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), which he suggests will turn contentious issues in the SCS into "another side of cooperation between the two sides [ASEAN and China]."<sup>158</sup>

The Chinese Embassy in Thailand promotes China's narratives in Thai media through press releases, which are reported on by local state-run outlets. For example, a March 2020 press release from the Chinese Embassy announced that China would "provide further assistance to Thailand in fighting the [COVID-19] epidemic." Deputy Chief of Mission Yang Xin said this would include "the Chinese government providing testing materials, masks, protective gear, as well as donations from Chinese enterprises and civil society organizations."<sup>159</sup>



### 2.3.4 Establishing a presence on social media in Thailand

Social media platforms are the most popular internet destinations for Thai people. The most popular platforms in 2018 were YouTube (98.8 percent); LINE, a messaging app (98.6 percent); Facebook (96 percent); Facebook Messenger (88.4 percent); Instagram (67.2 percent); Pantip, a Thai discussion forum (64.2 percent); Twitter (43 percent); and WhatsApp (10.6 percent).<sup>160</sup> Notably, Thailand has around 40 million YouTube users. Most Thai users use YouTube to listen to music (70 percent), watch TV reruns (51 percent), learn (33 percent), and browse products and services (24 percent).<sup>161</sup>

PRC media outlets have established a presence on social media in order to reach Thai internet users. CRI has a Facebook page targeted at Thai audiences. In Addition to CRI’s Thai Facebook presence, Xinhua has signed agreements to share content with other Thai Facebook pages, including “Shoot2China” and “UnderstandingChina.”<sup>162</sup>

Table 9. China’s presence in Thai social media

Facebook	Followers	Managed from
CRI Thai-language	2.45 million followers	China
UnderstandingChina	39 thousand followers	Thailand
Shoot2China	1.25 million followers	Thailand

Source: Facebook.



### 2.3.5 Investing in telecommunications infrastructure

Thailand’s government decided in early 2019 to partner with Huawei to build a national 5G network and develop the country’s “5G ecosystem.”<sup>163</sup> The Huawei-Thailand relationship goes back over a decade. In 2008, Thailand was the first Asian country where Huawei launched its “Seeds for the Future” training program. Huawei has “helped over 1,000 Thai ICT students” from leading Thai universities. In December 2012, Huawei Thailand signed an agreement with the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology (MICT), now the Ministry of Digital Economy and Society, to jointly develop professionals for the Thai ICT industry.<sup>164</sup> Media reports indicate that the decision was made based on Huawei’s prices and speed.<sup>165</sup> Three years earlier, the Thai government offered Huawei financial incentives for building its regional HQ in Bangkok.<sup>166</sup>

## 2.4 Attempting to Influence Thai media to promote China-friendly narratives

In addition to using its own state-run media to promote its narratives, China seeks to influence reporting by foreign media outlets and journalists. It does this by promoting censorship and seeking to shape the perceptions of foreign media professionals. There is evidence that Beijing is using the following tools to accomplish this in Thailand:

- Purchasing the right to shape content
- Hosting international media forums and conferences
- Hosting education and training programs for foreign media professionals



### 2.4.1 Purchasing the right to shape content

Chinese companies have found ways to circumvent Thai law in order to acquire media outlets in Thailand. This is quite possibly the most concerning aspect of China's efforts to shape the media environment in Thailand. As noted earlier in this report, Thai law places limits on foreign ownership of media outlets based in Thailand. The Broadcasting and Television Business Act of 2008 restricts foreign ownership of broadcast media companies to 25 percent.<sup>167</sup> In addition, the 2017 Constitution mandates that "the owner of a newspaper or other mass media shall be a Thai national."<sup>168</sup> However, it appears that large Chinese companies such as Global CAMG and Tencent have been able to establish de facto ownership of local Thai media outlets by registering subsidiaries in Thailand, with Thai nationals as local subsidiary owners.

According to experts, many Thai media outlets have been struggling financially in recent years. One expert noted that more Thai media outlets closed in 2019 than in any previous year in history. The economic downturn brought about by the global COVID-19 pandemic is likely to worsen this trend, making Chinese funding even more appealing to cash-strapped Thai media outlets.<sup>169</sup>

## Global CAMG acquisition of 103 Like FM

The Global CAMG Group—which broadcasts CRI content and is majority-owned by state-run CRI—has operated Bangkok’s 103 Like FM since January 2011 through a wholly owned subsidiary that is registered to two Thai businessmen—a Thai golf course operator and a fiber-optics company executive.<sup>170</sup> The station was contracted to the local CAMG subsidiary on a concession from the Royal Thai Army’s (RTA) radio communications department. The RTA gives private concession contracts as a means of generating revenue.<sup>171</sup> CAMG invested heavily to renovate the property and promote it on various social media platforms.<sup>172</sup> According to a 2011 *Bangkok Post* article, the venture between CAMG and the two Thai businessmen amounted to about 120 million baht (about USD\$3.9 million in 2011) for the radio station.<sup>173</sup>

According to the CAMG Group website, the station is committed to broadcasting “hit music and Chinese news in Thai” and broadcasts in Bangkok and the surrounding area to an audience of over 10 million listeners.<sup>174</sup> The station has a substantial social media presence, including 280,000 followers on Facebook, 15,000 followers on Instagram, and 20,000 subscribers on YouTube.<sup>175</sup> While the radio station broadcasts primarily “feel good” music and pop culture content, the news page of its website specifically highlights news pertaining to China and Thai-China relations.<sup>176</sup>

At first glance, the 103 Like FM website does not show any indication that it is part of China’s state-run media operation in Thailand. The station’s website features embedded background videos of live performances by Thai stars and its team of DJs, as well as links to music and entertainment events targeted toward youth audiences. The website’s homepage and non-news sections present a radio station with a pop culture focus (see Figure 7).<sup>177</sup> If the user navigates to the “News” section of the website, however, it becomes apparent that the station’s news coverage focuses exclusively on China and demonstrates a clear pro-China editorial bent (see Figure 8).

Figure 7. 103 Like FM website emphasizing Thai pop music and youth lifestyles



Source: CRI, "103 Like FM," accessed Feb. 14, 2020, <https://www.103likefm.com/activity/>.

Figure 8. 103 Like FM website's news section in Thai and English translation

<p>December 19, 2019</p> <p>ข่าวเมืองจีน</p> <p>“หนึ่งประเทศ สองระบบ” เป็นการประกันที่ดีที่สุดเพื่อรักษาความมั่นคงและความสงบสุขของมาเก๊า</p> <p>ผลิตภัณฑ์มวลรวมเพิ่มขึ้นจาก 15,000...</p> <p>December 19, 2019</p> <p>ข่าวเมืองจีน</p> <p>นายกฯ หลี่ เค่อเฉียง พบผู้ว่าเขตบริหารพิเศษฮ่องกงของจีน</p>	<p>December 19, 2019</p> <p>CHINA NEWS</p> <p>“One country, two systems” is the best insurance to maintain the stability and peace of Macau.</p> <p>Average GDP per person increased from 15,000 ...</p> <p>December 19, 2019 CHINA NEWS</p> <p>Prime Minister Li Keqiang meets the governor of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China.</p>	<p>December 19, 2019</p> <p>ข่าวเมืองจีน</p> <p>ชาวจีนในตุรกีประณามสหรัฐฯ ผ่านร่างกฎหมาย Xinjiang</p> <p>December 19, 2019</p> <p>ข่าวเมืองจีน</p> <p>บทวิเคราะห์: จีนยืนยันเศรษฐกิจมีเสถียรภาพและยังคงเติบโต</p>
<p>December 19, 2019</p> <p>CHINA NEWS</p> <p>President, See the governor Hong Kong Special Administrative Region</p>	<p>December 19, 2019</p> <p>CHINA NEWS</p> <p>2019.</p> <p>December 19, 2019</p> <p>CHINA NEWS</p> <p>Chinese people in Turkey condemn the United States. Passed the Xinjiang law bill</p> <p>December 19, 2019</p> <p>CHINA NEWS</p> <p>Analysis: China confirms stable economy and continues to grow</p>	

Source: “NEWS,” 103 Like FM, accessed Dec. 26, 2019, <https://www.103likefm.com/news/>.

## Tencent’s purchase of Sanook

Chinese tech giant Tencent’s acquisition of Thai online news outlet Sanook offers another example of how PRC-based companies circumvent Thai laws restricting foreign ownership of media outlets. In 2016, Tencent’s Thailand-registered branch purchased Sanook.<sup>178</sup> Sanook claims 30 million active monthly users and has over 3.4 million Facebook followers. Tencent General Manager Krittee Manoleehagul told the *Bangkok Post*, “Tencent regards Thailand as one of the group’s strategic countries outside of China.” For this reason, the company launched WeTV in Thailand as the first non-Chinese market for the video-on-demand app.<sup>179</sup>

## PRC investment in Thailand’s Chinese-language media

PRC media entities have also acquired minority stakes in Thailand’s Chinese-language media outlets. Prominent examples include *Sirinakorn*, *The Sing Sian Yer Pao Daily News*, and *The New Chinese Daily News*—all of which receive support from China.<sup>180</sup> According to a *Bangkok Post* report, China’s Nanfang Media Group acquired a 20 percent stake in *Sing Sian Yer Pao* in 2013.<sup>181</sup> The Chinese-language daily newspaper *Sing Sian Yer Pao* has the highest circulation for Chinese print media in Thailand, with a circulation of 90,000.<sup>182</sup>

Table 10. Ownership of Chinese-language media in Thailand

Outlet name	Description	Ownership
<i>Sirinakorn</i> (京华中原联合日报)	Print and online	Jitti Tangsithipakdee, president of the Thai-Chinese Chamber of commerce. Partners with PRC government; in-country mouthpiece for the CCP’s views. <sup>183</sup>
<i>The Sing Sian Yer Pao Daily News</i> (星暹日报)	Print and online	Joint venture between Thailand’s Sing Sian Daily Group (80%) and China’s Nanfang Daily Media Group (20%) <sup>184</sup>
<i>The New Chinese Daily News</i> (新中原报)	Print	State-owned enterprise China National Publications Import and Export Corporation (CNPIEC) <sup>185</sup>
<i>Tong Hua Daily News</i> (中华日报)	Print and online	Somnuk Kyavatanakij of Tong Hua Communications Public <sup>186</sup>
<i>Asia News Times</i> (亚洲日报)	Print and online	Dr. Sangchai Soththavarakul, chairman of Thailand Tio Chew Association <sup>187</sup>

Source: CNA.



The *Sirinakorn* CEO Chen Zhenzhi (陈振治) (also known as Jitti Tangsithpakdi) is also the president of the Thai-Chinese Chamber of Commerce. *Sirinakorn* is known to publish CCP views on various sensitive topics. For example, in an August 2019 interview with Xinhua, Chen Zhenzhi reiterated Beijing’s position on the 2019 Hong Kong protests, stating the following:<sup>188</sup>

- “I think there are outsiders orchestrating behind [the Hong Kong protests].”
- “I was there at the ceremony when Hong Kong returned to the motherland in 1997. I was so glad that finally Chinese people could manage Hong Kong by themselves.”
- “It is quite clear that the ‘one country, two systems’ principle is very successful.”
- “I think the international community should condemn those who orchestrated these violent protests. They are really ill-intended.”



## 2.4.2 Hosting international media forums and conferences

China organizes and/or hosts a variety of international media forums and conferences in which Thailand has participated. For example, China hosted the second ASEAN Media Roundtable in Beijing in October 2019. The roundtable’s participants included major Thai media outlets. Editor-in-chief of Thai state-run media outlet MCOT Watcharin Setakudan lauded the roundtable as a model of effective collaboration for China and ASEAN countries.<sup>189</sup> Also at the roundtable was Acting Director-General of Asia and Africa Services for China Media Group (CMG) An Xiaoyu, who said that CCTV is adopting “5G+8K+AI technologies” to support translations into regional languages—such as Thai—faster dissemination, and higher-quality video.<sup>190</sup> These types of forums and conferences also appear to serve as forums to expand content sharing. For example, on the sidelines of the 2019 ASEAN Media Roundtable, CCTV Video News Agency signed an agreement with MCOT to provide news material from China to Thailand.<sup>191</sup>

In addition, official CCP mouthpiece *People’s Daily* is a co-organizer of the annual Mekong-Lancang Cooperation Media Summit (*Lancang Jiang Meigong He Hezuo Meiti Fenghui*; 澜沧江湄公河合作媒体峰会). This summit for journalists and media executives from China and the Mekong countries has taken place in China and alternating Mekong country capitals since 2017.<sup>192</sup> The summit’s participants include Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Thai journalists as well as the deputy director-general of Thailand’s Government Public Relations Department, Tassanee Pholchaniko, attended the 2018 conference in Vientiane.<sup>193</sup>

China also holds conferences aimed at promoting Chinese-language media abroad, including Thailand. Nine journalists from across Thailand’s Chinese-language media attended the 10<sup>th</sup> Forum on the Global Chinese Language Media in October 2019 in Shijiazhuang.<sup>194</sup>



### 2.4.3 Hosting training programs and journalist trips

China has sponsored Thai media professionals' participation in training programs and trips to China. According to a 2019 AIDDATA report, China paid for Thai journalists to visit China at least four times between 2002 and 2017.<sup>195</sup> In addition, China hosts events for media professionals in Thailand. Examples include the following:

- ***Belt and Road media training in Bangkok, January 2018.*** Over 300 professionals from the Chinese-language media in Thailand participated in the event, which was jointly sponsored by China Huaqiao University (*Zhongguo Huaqiao Daxue*; 中国华侨大学) and the Thai-China Correspondents Association (*Tai Hua Tongxun Jizhe Xiehui*; 泰华通讯记者协会).<sup>196</sup> During the event, faculty members from Huaqiao University, Peking University, and the Confucius Institute at Chulalongkorn University gave lectures on “The Development of Overseas Chinese Media in the Context of the ‘Belt and Road’,” “Similarities and Differences in Thai and Chinese Cultures,” and “News Writing Practices.”<sup>197</sup>
- ***Chinese language training for journalists, September 2014 and 2016.*** The training was supported by the China Cultural Center in Bangkok. Participants came from more than a dozen mainstream Thai media organizations, including Thai National Radio and TV, PPTV, Daily News, Bangkok News, Voice of the Northeast, and Thailand World Journal.<sup>198</sup>

China also appears to support professional media associations in Thailand, such as the Thai Journalists Association (TJA) and the Thai-Chinese Journalists Association. According to local media experts, the TJA receives a significant portion of its funding from the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok. The PRC Embassy also offers Thai journalists all-expense paid “cultural field trips.”<sup>199</sup> The Thai-Chinese Journalists Association, also supported by the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok, is a media guild focused on promoting “a better understanding of China” among the Thai populace, and works to introduce more content published by Chinese official news outlets to Thai audiences. Chairman of the association Chaiwat Wanichwattana, who has criticized “distorted” Western media coverage of China, has worked with PRC Ambassador to Thailand Lyu Jian to improve coordination between Chinese state media and Thai outlets.<sup>200</sup> Of note, the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok reportedly forced an international NGO’s Thailand office to cancel a planned event on Hong Kong.<sup>201</sup>

## 2.5 Using entertainment to promote Chinese narratives

In recent years, Beijing has sought to expand its footprint in the global entertainment industry as a means of promoting a positive image of China to global audiences beyond the news media. In Thailand, there is evidence that China is doing this by exporting Chinese-produced entertainment. China also promotes its own social media platforms; however, as discussed below, the evidence suggests that Chinese social media platforms have not yet become popular in Thailand.



### 2.5.1 Exporting Chinese-produced entertainment

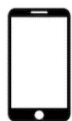
Some Chinese-produced entertainment has made it to Thai screens. The first Chinese drama aired on mainstream Thai Television in 2015, when the Chinese show *Beijing Youth* was dubbed by Guangxi Television into Thai and broadcast on free-to-air MCOT Channel 9. The head of MCOT at the time, Sivaporn Chomsuwan, said that the series “enjoyed great popularity since it is suitable for families to watch together, and helped Thai audiences understand Chinese youth and their ways of life.” He further asserted that it had “attracted a large number of Thai fans” and had “enriched Sino-Thai cultural exchanges and cooperation.”<sup>202</sup>

Since 2015, more Chinese television shows have been dubbed into Thai for local television audiences. Chinese media portray these programs as popular among Thai audiences. *People’s Daily*, for instance, claims that Chinese costume dramas such as *The Story of Yanxi Palace* have been “the epitome of popular Chinese TV programs in the region, [including] Thailand.”<sup>203</sup> Similarly, a *China Daily* article published in the Thai newspaper *The Nation* likewise claimed that Chinese dramas were growing in popularity in Thailand, saying that China’s television programs such as *Palace: The Lock Heart Jade*—a royal romance series set in China’s Qing Dynasty—are “spreading their wings across Southeast Asia [including] Thailand.”<sup>204</sup>

Figure 9. Ad for Beijing Youth broadcast on MCOT Channel 9 in Thai



Source: Pan Yingqiu, "Chinese Dramas Reach Thailand," China Report ASEAN, Apr. 13, 2017, accessed Mar. 18, 2020, <https://chinareportasean.com/2017/04/13/chinese-dramas-reach-thailand-china-thailand/>.

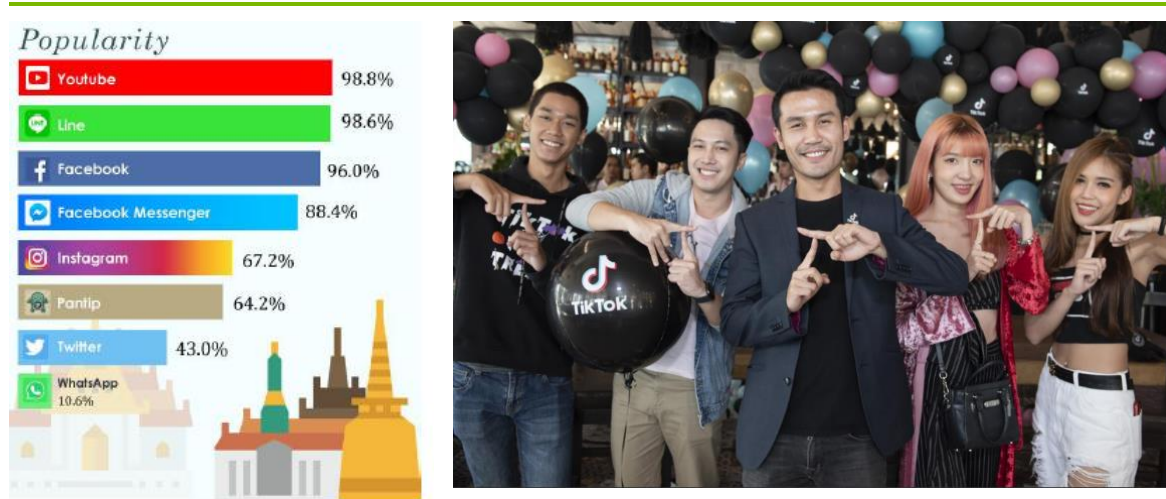


## 2.5.2 Promoting PRC-controlled social media platforms

Chinese social media applications have not yet surpassed other social media apps in popularity among Thais. Of the eight most popular social media platforms in Thailand in 2018, none is PRC-controlled. According to the Electronic Transactions Development Agency's (EDTA) survey on internet users in Thailand in 2018, YouTube, LINE,

and Facebook are the most popular platforms.<sup>205</sup> Within the last year however, TikTok has exploded in popularity. According to 2019 data collected by a digital marketing firm, TikTok was downloaded by one in seven mobile users in Thailand.<sup>206</sup> Local media experts confirmed that TikTok had become a very important social media platform in Thailand by mid-2020. The *Bangkok Post* reported in 2019 that TikTok parent company ByteDance Co set up an office in Thailand in late 2018.<sup>207</sup> WeChat parent company Tencent does not typically release user data by country; however, according to a 2019 article in *The Nation*, WeChat has been used sparingly in Thailand and mainly by those with links to China, but its popularity appears to be increasing.<sup>208</sup>

Figure 10. Popular social media platforms in Thailand in 2018; 2019 TikTok ad



Source: Electronic Transactions Development Agency, "Survey on Internet Users in Thailand in 2018," EDTA, <https://blog.infoquest.co.th/iqmedialink/free-download-thailand-media-landscape-2018/>; Suchit Leesa-Nguansuk, "TikTok seeks cash from ads," *Bangkok Post*, Aug. 1, 2019, accessed Mar. 31, 2020, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/business/1722231/tiktok-seeks-cash-from-ads>.

## 3. Assessing the Impact of Chinese Narratives

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### 3.1 Reach and resonance

This report offers an understanding of the variety and scope of Beijing’s efforts to shape the information environment in Thailand, but should not be viewed as a comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of China’s efforts. Such an assessment would require extensive polling data and sentiment analysis that goes beyond the scope of this report and is difficult to conduct during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, during the course of our research, we did identify several factors appear to affect the reach and resonance of PRC narratives in Thailand. These include the following:

***Expressions of anti-Chinese sentiment surged online amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the #MilkTeaAlliance movement.*** Local media experts noted that Thai netizens<sup>ii</sup> directed anger and fear about COVID-19 towards China in a “surge of anti-Chinese sentiment” during the onset of the pandemic in early 2020.<sup>209</sup> Also online, ongoing social media “hashtag” movements such as #MilkTeaAlliance (a solidarity movement between Thailand, Hong Kong, and Taiwan) amplify anti-Beijing and antiauthoritarian sentiment, which may also blunt China’s attempts to promote its narratives to Thai audiences.

***The Thai people and Thai government’s reluctance to fully embrace BRI likely will lessen the effectiveness of PRC narratives aimed at promoting the initiative.*** Thailand’s government under Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha has welcomed some BRI-related infrastructure development and financing, such as the Thai segment of the Kunming-Laos-Bangkok high-speed rail.<sup>210</sup> However, Thailand has taken the lead in creating a regional infrastructure development fund within ACMECS to lessen reliance on Chinese investment in the region and provide an alternative to China for regional development financing. According to the Deputy Permanent Secretary of Thailand’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs Arthayudh Srisamoot, Thailand is leading the fund because “Many of the countries in the region, while they welcome investment from certain countries, they want to keep a balance and not rely on only one country.”<sup>211</sup> With Thailand promoting its BRI alternative, Thai media—including key actors such as *Khaosod*, *Matichon*, CH7 TV, and others—devotes regular coverage to the non-

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<sup>ii</sup> A netizen is a user of the internet, often one who is actively engaged in uncensored online discussions of political and social issues.

China investment option, which may reduce the effectiveness of PRC efforts to promote pro-BRI narratives in the media.<sup>212</sup>

Additionally, local media experts note that Thai media outlets have published critical reporting on BRI-related projects in Thailand and other countries in the region. Examples include reports that Chinese organized crime has followed Chinese investment in casinos in Sihanoukville, Cambodia, as well as reports that BRI projects do not create jobs for Thais because PRC companies bring their own workers to Thailand instead of hiring Thai workers.<sup>213</sup>

***Public opinion data show that the Thai public's views of China are mixed.*** According to a 2020 public opinion survey of 95 Thai citizens conducted by ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute and the ASEAN Studies Center, respondents appear slightly more willing to side with China (over the US), but simultaneously express concern over its growing influence.

- In a hypothetical scenario where Thailand was forced to align itself with either China or the US, 52 percent of respondents chose to align with China.<sup>214</sup>
- Concern about China's role in Thailand is evident, with 88 percent of respondents worried about China's growing political and strategic influence in Thailand.<sup>215</sup>
- Only 6.3 percent of respondents had confidence that China will "provide leadership to maintain the rules-based order and uphold international law."<sup>216</sup>
- When asked which foreign languages are the most useful and beneficial for work and professional development, 40 percent of Thai respondents chose Mandarin, whereas 97 percent of respondents selected English.<sup>217</sup>

These mixed views suggest that Thai audiences may not be fully receptive to pro-PRC narratives.

Figure 11. Popular Thai media promoting ACMECS as BRI alternative



Source: “‘Big Tuu’ [Prayut Chan-o-cha] Opens the ‘ACMECS’ Summit, Inviting Members to Join the Fund (Clip),” ‘บิ๊กตู่’ เปิดประชุมสุดยอด ‘แอกเมคส์’ ขานสมาชิกลงขันกองทุน (คลิป), Matichon, มติชน, Jun. 16, 2018, accessed Mar. 31, 2020, [https://www.matichon.co.th/politics/news\\_1000647](https://www.matichon.co.th/politics/news_1000647); “[Deputy PM] Somkid presents the sufficiency economy policy to develop the ACMECS group,” ‘สมคิด’ เสนอนำปรัชญาเศรษฐกิจพอเพียงพัฒนากลุ่ม ACMECS, Khaosod, ข่าวสด, Oct. 26, 2016, accessed Mar. 31, 2020, [https://www.khaosod.co.th/economics/news\\_69869](https://www.khaosod.co.th/economics/news_69869).

**Thai media has expressed concern about the prospect of Thailand becoming subservient to China.** Thailand’s most important daily newspaper, *Khaosod*, with its 950,000 daily circulation and 754,975 average daily online readers, responded to Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha’s November 2019 meeting with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang by publishing an article titled “Is Thailand’s Vassalage to China Making a Comeback?” The opinion piece in Thailand’s most popular news outlet questioned the intent of PM Prayut Chan-o-cha’s rhetorical comparison of Thailand and China as an ant to a lion. The article argued, “Thailand should always be a good friend of China, as a much smaller partner, while fostering better relations with the EU, Japan, South Korea, India, the US, and other nations to neutralize China’s influence.”<sup>218</sup> Sentiments like this in popular Thai media may continue to blunt the effectiveness of China’s efforts to promote its narratives.



### **What can the international community do to support the integrity of Thailand's information environment?**

During our discussions with Thai media professionals and experts, they identified ways that the international community could help to support the integrity of Thailand's information environment. These include the following:

- ***Provide financial support to independent media outlets.*** Local independent media outlets—especially those outside of Bangkok—struggled to survive financially even before the COVID-19 induced economic downturn. Now, local media experts express concern that the compounded financial pressures will make Chinese funding even more attractive, and suggested that the international community could provide alternative sources of funding.
- ***Develop and implement media literacy programs for the general public.*** Providing consumers with the skills to find, identify, evaluate, and use information, especially on social media, will empower audiences to form views and opinions based on truthful information.
- ***Provide technical skills training for media professionals.*** Technical skills to improve digital security, visualization of data, and web scraping are increasingly necessary to be an effective independent journalist in Thailand's information environment.

## **3.2 Issues to watch**

This report has detailed the various tactics, techniques, and tools that China is employing to shape the media environment in Thailand. Based on these findings, key issues to watch include the following:

- ***Signs that Thailand's media industry is in financial distress.*** According to experts, many Thai media outlets have been struggling financially in recent years. The global economic downturn triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to exacerbate these financial pressures, creating more opportunities for PRC investment.
- ***Continued PRC efforts to circumvent Thai law to acquire more local media outlets.*** This issue bears careful monitoring because Thai citizens may be unwittingly consuming pro-PRC propaganda. Observers should watch for signs that PRC entities have acquired ownership stakes in local media outlets, such as the appearance of the logos of PRC state-run media outlets at the bottom of Thai news outlets' webpages.

- ***Indications that Xinhua's Thai news coverage is becoming more popular among local audiences.*** Beijing intends for Xinhua Thai to serve as an alternative to Western wire services as a source of international news content. Some local outlets reportedly regard its content as “filler” because it is relatively inexpensive or free and is comparatively low quality. If Xinhua Thai content begins showing up on the front pages of key local outlets, this could indicate its appeal to local audiences is increasing.
- ***Increasing PRC media reporting on local events in Thailand.*** PRC media's Thai-language reporting tends to be Sino-centric, focusing on China's activities abroad rather than domestic events in Thailand. This limits its appeal to Thai audiences who are interested in local news. PRC media outlets, including Xinhua Thai, may begin to report on local events—even those that do not involve China—in order to increase their appeal to Thai audiences.
- ***Greater PRC efforts to penetrate Thailand's entertainment market.*** To date, Chinese-produced entertainment directed toward Thailand appears to have gained less traction than it has in other Southeast Asian countries, which Beijing may view as a shortcoming in its effort to bolster its “soft power” in Thailand. If PRC entertainment companies engage in more joint production with local Thai media companies, this could suggest that China is actively seeking to remedy this shortcoming and increase its footprint in Thailand's entertainment market.

# Appendix A: China Radio International on Facebook

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China Radio International (CRI) has a noteworthy presence on Facebook in the five Mekong countries. Facebook is used by CRI in each of these countries to broadcast content produced by Chinese state media outlets in local languages.

The reach of CRI to Facebook audiences is indicated, by follower numbers, in Table 11.

Table 11. China Radio International on Facebook in the Mekong countries

Country	Facebook Account	Followers	Facebook Page URL
<b>Cambodia</b>	CCFR Beijing (China-Cambodian Friendship Radio)	1,214,192	<a href="https://facebook.com/ccfrbeijing/">facebook.com/ccfrbeijing/</a>
<b>Laos</b>	CRI-FM 93 Vientiane	1,185,992	<a href="https://facebook.com/crifm93/">facebook.com/crifm93/</a>
<b>Myanmar</b>	CRI Myanmar	1,182,951	<a href="https://facebook.com/myanmar.cri/">facebook.com/myanmar.cri/</a>
<b>Thailand</b>	China Face	2,453,364	<a href="https://facebook.com/ChinafacecriThai/">facebook.com/ChinafacecriThai/</a>
<b>Vietnam</b>	Đài Phát thanh Quốc tế Trung Quốc	1,961,314	<a href="https://facebook.com/criviet">facebook.com/criviet</a>
<b>Global</b>	China Plus News	20,941,191	<a href="https://facebook.com/chinaplusnews/">facebook.com/chinaplusnews/</a>

Source: Facebook, CNA.

## Appendix B: China's global narratives

<p><b>China is peaceful</b></p>	<p>China portrays itself as an inherently peaceful country that would never intentionally start a conflict.<sup>219</sup></p>
<p>How it supports PRC objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Promotes a positive image of China:</b> Portrays China as peaceful and non-threatening</li> <li>• <b>Counters critics:</b> Counters concerns about the rapid growth of China's military power and regional assertiveness</li> <li>• <b>Supports China's foreign policy objectives:</b> Seeks to foster receptivity to China's diplomatic overtures</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Cooperation with China is beneficial</b></p>	<p>China claims its approach to cooperation with other countries is mutually beneficial and "win-win."<sup>220</sup></p>
<p>How it supports PRC objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Promotes a positive image of China:</b> Portrays China as generous and helpful</li> <li>• <b>Counters critics:</b> Counters criticism of China's economic aid and investment practices as being exploitive</li> <li>• <b>Supports China's foreign policy objectives:</b> Seeks to foster support for cooperation with China on a range of issues, including economic, technological, and security matters</li> </ul>	
<p><b>China is a responsible member of the international community</b></p>	<p>China portrays itself as an upholder of the international system that provides public goods such as contributions to peacekeeping efforts, support to antipiracy missions in the Gulf of Aden, and disaster relief.<sup>221</sup></p>
<p>How it supports PRC objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Promotes a positive image of China:</b> Portrays China as a responsible and active contributor to the international system</li> <li>• <b>Counters critics:</b> Counters accusations that China is a revisionist power that seeks to reshape the international system; also counters concerns about the Chinese military's expanding overseas operations</li> <li>• <b>Supports China's foreign policy objectives:</b> Seeks to foster support for China's expanding global presence and position China as a leader in the international community</li> </ul>	
<p><b>China's approach to development and international affairs is different from that of the US/West</b></p>	<p>China often contrasts its approach to development and foreign policy with that of the US and other Western nations.<sup>222</sup></p>
<p>How it supports PRC objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Promotes a positive image of China:</b> Portrays China as better than the US and the West</li> <li>• <b>Counters critics:</b> Deflects criticism by the United States and other Western countries, often by seeking to delegitimize their policies, positions, and activities</li> <li>• <b>Supports China's foreign policy objectives:</b> Portrays China as a more desirable partner</li> </ul>	

Source: CNA.

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# Abbreviations

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ANI	Asia News International (India)
ANN	Asia News Network
APTN	Associated Press Television News
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCA	Computer Crimes Act
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCTV	China Central Television
CGTN	China Global Television Network
CH	channel
CMG	China Media Group
COVID-19	2019 coronavirus disease
CPJ	Committee to Protect Journalists
CRI	China Radio International
DOC	Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea
EDTA	Electronic Transactions Development Agency
FCCT	Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand
FDI	foreign direct investment
ICT	information and communications technology
IMS	International Media Support
LMC	Lancang-Mekong Cooperative
MCOT	Mass Communication Organization of Thailand
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MICT	Ministry of Information and Communication Technology
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NBTC	National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission
NCPO	National Council for Peace and Order
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NHK	Japan's national broadcasting organization
ODA	Overseas Development Assistance
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PM	prime minister
PRD	Public Relations Department
RFA	Radio Free Asia
RFI	Radio France International
ROK	Republic of Korea (South Korea)

RSF	Reporters Sans Frontières (Reporters Without Borders)
SBS	Special Broadcasting Service (Australia)
SCIO	State Council Information Office
SCS	South China Sea
SNTV	Sport News Television
TNN	Thai National News
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
VOA	Voice of America
VPN	virtual private network



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