



2023-24 WILSON CHINA FELLOWSHIP

Sponsored Press Trips as an Avenue of Foreign Influence

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Abstract

Shaping American discourse about China is an increasingly important objective for Beijing. Beijing does so, in part, by bringing American journalists to China. I identified the dates and participants for every sponsored media trip to China between 2011 and 2018 disclosed by the lobbying firms that helped organize them in the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) archive. Beijing schedules these trips, I find, when international media coverage is typically most damaging to the CCP: the anniversary of the Tiananmen massacre; the annual meeting of the rubber-stamp National People's Congress; and diplomatic crises, among others. Using tools from computational linguistics, I show that these trips shape subsequent coverage, even in America's newspapers of record. Participating media outlets depicted China's rise as less threatening and pivoted from Beijing's long record of human rights violations to its openness to economic cooperation with Washington. Over time, this essay suggests, Beijing's media outreach strategy may render Americans more comfortable with its bid for global leadership.

Policy Implications and Key Takeaways

- Media outlets should not participate in trips sponsored by foreign governments, either directly or through affiliates.
- Congress should modernize lobbying transparency legislation in several important respects.

Introduction

Global public relations campaigns, many scholars have suggested, are key to autocratic survival in the 21st century.² These campaigns, as Alexander Dukalskis put it, enable the world’s autocrats to “cultivate a positive image of themselves in the United States in order to bolster their internal and/or external security.”³ For Beijing, this is important in an era in which American views of China are declining precipitously. In 2024, 81 percent of Americans view China unfavorably, compared to only 35 percent in 2005.⁴ Public opinion on China matters profoundly for China policy because politicians campaign on voters’ perceived preferences and respond to their concerns in office.⁵ This has contributed to a bipartisan consensus on the importance of competing with, and even containing, China.

In this environment, foreign public relations campaigns are crucial for Beijing. Beijing’s strategy aims to put a “floor” on US-China competition: in particular, to avert American containment policies that would impede China’s ability to rise and the prospect of kinetic conflict, which China is still not favored to win. Beijing has long invested in campaigns to influence foreign perceptions of China, but its efforts expanded as public opinion on China soured. By 2017, I find, some 90 percent of Chinese lobbying expenditures disclosed to the Department of Justice were earmarked for targeting media outlets, think tanks, and universities.

Sponsored press trips, sometimes called “junkets,” are an understudied element of this strategy. Beijing aims to bring foreign journalists to China to better tell the “China story.” In 2021, for example, *China Daily* launched the “Edgar Snow Newsroom,” so named for the American journalist who effusively praised Mao Zedong even in the midst of the great famine. Among the strategy’s key tools is escorting “international friends”—especially foreign journalists—around China.⁶ Their subsequent reporting, *China Daily* chief editor Zhou Shuchun explained, would help record “the wonderful China story and reveal a rich and varied, vivid and multidimensional image of China.”⁷ While this essay focuses on American media outlets, this is a global phenomenon. Beijing and its affiliates offer sponsored press trips and training courses to journalists across Africa, Asia, and elsewhere, where their effects may be even more pronounced.⁸

The remainder of this essay traces the evolution of Beijing’s strategies to influence foreign public opinion, visualizes Beijing’s pivot to media lobbying

since the early 2010s, and assesses the timing and impact of sponsored press trips on American media coverage. The essay concludes with recommendations for journalists and Congress about how to ensure balanced coverage and enhance transparency.

The Evolution of the CCP's Outward-Facing Propaganda

Beijing's interest in shaping foreign perceptions of China is longstanding. As Larry Diamond and Orville Schell document, in the 1950s Beijing used shortwave radio broadcasts and foreign-language newspapers to promote socialist revolution worldwide.⁹ After an interlude due to the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, in the 1980s Deng Xiaoping reinvigorated these efforts. He launched the External Propaganda Small Group and founded or re-opened over 100 foreign propaganda outlets, including *China Daily*, *Voice of China*, and the overseas editions of *People's Daily*. In 1983, Xinhua began sending content abroad.¹⁰ After the Tiananmen Square massacre led the world to condemn the "butchers of Beijing," Beijing opened the State Council Information Office in 1991 to improve China's image through public diplomacy. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, documents Anne-Marie Brady, Beijing's outward-facing propaganda aimed to undermine support for dissidents, the Falungong, and Taiwanese democracy among the diaspora and to build support for investment and trade with China.¹¹

In the early 2000s, Chinese scholars articulated the intellectual foundations for Beijing's new global public relations campaign. "Public relations is about setting public discourse, public opinion, and the general discursive atmosphere," said Professor Zhao Hao-sheng at a speech at Tsinghua University.¹² Since most Americans knew relatively little about China, he reasoned, they were open to persuasion. Zhao advised Beijing to work through American media outlets. His argument is worth quoting at length:

America is a country where public opinion determines everything. The power of public discourse rests entirely within the hands of a few major media organizations, primarily consisting of the four major television channels (NBC, ABC, CBS, and CNN) and the four

major newspapers (*Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *LA Times*, and *Wall Street Journal*), as well as a few think tanks and university research centers. Average Americans, including most members of Congress and government officials, possess limited knowledge of China. Most of their knowledge of China comes from these media sources and research organizations. For instance, if the *Washington Post* publishes an article attacking China's family planning policy, it will form the basis of knowledge of a US congressperson, who will issue a statement according to this report. The statement will then be published by his local newspaper, thus influencing American public opinion. This is how public opinion is formed in America.¹³

For Zhao Kejin, deputy director of Tsinghua University's Center on US-China Relations, Beijing confronted a strategic imperative: countering the content in most American media outlets, which presented Beijing "a 'communist state' that lacks internal legitimacy, runs rampant with corruption, abuses human rights, suppresses dissent, and does not abide by international law, though it is growing rapidly in economic and military prowess."¹⁴ The solution, he argued, was for Beijing to "establish a network of experts" in the United States comprised of political scientists, scholars, and commentators who can combat negative images of China." This "team of 'iron mouths' and 'iron pens'," he argued, "can 'persuade' the American public by writing a large number of articles supporting China in mainstream American media and participating in television interviews."¹⁵

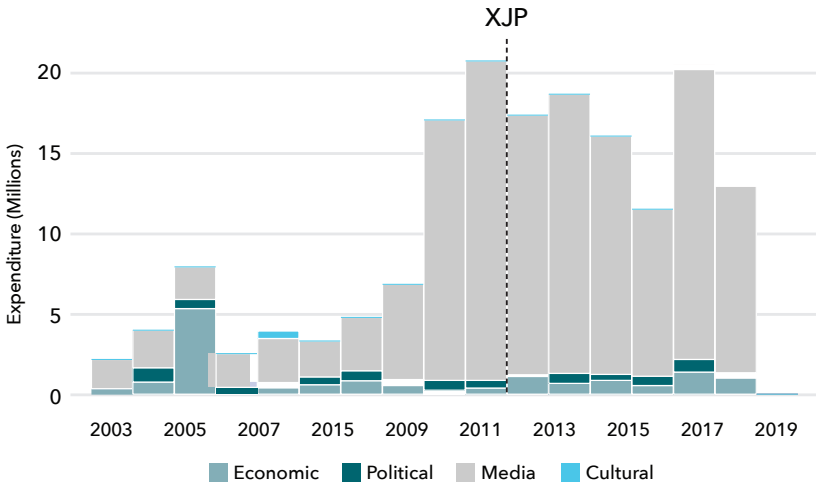
Hu Jintao soon launched the Grand Overseas Propaganda Campaign, embracing Joseph Nye's concept of "soft power."¹⁶ The goal, for Hu, was to "make socialist ideology more attractive and cohesive" and introduce the CCP's "outstanding achievements and distinguished scholars to the world."¹⁷ Hu reportedly earmarked \$7 billion for the campaign. As Diamond and Schell document, Xinhua expanded its coverage to seven languages and opened 80 new bureaus, doubling those in the United States.¹⁸ China Radio International (CRI) began leasing local Western radio stations.¹⁹ *China Daily* began purchasing \$250,000 advertisements in important American media outlets like the *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Des Moines Register* to feature pro-China content that appeared as though it had been published by the news outlet itself.²⁰

Xi Jinping, upon taking power in 2012, set his sights higher: to “develop a voice in international discourse that matches with China’s comprehensive national strength and international status.” Before he took power, the FARA disclosures filed by Beijing’s lobbyists focused overwhelmingly on trade issues: securing membership in the World Trade Organization, for instance, or facilitating market access for leading Chinese firms. By 2017, some 90 percent of Beijing’s FARA-reportable expenditures focused on cultivating media outlets, think tanks, and academic institutions. In 2018, Xi centralized Beijing’s various outward-facing propaganda initiatives under the new Voice of China organization.²¹ Xi also increased its budget even further. The CCP, David Shambaugh estimates, now spends around \$10 billion annually on “soft power” initiatives, over ten times Washington’s annual public diplomacy expenditures.²² Its reach expanded accordingly. CGTN now reaches some 30 million American households.²³

Tracking CCP Media Lobbying

To explore how Beijing’s lobbying strategy evolved, my research team coded all FARA disclosures filed by its lobbyists between 2003 and 2019. These disclosures reveal more than 10,000 outreach activities on Beijing’s behalf, encompassing everything from emails to and meetings with policymakers, various forms of outreach to media outlets, and campaign contributions to candidates for elected office. Figure 1 visualizes Beijing’s annual lobbying expenditures. The dashed vertical line in 2012 marks Xi Jinping’s rise to power.

In the early 2010s, Figure 1 shows, Beijing’s lobbying efforts focused on economic and political issues, especially securing market access for Chinese firms. The 2005 campaign to permit the state-owned oil firm China National Offshore Oil Corporation to purchase US energy company Unocal, for instance, drove an important spike in lobbying. Much of this lobbying focused on global trade and market access issues and was similar to that undertaken by other countries. In the early 2010s, as US-China relations worsened, Beijing’s lobbying efforts shifted towards media and cultural initiatives: distributing propaganda in the United States and hosting American journalists and experts in China. Previously negligible, these expanded dramatically. One of Beijing’s lobbyists, BLJ Worldwide, described

FIGURE 1. The evolution of Chinese lobbying expenditures

Xi’s strategic pivot succinctly: to “develop and foster a community of like-minded experts on US-China relations.”²⁴

BLJ’s disclosures illustrate how Beijing’s lobbyists pursue that objective. BLJ Worldwide regularly arranges trips to Beijing for scholars, journalists, and legislators. It organizes programs with numerous American think tanks.²⁵ It even “[arranges] for media campaigns in national and local US sources, focusing on particular areas that can benefit from US cooperation with China.”²⁶ BLJ Worldwide’s CEO, Peter Brown, holds frequent private dinners at his home attended by representatives from prominent news outlets like ABC News, Bloomberg, CNN, *The Economist*, *Financial Times*, Forbes Asia, *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, Reuters, and *Wall Street Journal*. BLJ Worldwide holds similar parties in Washington and New York. These efforts constitute a form of image laundering: to secure more favorable media coverage and shape conversations among policymakers and observers. In crafting this strategy, BLJ Worldwide drew on its work for other repressive governments. BLJ Worldwide previously represented the Syrian government in the midst

of the civil war—it secured a *Vogue* cover story describing Syria’s first lady as the “rose of the desert”—and Qatar’s bid for the 2022 World Cup, marred by corruption and human rights abuses.²⁷ Though my period of analysis ends in 2018, FARA data tracked by Open Secrets suggests that Chinese lobbying has more than tripled since then. The issue of Beijing’s image laundering is becoming more pressing over time, not less.²⁸

Sponsored Media Trips

Sponsored trips to China for American journalists represent a key part of Beijing’s foreign public relations campaign. These trips are typically organized on Beijing’s behalf by the China-US Exchange Foundation (CUSEF), a Hong Kong-based NGO that was founded in 2008 by C.H. Tung, who became Hong Kong’s first chief executive after the handover.²⁹ These trips typically last two weeks, feature meetings with government officials and business leaders, and often include cultural outings and trips to secondary cities.

Sponsored press trips are surprisingly common. Between 2011 and 2018—the period for which trip dates were available in the FARA archive—I identified 16 trips attended by 47 total media outlets. Each trip is attended by journalists from around three to six media outlets, encompassing regional newspapers and America’s newspapers of record. Journalists participate for a variety of reasons. Some participants, one journalist told me, believe CUSEF is genuinely independent. Others expect the trips to portray Beijing positively but believe they can see through the spin.³⁰ All value the access the trip may confer. Although the trips formally entail no costs to participants, many media outlets have ethical guidelines that require the outlet or journalist to pay all associated costs in the interest of unbiased coverage.

FARA records offer a unique opportunity to evaluate the timing and effects of Beijing’s sponsored media trips. Two key results emerge. First, trips are scheduled when American media outlets ordinarily cover the CCP most critically: the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre, most notably, but also the annual meeting of the National People’s Congress (NPC), a rubber stamp parliament with virtually no power which Beijing fashions as an exercise in genuine democracy. This propagandist calendar makes sense. Beijing’s media trips aim to shape subsequent coverage by casting China’s rise

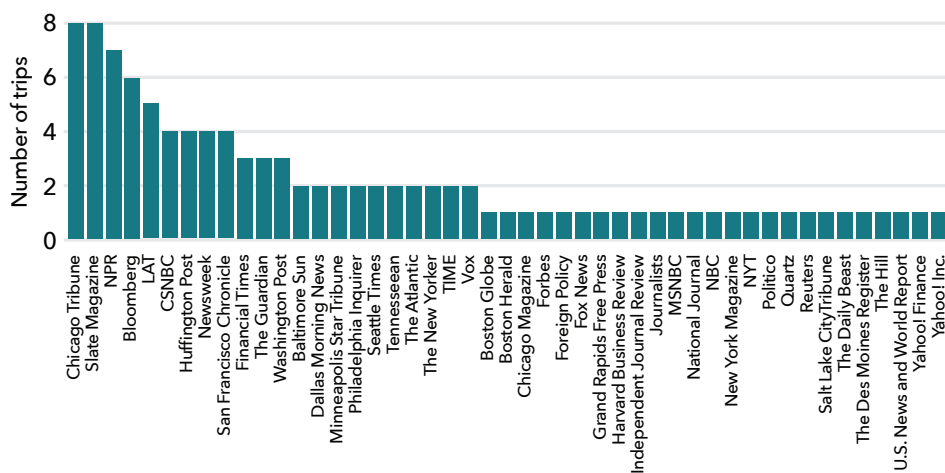
as unthreatening to American interests and Washington's push towards containment as undermining the global economy.

Second, these trips are remarkably successful. I use tools from computational linguistics to measure how the trips affected participants' coverage of China. As a comparison set, I analyze coverage of China in American media outlets that did not participate on a given trip, but which participated on a trip at some other time. This is an ideal comparison set because it includes outlets that were not opposed to participating in principle, but did not receive the public relations treatment at that point in time, perhaps because they were not invited or had other priorities. In all, I compare over 15,000 articles published by US media outlets that participated on sponsored press trips to China to over 26,000 articles published by US media outlets that did not participate on the same trips, but which participated at some other time. Participating media outlets, I show, cast China's rise as less threatening, precisely as Beijing would have them. Coverage pivoted away from areas of tension between Beijing and Washington—like military rivalry and the CCP's long record of human rights abuses—and toward prospects for economic cooperation. These effects persisted for some three months.

Precisely why these trips shape media coverage remains an open question, which my observational data is unable to fully address. The available evidence, however, suggests the possibility of recency bias: the tendency for individuals to overemphasize the importance of recent information compared to older information. Recency bias has been shown to favor candidates in the "last slot" in contexts as different as courtroom arguments and singing contests.³¹ It also induces journalists who are embedded in conflict zones to unintentionally favor the side with which they are embedded.³² I suggest it leads American journalists, after they participate in sponsored press trips, to downplay Beijing's military might and human rights abuses and emphasize its contribution to the global economy, consistent with the pro-Beijing framing intended by trip organizers.

Participants

Beijing's media trips provide an uncommon opportunity to probe its calendar of outward-facing propaganda and measure its effects. The FARA legislation, introduced above, requires Beijing's agents to disclose their activities

FIGURE 2. Participants on all sponsored media trips, by frequency

on its behalf in extraordinary detail. Beijing’s media trips are generally organized by CUSEF, but, in Washington, CUSEF enlists BLJ Worldwide to handle the logistics. Since BLJ Worldwide’s activities are subject to FARA disclosure, there is an extraordinary record of the trips themselves: when they were scheduled, what outlets attended, and more.

Between 2011 and 2018, the FARA archives report 16 sponsored trips to China for American journalists, which generally included between three and six media outlets. Figure 2 shows the participants, scaled by how often they attended. The most frequent participants were *Chicago Tribune* and *Slate Magazine*, which each participated in eight trips. Bloomberg, CNBC, Huffington Post, *LA Times*, *Newsweek*, NPR, and *San Francisco Chronicle* were also frequent participants, joining between 4 and 7 trips. Other notable participants include America’s newspapers of record, including *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. But Beijing equally targets regional newspapers, magazines, websites, and television stations. Strikingly, unlike RT, which routinely targets more partisan outlets,³³ virtually all of Beijing’s targets represent the mainstream media.

Timeline

BLJ Worldwide reported the precise dates of six of the 16 trips disclosed in the FARA archives. Of these, three coincided with the anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, widely acknowledged as the most politically sensitive time of the year. In Washington, Members of Congress routinely schedule testimony from survivors of the massacre, human rights lawyers, and other Chinese dissidents. Globally, media outlets commemorate the massacre with various retrospectives and updated, generally negative, assessments of the status of human rights in China.³⁴ The CCP appears to intend to counter this otherwise negative media coverage with sponsored trips.

The next most common driver: the annual meeting of China's rubber stamp parliament, the National People's Congress (NPC), which is held each March. The CCP's outward-facing propaganda apparatus casts it as an exercise in democracy. The English edition of the *People's Daily* put it this way: "The annual meetings have showed the international community how China's democracy is an extensive and true democracy that works".³⁵ Beijing recruits foreigners to make the absurdities more credible to foreign audiences.³⁶ During the 2018 NPC meeting, Xinhua hired Colin Linneweber, a Chicago sports journalist, to visit China and, while there, explain "Chinese democracy" to Western democracies. Beijing's propaganda apparatus promoted the clip widely on social media. One excerpt:

It is widely acknowledged that a key to China's success is its system of democracy, which results in political stability and vitality...You can see how the Chinese democracy works by following an annual event that takes place in Beijing, the 'two sessions.'...In Chinese, democracy is called *minzhu*, and it means that the people are the masters of the country. But how exactly does China's democratic system work, and how can its people's voices be heard? Let's check it out.³⁷

In 2021, Linneweber described his "chagrin" for having been an "unwitting" participant in "the CCP's never-ending propaganda."

Beijing's media trips are sometimes occasioned by political events. One such event was the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," announced in November 2011. In the pages of *Foreign Policy*, Secretary of State Hillary

Clinton called on Washington to challenge China's growing influence in the region by expanding its economic engagement with key partners, strengthening regional multilateral organizations, defending democracy, and bolstering military cooperation. Later that month, the administration reached an understanding on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) with eight partner-governments. The CCP interpreted the pivot as Washington's latest attempt to contain it. Its sponsored media trip, organized hastily, was an effort at damage control. In short, the CCP's public relations initiatives suggest a strategy of blunting: discouraging negative coverage of China when it is most damaging.

Effects

To measure media content, I analyzed all articles published by all participating media outlets in the three months before and after a given trip. I also analyzed all articles from all outlets that did not participate in a given trip as

TABLE 1. The calendar of media trips

Occasion	Dates	Participants
US Pivot to Asia	10/31/2011-11/09/2011	NPR, Atlantic, Yahoo, Bloomberg, MSNBC, Reuters
NPC	03/12/2012-03/20/2012	Seattle Times, San Francisco Chronicle, Tennessean, Dallas Morning News
Tiananmen	05/14/2012-05/22/2012	Bloomberg, Chicago Tribune, Washington Post
NPC	03/12/2013-03/20/2013	Seattle Times, San Francisco Chronicle, Tennessean, Dallas Morning News
Tiananmen	05/14/2013-05/22/2013	Slate Magazine, Bloomberg, Chicago Tribune, Washington Post
Tiananmen	06/10/2014-06/18/2014	NPR, Harvard Business Review, Financial Times, Slate Magazine, Politico

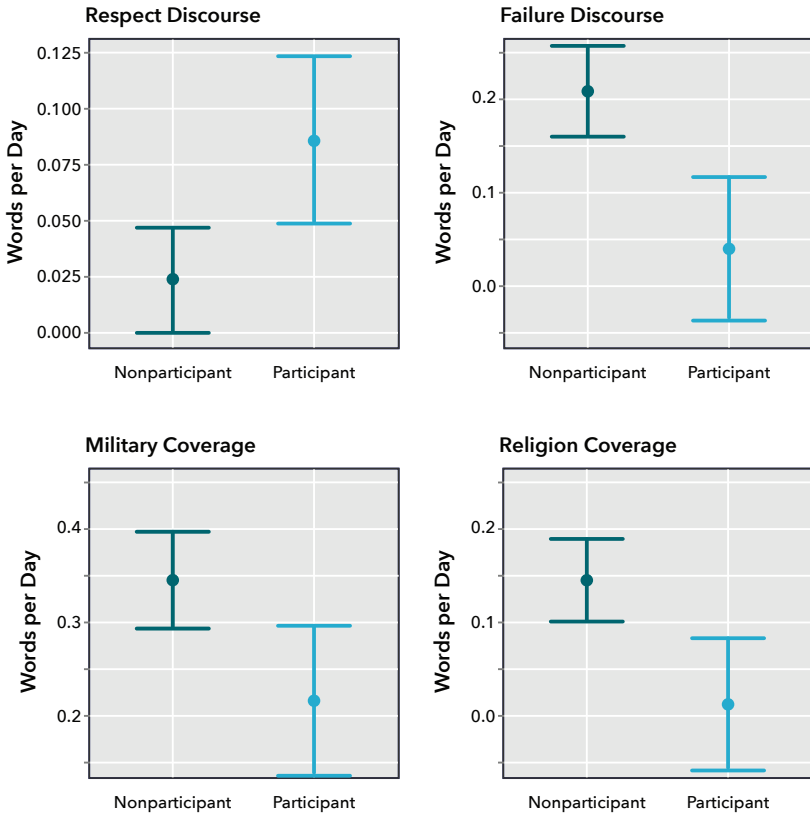
a comparison set, but did participate in some other trip. For the six trips in Table 1, the group “treated” with the CCP’s public relations messaging includes 15,417 articles from 15 outlets that participated on a given trip and the control group includes 26,417 articles from outlets that did not participate on a given trip but did participate on some other trip.

I used a variety of computational techniques to identify coverage content along a range of dimensions—by whether it references China or various substantive topic areas like politics, economics, legal matters, the military, or religious life. I measure the valence (positive or negative) of China coverage. I use semantic dictionaries to measure a variety of more sophisticated concepts like strength, power, activity, virtue, overstatement, respect, feeling, work, goal, try, completion, and failure.³⁸

For each trip identified in Table 1 in this study, I assign participating outlets to the treatment group and non-participants to the control group. This allows me to measure the effect of participation on subsequent coverage for outlets that attended a trip relative to outlets that did not attend but were, in principle, willing to do so. I study changes in coverage for 30 days after the conclusion of a trip using a difference-in-differences identification strategy. The results are visualized in Figure 2. The top row of Figure 2 focuses on two key sentiments: respect and failure. Strikingly, trips lead American journalists to cover Beijing as more worthy of respect and less associated with failure. Compared to nonparticipants, media outlets that participated on trips use three times as many respectful words when describing China. They are also more than twice as likely to describe China as successful rather than a failure.

The bottom row of Figure 3, however, suggests that two coverage topics are less common after sponsored press trips: military activity and religious affairs. Nonparticipating outlets write 75 percent more about military issues than participating outlets and a stunning 650 percent more about religious issues. These, indeed, are two of the most sensitive topics for Beijing. The CCP is keen to avoid being portrayed as a threat to American hegemony, which could elicit a Cold War-style containment policy. The CCP is also tremendously repressive of religious minorities in Xinjiang and elsewhere. Shifting media attention from China’s military rise and domestic repression is profoundly in the CCP’s interests.³⁹

FIGURE 3. Effect of media trips on coverage of China



Conclusion and Implications

Beijing seeks to influence American public opinion by shaping American media. It does so at predictable moments: the anniversary of the Tiananmen massacre, for instance, and the annual session of the rubber-stamp National People’s Congress, when American media outlets ordinarily cover the CCP most critically. The media trips that Beijing sponsors are remarkably successful. Beijing’s outreach strategy does not change the frequency of media coverage, but it does change its content. Sponsored press trips induce American

journalists to cast China's rise as less threatening, precisely as Beijing would have them. Coverage routinely shifts away from areas of geopolitical tension—like military rivalry and the CCP's long record of human rights abuses—and toward prospects for economic cooperation. These changes persist for roughly three months. Beijing's efforts to shape American media coverage are ongoing. Data suggest that Chinese lobbying has tripled since the end of my period of analysis.⁴⁰ From Beijing's perspective, fostering a "community of likeminded experts on US-China relations" is more urgent than ever due to declining American views of China and increasing hostility from Washington.

Beijing's programs to shape media coverage in Africa and Asia may be even more influential, where it organizes sponsored trips and training courses for thousands of journalists.⁴¹ Joseph Odindo, formerly an editorial director of Nation Media Group, the largest media conglomerate in East and Central Africa, underscored the frequency of these trips: "we had to draw up a chart which would enable us to see who was out on a Chinese training at any given time, who was due to come back, and who was next—otherwise you could find half of your newsroom is in Beijing undergoing training."⁴² Bob Wekesa, a former editor and media scholar at the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa, views Beijing's focus on African media as driven by its competition with Washington.⁴³ In his account, sponsored trips for African journalists became common between 2010 and 2012, coincident with the spike in sponsored trips for American journalists in the FARA data. These trips, he said, "are loaded with the ideological positions that China is pursuing on the African continent," such as Chinese support for Africa and Global South cooperation. In his view, there is an "understanding" that participants "become journalistic ambassadors for Beijing towards the continent, helping build relations back in their newsrooms and persuade their colleagues on the continent to use [content from] Xinhua news agency," which is often available free of charge unlike content from the AFP, AP, or Reuters.

These findings have two major implications. First, journalists in the United States and elsewhere should be more cautious about sponsored trips. Participation on sponsored media trips influences subsequent coverage in ways consistent with the interests of the sponsor, despite whatever efforts participants may undertake to seek out alternative viewpoints. Many media

outlets have ethical guidelines that state that on a sponsored trip, the outlet or journalist must pay their own way and may not accept financial or in-kind transfers from the sponsor. This research makes clear that these guidelines are insufficient to guarantee fair coverage. Trip organizers are still able to filter the information that reaches participants in ways that ultimately shape coverage. Marginal viewpoints do not organize sponsored tours. Therefore, media outlets should prohibit participation on trips sponsored by foreign governments, either directly or through affiliates.

If media outlets choose not to prohibit such trips, they should disclose how journalists' access to a particular environment was facilitated in order to enable readers to assess potential bias in reporting. This, however, is a distant second best. Research shows that labeling is not as powerful as one might think. For example, Russian propaganda still influences the views of American voters in ways consistent with Russian government interests, even when voters are told that it is financed by the Russian government.⁴⁴

The second major policy implication of this research is that Congress should revitalize the transparency legislation that enabled this research. Much of FARA is ill-suited for the modern information age and Congress must modernize it in several key ways. First, Congress must close a loophole that lets agents for foreign governments register under the Lobbyist Disclosure Act (LDA), which has far less onerous disclosure requirements. A significant amount of China-based lobbying passes through LDA and we know little about its nature or effects given the comparative lack of transparency.⁴⁵ Legislation to remove the LDA exemption passed the Senate but not the House in 2023.⁴⁶ Congress should try again with the Preventing Adversary Influence, Disinformation and Obscured Foreign Financing Act (PAID OFF Act), which removes the LDA exemption for foreign adversaries only.

Congress should also authorize enhanced FARA enforcement measures, such as increased fines and perhaps even civil demand authority, which would permit the Department of Justice to require documents from entities it suspects to be foreign agents. This is important because lobbyists for China and Russia file some of the least forthcoming disclosure statements compared to lobbyists for other countries.⁴⁷ While pursuing these reforms, Congress should engage in dialogue with other legislatures around the world through forums like the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC). Democracies

will be better defended if they share best practices in fostering transparency and limiting foreign political influence.

Recognizing that Beijing's media influence campaign is global in nature, Congress should fund efforts to foster independent media in developing countries. These programs may include scholarships and exchange programs for foreign journalists and funding for independent media abroad, ideally distributed through multilateral or nongovernmental organizations like the International Fund for Public Interest Media.

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Notes

1. This essay draws on research in my ongoing book manuscript, *Changing Each Other: US-China Relations in the Shadow of Domestic Politics*, and from my written congressional testimony, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2023-03/Erin_Baggott_Carter_Statement_for_the_Record.pdf.
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