

Chinese influence and interference in the Dutch media landscape



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Summary: findings and recommendations

The aim of this study is to understand the extent of Chinese influence and interference in the Dutch media landscape. Different manifestations and tools and tactics used by China are highlighted. This report focuses on three different aspects of influence:

1. Working conditions of Dutch correspondents in China;
2. Chinese influence and interference in the Dutch-language media landscape in the Netherlands;
3. Chinese influence and interference in Chinese-language and diaspora media in the Netherlands.

The main conclusion is that China is **targeting by attrition** – both within its borders and in the Netherlands – **critical voices about China** (the so-called *chilling effect*), to diminish the activity of critical voices, causing them to be drowned out or to give up entirely. This affects both correspondents in China and specific groups in the Netherlands. China is one of the most sophisticated actors in transnational repression worldwide. This also manifests itself in the Netherlands, especially among human rights activists, non-Han Chinese diaspora and Chinese students.

China's complete surveillance society makes **correspondents' working conditions arduous**. Editors in the Netherlands are not well equipped in the face of social and psychological insecurity and threats from authoritarian countries like China; neither for correspondents in China, but certainly not when these practices take place in the Netherlands. China employs a **range of tactics targeting the media landscape, including in the Netherlands** (see Chapter 5 for an overview). A notable feature is that China (unlike Russia's often more physically focused tactics) operates much more subtly, delivering socio-cognitive (or socio-psychological) subtle provocations that are only fully understood with substantial background information.

Recommendations include:

- Develop protocols for correspondents in authoritarian countries, if not already in place, and ensure that these are known to their editorial contacts in the Netherlands;
- Do not place all risks on the correspondent, who is often a freelancer. Ensure job security;
- Be alert to the mental health of correspondents due to the constant stress caused by the Chinese surveillance system;
- Offer support to local Chinese staff of Dutch media as they are at high risk but have no safety net;
- Publicly and through formal channels, the Dutch government should continue to firmly state that the Netherlands resolutely condemns influencing, especially after incidents surrounding correspondents and their Chinese staff;

- Editors in the Netherlands should structurally discuss transnational repression, intimidation and psychological warfare by state actors, including China;
- Building more structural knowledge about China on editorial boards is key;
- Cooperation with other media in the Netherlands and Europe/global regarding issues sensitive to China helps spread risks for media organisations and individual journalists, and contributes to sharing knowledge and experiences on influence and interference practices;
- Facilitate security training that deepens knowledge of social and digital security, transnational repression, (national and transnational) influence and interference practices of authoritarian countries;
- The Dutch government should actively contribute to combating disinformation campaigns by authoritarian regimes that aim to polarise and exploit vulnerabilities in our political system and society;
- Act transnationally in this regard. Make use of the opportunities within the *Digital Services Act (DSA)* and the *European Media Freedom Act* of 2022 to regulate the rules on digital services, strengthen transparency and accountability of digital platforms, and protect media pluralism and independence in the Netherlands.

All groups of Dutch Chinese **routinely apply self-censorship** and self-surveillance. **Intimidation tactics common in China itself are also applied in the Netherlands** to specific groups, such as students, activists and non-Han Chinese groups like the Uighurs and Tibetans. They feel actively watched and pressured. Protection of the foundations of Dutch democracy, freedoms, political system, rule of law and society must be central to relations with China. Take strict action on interference in the Chinese diaspora in the Netherlands, ensure visibility of these groups and invest in society-wide awareness campaigns around influence and psychological warfare of authoritarian regimes, as China is not the only actor in this.

Above all, be **careful and balanced towards Chinese and Asian Dutch people**. It is important not to demonise them or reinforce pre-existing or new stereotypes. Besides the risk of discrimination and isolation, by doing so you promote alienation of these groups, and by doing so you play right into the hands of the Chinese Party State. Protect diaspora groups in the Netherlands and actively and publicly propagate these safeguards.

For a more detailed description of conclusions and policy recommendations, see chapter 6 of this report.

1. Introduction, methodology and context

1.1 Introduction

Control of information has been central to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) power strategy since its inception. For a very long time, this was mainly focused on information management and (internet) censorship within the People's Republic of China itself, also known as the *Great Firewall*. However, under president and party leader Xi Jinping, the Chinese government has increasingly focused on the global information environment with a comprehensive campaign to influence news consumers and media outlets worldwide. In this context, and more broadly, the Party State is deploying transnational intimidation of journalists, dissidents and diaspora groups (Cook et al 2022, p. 2). This involves the use of tools and tactics of traditional public diplomacy, as well as more coercive or covert measures, which border on or exceed what is legitimate in the Netherlands. The deployment and tactics of the CCP and Chinese Party State have become more sophisticated, more aggressive and more difficult to detect in a short period of time.

Russian efforts to sow mistrust around the 2016 US elections and similar campaigns in Europe - for example, around Brexit - seem to have changed Beijing's strategic assessment (Allen 2023, p. 128). The Kremlin has shown the world that the global information environment is a site of successful asymmetric warfare. During the 2018 and 2020 local and national elections in Taiwan, China made massive use of *trolling* campaigns, disinformation and spreading conspiracy theories (Atlantic Council 2020a). During the Covid pandemic from 2020, China used lessons from the Russian manual to divert attention away from China as the source of the pandemic (Atlantic Council 2020a). Chinese conspiracy theories were meant to make one believe that the US military had planted the virus in the city of Wuhan (Allen 2023). There has also been talk in this context of the Russification of Chinese influence operations and a 'Machiavelli moment'; Beijing has apparently chosen to 'rather be feared than loved' (Charon et al 2021, p.15).

The distorted information flows resulting from censorship and self-censorship, propaganda, disinformation, influence and interference campaigns by countries such as Russia and China pose a real challenge to the open societies, democracies, norms and values of Europe, and therefore also to the Netherlands. This research focuses on Chinese influence and interference in the Dutch media landscape, in particular its undesirable aspects.

The aim of the study is to understand the extent of (unwanted) Chinese influence and interference in the Dutch media landscape, different manifestations and tools and tactics used. In this context, this report focuses on **three different aspects of influencing** the global information environment:

1. Working conditions of Dutch journalists in China;
2. Undesirable Chinese influence and interference in the Dutch-language media landscape in the Netherlands;
3. Undesirable Chinese influence and interference in Chinese-language and diaspora media in the Netherlands.

The research was commissioned by the Netherlands' central government and implemented within the China Knowledge Network (CKN) framework agreement.¹ The research was conducted between February and September 2024.

1.2 Methodology and disclaimers

Several research methods were used in this study. To answer the section '**working conditions among Dutch correspondents in China**', a survey was sent out to correspondents, journalists and Dutch support staff over the past 20 years. An even distribution was sought among the different time blocks (2002-2007, 2007-2012, 2012-2017, 2017-present). The time blocks chosen deliberately coincide with the reigns of Chinese presidents, including the last two terms of current Chinese leader Xi Jinping. The questionnaire included forty-five questions around the themes of working conditions, influence and interference, impact on reporting, activities and (counter)measures, and (policy) recommendations. Most of the (former) correspondents were willing to cooperate, but some preferred to not share their experiences, or in a different way. For this reason, we conducted oral interviews with five of them and manually added the data to the survey. We also interviewed contacts for correspondents in China at editorial offices in the Netherlands about the working conditions of correspondents in China and their experiences of reporting on China in the Netherlands. The findings of these interviews are also included in this section.

For the subtopics '**undesirable Chinese influence and interference in the Dutch-language media landscape in the Netherlands**' and '**undesirable Chinese influence and interference in Chinese-language and diaspora media in the Netherlands**', 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted among journalists and news editors in the Netherlands, who cover China and/or Asia professionally. Among diaspora media, interviews were conducted with 12 key persons and journalists in the community, both Chinese-speaking and non-Chinese-speaking. Chinese state media operating in the Netherlands were approached for an interview, from which 3 media organisations responded. Six context interviews were also held with the professional associations Dutch Association of Journalists (NVJ), PersVeilig and NGOs/human rights organisations *Amnesty International*, *Free Press Unlimited* (FPU) and *International War and Peace Reporting* (IWPR).

We have included findings from the *Foreign Correspondents Club of China's* (FCCC) previous surveys of foreign correspondents between 2012 and 2024 and built on LeidenAsiaCentre's 2021 and 2023 reports on Chinese influence in the Netherlands among the Dutch-Chinese population. In addition, we conducted desktop research on publicly available primary and secondary sources in Dutch, English and Chinese, and drew on our own previous research on Chinese influence and interference

¹ On 20 April 2023, the *Brekelmans c.s. motion on investigation into Chinese intimidation of and interference in Dutch media* was tabled following the *Volkskrant's* coverage of intimidation and threats against *Volkskrant* journalist Marije Vlaskamp. The motion requested the government to "conduct wider investigations into Chinese intimidation of and interference with Dutch media. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs acceded to this on 3 May 2023, following interdepartmental consultations, with the recommendation "to broaden the scope of the investigation slightly from only Dutch media to the media landscape in the Netherlands, in order to better align with existing policy trajectories." The CKN has been asked to conduct this research on behalf of the central government.

in Europe and globally, including as part of the *Asia Pacific Research and Advice Network* (APRAN) and the *Europe-China Partnership Facility* (ECPF) for the European Union.

1.2.1 Limitations

Due to the sensitivity of the subject and to ensure the safety of those involved, respondents in both the survey and the interviews have been **anonymised** - mostly also at their own request. The incidents and categorisations described have also been generalised where necessary, in order to prevent traceability back to individuals or groups in question. Research ethics and journalistic codes made it necessary for this study to protect respondents and their environment. This results in a limitation for the research findings, as some cases may be less specific or comprehensive than they were in reality. Nevertheless, the report provides the most accurate representation of the situation based on the available survey data and interviews with the involved parties.

1.2.2 Vocabulary

In addition, it is important to emphasise that the influence and interference activities and tactics described in this report are implemented by the Chinese Party State; with the CCP, the state, and the People's Liberation Army as the main pillars. It is important to distinguish between this Party State and the Chinese people. In this report, we will talk about the Chinese Party State as a whole and not China as a country, nor the Chinese people or society. Where we refer to 'China' in this report, we mean the Chinese Party State. This disclaimer is important, because those who criticise the practices of the CCP or Chinese Party State risk being accused of being 'anti-China' by Chinese authorities, media or social media trolls. This only plays into the hands of the Chinese Party State: by mixing government and people in the discussion, the Chinese Party State aims to speak on behalf of the people and limit the space for the people - inside and outside China - to have their own voice.

Thus, this study is about the authoritarian practices of the Chinese regime. We try to seek nuance between those at one end of the spectrum, who deny the reality of Chinese influence operations, and those at the other end of the spectrum, who merely portray China as a threat or danger. Both extremes play into Beijing's hands: a strongly hostile attitude that portrays government and population as one allows the Chinese Party State to present itself as the protector of diaspora groups and dismiss criticisms of the regime as 'anti-China' or sinophobic. Stereotyping diaspora groups and equating them with the Chinese Party State risks alienating these groups and actually making them more isolated. The result may be that people from the Chinese diaspora turn more to the CCP; which is precisely the objective of the Party (*The Economist* 2024). This is also important because recent research by the University of Amsterdam and Fontys among Dutch people from East and Southeast Asian backgrounds shows that discrimination occurs in 36% of people in this group. Among people with a Chinese background, this is more than half (Feddes et al 2024).

As researchers, we stress the importance of nuance and the risk of oversimplification. Hence this disclaimer in vocabulary use in this report (after Charon et al 2021, p. 11-12). The problem is not 'China', but as historian Frank Dikötter describes, "That the CCP is structurally a Leninist one-party state, seeking to undermine everything that opposes it at home and abroad" (as quoted in Hamilton

2018, p. 276). Hence, it is about the repressive practices of an authoritarian regime with vast economic, political, military and technological resources, and what impact this has (potentially) on democratic spaces and freedoms in the Netherlands and elsewhere.

1.3 Context and concepts

Democracy is under pressure worldwide. Almost 40% of the world's population lives under authoritarian rule; less than 8% of citizens in 'full democracy', 38% in 'flawed democracies', and 15% in hybrid regimes - a combination of formal democracy and authoritarianism (EIU Economist Intelligence Unit 2024, p. 3-4). Civic spaces are being undermined in many countries, including in Europe (FRA 2023). Most regression takes place in hybrid and authoritarian regimes (EIU 2024, p.3). However, freedom of expression and media freedom are under pressure in both developed democracies and autocracies. This is identified as one of the biggest threats to democracy worldwide.

Global freedom declined for the eighteenth consecutive year in 2023 in all regions of the world (Freedom House 2024). China is characterised in *Freedom House* reports as a country with *entrenched authoritarianism*; besides the lack of representative democracy this is due to the de facto one-party state, the systematic denial of political rights to citizens and other residents is to blame (ibid. p.11). Journalists, activists and dissidents suffer extra in this context, both in China and abroad. The space for freedom of expression, freedom of information and media freedom is increasingly curtailed in authoritarian regimes, and increasingly they make their influence felt beyond their national borders. In this **transnational repression (TNR)**, journalists and media are increasingly targeted (Wilcox Boyajian 2024). TNR is carried out by governments to silence dissidents and diaspora outside their borders, through illegal deportations, abductions, digital threats and intimidation, including through family members in the country of origin. It can therefore take place **both physically and digitally**. Between 2014 and 2022, the human rights organisation *Freedom House* collected information on 854 direct, physical incidents of transnational repression around the world, committed by 38 governments in 91 countries (White et al 2023, p. 4). China ranks no 1 in the top offenders, accounting for 30% of cases, with "the most comprehensive and sophisticated campaign of transnational repression in the world" (Freedom House 2021). In the *Media Freedom Index*, China dangles at the bottom, ranking 172 out of 180 countries (RSF 2024b).² China also has the largest number of journalists and media personnel in prison in the world: in 2023, 44 journalists were imprisoned as a result of their work, according to the *Committee to Protect Journalists* (CPJ 2023); in 2024, 109, according to *Reporters without Borders* (RSF 2024b).

New methods of global operations targeting the information environment, such as disinformation campaigns and other forms of influence and interference such as intimidation and blackmail to actively counter dissemination of information disagreeable to China, mark a shift in China's foreign policy (Atlantic Council 2020b, p. 5). In this, the concept of **discourse power** plays major role; achieving greater geopolitical power by promoting own values and concepts internationally,

² In 2023, it was still the second-last place: 179.

strengthening the capacity to set narratives and international agenda, and making the 'own story and own narrative' dominant in global discussions. Furthermore, the aim of this is to influence the China policies of individual countries in line with the interests of the Chinese Party State. Strongly related to this is that the Chinese leadership is convinced of its ability to undermine democracies and democratic processes in the West and undermine the hegemony of the United States in the international system. In recent years, Brussels has referred to this as **Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)**, which primarily targets the global information environment and aims to undermine democratic processes.³ It undermines freedom of expression, freedom of information and freedom of the press.⁴ TNR can be an instrument of FIMI, but it is also broader in scope and more specifically targeted at dissidents and diaspora. FIMI is part of hybrid conflict, or hybrid threats, which intelligence and security agencies say that countries such as Russia, China, but also Iran and North Korea are the main actors.⁵ During the Covid pandemic, China emerged more as an actor in FIMI, with active disinformation campaigns to deflect blame for the pandemic, mostly targeting the United States (EEAS 2023, p. 9). In January this year, Josep Borrell, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, characterised FIMI as, "Foreign actors making deliberate, strategic and coordinated attempts to manipulate facts and spread confusion, division, fear and hatred." Borrell believes that FIMI has become a crucial part of modern warfare and calls it a major threat to liberal democracies, which depend on free and open information. Manipulation of information has major implications for public debate. "When information becomes toxic, democracy cannot work," Borrell concludes (EEAS 2024, p. 2).

The EU's first FIMI report in February 2023 analysed a *sample* of 100 global FIMI incidents in 30 languages detected between October and December 2022. In 88 cases, formal **Russian** actors were involved; in 17 cases, **Chinese actors**; and in 5 cases, both actors acted operated jointly (EEAS 2023, p. 5; EEAS 2024). Diplomatic channels are an integral part of FIMI for both countries; in which China particularly targets the United States. For China, the aim of these incidents in 56% of cases was to shift attention to another actor, to promote a different narrative or to shift blame. In 18% of the incidents, Chinese actors attempted to disrupt the frame or narrative. FIMI is mainly applied through the use of videos and images; these are cheap and easy to produce and distribute, and are believed faster than text (EEAS 2023, p. 5). It targets organisations, such as NATO, EU member states and media organisations - such as Euronews, Reuters, Deutsche Welle and the New York Times - as well as civil society groups and individuals. Media organisations, or their brand names, are also often misused in FIMI incidents through impersonation, to lend credibility to manipulated content. This will only become more problematic with developments in artificial intelligence (AI). Online FIMI content is distributed through websites, social media profiles and channels. Most commonly used in this sample were Telegram and X (formerly Twitter), but also TikTok, Facebook and YouTube (EEAS 2023, p. 10-11).

³ For many EU member states, this is a relatively new and uncharted area. To the extent that they engage with it, the focus has primarily been on Russia. China has only more recently been recognized as a FIMI actor, particularly since the Covid pandemic.

⁴ This is part of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), Article 10, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Article 19.2.

⁵ Hybrid threats influence and exploit vulnerabilities in societies to harm rivals and adversaries that fall just below the threshold of overt aggression. They often involve a mix of coercive and subversive activities with conventional and unconventional methods, used in a coordinated manner across domains, and with a strategic intent behind them. See also AIVD 2024a, NCTV 2022 and Kamerling et al 2023.

Finally, we will mainly use the terms Chinese **influence, influencing** and **interference** in this report. Whereas (attempted) influence and influencing may be legitimate or legal, think of public diplomacy or *soft power*, interference is undesirable and often on the border of what is legally permissible, or crossing that border. The dividing line between influence and influencing (legal but possibly undesirable) and interference (undesirable and bordering on what is lawful or outright illegal) is thin, fluid and often murky (Charon 2021, pp. 23-24). Even if a particular activity or practice is illegal, it is difficult to prosecute or attribute to individuals or foreign (state) actors. To the extent that it comes to criminal cases, these are mostly espionage cases.⁶ Because influence and interference activities are on a continuum, it is difficult for governments to draw red lines and have well-defined definitions. The line is often drawn at foreign influence activities that are in some way "secret, systematic, deliberate, coercive or corrupting" (NCTV 2024; AIVD 2019). It also includes political or economic espionage and the intimidation of diaspora communities ('long arm politics'). Manipulation of public perceptions, spreading disinformation and other deceptive activities that undermine political processes, media environments, public debate and academic freedom fall under covert political influence. The Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) and the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) use the term **undesirable foreign interference (UFI)** for the category of foreign influence activities. It is undesirable because other countries thereby undermine the "foundations of the Dutch democratic legal order and open society" and "the political, economic and social system in the Netherlands" (NCTV 2024; AIVD 2019).

This report focuses mainly on the undesirable aspects of influence, (attempted) influencing and the various manifestations of interference.

⁶ Espionage cases have recently come to light in Belgium, Germany and the UK. In the latter 2 countries, these cases are still ongoing. There are also criminal cases surrounding espionage against Chinese individuals in the United States.

2. Policy and influence goals and practices of the Chinese Party State

2.1 Discourse power and information operations

The concept of **discourse power** (话语权, *huàyǔ quán*) is literally the right to speak and be heard, or to speak with authority (Murphy 2014). It is also "the power to lead and direct debate, or to set the parameters of acceptable discourse" (Sun 2019). The concept, already on the rise under Chinese president and party leader Hu Jintao, was named as a guiding goal by his successor Xi Jinping at the 18^e Party Congress in 2012, with the broader goal of increasing China's international influence, setting economic and political agendas and shaping global public opinion (Chen 2022).⁷ The concept is closely linked to the CCP's historical narrative of power and legitimacy, which argues that China's reputation suffered from the dominance of Western political and public opinion. Therefore, it is the Party's task to lead the historical return and central cultural and political role of the Chinese people (Chen 2022). This includes promoting its own values and concepts internationally, and making its 'own story and narrative' about China dominant in global discussions, or to 'tell China's story well' (讲好中国故事, *jiǎng hǎo zhōngguó gùshi*). Thus, Beijing aims to influence China's policies of third countries in favour of the CCP, or create an external public opinion and international environment favourable to China's reform, development and stability (Chen 2022; Aukia 2021). Thus, China focuses in the global information environment on projecting its own 'China Story', focusing on creating a positive image about China, for both domestic and foreign audiences (Atlantic Council 2020b, p. 3).

Under Hu Jintao, a *going-out policy* of Chinese media to strengthen China's global voice was initiated from 2009 (Aukia 2021, p. 20-21). Xi Jinping expanded the concept as a vehicle for international communication, with the premise that China has to promote its ideas on the global stage as an **alternative to the dominant Western discourse**. According to several CCP theorists, the current period is deemed optimal for this goal, due to the decline of US power (Atlantic Council 2020b, p. 3). Therefore, the Chinese leadership is convinced that it can undermine the hegemony of the United States in the international system. Moreover, according to Hong Kong political scientist and historian Steve Tsang, monitoring and shaping public opinion is one of the five defining characteristics of 'Xi Jinping Thought', with as an end goal an international Pax Sinica or sino-centric world order. In Xi Jinping's eyes, a Pax Sinica is a much better alternative to the current liberal international order that favours the US and Western countries (Tsang & Cheung 2024, p. 35 and 172-193).⁸

China's goal of strengthening its international discourse power - or aligning it with the interests of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) - have intensified Beijing's influence, interference and hybrid operations aimed at advancing national interests and geopolitical goals with associated narratives, while suppressing unwelcome information. Since the Covid pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, these operations have been intensified by China (Allen 2023, p.128; Atlantic Council 2020b,

⁷ For a brief history of Chinese-language media in Europe, see Nyíri et al (2017)

⁸ The other four characteristics are: 1) Party supremacy; 2) reform of 'governance', 3) economic growth, and 4) Party-centric nationalism.

p. 7). This has led to new methods of information operations, which China is increasingly adopting from Russia. These new methods include (attempts at) silencing critical voices and suppressing information undesirable to the CCP.

Chinese influence operations are as old as the CCP itself, and partly inspired by the Soviet experience. The two main doctrinal sources are the **United Front** (统一战线, *tǒngyī zhànxiàn*), which has its origins in the Party itself, and the **Three Warfares Doctrine** (三种战法, *sānzhǒng zhànfǎ*) from 2003, which was drafted by the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The Three Warfares Doctrine includes **psychological warfare, public opinion warfare and legal warfare**. These three dimensions also apply outside the military domain and are aimed at influencing the opponent's decisions, influencing public opinion and enforcing a normative environment favourable to China and the CCP's activities and interests (Charon et al 2021, p. 27-29). The United Front is one of the 'three magic weapons' devised by Mao Zedong in 1938 - inspired by Lenin - which today mainly means 'the Party must mobilise friends to hit enemies' (Charon).⁹ In other words, it is about influencing forces outside the Party (both domestic and foreign) to ensure the Party's survival. There is a United Front Work Department (UFWD) directly under the CCP's Central Committee - with an influential *small leading group* led by Xi Jinping himself since 2015. In 2019, the UFWD had a substantial budget of \$2.6 billion, with a quarter allocated to external (i.e. foreign-facing) propaganda efforts (Thibaut 2022, p. 15).

Media censorship in China

In China itself, media organisations receive daily directives on how to deal with important news developments: feature them prominently on the front page with a photo, tuck them away on an inside page, or ignore them altogether. For major developments, state news agency Xinhua provides all literal texts and photos. On days with big news, the front pages of different newspapers look identical.

For social media, the list of hashtags to be censored is updated daily (and continuously in case of major developments). For people who still want to pay attention to a 'sensitive' topic, a kind of cat-and-mouse game arises to circumvent censorship. For instance, '35 May' is used to describe '4 June 1989'.

The CCP's control over China's media has been strengthened: duties have been transferred from a state body to the Party's propaganda department. Chinese media are now required to undergo ideological training, including the Marxist interpretation of the role of journalism. A 2021 report by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences names several tactics in preparation for the "impending media war with the West" (Aukia 2021).

⁹ The other two are armed struggle and Party building.





Total spending on overseas news coverage and the international media conglomerate dedicated to 'tell China's story well' - a priority significantly expanded by Xi since 2016 - is estimated to be between \$7 and \$10 billion annually (*The Economist* 2018; Global Engagement Center 2023; Goldenberg & Osieck 2023). By comparison, the US government's budget for foreign public broadcasters is about \$800 million a year (Goldenberg & Osieck). Xi Jinping said in 2016, "Where the readers are, where the viewers are, that's where we should let the propaganda reports extend their tentacles. That is where we find the focal point and end point of propaganda and ideology" (Goldenberg & Osieck). Departments that play a role in 'telling China's story well' besides the UFWD are: the *Central Propaganda Department*, the *International Liaison Department*, the *Foreign Affairs Commission*, the *State Council Information Office*, the *Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference* (CPPCC) and the *Cyber Space Affairs Commission* (Thibaut, p. 14-15). Key state organisations involved in conducting influence and interference operations include the Ministry of State Security (MSS), Ministry of Public Security (MPS), including the *People's Armed Police* (PAP), and the People's Liberation Army (PLA). **As a result, China's system of censorship has acquired an international dimension:** Party and state actors operating in the realm of security (and beyond) have increasingly expanded into the international arena, including those that until fairly recently focused exclusively on domestic security, such as the MPS.

The strategy is twofold: on the one hand, **promoting positive propaganda**, stories and images to highlight China's success and its own interpretations of concepts and values, and on the other hand, drowning out or **suppressing undesired information** (MERICS 2023). Activities aimed at the perception, manipulation and suppression of information - such as removing, suppressing and trivialising or denying negative information about China, as well as suppressing and silencing individuals and groups that deviate from the CCP narrative and interests) are all emerging as key tactics. This eminently impacts the global media landscape and China-related diaspora media, including in the Netherlands.

2.2 Tactics for global influence on public opinion and media

The Chinese Party State focuses on both **traditional media** and **social media**. The rapid advancement of technology, particularly the early stages of artificial intelligence (AI), has made it increasingly feasible and scalable for the CCP to implement its strategy as described above. The strategy of psychological- and public opinion-warfare result in tactics expressed in both **the digital and physical realms**. A study by the *Mercator Institute for China Studies* (MERICS) shows that the CCP uses a diverse *toolbox* to manage global public opinion, in which the think tank identifies **four categories** (Drinhausen et al 2023, p. 2):¹⁰

¹⁰ MERICS is 1 of 4 European organisations placed on a sanctions list by China in 2021, in retaliation for EU sanctions targeting 4 Chinese officials for human rights violations in Xinjiang. 10 European individuals, including a Dutch parliamentarian, were also placed on the sanctions list.

	<p>Improve & correct</p>	<p>The goal of improving and correcting China's image abroad is to better align it with official Party narratives, for instance through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - propaganda and disinformation - drowning out undesirable information by a flow of other information - and disrupting public debate
	<p>Mobilise support & strengthen</p>	<p>Seeking support for CCP positions, for example through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - soliciting statements from foreign political and economic elites - mobilising Chinese citizens and diaspora
	<p>Erase & deter</p>	<p>Removing unwanted content and voices from national and international debates and deterring further action e.g. by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - threats and intimidation - economic coercion - legislation with extraterritorial effect
	<p>Crop & filter</p>	<p>Cropping and filtering critical voices and non-CCP-approved information by denying access to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the country, - sources/ contacts in the country, - government information or communication platforms.

Hence, the Chinese Party State uses a whole range of tactics to influence the information environment. These include propaganda, disinformation campaigns (increasingly in coordination with the Kremlin), censorship, intimidation, control over content distribution infrastructure, and export of the CCP model. A *Freedom House* study of 30 countries between 2019 and 2022 reveals the following **most commonly used tactics** (Cook et al 2022, p. 7):

✓ **PROPAGANDA**

- Expanding Chinese state media in third countries;
- Publish state-provided content in foreign media outlets;
- Open social media accounts in local languages;

✓ **DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS**

- Spreading falsehoods, e.g. about Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong, Covid and the South China Sea;
- Artificially increasing reach of posts on social media;
- Large-scale use of fake accounts in campaigns;

✓ **CENSORSHIP**

- Intimidating journalists and media organisations;
- Blocking websites and harassing foreign journalists in China;
- Carrying out cyber-attacks and deploying online trolls and smear campaigns;

✓ **CONTENT DISTRIBUTION**

- Chinese companies control local communications infrastructure;
- (Risk of) censorship on television, social media or mobile devices;
- Censorship on WeChat for China-related diaspora media;

✓ **EXPORT OF THE CCP MODEL**

- Technical support for internet censorship and sale of surveillance software;
- Acquisitions of and mergers with foreign media companies;
- Training of journalists or news organisations by state media.

An example of disinformation campaigns and content distribution that also reached the Netherlands is the *Paperwall* campaign. In February 2024, the Canadian research group *The Citizen Lab* discovered a **network of at least 123 websites** distributing **pro-Chinese (dis)information** in 30 countries in Asia, Latin America and Europe, including the Netherlands. The websites are dressed up as local news websites and are very similar. The websites feature a mix of information taken from existing local media from the target country, political content and commercial press releases (Fittarelli 2024). The political content consists of **targeted attacks on individuals, conspiracy theories and targeted disinformation** and (propaganda) articles from Chinese state media. The conspiracy theories are mainly aimed at the US and its allies, and content, for example, deals with alleged US biological experiments on the local populations of Southeast Asian countries.

Furthermore, another global disinformation campaign that reaches Dutch social media is specifically about **Xinjiang**, aiming to contradict or drown out information about the camps - where an estimated one million Uighurs are involuntarily detained - with other, apolitical images and information. Research by de *Groene Amsterdammer*, based on an analysis on Twitter (now X) of over 15,000 English- and Dutch-language tweets between the beginning of 2019 and May 2023 and a network analysis of accounts, shows that a distorted picture of life in Xinjiang is reaching Dutch users as well (Goldenberg & Osieck 2023). Analysis of images used shows that so-called pictures of Xinjiang actually show Italian Tuscany or the Swiss Alps. In a series of videos on 'this is what Western media doesn't show you about the "freedom" of Uighurs in Xinjiang' on TikTok, traditional Uighur dances are interspersed with paradisiacal natural beauty and Chinese roads and bridges.

Increasingly, **Western vloggers and influencers** talk with admiration about what they see in Xinjiang, comparing it to (security in) the European country they come from, and questioning the reporting in Western media (Ryan et al 2022; Goldenberg & Osieck; Vergeer 2022, p. 24-29). Criticism of the West, NATO, double standards concerning Israel and Gaza, and interference with Taiwan also find their way into the narrative (Goldenberg & Osieck). *De Groene Amsterdammer's* network analysis

revealed a connection between Dutch social media users, the Chinese Party state-affiliated media account *Discover Xinjiang*, the Chinese consul-general in Kolkata in India, and the cultural adviser to the Chinese embassy in Pakistan. Among the followers and sharers of outspoken X users spreading disinformation about Xinjiang are Chinese officials and diplomats and official Chinese agencies and organisations. The same pattern as on X and TikTok can be seen on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Douyin (the Chinese TikTok). Disinformation campaigns also took place in relation to the 2018, 2020 and 2024 local and national elections in **Taiwan**, and around the pro-democracy movement in **Hong Kong** and the passing of the National Security Law in 2020 (Atlantic Council 2020a; IDEA 2024; National Democratic Institute 2021).

In recent years, several cases of censorship took place through the **harassment of journalists and media organisations**, including in Sweden, New Zealand and Israel. In all three examples, the Chinese embassy in the country concerned directly linked the publication of an article, interview or investigation to **negative consequences for bilateral relations** or damage or repercussions for the interests of the country in question (Jerdén & Bohman 2019; IFJ 2020 and 2021; *Stuff* 2024; *The Jerusalem Post* 2022a and 2022b). A Chinese journalist in Sweden accused of cooperation with Chinese intelligence services and payment by the Chinese embassy for publishing content from Chinese state media will be expelled by Stockholm (*Kina media* 2024, p.4).

In addition, China is investing in reaching foreign audiences through **acquisitions, mergers and joint ventures with international media companies** and through content distribution through traditional media. This ranges from collaborations and mergers with media organisations, also in Europe, to providing free content from Chinese state-owned media (e.g. full supplements for newspapers), exchange programmes, bilateral agreements with local media or cultural organisations, plus training and paid trips for foreign journalists (Kumar 2021). According to an *International Federation of Journalists* (IFJ) survey of its members in six regions of the world, exchanges and training of journalists (50% of IFJ members), exchanges with Chinese trade unions or other entities (30%) and official *Memoranda of Understanding* for cooperation (14%) are the most common forms of Chinese influence in the media (IFJ 2020, p. 4).

In Europe, China Media Group (CMG), which includes the China Global Television Network (CGTN) and China Radio International (CRI), for instance, has signed deals with Italian public broadcaster RAI and news agency ANSA (Kumar 2021). Similar deals have been struck with Czech and Serbian media.¹¹ In the Netherlands, Chinese media deals with local and international media and news agencies also seep into news coverage. More on this in chapter 3.

¹¹ Interviews Dutch news editors, spring 2024.

3. Chinese influence and interference in Dutch media

The harassment of Volkskrant journalist Marije Vlaskamp in the Netherlands served as the main motivation for this research. In this chapter, we examine the extent of Chinese influence and interference in Dutch-language media. In Chapter 4, we discuss Chinese-language media in the Netherlands and information operations towards Chinese human rights activists and China-related diaspora groups, such as Uighurs and Tibetans in the Netherlands.

Dutch correspondents in China face a range of influence and interference practices from the Chinese Party state on a daily basis. This will be outlined in the first part of this chapter. The survey conducted as part of this research among current and former correspondents reveals how comprehensive its influence is on the working conditions of journalists residing in China. The second part of this chapter then discusses Chinese influence and interference in the Dutch media landscape more broadly, also looking at similar cases in Europe.

3.1 Working conditions of Dutch correspondents in China

The working conditions of Dutch correspondents in China have **deteriorated significantly** since President and party leader Xi Jinping took office in 2012, respondents to the survey conducted in Spring 2024 agree. Of the 26 correspondents of Dutch writing and audiovisual media approached, 73% completed the questionnaire. On average, they spent 75 minutes completing it. To capture changes over an extended period and to ensure anonymity of the current group of correspondents, we approached journalists and supporting Dutch staff who were **stationed in China for a long period between 2002 and 2024**. Over a third of them are currently working in China, 24% between 2012 and 2017, 29% between 2007 and 2012, and the remaining 12% between 2002 and 2007.

Anonymity is a prerequisite for participation for many respondents. This is especially true for journalists currently based in China, but also for some of the former correspondents. Interestingly, journalists covering China in newsrooms in the Netherlands also often requested anonymity. Nobody wants to make themselves a target of the Chinese Party State's attention, is the impression. Above all, make sure you do not stand out. "I try to keep my distance, then I do not get into trouble," says one respondent. "It is important to remain a moving target," explains another. This is the reason we chose to anonymise all respondents and quotes.

When asked whether they can comply with the International Federation of Journalists' *Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists* in their newsgathering, over 84% replied 'not at all' or 'a little'.

Over 42% of respondents often to very often felt or felt **socially unsafe** while working in China. Social safety refers to the extent to which people feel free and protected, so that they dare to express themselves without fear and can be themselves, thus optimising their professionalism.

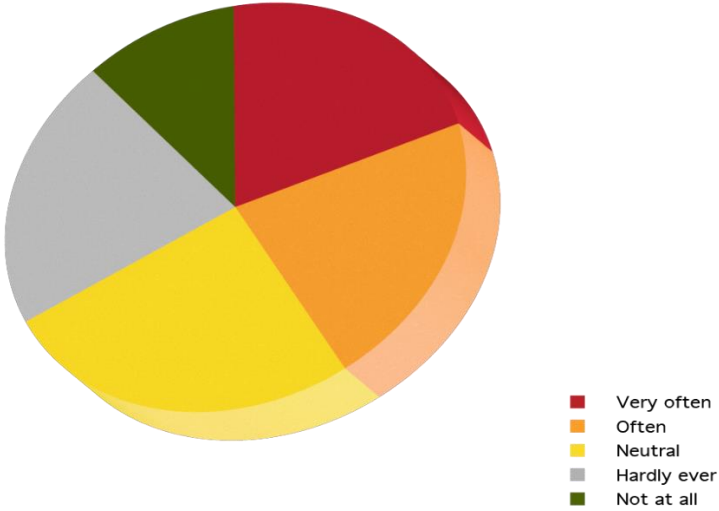


Figure 3.1 Have you felt socially unsafe doing your job?

In addition, **21%** of respondents **often** feel or felt **physically unsafe**:

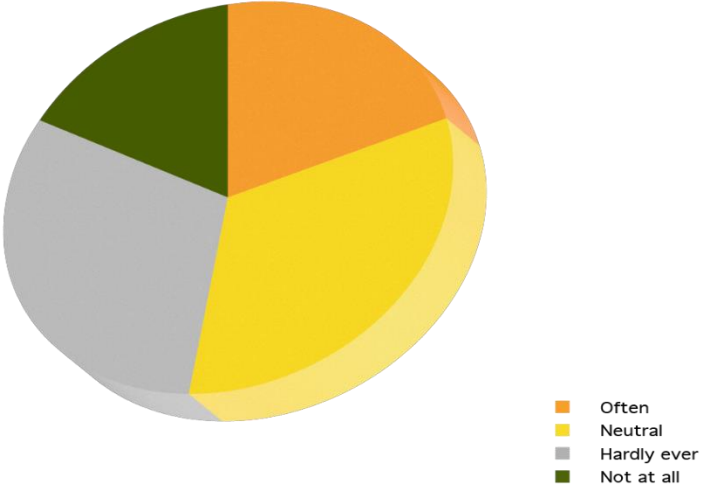


Figure 3.2. Have you felt physically unsafe doing your job?

On both social and physical unsafety, these are alarming numbers. Working in China is not easy, especially since Xi Jinping took office in 2012 (and certainly since the Covid pandemic): over **63% experience working conditions in China as poor to very poor** (see Figure 3.3). Only one respondent, who worked in the period before 2012, rated them as good.

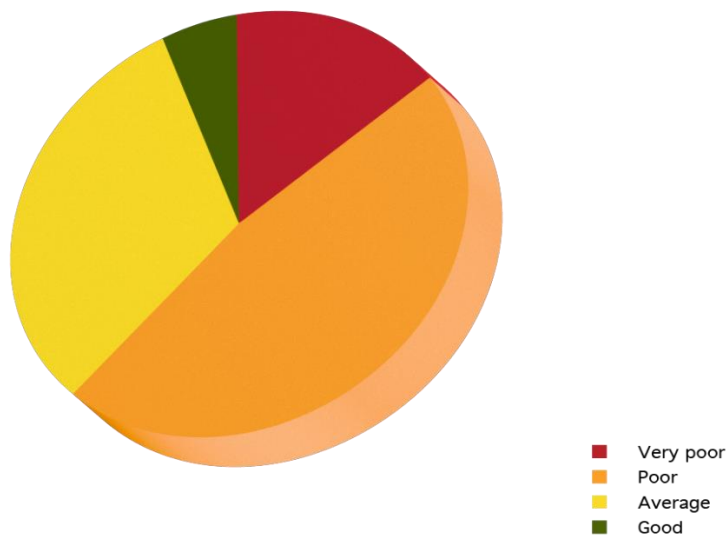


Figure 3.3 Working conditions of correspondents in China

The correspondents who answered 'average' were almost all working in the period before 2012. No one felt that working conditions had improved during their time as a correspondent. On the contrary, 74% of respondents felt that **working conditions had worsened** during their period. "It goes in waves, but the predominant direction is gradual deterioration," writes a correspondent still working in China today. "The removal of physical restrictions in 2023 [after the zero-Covid period] initially seemed like an improvement, but mostly exposed how many more other (non-physical) restrictions had been added." Another reported, "First, Covid made freedom a lot worse, then geopolitical tensions followed and, on top of that, China's massive wave of national security legislation." *The Foreign Correspondents' Club in China's* (FCCC) 2023 annual report highlights the misplaced optimism among correspondents that conditions would improve following the lifting of the strict zero-Covid policies. According to the *Masks Off, Barriers Remain* report (FCCC 2024), journalists from all backgrounds in China have continued to face challenges despite the policy changes.

When asked in the survey about examples of influence and intimidation, a recurring answer is that it involves a whole system of control. "It involves a **complete ecosystem of laws, regulations, means of pressure, technological and physical controls, deterrent examples and propaganda tools.**" Another sighs, "Where to start? Everything! The whole system is aimed at controlling information and restricting free news gathering, not only for foreign, but also for Chinese journalists." A third describes it this way: "It involves a package of circumstances, such as registering at your hotel when you arrive in another city, being tracked by silent police, but also the (...) awareness among interviewees that they might get into trouble and so do not want to meet up." An important consequence of the whole Chinese package of measures is that newsgathering is restricted in many ways. Not only is the freedom of movement of the correspondent itself affected, but also access to areas and potential interlocutors for making journalistic stories.

Creating a lack of information and accordingly **filling that gap with its own (positive) narratives** is a common tactic used by Chinese Party State (Drinhausen et al 2023). Especially for television, it is

almost impossible to create stories without images. For instance, while it is extremely difficult to access Xinjiang and Tibet, China's state-owned media offer content featuring singing and dancing Uighurs with great regularity, in order to push away negative stories about forced labour and other human rights violations (Ryan et al 2022; Goldenberg & Osieck 2023; MERICS 2023).¹² Most Western media do not use these images, but neither do they have access to information or images to stories they do want to make. There has also been virtually no news or information coming out of Tibet since 2008. Even then, it is difficult to make journalistic stories: "The conclusion might be that nothing significant is happening."¹³

The Chinese authorities employ an **impressive range of forms of influence and interference**. This ranges from a soft approach - such as an organised press trip (Huijgen 2024) or a request for cooperation - through active attempts to discourage newsgathering on sensitive topics, to harsh forms of intimidation, such as detention, questioning at the police station, being involuntarily removed from certain places or physical violence. If you complain about the harsher forms of harassment, the Chinese authorities portray you as a "troublemaker", saying that others do not cause such problems. "The intention is to sow divisions among themselves."¹⁴ Two respondents reported that pressure was put on them and the editors in the Netherlands in relation to his/her work. In the case of one of them, this concerned pressure, when a Chinese dignitary visited the Netherlands, to place a submitted comment in their newspaper. The expulsion of foreign correspondents and especially the hasty departure of two Australian journalists in 2020 (after a warning about a 'national security investigation') and a BBC correspondent in 2021 (after threats of legal action over his reporting on Xinjiang) are illustrative of the sharply deteriorating working conditions (BBC 2020; Sudworth 2021).¹⁵

Not only foreign correspondents themselves are harassed, but especially Chinese support staff and sources are intimidated. One correspondent was conducting an item in a remote village far from Beijing. When the correspondent's assistant called to ask how things were going on the ground, someone with a local accent shouted loudly through the phone, "Get out of our village, what are you doing here?" This came across as gnarly and unprofessional, but it made it clear to both the correspondent and assistant that they were being watched. This also occurred back in the days, when there were no such sophisticated technological tools.¹⁶

The effect of the accumulation of different forms of influence has been called the '**chilling effect**' or a 'war of attrition'. You have to be on your guard always, everywhere and with everyone. You never know exactly what red lines are, who can be trusted and whether you are being watched. It is exhausting and stressful because it happens continuously and over many years. The experience indicates that correspondents only find greater freedom to think and act when they are outside of

¹² Plus interviews with key people and journalists from the diaspora, Spring 2024.

¹³ Interviews with key people and journalists from the diaspora, May/June 2024.

¹⁴ Interview with correspondent, summer 2024.

¹⁵ The arrest and jail stay between 2018 and 2021 of Canadian ex-diplomat Michael Kovrig and businessman Michael Spavor - in retaliation for the arrest of Huawei top woman Meng Wanzhou - also made it clear to journalists that imprisonment had become a real option (*Guardian* 2021). The 2020 arrest of Australian journalist Cheng Lei (who worked for China's state broadcaster in Beijing) confirmed this (Ferguson & Freri 2023).

¹⁶ Interview summer 2024.

China. Although for some then - by their own admission - there is a certain conditioning, which has to be unlearned upon returning to the Netherlands.

Figure 3.4 below shows the various forms of influence and interference that correspondents in the survey say they experienced during their time in China. We classify the yellow-coloured circles under 'soft' influence, at orange we can speak of continuous to fairly serious perceived pressure, red is experienced as heavy-handed intimidation and interference and at dark red the intimidation also has a physical aspect. The size of the circles indicates how often a particular type was mentioned by correspondents. See the annex to this report for the exact number of times each type was mentioned.

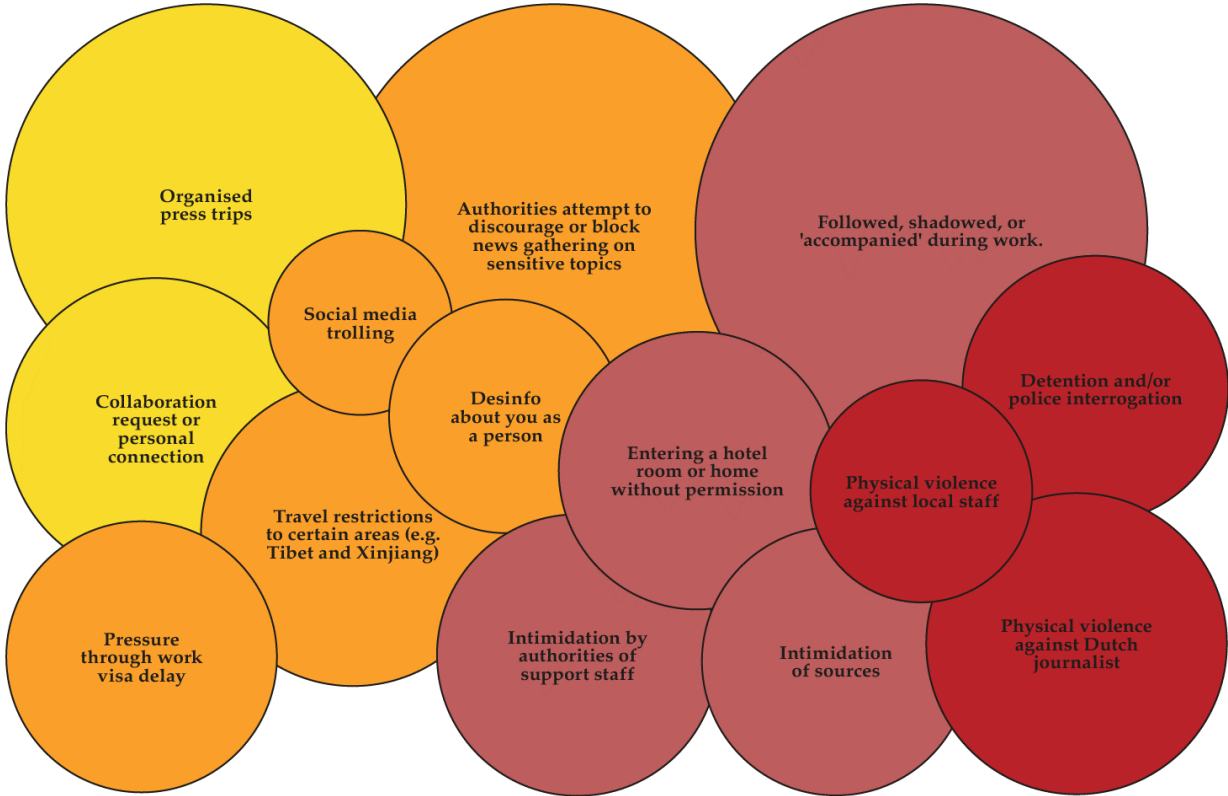


Figure 3.4 Influence, interference and harassment

Over half of the respondents believe organised journalists' trips are acceptable, as long as there is no pressure or coercion to publish or not publish certain things. And as long as the correspondent has a free choice to accept the travel proposal. According to some of the respondents, also in the Netherlands attempts to influence by press officers and communication advisers take place. The limit lies in attaching consequences to not following the desired line. This is not always without consequences in China. Among correspondents, 42% oppose all forms of influence by the Chinese authorities.

More than half of the respondents (58%) say they have (had) often to very often faced attempts at influence, 21% almost not and 21% are neutral. Support staff are targeted almost as often as the Dutch journalist: according to 53% of correspondents, their local staff have had to deal with

influencing. This includes not only attempts to influence the actions of the staff themselves, but also through pressure exerted on their families.

Correspondents on digital and physical surveillance:

<p>Always having the idea of being followed and bugged.</p>	<p>The influence of street and neighbourhood committees during fieldwork. People who are more Catholic than the Pope and report your presence immediately higher up.</p>
<p>You have to announce appointments, travel schedules and so on in advance. This gives the authorities a chance to dissuade interviewees from speaking to me.</p>	<p>Most limiting to me is the fact that Chinese citizens know that talking to the media is risky. As a result, they conceal things or don't talk at all.</p>

Further down the escalation scale:

<p>I went through the whole palette, from drinking tea (talking to the police, ed.), hassles with work visas to tracking and blocking work. My personal record: followed by 4 teams of plainclothes officers.</p>	<p>I was detained, interrogated, harassed during interviews, too many to mention. The best thing was to remain calm and patient. It always ended with a hiss, but for the cameraman, the assistant, myself and the person we were interviewing, the feeling of intimidation and as if you were balancing on a thin wire was no less.</p>
<p>Harassment by police and security forces, especially outside major cities.</p>	<p>The widespread deployment of uniformless types who follow and intimidate you during reporting.</p>

Chinese harassment attempts increase over the years:

<p>It went from bad to worse. From polite conversations in hotel lobbies to being held for long periods in a security basement.</p>	<p>Certainly until say 2017, I could usually go on reportage undisturbed, after that I was watched more often. Since 2020, it has been standard that I am followed, and also more explicitly worked out of the area.</p>
<p>The subject of 'faith and home churches' was sensitive in my time. After I wrote on the subject, men would come to my compound and ask the</p>	<p>A few years after I left China, I went to Tibet with a friend as a tourist. But within 24 hours, I was picked off the street by the police and questioned about my previous journalistic activities and they wanted to</p>

<p>supervisor if I was home, when I would come home, etc. I saw that as a form of intimidation.</p>	<p>know what I was up to. My (obligatory) guide was called at least three times a day: What were our plans? What time would we be somewhere? Throughout the trip, we were chased by men who were watching us. This was pure intimidation.</p>
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Tactics that were previously reserved for influencing high-profile Chinese (such as human rights lawyers, feminists) and ethnic minorities within Chinese territory are now being used for a wider group of non-Chinese, both within China and in *Greater China* (including Taiwan) and internationally, one respondent believes.

Having to **renew journalist visas** annually is stressful for both correspondents and editors in the Netherlands. This is often a period when slightly less critical and more positive stories are produced, or a decision is made not to escalate certain situations towards the Chinese authorities. The same applies to the period when correspondents are changed: it is better not to focus too much attention on yourself.

The **vulnerability of local staff** is a major concern. The assistant, fixer, cameraman or woman, driver and even the housekeeper; all are targeted by the Chinese authorities as a result of working for a foreign journalist. This is intimidating for all concerned. The same goes for sources. They are essential to almost every story. **Protecting sources** is at the top of the priority list for correspondents and their editors in the Netherlands. In practice, this means that some stories cannot be made. This aligns with the Party State's objective of stifling certain information flows and substituting them with the 'official narrative about China.'¹⁷

<p>My assistant was so intimidated that she had to leave the country. My fixer of a documentary later became politically active and has been imprisoned in Hong Kong for two years without trial. I continue to do my work, under the radar and unintimidated.</p>	<p>While reporting in Tibetan areas officially accessible to the media, I was permanently followed for a week. In Qinghai, I was detained by police and then dragged out of the car by People's Armed Police, physically intimidated and evicted from the hotel. Then, for a year and a half, I had to compulsorily turn up at every government conference on Tibet to 'acquire the right view.'</p>
<p>Unidentified men on forklifts wearing construction helmets drove into me and my camera crew.</p>	<p>Our assistant was asked 'to tea' (invited to talk to the police, ed.). This included explicit mention of his family elsewhere in the country. This was very intimidating for him.</p>

¹⁷ See also chapter 2.

<p>After the zero-Covid protests, many assistants, including mine, were called by the police: whether we had been at protests and taken photos or videos. My assistant stayed at a friend's house for two nights. The third day, around midnight, she got a call: she had to come to the police station. With three men, they came to pick her up at her home. They questioned her about our work and office while filming her. After signing a statement, she got back her ID and phone. After leaving an hour and a half later, she was told not to tell this to me. I waited outside and she stayed with me for a few nights. She moved out, because she felt not safe and her housemates distrusted her. Eventually, she resigned from her position as an assistant, unable to shake off the experience.</p>	
<p>Access to the Winter Olympics was made conditional on avoiding sensitive topics ("we don't want stories about Tian'anmen, 4 June 1989"). Invitations to events or group tours were made conditional on the 'friendliness' of my reporting.</p>	<p>Our Chinese employee was approached at the hotel by a government official who wanted to know exactly what we had come to do, who we were going to speak to and where we were going. She was approached every day about what we had done. We advised her to be open but never specific. We looked out for who we approached and whether we were being followed because we did not want to get our interlocutors in trouble."</p>
<p>I was detained for a day by the police in Urumqi on charges of inciting Uighurs to violence against officers. Late in the evening, after forcibly signing a statement and after mediation by the Dutch government, I was released.</p>	<p>I was physically attacked several times in one day by a 'gang' in Guangdong, where I was reporting on local elections. Eventually, a local official took me away to the nearest town. On the way, he stopped once more so that some men could give me some more blows.</p>
<p>At the protests in Shanghai, I was taking photos. I was tapped on the shoulder by an officer. They wanted to push me into a van, but I pretended not to understand and played 'stupid foreigner'. I was released because they were more concerned about the protesters.</p>	<p>My assistant was repeatedly interrogated by the secret service during preparations for the Party Congress. In the process, he was shown documents from my personal file. This had an intimidating effect on him, and also on myself, as I had previously made attempts to see these documents, but was told they were lost.</p>
<p>All in all, this meant I had had enough and felt I could no longer report neutrally on what was going on in China. Therefore, I left and became a correspondent elsewhere.</p>	<p>In the countryside near Xi'an for a report on Covid, a couple of men turned up almost immediately. The doctor I spoke to was taken aside and would not speak to me after that. In the villages I visited, I was followed. These men stayed so close to us that they intimidated our interlocutors.</p>

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All examples show constant pressure from **local** authority figures during reports, but also from **central** Chinese authorities, as in this case: 'Pressure was applied by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs following an interview the government did not like. There were threats of 'measures', including visa problems and mobilising public outrage against my person. The request was to keep a particular article out of the media. When we published anyway, the pressure continued so much that I decided **to leave China by myself.**" Other respondents also report being "put on the spot" at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the *State Council*.

Examples of socially and physically unsafe situations

<p>The office I shared with other journalists was broken into. It was completely trashed.</p>	<p>My neighbour was a barber and hung around in front of his door all day, near the gate to my flat. I felt he was watching me. Around that time, I also got the impression that someone had been in my house. That was all a pretence, I think. Purely a feeling, but you get suspicious.</p>
<p>Detention, interrogation, days-long chases, demonstrable monitoring of communications, demonstrable use of surveillance, disruption of telephone and internet connections.</p>	<p>After checking in, I took the lift to my floor, when suddenly a man who had been sitting on a couch in the lobby next to the lift also jumped into the lift. He got out on the same floor and walked behind me. I then went down via the service lift to eat. On my return, I decided to check the lobby. There were two young boys in black clothes looking up. As I walked towards the shop, I saw that one of them wanted to take a picture with his mobile. When he saw that I saw it, he quickly put his mobile away. That night, I barricaded my door with a chair.</p>
<p>If I did not comply with a 'request' not to publish something, the state security services threatened to become intensely involved with me, my sources and staff. The fact that they suggested that was problematic for me.</p>	<p>After more than five years of being a correspondent, I distrusted a lot and became excessively <i>anxious</i> if passport control at a Chinese airport, for instance, took longer than usual. It led to disproportionate distrust in situations and towards people. Having to be constantly on your guard and not being able to do your work freely affects your whole life, your relationships, your mental well-being, your job satisfaction, everything. It takes strong resilience to do this work.</p>

Some note that **tactics** have become **less subtle**: 'Less carrots and more stick.' 'More aggressive and offensive,' is another's description used. One respondent explains that it is difficult to put your finger on changes because many of the **tactics and tools** are **invisible**. For example, how can you know

exactly how your digital communication is being monitored? How do you know whether the techniques for doing so are being expanded? As a result, you become even more cautious, because a safety margin must always be built in.

Self-censorship is a recurring theme here. **Only 5% say they do self-censorship often**, 47% almost not, 32% not at all, and the rest (16%) are neutral. When respondents say they engage in self-censorship, it is in the vast majority of cases **to protect local sources**. A few respondents mention the period around the renewal of their work permit as a time when they sometimes produce less critical stories, and a few apply self-censorship to make journalism in China more 'workable' for themselves. One respondent, who has not been stationed in China for some time, replied that it 'took a while' to overcome self-censorship on topics such as human rights violations.

When asked whether the Chinese attempts at influence led to (temporarily) different outcomes in news gathering, 21% replied that it did not and 37% almost not. Newsgathering continued as usual, was the belief. In contrast, 26% believed that newsgathering did (often to very often) have been affected. There are caveats to the vast majority (58%) who believe that efforts were not successful or almost unsuccessful. The hurdles to be overcome for making a 'sensitive' story may lead to choosing a different angle, not making the story (temporarily), or the item failing altogether. The **obstruction of research and journalism**, so that information flows do not take place, is actually commonly used and, according to many respondents, a very **successful tactic of the Chinese Party state**. Travel restrictions, intimidation of sources and sowing doubt (by systematically offering disinformation, but also, for example, by attacking the credibility of sources), are all tried and tested means.¹⁸

Influencing or interfering practices affect **work and private decisions** of Dutch journalists in China, more than two-thirds of respondents indicate (even if they believe they do not affect newsgathering itself). Two respondents note that there **is much less** (or different) **newsgathering** because journalists have less access and therefore get a less varied picture: 'It has become much more geopolitical. That is a consequence of the demand from Dutch editors combined with the difficulty in China to set up and produce reports.' There is also the impression that it is less about what the correspondent itself writes: 'I have become much more of a **pawn of wider bilateral relations**.'

Less political or more positive *human interest* stories may therefore be made significantly less. This can also lead to more negative coverage of China. A serious example is a reporter from Dutch TV that was pushed on the ground and detained, which was captured on camera. The item about a demonstration failed, but instead became an item about this incident of intimidation (NOS 2024). The footage was picked up by international media (CPJ Committee to Protect Journalists 2024; *The Globe and Mail* 2024).¹⁹ **Thus**, in the short term, this kind of severe **Chinese attempts at influence** works **counter productively**. A longer-term consequence may be that the more conspicuous journalists are monitored even more intensely.

¹⁸ Interview Free Press Unlimited, June 2024.

¹⁹ In a similar incident in 2022 surrounding a Dutch correspondent: *Daily Mail* 2022.

3.2 Chinese influence and interference in Dutch media

The picture of influence and interference in the Dutch media landscape is more diffuse than that of the working conditions of correspondents in China itself. The **Marije Vlaskamp case** was, as far as is known, the first time a Dutch journalist on Dutch soil faced severe Chinese intimidation practices.

Vlaskamp has reported for many years (first as a correspondent from China, then from Amsterdam), including on sensitive topics for China such as Tibet, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang. In her reporting on China's influence outside Chinese territory, Vlaskamp's focus includes the work of the United Front, whose mission is to influence people and organisations outside China.²⁰ For reports on the situation of Uighurs in Turkey, she entered sensitive networks and spoke to people who were in danger of being extradited to China under Chinese pressure (Vlaskamp 2021a and Vlaskamp 2021b). Several Hong Kong refugees in the UK she interviewed are on Chinese most wanted lists (Vlaskamp 2020). Vlaskamp also published about a Uighur whistleblower residing in the Netherlands (Vlaskamp 2019a). Each of these are sources that Chinese authorities want to avoid giving a voice.

Vlaskamp described in detail in the *Volkskrant* how **fake hotel bookings and bomb threats** were made in her name (Vlaskamp 2023). The Chinese embassy informed the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs about this and reported it to the police, which led to Vlaskamp becoming a suspect. Vlaskamp and her employer proactively contacted the police and judicial authorities. However, it proved impossible to trace the perpetrators of the false accusations.²¹

Globally, there are many known cases of intimidation by Chinese authorities targeting Chinese activists, Hong Kongers, Tibetans, and Uighurs (see also Chapter 4 for more details), but it is much less common for this to happen to journalists from Western media, though there are a few known instances in the broader context of transnational repression aimed at researchers, journalists and human rights activists.²² The best-known case is that of two Canadians, researcher and former diplomat Michael Kovrig and entrepreneur Michael Spavor, who were detained in China for almost three years in what is seen as a retaliation for the arrest in Vancouver of Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou.

An example of **far-reaching intimidation in the Netherlands** is the **death threat** of the Xinjiang whistleblower (also source of Vlaskamp's aforementioned story) received via Facebook. The person concerned would 'end up cut into pieces in the black bin in her front garden' was the message (Vlaskamp 2019a). The Dutch local police took that threat seriously, regularly checking the neighbourhood and reporting the matter to the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Services (AIVD). The same source was also the subject of a **targeted, personal video message** and English-language written column by the Chinese state-run newspaper the *Global Times*, telling her not to be

²⁰ See also Chapter 2.

²¹ There is ambiguity surrounding the role of a China-born activist who presents itself on X (formerly Twitter) as "wanted by the CCP" and who, around the same time as Vlaskamp, also filed a report with the Dutch police about false bomb threats. NPR conducted an extensive investigation into this activist's involvement in manipulating a Chinese asylum seeker in the Netherlands and falsifying emails from the Dutch Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND) (Langfitt 2024, NPR 2024, Wu 2024).

²² For examples of incidents involving journalists, see: Zhang & Cave 2022; RSF 2019. For examples of incidents involving researchers and human rights defenders, see: Nippert 2019; Campbell 2022; Boisvert 2021; Phillips 2018; GMF 2019. In July 2022, Huawei unexpectedly withdrew defamation charges against the French researcher, see RFA 2019.

afraid of China, but not to think she would be safe in the West. "US intelligence, separatists from Xinjiang, even interested Western journalists: that's where the danger is," said the editor-in-chief of the popular Chinese *tabloid*. Soon after, she faced a **smear campaign** coming from her own community - from people she did not know (Vlaskamp 2019b).²³ The report and lawsuit filed by the whistleblower led to nothing. **Intimidation of sources** is a tactic that is increasingly taking place outside China globally through transnational repression.

In the rest of Europe, there are a handful of known examples of harassment of journalists. Su Yutong, a **German-based journalist** of Chinese origin, works for Radio Free Asia, a major source for Chinese dissidents and China-related diaspora. Su, like Vlaskamp, was a victim of false hotel bookings (dozens in her case) and bomb threats. She was additionally threatened with rape and death. As a result of **fake escort ads** in her name, anonymous individuals rang her doorbell daily (RFA 2023).

Previous research shows that targeting **women**, particularly those of Chinese or Asian origin, has increased. It is among the specific tactics from the CCP toolbox: "*In an effort to counter the views and work of these women, the CCP has been busy pivoting its growing information operation capabilities to target women, with a focus on journalists working at major Western media outlets*" (Zhang & Cave 2022).²⁴ This is done in part through the pro-CCP active on X (formerly Twitter) *Spamouflage* network, which attributed the platform to the Chinese government in 2019 (Nimmo et al 2019, Zhang & Cave).²⁵ The Australian think tank ASPI speaks of a "**spectrum of psychological abuse, intimidation, mass trolling and threats**" (Zhang & Cave). An Australian journalist of Chinese origin says: "Harassment of Chinese journalists like me has become very common. It is a standard practice encouraged by the [Chinese] state" (RFA 2023). One notable incident in Canberra was the physical blocking by two Chinese embassy employees of a Chinese-Australian journalist from Sky News, who was attending a press conference by the Chinese prime minister in the Australian parliament. Later, she was also denied access to a second press event at a hotel (Cheng Lei 2024).

In such cases, it is not always clear to what extent the intimidation is carried out by official Chinese authorities, **criminal groups - whether directed or not - or Chinese nationalists** (ProPublica 2023). The latter may not need instructions to achieve what is important to them: protect China from tarnishing its good name and image. This is illustrative of how the Chinese system works: not everything needs to be centrally controlled. General guidelines are issued at the central level; at the decentralised level, actors take their own initiative to take actions that, in their perception, are in line with central policy.

Two French investigative journalists received **threatening messages** ('We will find out your address') and phone calls in May 2024, following the **broadcast of a documentary** on television channel France 2 about an attempted forced repatriation, or kidnapping, of a Chinese dissident. Before the broadcast, their *group* chat on an encrypted platform was infiltrated with an attempt by an unknown person to stop the broadcast. The journalists assume that the Chinese police are involved in the

²³ The online version of the Volkskrant article includes the *Global Times* video. Plus: interviews key people and journalists diaspora, Spring 2024. Since 2011, infiltration of the Uighur community in the Netherlands has been listed as a concern in the AIVD's annual reports.

²⁴ They are high-profile journalists from the *New Yorker*, *The Economist*, the *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and *Quartz*.

²⁵ Most *targeting* via Twitter happened during Beijing office hours and decreased substantially during Chinese holidays.

threats (RSF 2024a). Meanwhile, two Chinese diplomats (the most senior in charge of the Chinese Ministry of State Security in Paris and his deputy), have been expelled from France (*Le Monde* 2024).

Swedish journalist Jojje Olssen was threatened by the Chinese embassy in 2021. He was accused of *moral corruption* and the embassy demanded cessation of his critical reporting on China. They added that if this did not happen, he would "feel the consequences of his own actions" (IFJ 2021).

Attribution of harassment of internationally operating journalists proves to be extremely difficult in most cases known worldwide. If it comes to court cases on Chinese interference at all, they usually involve espionage cases, not intimidation of journalists.

Hence, there are only a few known cases of harsh harassment of Dutch or European journalists covering China. Internationally, there are more. Most cases of influence are much more sophisticated. Amsterdam-based Free Press Unlimited (FPU), which supports media and journalists worldwide, describes Chinese influence methods as "subtle" and thus less visible than the more heavy-handed Russian methods.²⁶ The **Chinese strategy involves employing numerous subtle provocations**, which you only really recognise and understand when you are in that Chinese network and have a lot of background information. These include middlemen with ties to the Chinese embassy, who contact you and appear to know personal details about you. This is how they subtly let you know that you are being watched. Sometimes they even kindly invite you to cooperate with the Chinese authorities.²⁷ Only if the efforts of these 'trailblazers' do not lead to the desired result a switch can occur to more repressive methods. First indirectly, through smear campaigns and the sharing of private data (also known as *doxing*), then more aggressively by approaching people in person.²⁸ One respondent indicated that Vlaskamp's case is a classic example of how China operates. "An entire system is deployed against one individual. That way, you can frighten people and silence them. It is a Leninist system testing how far the boundaries can be stretched. Remember the Chinese saying of 'kill the chicken to scare the monkey'. After that, they can achieve the same effect with a more moderate approach."²⁹

The question is whether an average chief or desk editor in the Netherlands, without much knowledge about China, recognises that first stage of subtle tactics. Free Press Unlimited (FPU) believes that Dutch **matter of factness** may also play a role: the idea that things are not that big a deal, while there may be a lot going on. Security threats (not related to China) to female journalists were also initially dismissed. A physical attack is obvious and understandable, then chief editors take immediate action. An indirect attack results in some raised eyebrows in the best case scenario. FPU draws the comparison with the unsafe working environment for women in Dutch editorial departments. That issue was not taken seriously for a long time, even though there appeared to be a lot going on.

Another attempt at influence is that the **Chinese embassy in The Hague** regularly publishes **comments on news items** in Dutch media. The 'negative reporting' on espionage, Hong Kong, and unfair competition prompted this, for example, but also the interview of a former Taiwanese

²⁶ Interview with Free Press Unlimited, May 2024.

²⁷ Interview with journalist, June 2024.

²⁸ Interview with Free Press Unlimited, May 2024.

²⁹ Interviews key people and journalists diaspora, May/June 2024.

diplomat. Sometimes those comments are addressed to Dutch media in general, sometimes media organisations like NOS, RTL and Follow The Money are specifically mentioned (Embassy of the PRC 2024, Embassy 2022). This does not seem to be taken very seriously by most journalists on Dutch editorial boards we spoke to: "To be honest, I have to laugh at that. That is mainly addressed to their own community." Another editor did report being shocked by it.³⁰

In addition, Chinese ambassadors sometimes allow themselves to be **interviewed by Dutch media**, or offer op-eds. In 2019, then-Chinese ambassador Xu Hong - after being rejected an op-ed - bought a full page of advertising space in NRC,³¹ in which he explained official Chinese positions in English, using many words in a small font. A Chinese-looking modus operandi whose effectiveness is questionable. A few weeks later, he gave an interview to NRC. In recent years, several Dutch media, including FD, Trouw and NOS, have spoken to successive ambassadors. A foreign editor says: "Those interviews work positively, I think. Advertisements don't work, or are counterproductive." One respondent indicates that - to be able to oversee how China operates - we need to look much more broadly at the whole system of media and information provision, including advertising departments, publishers and so on.³²

It is important to note that the vast majority of editors on Dutch editorial boards covering China also value **anonymity**. Reason given by several is that they **like to keep a low profile**. Some journalists are surprised that the Chinese authorities have never shown any interest in them or their work.³³ People who cover China for a long time and speak the Chinese language say they have become more suspicious towards Chinese authorities, and think carefully about protecting their sources, both nationally and internationally. They also seek cooperation to avoid being left alone and unsupported on critical stories. An example of European cooperation is the explosive investigation by the *Financial Times*, *Der Spiegel* and *Le Monde* that revealed that Belgian politician Creyelman was an informant of the Chinese secret service for years (*Politico* 2023). In such a case, cooperation seems to offer some protection to the journalists and media involved.

The experiences of correspondents in China impress bureau editors who are their contact in the Netherlands more than the admonitions by the embassy. One Asia editor describes examples of the "harassing manner of intimidation" of the correspondent by the Chinese authorities: dropping by the office, being addressed in the market by a complete stranger using one's own name, always the same cars in front of the door following you, always fussing with permission for reports. But that kind of practice takes place far away from the Netherlands.

The *Foreign Correspondents Club of China* in Beijing reports on influence that does occur outside China: "Pressure around stories unwelcome to China can sometimes reach far beyond China's borders. Among foreign correspondents in the FCCC survey, 19% say editors in their home country have been approached by the government regarding China stories" (FCCC 2024, p. 8). Our own

³⁰ Interviews with various media organisations involved, May/June 2024.

³¹ A screenshot (<https://images.app.goo.gl/eqWWGVZ4AZ1pNhQW7>) accompanying an opinion piece in NRC (28 May 2019) by Eric C Hendriks: <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2019/05/28/wat-ambassadeur-xu-wel-had-moeten-zeggen-over-huawei-a3961913>

³² Interviews key people and journalists diaspora, Spring 2024.

³³ Interviews with journalists, Spring 2024.

interviews do not confirm this picture; we did not come across any instances where this happened, except for two correspondents who do report it in our survey.

An almost invisible way of Chinese influence on the Dutch media landscape stems from a **deal by international news agencies Reuters and AP** with Chinese state news agency Xinhua and Chinese state television, for the **use of footage from Chinese state television CGTN** (China Media Project 2024). This exchange has existed for years and indirectly affects what you see on Dutch TV. In an item about Corona protection equipment, for example, boxes were shown with the text *China Aid*. However, that is not aid at all; it had to be paid for.³⁴ Thus, a Chinese narrative creeps into Dutch media unnoticed.

The Chinese influence is especially noticeable when there is something going on around a sensitive topic such as Tibet or Xinjiang. Then a big stream of positive stories and images are offered, making the more critical stories from Reuters itself no longer stand out. There is clearly a strategy behind this: **flooding the zone** with China's own narrative. Recently, the NOS put CGTN's material in a separate folder so that it is not accidentally used by an inexperienced editor. The material provided by the *European Broadcasting Union* (EBU) includes *content* from countries such as Serbia, Italy and Hungary, where China has more influence and deals with local media. Chinese narratives and propaganda material can also come in indirectly via that route.³⁵

One concern is the **limited knowledge about China** on editorial boards. That knowledge often resides with the correspondent and one foreign editor. Specialist knowledge about China disappears when such a specialist leaves. When Prime Minister Rutte visited China in spring 2024, there were images of Rutte in a park, with people in Tibetan costumes in the background. You need a lot of knowledge and experience to know that this was staged.³⁶ One such subtle incident may be innocent, but around Tibet and Xinjiang there is a relentless stream of images and narratives about minorities who are happy and grateful for the opportunities and prosperity offered to them by the Chinese state. This is precisely the positive narrative that China is widely using to try and drown out the more critical narratives about these regions, and is intended for foreign audiences, including the Chinese diaspora.

Knowing more about the **tactics of Chinese propaganda** can increase the quality of reporting. Common tactics used are:

- Primarily delivering **positive news**; mostly in the form of propaganda and disinformation;
- **Flooding the zone**, also widely used on social media. This is pushing out information (negative, critical or undesirable to China) and is also called *drowning out*;
- Repeating **the message** over and over again to reinforce it is known as the *illusory truth effect*;
- A frequently used tactic is **what-aboutism**: accusing the other of hypocrisy or racism, when you yourself are accused of it, and thus diverting attention;

³⁴ Various interviews with journalists and media organisations, Spring 2024.

³⁵ Interviews (former) journalists and various media organisations, Spring 2024.

³⁶ Interview diaspora media, Spring 2024.

- **Rewriting history** is a favourite tool: 'China has always been...';
- **Creating doubts** is a proven and effective tactic, for example by disbelieving (or delegitimising) a speaker;

And then there is the **spread of disinformation**, including the promotion of alternative theories. 'The Covid virus originated from an American laboratory' is one example. Or more recently, the adoption of the Russian narrative that the war in Ukraine was started by NATO. Similarly, *Spamouflage* networks linked to China have been active on X (formerly Twitter), with accounts impersonating real people to give the impression that they are strong supporters of Chinese policy. This also happened to a Dutch cartoonist, who noted that it was "ironic that his identity as a political cartoonist was being used for [Chinese] political propaganda" (VOA 2024).

The Chinese Party State employs numerous tactics to influence information about China in third countries. In the process, harsh intimidation practices are not shunned in China itself, as the stories of Dutch correspondents and Figure 3.4 clearly illustrate. While the combination of soft influence, constant pressure and harsh intimidation does not prevent correspondents from continuing to do their work, it does affect the content of reporting, largely because geographic areas and sources are not accessible due to active interventions by Chinese authorities, preventing stories from being produced.

On Dutch soil, with the exception of the harassment of Marije Vlaskamp and the source on Xinjiang, the influence is more subtle. However, even in the Netherlands, the danger of the extraterritorial effect of Hong Kong's 2020 National Security Act and Article 23 of the *Basic Law*, adopted in 2024, must be taken into account. This also puts journalists in the Netherlands, who interview Hong Kong activists who are on a most wanted list, at risk of being charged with complicity in treason or subversion for providing a platform (Ho 2024; Kawase 2024).

The desire of many of our interlocutors to remain anonymous does illustrate the caution with which China is approached. Preferring to remain unobtrusive, in order to keep doing your job, seems to be an approach chosen by many. Harassment of sources appears to be a tactic that China is using increasingly aggressively beyond its borders, including in Europe and the Netherlands. Women are increasingly specifically targeted in this. In the next chapter, we discuss Chinese-language media in the Netherlands and the provision of information for Chinese human rights activists and China-related diaspora groups, such as Uighurs and Tibetans in the Netherlands.

4. Chinese influence and interference in Chinese-language and diaspora media in the Netherlands

The China-related **diaspora** living in the Netherlands **has a very diverse composition** and includes the older generation of Chinese who have worked in the restaurant sector and their children who grew up and were educated in the Netherlands, students who came directly from China for a bachelor's, master's, or PhD degree, businesspeople and Chinese who came to the Netherlands for a partner. A separate group are human rights activists from China and Hong Kong, and the various non-Han Chinese diaspora groups, such as Tibetans and Uighurs.

We highlight the experiences of these two different groups separately. The first part of this chapter looks at the specific influence of Chinese-language media in the Netherlands, focusing on the broad first group. In doing so, in addition to our own interviews, we mainly use existing recent research on the subject. For Chinese and other human rights activists and non-Han Chinese diaspora groups, in the second part of this chapter we consider other undesirable Chinese influence on their lives in the Netherlands, in addition to influence on the general provision of information. The reason is that in this way it can be made clear how the Chinese Party State operates when it comes to interference and transnational repression.

4.1 Chinese language media

The media habits of the various Han Chinese groups in the Netherlands varies widely, Pieke shows in a recent report (Pieke 2023). The older generation mainly relies on Chinese-language newspapers for information about both the Netherlands and China, which can be found for free in Chinese restaurants.³⁷ In addition, their children often act as sources of information and interpreters. For young people from all groups of the China-related diaspora, **social media**, in addition to Dutch-language and international media, are a particularly important source. The influence of propaganda, disinformation campaigns and other forms of influence on social media, sometimes through *influencers*, is also potentially high among this group (Ryan et al 2022; Goldenberg & Osieck 2023).

Pieke notes that the vast majority of Chinese living in the Netherlands believe that the Chinese government does not have (or should not have) a say in what Chinese people say or think here (Pieke 2023, p. 72). Yet almost all first-generation migrants "tell us that they themselves (...) **are cautious about expressing their opinions on the well-known sensitive issues**: China's unification with Taiwan, the protests in Hong Kong, the repression of the Uighurs in Xinjiang and the status of Tibet" (Pieke 2023, p. 72).

The conclusion from the interviews we conducted ourselves endorses this. The Chinese-language news site *Holland One* (荷兰一网, *Hélán yīwǎng*) says it adopts many reports from Dutch media, but

³⁷ Around the adoption of the 'genocide motion' on Xinjiang in the House of Representatives, a joint statement was published herein in March 2021 by 55 Chinese organisations in the Netherlands, which spoke out against it, see: United Times (2021, p. 11) and: *RFA Chinese* (2021).

takes care with translations. For example, when it talks about Taiwan, it refers to 'mainland and Taiwan' rather than 'China and Taiwan'.³⁸ According to the editor-in-chief, the main purpose of the website is to help Chinese people gain more knowledge and understanding about Dutch society. The *United Times* newspaper (联合时报, *Liánhé shíbào*) says it pursues the same goal. Both say they run entirely on advertising revenues and have little contact with the Chinese embassy in The Hague. Interestingly, both did not consider anonymity necessary (unlike most of the people we interviewed), and say they consider transparency important. The other Chinese-language media in the Netherlands did not respond to our request for an interview. Representatives of *United Times*, *Holland One* and *Asian Times* attended the 10^e *Forum on Global Chinese Media* in Beijing in 2019, which is organised by the United Front every two years (with the exception of Covid years) and where overseas Chinese media are urged to show more 'discipline', i.e. to follow the Party line (China Media Project 2023). In a written response, the *United Times* says it is mainly an opportunity for them to "learn from the professional knowledge of news media and about the practices of colleagues in other countries" rather than a place where participants are disciplined.

Incidentally, in July 2024, the 14th *European Chinese Media Forum* was held in The Hague, co-organised by the *United Times* and 'strongly supported by the Chinese embassy in the Netherlands' (*China Times HK* 2024). A representative of a Shanghai-based media organisation there explained the creation of international communication brand '*Foreigners Telling Stories*', aiming 'to make more foreign friends and optimise international communication' (China Times HK 2024).³⁹

A conclusion drawn by Pieke in a 2021 report on the Chinese community in the Netherlands is that substantive steering by Chinese authorities is not necessary, because people are naturally in line. "The (...) steering of Chinese communities by the Chinese Communist Party (...) is falling on fertile ground in the Netherlands," he said. During our interviews with Chinese-Dutch organisations and media, an almost **casual willingness to accommodate Beijing** or, at the very least, not to antagonise Beijing, became apparent time and again" (Pieke 2021, p. 31). To then note, "When it is necessary to broach 'sensitive' topics for the Chinese government, they take great care not to fall out of step with Beijing. This is done without explicit guidelines being given." (Pieke 2021, p. 31). This is helped by the fact that most editors-in-chief of Chinese media in the Netherlands, before coming to the Netherlands, gained work experience at media organisations in China. This does not only influence the Chinese community. That influence also reaches the rest of Dutch society, Pieke concludes, allowing "pro-Chinese interests and beliefs to find their way within the Dutch social and political playing field" (Pieke 2021, p. 37). The CCP's influence on the teaching materials of Chinese weekend schools in the Netherlands is an example (de Regt and Strijker 2023).

Representatives of Chinese-language media deny facing direct interference. *Follow the Money* found Chinese government influence in Chinese-language media in the Netherlands however in 2021: online censorship, the copying of content from Chinese state media and the re-posting of columns from the Chinese embassy (Booij and Sys 2021). But much more than 'hard' influence is

³⁸ The latter creates the impression of two equal powers and is unacceptable to China.

³⁹ A typical United Front tactic; see also Chapter 2.

what Pieke calls the '**soft threat**' at play in his 2023 report: the awareness that it is better to behave with restraint, not to express explicitly dissenting opinions and, more generally, not to seek the limelight. A journalist in the Netherlands of Chinese origin agrees: "I am very cautious and try not to stand out. As a result, I fortunately have no experience of threatening messages from the Chinese authorities on my journalistic productions. Not yet anyway," she adds.⁴⁰

Pieke concludes that there is thus "indeed a clear degree of at least partially undesirable influence." The soft threat makes it unnecessary for Beijing to enforce conformity. "The Chinese population in the Netherlands apparently does this largely by themselves," he says. Pieke speaks of "**self-surveillance**" that in some ways is reminiscent of contemporary China itself (Pieke 2023, p. 84).

4.2 Human rights activists, Uighurs and Tibetans

The influence of the Chinese authorities has much sharper manifestations, including on Dutch soil, up to outright transnational repression. This can be seen through the experiences of critical Chinese students living in the Netherlands, LGBTQ+, Hong Kongers, Falun Gong practitioners, human rights activists and, for much longer, Tibetans and Uighurs. They often face pressure or **threats from the Chinese Party State** on a daily basis. This is also evident from a recent Amnesty International survey of students, including in the Netherlands (Amnesty International 2024b). The space for 'dissenters' outside China has also shrunk sharply in recent years, or, as *The Economist* describes it, "Life outside China is looking more and more like life in China. The Chinese Communist Party is trying to tighten its grip on the Chinese diaspora" (*The Economist* 2024). Surveillance of Chinese students and researchers abroad, for example, is increasing. Digitally, by monitoring their activities on *WeChat*, but also in the physical world, including on Dutch soil.

Chinese students at the University of Amsterdam are bothered by China's long arm, writes university magazine *Folia* in May 2024 (Meijerink 2024). They fear that other Chinese will report them to the Chinese embassy in The Hague, or directly to local authorities or police in China. In lectures, they keep a low profile and speak out only when they trust the political views of their Chinese fellow students, or - as a precaution - not at all.

Christine from Hong Kong tells *Folia*: "Look, here I have **hundreds of missed calls in one day from random numbers** from Pakistan, India and some African countries. I'm pretty sure the Chinese government is using those as spam numbers. After all, this was a day after I had protested for trans rights in China at Dam Square in Amsterdam; all the people were taking pictures of us and that already felt very frightening." She always watches what she says when sitting next to Asian people in the canteen and never digitally submits a critical essay. "You can be reported by a fellow student to the Chinese government just like that via *WeChat*. They then send screenshots that they have reported you to the Chinese police or I receive anonymous threats like 'Watch out when you leave home.'" For a Chinese national, it is then risky to report threats in the Netherlands.

⁴⁰ Interview Chinese-Dutch journalist, Spring 2024.

Emma no longer even feels safe at her home address: "It (...) even goes so far that people now **regularly ring my doorbell** at my house and then I let my partner open it, because I have become very alert after all this time. Then suddenly there is no one at the door. I therefore now also carry defence equipment with me all the time," (Meijerink 2024).

Amnesty International gives the example of Rowan (Amnesty 2024a) in the previously named report on overseas students. She was participating in a memorial service for the crackdown surrounding the pro-democracy protests in Tian'anmen Square in 1989. Within hours, her father in China reported that the security service had been contacted and that he had been told to "educate his daughter who is studying abroad so that she does not attend gatherings that may damage China's reputation in the world," (Amnesty 2024b). At the protest, Rowan had not shared her real name with anyone and had not posted anything online. She is shocked at how **quickly she and her father were traced**. The message from the Chinese authorities was clear to her: "We are watching you and although we are on the other side of the planet, we can still reach you" (Amnesty 2024b).

There are many different means of pressure when it comes to overseas students:

- Chinese student associations (so-called *Chinese Students and Scholars Associations; CSSAs*) in the Netherlands keep in close contact with the Chinese embassy in The Hague;
- Students feel that they can always be reported by a fellow student, including for what they say during lectures, resulting in self-censorship;
- At meetings around China, participants are often photographed, those images can be forwarded to authorities as well as parents in China;⁴¹
- Calls from unknown numbers;
- Doorbell ringing at home address;
- Being followed;
- Parents in China are urged to turn off the financial tap;
- Parents will lose their jobs if their child does not stop 'activist' activities.

Interestingly, women seem to be targeted more often than men in Chinese harassment campaigns, especially online (see also 3.2). This is consistent with experiences in other countries. "The most malicious and sophisticated parts of this information campaign are focused on women of Asian background," (Zhang & Cave 2022). Targeting a family member (in this case teenage daughter) of a Chinese dissident in the US appears to be a novel tactic. In a smear and intimidation campaign, she was portrayed as a prostitute, drug user and arsonist (Myers & Hsu 2024).

The pressure on **human rights defenders, Uighurs and Tibetans** in the Netherlands and around the world is heavy. Reports such as *Nowhere feels safe, Uighurs tell of China-led intimidation campaign abroad* by Amnesty International (Amnesty 2020) and reports by Human Rights Watch and Freedom House underline that. It reaches too far for this report on media to present many examples, but the list below is a sample of what the effects of **extreme forms of Chinese transnational repression** are on these groups:

⁴¹ Facial recognition *software*, based on (sometimes involuntarily collected) big data, is very advanced in China.

- There is a climate of mistrust and social unsafety in these groups as the Chinese authorities recruit informants from among members of their community;⁴²
- Family members staying in the PRC are questioned, placed under house arrest, detained or disappear. Since 2017, any contact of Uighurs with relatives in China has been cut off. This has led to many personal tragedies and trauma in the community, including in the diaspora;⁴³
- Under the pretext of renewing passports or driving licences, dissidents are lured back to China, often resulting in detention or disappearance;
- Forced repatriation, or attempted kidnapping - as in France - by Chinese actors in the country of residence.⁴⁴

Dissidents or people who have fled China for other reasons are constantly aware of the possible presence of the Chinese Party State, even when living in the Netherlands.⁴⁵ This affects their dealings with Dutch authorities and media. They are often reluctant to use social media - or have closed down *WeChat* altogether - and try to project a neutral attitude. One interviewee says: "I express myself less activist, I do that consciously. I don't feel like interacting with Chinese spokespeople. I avoid that through this self-censorship."⁴⁶ Yet **publicity** seems to **have a preventive effect**. By seeking publicity, they say they have suffered less harassment from the Chinese authorities and intimidation from Chinese spokespeople or proxies. People who speak out openly feel safer. "From the Chinese side, they then act more cautiously, I think because it makes it easier for me to seek publicity," several interviewees indicate.⁴⁷

Amnesty International concludes that those affected are almost constantly preoccupied with these threats. This causes a lot of stress and affects their mental well-being. Some decide to cut off contact with their families altogether, however painful. Or they create a different persona in relation to their family, hoping that this will cause them less trouble.⁴⁸

Human rights organisation Safeguard Defenders found in 2022 that so-called 'Chinese overseas service centres' exist in dozens of countries, including the Netherlands (Safeguard Defenders 2022). Reports on the existence of these illegal police stations in the Netherlands added to the distrust of people critical of the Chinese Party State's policies (Eikelenboom 2022). Several interviewees mentioned the police stations as a possible source of anonymous phone calls they received. The French journalists who made a documentary on the forced repatriation of a Chinese dissident (see chapter 3.2) are convinced that the threatening text messages they received surrounding the broadcast came from Chinese overseas police stations (RSF 2024a).

⁴² Of incidents in which alleged dissidents cheat or intimidate their peers, it is not always clear whether Chinese authorities play a role in it. The consequence, however, is that such incidents contribute to the climate of distrust and fear among these groups. The Chinese activist in the Netherlands (who also played a role in the *Flaskamp* case and the *France 2* documentary mentioned on page 28 of this report) is an example of this (NPR 2024, Wu 2024).

⁴³ Interviews key people and journalists diaspora, May/June 2024.

⁴⁴ A recent example was the failed attempt to forcefully repatriate dissident Ling Huazhan from Paris to China (*FranceInfo* 2024),

⁴⁵ At the celebration of Chinese New Year at the Hague city hall, for instance, Chinese girls performed in Uighur costumes. A protesting Uighur man was also forcibly taken away and was reportedly later fined. The Dutch political party VVD asked questions to the Board about this 'evil propaganda' in the city hall of the International City of Peace and Justice' (*Dagblad070*, 2024).

⁴⁶ Interviews key people and journalists diaspora, May/June 2024.

⁴⁷ Interviews, May/June 2024.

⁴⁸ Interview Amnesty International, May 2024.

Conclusions

Both the different generations of Dutch Chinese as well as the more recently arrived human rights activists and non-Han Chinese groups such as Uighurs and Tibetans, experience the influence and interference of the Chinese authorities. This takes different forms. First to third generation Dutch Chinese mainly engage in self-surveillance and self-censorship, others feel actively watched and pressured.

That self-surveillance naturally extends to the digital domain. Digital borders do not coincide with national borders. This means that people should not only exercise caution when expressing so-called 'subversive' opinions within the borders of the PRC (and the internet within the *Great Firewall*), but also beyond. Those transnational effects include the use of encrypted apps like Signal and Telegram. Research by Morris suggests that (especially for activists) digital space is at least as vulnerable as physical space (Morris 2023, p.14).

The experiences of non-Han Chinese diaspora, recently arrived human rights activists and Hong Kongers, as well as Chinese students in the Netherlands, illustrate clearly how the Chinese authorities - and Chinese criminal groups or nationalists, whether or not directed by them - operate. A wide range of tactics common in China itself are also used in the Netherlands. To understand Chinese influence and interference, it is useful to study their experiences and learn from them.

One lesson is that seeking publicity by human rights defenders and non-Han Chinese groups seems to have a protective effect, possibly because of the perceived damage to China's image when they speak out openly about transnational repression and harassment. Attention and connections with organisations that can provide publicity (e.g. media or government organisations) may have a preventive effect. However, this is not for everyone in the diaspora. For the non-Han Chinese diaspora and for Chinese students in the Netherlands, this can have consequences for their families in China; this is a means of pressure often used by the Chinese Party State. Moreover, not everyone in the diaspora has the connections or *know-how* to generate publicity.

5. Chinese tactics in Dutch / EU media landscape

Suppressing undesirable information with propaganda	Organised trips, exchanges and trainings	Chinese and English-language state media and social media
Propaganda, disinformation & conspiracies through copy websites and influencers	Collaboration, acquisitions or mergers with local media	Sponsoring local Chinese-language media in the Netherlands
Defamation of a journalist or source and trolling by fake accounts	Advertisement content, free supplements	European Media Forum, European China Media Association
 Propaganda and disinformation	 Deals with local media organisations	 Expansion of Chinese state media
 Diplomatic pressure	 Censorship	 Deception and obstruction
Repercussions for bilateral relations and national interests	Denying access, (threat of) visa refusal, blocking internet sources and contacts in China	Espionage under cover of journalism
Pressure to publish Chinese (state) content	Intimidation of journalists and media outlets	Cyber infiltration and identity fraud
Criticism of publication, urgent request not to publish/withdraw content	Threatening sources or their families	Risk of extraterritorial effect of Chinese legislation, forced repatriation or expropriation of property in China

6. Conclusions and policy recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

- The Chinese Party State aims to **exhaust critical voices on China** (the *chilling effect*) so that they become less active, get drowned out or give up altogether. This affects both correspondents in China and specific groups in the Netherlands. The Party State **fills the gap with propaganda and 'positive stories'** about China; to 'tell China's story well';
- China's complete **surveillance society** makes **correspondents' working conditions arduous**; it is extremely difficult to engage in newsgathering. The playing field is different from most other countries;
- **Editors** are prepared to send reporters to war and conflict zones, where physical security is a concern, but the reporters are **not well-equipped** in the face of **social and psychological insecurity and threats from authoritarian countries such as China**;
- China employs a **range of tactics** in its **information operations targeting the media landscape**, including in the Netherlands, including engaging in "cooperation and partnerships", "propaganda and disinformation campaigns", "deterrence and attrition" of critical voices, and "obstruction and denying access";
- China engages in **subtle attacks that are difficult to fully understand without substantial background information**. That is the intention; the approach is often subtle and touches journalists and other specific audiences who work on China or engage with China for personal or professional reasons, but is less visible or recognisable to non-experts;
- To a physical attack or incident involving a correspondent or journalist, editors in the Netherlands can respond adequately, but **the Netherlands** and Europe is **not used to psychological warfare**, with indirect attacks such as smear campaigns, private data sharing, public attacks on journalists by politicians/diplomats, and does **not** have **a good answer to it**;
- **Attribution** of Chinese harassment practices proves **very difficult** worldwide. **Legal instruments** to counter these specific forms of interference are **underdeveloped** in the Netherlands and Europe;
- **Editors** have **varying levels of knowledge about China's policy goals, tools and tactics**. Awareness of this depends mostly on incidents they have experienced with journalists in the Netherlands and Europe;

- **Self-censorship** or 'self-surveillance' is **standard** practice among all groups of Dutch Han Chinese;
- Human rights activists and non-Han Chinese groups such as the Uighurs and Tibetans feel actively watched and pressured. **Tactics common in China itself are also used in the Netherlands;**
- China is the **most advanced actor in transnational repression** worldwide. This **also manifests itself in the Netherlands**, especially among (human rights) activists, non-Han Chinese diaspora, and students from China and Hong Kong.

6.2 Recommendations

6.2.1 To the Dutch government

- **Send a strong diplomatic message after incidents surrounding correspondents, journalists and groups vulnerable to Chinese intimidation. Do not underestimate the importance of strategic communication.** Offer these individuals and groups visibility in response. Where intimidation occurs, the Netherlands should act firmly and clearly so that the people in question feel protected. Send the signal that the Netherlands considers the intimidation of Dutch citizens in China, let alone on Dutch soil, unacceptable. That should be the absolute starting point;
- **Behind the scenes, always indicate through formal channels that the Netherlands resolutely condemns influence and that Dutch correspondents must be able to do their work unhindered.** Press freedom cannot be compromised. Show backbone in case of serious incidents. **Emphasising reciprocity** is a possible strategy in this: emphasise the standards used in the Netherlands and Europe with regard to journalists (including Chinese ones) and set the same expectation in China with regard to Dutch/European journalists. For instance, the reciprocity principle can be used for invitations to *high-level* events and thereby the acquisition of visas. Act as much as possible in larger contexts such as the EU;
- **Protect the foundations of Dutch democracy, freedoms, political system and rule of law. This is the first priority in relations with China.** Take strict action on interference with the Chinese diaspora in the Netherlands and other vulnerable groups, such as Chinese students and (human rights) activists. Create policy on possible harassment of foreign journalists and vulnerable groups in the Netherlands coming from repressive regimes, such as China, Russia and others;
- **Invest in awareness campaigns around influence and psychological warfare of authoritarian regimes. Offer structural knowledge on tactics of influence and interference.** Organise closed sessions to brief chief and foreign editors on hybrid conflict management, TNR, FIMI, Chinese policy goals and influence tactics. Make relevant professional groups

resilient to co-optation mechanisms;

- **Fight propaganda and disinformation campaigns by authoritarian regimes. These are aimed at polarising the Dutch debate and undermining the democratic system.** Act in transnational contexts, such as the EU. Make use of the *Digital Services Act* (DSA) and the *European Media Freedom Act* in this regard. This is crucial because of the transnational nature of many media and the borderless nature of social media. In this context, set stringent requirements for social media platforms and companies and protect media pluralism and independence. **Learn from the experience and initiatives of countries that have been dealing with this for longer;**
- **More professionalisation at embassies in authoritarian countries regarding the protection of journalists is needed. While local protocols may exist, they are often unknown to correspondents and foreign editorial teams in the Netherlands.** The support from the embassy is appreciated ('goodwill, open door'), but more professionalisation and less reliance on coincidental personal contacts would improve both the quality and effectiveness. Establish clear communication channels (preferably at a high level) and an escalation ladder, ensuring that these are not only known to correspondents but also to their contacts at editorial offices in the Netherlands. Offer expertise to think collaboratively about next steps in case of incidents;
- **Create a 'hub' for independent Chinese and China-related diaspora media.** Russian media in exile gather in Amsterdam, also because the municipality of Amsterdam, the Postcode Lottery and various media funds (such as DPG media and Vereniging Veronica) provide financial and logistical support. Something similar for Chinese and diaspora media, with financial support and expertise from Dutch institutions, would be a good boost for independent media not linked to the Chinese Party state in the Netherlands and Europe. Realise that this will require mutual trust and a long haul;
- **Be careful and balanced towards Chinese and Asian Dutch people.** It is important not to demonise Chinese people; besides the risk of discrimination and isolation of individuals and groups, by doing so you actually play into the hands of the Chinese Party State (incl. the CCP and the United Front). Realise that many Chinese and China-related diaspora groups come to the Netherlands because they want to start a new life. Protect them and propagate that.

6.2.2 To editors

- **Conduct structural discussions in editorial offices about transnational repression, intimidation and public and psychological warfare by authoritarian countries in the Netherlands.** Create awareness on editorial boards of tactics exercised by authoritarian regimes on journalists, editors and correspondents. The situation in China differs gradually, but not substantially, from Russia. Increase knowledge about interference, how to recognise it and how editors can deal with it;

- **Develop protocols for authoritarian practices towards journalists in the Netherlands and Europe.** This is rapidly increasing in intensity, not only from China. This is the only way to gain insight into it, create awareness, protect journalists against it, formulate policy and make it easier to talk to the police, the judiciary and the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) about how to deal with it and how to deploy existing government expertise;
- **Develop protocols for correspondents in authoritarian countries,** to create awareness and increase incident response speed and effectiveness. **The response is inadequate** and is case- and incident-driven. **Do not put all the risks on the correspondent, who is often a freelancer.** Offer structural stability and mental health support. Freelancers are vulnerable, so in case of high-risk posts in authoritarian countries, the security of a safety net, permanent contract or job guarantee should be offered, if China becomes too unsafe and the correspondent is forced to leave the country. Offer support to Chinese staff of Dutch media. They are most at risk but have no safety net. Clear guidelines are needed regarding the **protection of sources**. Everyone indicates this is priority number one, but in practice, the individual journalist's own insight is leading. Knowledge in the newsroom about how China works helps the correspondent. Interest and empathy on the part of the desk editor is at least as important, in both work and private situations;
- **Set up a knowledge network to encourage exchange of experiences and *lessons learned* between media, preferably transnationally, for example in an EU context.** The NRC has developed protocols for Dutch journalists travelling, including in seemingly harmless countries (such as in Europe). The newspaper is an exception in this regard. The FPU also indicates that lack of sharing is a well-known phenomenon. This does not improve knowledge and action perspectives in case of incidents. Perhaps interest groups such as the Society of Chief Editors or the Netherlands Press Association (NVJ) could play a role in this;
- **Build structural knowledge about China.** Knowledge about China is too fragmented. Make sure there are multiple China experts in the editorial office. One correspondent and (sometimes) one editor is not enough for a country with so many influencing activities. Ensure cooperation between colleagues internally so that not all the risk falls on the correspondent. Do not send inexperienced journalists to China. Be aware that female colleagues are a specific target and thus extra vulnerable. Good preparation on working conditions, risks and a basic command of Chinese are essential. For research projects and sensitive reporting, seek cooperation with other media in the Netherlands or abroad. That way you spread risks and are less vulnerable.

6.2.3 To the government, editors and interest groups: technical and other support is needed

- **Facilitate security training, with knowledge of digital security and use of equipment by security experts.** Make use of international expert networks with China knowledge in this context. Be aware of **spyware on phones** and other communication devices and platforms. Knowledge solely in the IT department or among security personnel is insufficient to deal with specific risks from authoritarian countries. Security policies often focus on limiting infiltration from China, but not on how to function as a journalist in China, how to resist practices of the Chinese Party State in the Netherlands and how to gather knowledge about China in light of the propaganda, disinformation and intimidation of sources present, including in the Netherlands;
- **Educate journalists, editors and other relevant professionals on the mental health implications of the constant stress and pressure of the Chinese Party State surveillance system.** Be alert to prolonged exposure to this and offer the possibility of breaks, similar to people working in conflict zones. Provide accessible psychological support where appropriate, even in seemingly minor incidents. Provide training, workshops and, if necessary, individual counselling on maintaining or strengthening mental resilience;
- **Expand the mandate of the Press Safety (PersVeilig) hotline** (for journalists facing aggression and violence in the Netherlands) **from physical and digital to social and psychological safety and resilience**, focusing on FIMI and transnational repression by authoritarian countries in the Netherlands and its impact on the mental health of journalists and their sources;
- **Set up an expertise 'hub' for transnational repression, where journalists, media organisations as well as activists and diaspora can go.** This could be at the Dutch Association of Journalists (NVJ), NCTV or the National Police, and could be linked to the hotline announced by the government against transnational repression and foreign interference. While the tactics of authoritarian regimes may differ, there are also many similarities; through exchange, one can learn from practices in different countries and distil common denominators for general policy.

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Annex

Numbers for figure 3.4 Influence, interference and harassment

The survey question was the following: *What forms of influence or intimidation did you experience during your time as correspondent (multiple answers possible)?*

There were 19 respondents (N=19). The numbers below represent the number of times some form of influence or interference was mentioned.

Influence (yellow)

Organised journalist trips	11
Collaboration request or personal connection	6

Interference (orange)

Travel restrictions to certain areas (e.g. Tibet and Xinjiang)	15
Authorities seek to discourage or block newsgathering on sensitive issues	13
Pressure via work visa delay	8
Social media trolling	6
Disinformation about you as a person	4

Harassment (red)

Followed, shadowed or 'accompanied' during work	15
Intimidation of sources	13
Intimidation by authorities of support staff	11
Entering hotel room or house without permission	8

Physical harassment (dark red)

Detention and/or police interrogation	9
Physical violence against local staff	8
Physical violence against Dutch journalist	7