

ReConnect Europe-China Table

China's Narrative Challenge to Europe

Discussion note by Ties Dams, Research Fellow at the Clingendael Institute

Beyond Disinfo: introducing the battle of narratives

In March of 2020, HRVP Borrell focused attention on an often underestimated but vitally important aspect of geopolitical competition: narrative power. Borrell said that there was a 'global **battle of narratives** going on' in which states, most importantly Russia, China and the US competed for dominance in the way the coronavirus pandemic was being perceived by global audiences.

The battle of narratives has not waned since. Disinformation and propaganda have been longstanding components of Russia's strategic arsenal, only to be amped up since February 2022. Chinese and Russian **disinformation** campaigns seem increasingly to converge. European policymakers are turning their eyes to foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), leading to a *FIMI Toolbox* jointly announced by VP Jourová and HRVP Borrell and an *Information Sharing and Analysis Center* housed at EEAS.

And yet, China's narrative challenge to Europe remains elusive: whereas a trend of China-related disinformation campaigns raise worries and the PRC's narrating of Russia's war in Ukraine seems muddled at best, the larger, more long-term challenge China poses is hard to pin down. It raises the question how **Europe** – MSs and EU institutions – can meet China's narrative challenge in its own way, by innovating its story of international order and, crucially, the ways it tells it to a global audience.

In short: strategic assessment of China's narrative power

In spite of recent attempts at a charm offensive in European capitals, soft power – defined as the ability to influence the preferences and behaviour of foreign actors through attraction or persuasion – is no longer the leading concept in China's narrative strategy to Europe¹: achieving '话语权', or the 'right to speak', closely associated with the goal of 'telling China's story well', has become the main **strategic objective**.² Leading theorist Zhang Weiwei defines it thus:

Telling the story of China's politics well depends to a large extent on whether we can truly deconstruct the discourse of the West, and particularly the mainstream China narrative in Western discourse, and establish our own political narrative.³

Within this strategic frame, competition between Chinese and Western narratives amongst third audiences is seen as a zero sum game where the **power**, rather than likeability or attractiveness of narrative dominates.

The most important **internal source** of China's narrative power is its long-standing whole-of-society approach, where external propaganda goals are internalized across different levels of society and leadership.⁴ The most

¹ T. Dams, X. Martin and V. Kranenburg, eds. (2021), *China's soft power in Europe: falling on hard times edited volume*, European Think-tank Network on China.

² T. Friedman (2022), 'Lexicon: 'Discourse Power' or the 'Right to Speak' (话语权, Huàyǔ Quán)', DigiChina.

³ D. Ownby (2022), Zhang Weiwei on Telling China's Story', Readingthechinadream.com.

⁴ Read the official report on the meeting [here](#).

important **external source** of China's narrative power is the aspirational value of its rise latent anti-Western sentiments amongst third audiences. Recent research suggests that CCP propaganda messaging the superiority of China's model of governance is more competitive than often thought, especially when compared to US messaging.⁵ For these reasons and others, China's narrative power poses first and foremost a **political challenge to Europe**, where its status as an aspirational model of society and indeed as a strong partner among key audiences in various parts of the world is at stake.

Thoughts for discussion: answering China's narrative challenge

The counter-FIMI Toolbox is an important step in addressing the 'battle of narratives', as the Information Sharing and Analysis Center will be. This approach is aimed at protecting information flows within the open societies of Europe against malign actors by focusing not on regulating the substance of narratives, but rather on manipulation of media for dissemination. It is 'narrative'-agnostic, protecting free speech and diversity of opinion. This approach plays to the EU's strengths: internal, regulatory and neutral.

At the same time, it only covers part of the story: it addresses some of the tactics of China's 'global struggle' for narrative power, but does not meet its overall strategy at eye-level. The very fact of China's ascent to superpower status unhinges some of the **main narrative anchors** of Europe's story to the world: the story of the EU as belonging to Fukuyama's end of history as well as that of the Transatlantic partnership as the harbinger of a universal world order are being challenged. As Borrell said,

When the pandemic came, we started speaking about 'the battle of narratives. This is a sentence as important as 'the Geopolitical Europe.'⁶

If Europe is to fulfil its promise of evolving into a mature geopolitical actor with a degree of strategic autonomy, it needs a 'narrative identity'⁷ to match.

Sino-US rivalry exposes Europe's main **weakness**, as European MSs and EU Institutions struggle to meet Biden and Xi with an equally unified form of representation on the world stage. Furthermore, European MSs and EU institutions lack a meaningful presence in global Chinese-language media, let alone narrative pathways into Chinese society, whereas PRC-based global media are present in the European infosphere. Europe's narrative strategy towards third audiences is strongly norm-based, emphasizing the ethical standards one needs to adopt when cooperating with the EU and its MSs, failing to exploit the laws of persuasive story-telling that underlie Chinese narratives.

Europe's main **strength** should be its global economic weight – like China, it could more strongly connect the battle of narratives with the **battle of offers**, especially to audiences in Africa and Asia that are looking to hedge against Sino-US rivalry. A **locus** of strategic narrative formation could help EU institutions and MSs coordinate strategic communications. The EU could invest more in deep, localised research into different regional audiences' aspirations, grievances, common interests, and values and connect that knowledge to the strategic formation of narratives in congruence with MSs, playing into particular strong ties certain MSs have with third audiences, leading to a division of labour. In the context of Global Gateway, the EU should invest in structural capacity to cobrand successes of cooperation with third countries. The establishment of the EU-co-funded Strategic Communications Education and Research Unit at the University of Tokyo presents a best practice for exploring ways in which to combine expertise on strategic communication with key likeminded countries.

⁵ Mattingly, D., Incerti, T., Ju, C., Moreshead, C., Tanaka, S., & Yamagishi, H. (2023). Chinese State Media Persuades a Global Audience That the "China Model" is Superior: Evidence From A 19-Country Experiment. OSF Preprints.

⁶ See Borrell's full text speech [here](#).

⁷ P. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Volumes 1,2, and 3.

Further reading

- T. Dams and V. Kranenburg (2022) ‘China’s divided on Russia – let’s keep it that way’, Clingendael Institute. [See here.](#)
- D. Abrahams (2022) ‘The Power of Narrative: An Analysis of Research Commissioned by the Dutch China Knowledge Network’, China Knowledge Network. [See here.](#)
- T. Dams, G. Cretti and L van Schaik (2022), ‘Europe cannot wait for unity: teaming up to improve EU foreign policy effectiveness – and what the Netherlands could contribute to it’, Clingendael Institute. [See here.](#)
- T. Dams, X. Martin and V. Kranenburg, eds. (2021), *China’s soft power in Europe: falling on hard times* edited volume, European Think-tank Network on China. [See here.](#)
- T. Dams and M. Sie Dhian Ho (2021) ‘Will the European hero please stand up? An essay on European global narrative strategy’, Clingendael Institute. [See here.](#)