D3.6 SECOND PROGRESS REPORT ON RESEARCH CLUSTERS WP3

Project Information	
Acronym	ReConnect China
Title	ReConnect China: generating independent knowledge for a resilient future with China for Europe and its citizens.
Project no.	101061483
Type of Action	RIA
Deliverable Information	
Title	D3.6 Second progress report on research clusters WP3
WP number and title	WP3, China's Domestic Governance
Authors	Christian Göbel
Description	Summary of the activities of WP3 in months 12-23
Lead Beneficiary	University of Vienna
Type	R: Document, report
Dissemination Level	PU: Public
Status	Final
History of Changes	
Draft version 0.0	Consultation with WP3 partners (September 2024)
0.1	First created by UNIVIE (2024-09-20)
0.2	Progress report by WP3 partners (2024-09-01 - 2024-09-15)
0.3	
Version 1.0	Submitted by Christian Göbel (2024-10-03)

1   LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Meaning
DoA	Description of the Action – annex 1 to the GA
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
WP	Work Package

2   EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Work Package 3 (WP3) is structured into four pivotal tasks, each led by a distinct entity:

1. **New Sources of Information** (Lead: UNIVIE)

2. **Domestic Governance** (Lead: UPOL)

3. **International Relations** (Lead: UTURKU)

4. **Ideology and Values** (Lead: UGENT)

The success of Tasks 2-4 is significantly tethered to the data procured by Task 1, which has been the focal point of WP3 activities during the reporting period. Significant progress has been made in building the infrastructure and expanding the team for data collection. The project has hired software developers, data collectors, and coders, and launched a bilingual website that allows users to query data in Chinese and English. Key technical advancements include a MongoDB database, real-time data scraping via Docker, and automated translation tools for English-language access to Chinese data.

The team has reclassified large datasets and conducted fieldwork on topics such as party-building in non-governmental organizations and grid-style social management, with several academic articles in progress based on these findings. A policy brief on China's COVID-19 diplomacy in Europe has been published, while ongoing projects explore China's ecological civilization, nationalism, and the psychological mechanisms driving nationalist sentiments among Chinese youth.

Overall, the project has achieved significant progress in data collection, classification, and analysis, with several publications and collaborative research efforts underway in key areas of Chinese governance and international relations.

3   INTRODUCTION

In the modern geopolitical world, the EU and China stand in a constant dynamic relation with each other. The question in which domains EU collaboration with China is desirable, possible, or impossible is therefore the central focus of ReConnect China. To answer this question, this project identifies Science & Technology, Economy & Trade, Domestic Governance, and Foreign Policy as four key fields on which the EU should upgrade its independent knowledge. To that aim, it will develop a database which will provide access to new sources of information. The independent knowledge generated in this project will bring together stakeholders and experts in a Europe-China Knowledge Forum and raise awareness on China among the general public and youth. In this way, leading scientific European expertise and innovative digital technologies are mobilized to generate a deeper, sustainable understanding of contemporary China, and work towards a resilient future with China for the EU and its citizens. The project consortium brings together 15 partners from across Europe: Six universities (Ghent University, University of Tartu, University of Turku, University of Groningen, University of Vienna, and University of Olomouc), six think tanks (Egmont Institute, Clingendael Institute, Istituto Affari Internazionali, French Institute of International Relations, Swedish Institute of International Affairs, Elcano Royal Institute), one research institute (ZSI), one state agency (Innovation Norway) and one public institute under governmental administration (Macau Scientific and Cultural Centre). ReConnect China is coordinated by Ghent University, Belgium.

3.1   Deliverable scope

The key objective of WP3 is to shed light on the CCP's sources of legitimacy by tracing government narratives and popular discourses on the core values underlying CCP one-party rule, its state-building efforts and its relationship with the international community. Throughout the duration of the project, this will be achieved by:

•   creating a comprehensive repository of policies, laws and regulations, government narratives and social media feeds;

•   using state-of-the-art natural language processing and machine learning as well as field research to trace how government narratives and popular discourses influence each other;

•   researching how the propaganda system attempts to influence public opinion at home and abroad;

•   keeping track of core ideologies and values informing China's policies and international relations.

Based on the results, WP3 will develop policy recommendations related to China's governance and political system, as well as international relations, ideology and values.

This deliverable provides a summary of the activities and progress of WP3 for the second reporting period (September 2023 to August 2024 (end of the reporting period).

3.2 Reference documents

- ReConnect China Grant Agreement no. 101061483
- ReConnect China Consortium Agreement
- ReConnect China Project Management Handbook (D7.1)

4   PROGRESS OF WORK PACKAGE 3

WP3 consists of four tasks: 1) new sources of information (lead: UNIVIE); 2) Domestic governance (lead: UPOL); 3) International relations (lead: UTURKU); 4) Ideology and values (lead: UGENT). To a large extent, the deliverables of Tasks 2-4 depend on the data collected by Task 1. For this reason, most of the activity in WP3 during the reporting period pertains to this Task. The following sections report the progress of each Task during the reporting period.

4.1   Task 3.1: Database – New sources of information (lead: UNIVIE)

Task 3.1 will provide the information needed to trace political developments not only in Beijing, but also in China's provinces, municipalities and counties, to map public discourses on these topics, and to study how narratives, discourses, and policies influence each other. All this is necessary to obtain a more nuanced and up-to-date image of current political developments in China. To this end, we are creating an interactive and up-to-date repository for the analysis of policies, laws and regulations, government narratives, and public discourses which will be essential not only to the other tasks of this WP, but also for the other WPs of this project. To examine the relationship between citizen demands and public policies, the repository will also contain updated information on social unrest, citizen complaints to the government, and official responses to public complaints.

In the reporting period, task leader UNIVIE consolidated and improved the infrastructure for data collection, hired front-end and back-end developers, hired more coders, and delivered a website that allows users to query the collected data in Chinese and English.

4.1.1   Personnel and infrastructure

- Hired a software developer to improve the data collection infrastructure and create a public-facing website that displays collected data in real time
- Hired seven junior data collectors
- Created handbooks and tutorials for data collection
- Improved data collection pipeline
    o   Set up MongoDB database server
    o   Set up a real-time scraping scheduler
    o   Scrapers deployed as Docker packages through a Gitlab pipeline. Docker packages are OS-agnostic and can be deployed on practically any machine without the need to preinstall packages
    o   Created one more base scraper to perform post requests
    o   Fixed bugs in previous base scrapers
    o   Fixed bugs in existing scrapers

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- o Modified scraping to enable data collection through CURL
- o Implemented a "buddy system" so coders can support each other

4.1.2 Identifying sources for data collection

- More than 20.000 official Weibo accounts operated by government units and news organizations, of which more than 3.000 Weibo accounts of official and non-official news organizations (for Task 3.2)
- List of all province- and prefecture-level units of China (for all tasks)
- Centralized website for citizen complaints to the government (for Task 3.2)
- More than 300 Twitter accounts of Chinese news organizations, embassies, and diplomats (for Task 3.3)
- Websites of the Science and Technology Bureaus of Chengdu and Chongqing (for Task 3.2)
- Website storing amendments to charters of listed companies (for DWARC synergy project)

4.1.3 Data collection

- Continued previous data collection efforts
  - o several dozen million Weibo posts by official accounts
  - o several dozen million Weibo posts that contain keywords which appear in protest-related posts with high frequency
  - o several million Weibo posts containing the keywords (in Chinese) "USA", "Europe", "Ukraine", "Russia", "social credit", "human rights", "democracy", "freedom"
- implemented daily collection of central and local laws, regulations, policies, leaders' activities, and news items. Progress so far:
  - ▪ 20,787 laws, regulations and policies passed by the central government
  - ▪ 97.951 documents created by province-level authorities
  - ▪ 52.034 documents created by prefecture-level authorities

4.1.4 Data classification

- Improved classification by using better training sets
  - o Text: use GPT-4 to evaluate quality of each entry in the text classification training data; used this to train ERNIE 3 instead of ERNIE 1
  - o Images: use vision transformer instead of conventional CNN
- Explored technical possibilities for automated translation Chinese-English that can be run locally

- Tried several LLMs that fit onto a 48G GPU (<10B parameter models, quantized high-parameter models)
  - Settled on Llama 3.1 8B
- Implemented automated translation and summary pipeline to enable English-language queries for the Chinese language source data
  - Headline auto-translated into English
  - English-language text summary of text body
- Set up a scheduler to auto-translate/summarize new documents daily and publish them immediately
- Designed, deployed and improved a web interface (https://reconnectchina.univie.ac.at) to view and search legal documents at three administrative levels (center, province, prefecture) as well as local news and information about the activities of local leaders
- Mitigated issues with formatting, hallucinations in summary generation

4.2   Task 3.2: Domestic governance (lead: UPOL)

Task 3.2 is concerned with the continuities and changes in domestic politics during the Xi Jinping era and analyzes complex, contested and, in the case of the social credit system, often misrepresented policies. It will draw on a mixture of digital sources and field research in order to provide insight into the strengths and weaknesses of either research technique. In highlighting the applied potential of such technologies, the latter aspect complements the analysis done in Task 1.3. Furthermore, domestic narratives impact China's perceptions of other countries and regions; in that regard, this task links up with Task 4.1.

Progress:

- reclassified collected Weibo posts with new algorithm. New dataset almost twice as large as old one.
- hand-coded additional entries of Weibo posts related to social credit
- Two rounds of field research by Runya Qiaoan (UPOL)
- Two internal field research reports by Runya Qiaoan on NGOs and grid management as well as party building in China
- Article on party-building efforts in Chinese non-governmental organizations in progress (Runya Qiaoan)
- Article on grid-style social management in China in progress (Runya Qiaoan)

4.3   Task 3.3: International relations (lead: UTURKU)

Task 3.3 is concerned with how the EU and other political entities are framed by the Chinese propaganda system, and how China attempts to shape citizen attitudes abroad. It will draw on

existing data sets, for example MoFA's English language media communication collected by UPOL, datasets curated by NGOs as well as (offical) news items and social media feed

Progress:

- Policy brief "Rethinking China's COVID-19 Aid Diplomacy in Europe" published (https://www.reconnect-china.ugent.be/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/ReConnect-China-Policy-Brief-10-Rethinking-Chinas-COVID-19-Aid-Diplomacy-1.pdf)
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4.4 Task 3.4: Ideology and values (lead: UGENT)

Task 3.4 is concerned with the "big ideas" and priority areas that guide and inform policy making in China. Although ideology is often dismissed as unimportant and inconsequential, it is an essential element of Chinese politics. Understanding how concepts such as human rights and democracy are redefined, and how history and identity are reinvented by the CCP, will aid stake holders in their communication efforts by sensitizing them to the fact that the same concept might have different meanings and thereby complement existing, valuable efforts at "decoding" China. Task members will mainly draw on data produced in T3.1 and interviews that uncover psychological mechanisms behind nationalist sentiment among the Chinese youth, for example how they cope with contradictory historical/political information related to e.g. human rights after having been socialised into an official history discourse

Progress:

- Collected data from official Weibo accounts containing related keywords
- Discussion to set up a cooperation between WP3 researchers for delving into China's role in fighting environmental degradation and climate change. Initial background research on the topic for the academic paper to be published in M42
- Collaborative working paper (Beatrice Gallelli (IAI), Robert Weatherly (UTARTU)) on "ecological civilization" in progress, presentation at 25th Biennial Conference of the European Association for Chinese Studies by Beatrice Gallelli
- two articles regarding China's nationalism and collective identity in progress, collaboration between Urmas Höbepappel (UTARTU), Robert Weatherly (UTARTU), Bart Dessein (UGENT), and Mieke Matthyssen (UGENT).
- article on human rights in China in progress (Bart Dessein, UGENT and Huanyu Zhao, UGENT)

5   CONCLUSIONS

WP3 is devoted to a comprehensive exploration of various facets of Chinese politics, from domestic governance and international relations to ideology and values. During the reporting period, the work has progressed according to plan and in line with the Grant Agreement. The project has made substantial strides in developing the necessary infrastructure, expanding personnel, and advancing data collection and analysis related to Chinese governance, public discourse, and international relations. The creation of a bilingual, interactive database and progress on several research fronts, including domestic policies and China's international influence, demonstrate the project's growing impact.

The next steps will focus on refining the data classification systems, expanding the scope of data collection, and finalizing the academic publications in progress. Ongoing collaboration between research teams will continue to explore critical issues such as China's ecological policies, nationalism, and the impact of Chinese propaganda abroad. These efforts will further deepen understanding of China's political landscape and its global interactions, providing valuable insights for stakeholders and policymakers.