

Project Title: Public Diplomacy, Propaganda, and Public Opinion: Measuring the Impact of Information and News Dissemination by the Chinese State in Pakistan

As China's economic, political, and military interests have increasingly expanded to Pakistan, at the same time, the Chinese government has been diligent in disseminating Chinese state-sponsored (CSS) news and information in Pakistan and shaping the minds and hearts of the public. To what extent have the Chinese state's efforts limited the diversity and free flow of information on certain issues in Pakistan? To what extent have these efforts changed people's views on certain issues? So far there has been no systematic scholarly investigation on this topic. This proposed pilot study aims to probe the processes and impact of information and news distribution mechanism sponsored by the Chinese state in Pakistan; specifically, the study tries to answer what kinds of people are more exposed to CSS news and information, how they get access to them, and what kind of effects CSS news and information have in changing people's opinions on certain issues, especially foreign affairs. Having a better understanding of Chinese public diplomacy/propaganda efforts in Pakistan will benefit both academics interested in authoritarian political communication as well as journalists and information distributors in Pakistan and the wider developing world.

Since 2019, *Xinhua News*, a major Chinese state-owned news agency, started offering public and private Pakistani news organizations access to its news content. Leading Pakistani news agencies, including the Jang Group, *Daily Pakistan*, and *Nawa-i-Waqt*, have subscribed to *Xinhua*. *Dawn*, Pakistan's newspaper of record, reserves a section for the newsfeed from *China Daily* on its main webpage. Not only are Chinese state-owned news agencies involved in the Pakistani media ecosystem, but also privately-owned ones. *Huashang Weekly*, a private Chinese-language newspaper in Pakistan, has collaborated with the Jang Group, the biggest news organization in Pakistan, to provide 1-2 pages of Chinese-language content weekly for Jang's English newspaper, *The News*. Based on the deepening ties between the two countries, I believe the collaboration between the Chinese and Pakistani news agencies will increase in the future.

Since there is limited knowledge of the extent to which CSS news and information have been circulated, read, and disseminated across the public in Pakistan, my proposed project will serve as a heuristic pilot study to probe the scope of China's public diplomacy/propaganda project in Pakistan and inform future surveys and experiments. Specifically, I am planning to conduct Focused Group Discussions (FGD) in major cities of Pakistan. Gallup Pakistan, a Pakistan-based survey research organization, is my local collaborator who is responsible for recruiting and setting up the discussion space. I can already speak and write Urdu (advanced), Punjabi (intermediate), and English (almost native), and Gallup Pakistan will also help when there are language barriers. In total, about 24 participants will be recruited for three FGDs, so each FGD has 8 participants. The three FGDs are planned to be conducted in Islamabad, Lahore, and Karachi respectively to represent the geographical/ethnic heterogeneities of Pakistan. Two FGDs only have male participants, one of them is relatively more educated (all participants have obtained undergraduate degrees or higher), and the other one is relatively less educated (less than undergraduate). The third FGD only has female participants, and their educational profiles can be mixed. The assumption behind this arrangement is that participants from the same city tend to be geographically and ethnically homogenous so that they feel comfortable talking about their experiences and opinions. Women and men are separated, so that women can feel comfortable speaking without male presence in the Pakistani context. Geographical, ethnic, educational, and sex heterogeneities are included in this arrangement. I am also considering an additional FGD specifically for religious minorities if there is extra time and funding.

The discussions will be semi-structured. Each session will include leading questions for the participants and then participants will be allowed to engage in the discussions freely. The questions are about four major topics: 1) people's main sources for information and news on international affairs, their attitudes on

information diversity, credibility, and freedom, and their habits of acquiring information; 2) people's attitudes, opinions, and experiences with Chinese workers and companies in Pakistan and the Chinese-financed development projects in Pakistan, and their understanding of China's development model as opposed to the so called "Western model"; 3) people's attitudes, opinions, and experiences with foreign aid and development projects financed by other sources, like the US, the IMF, and the World Bank; finally 4) how people's attitudes and opinions on international affairs influence their voting behaviors and collective preferences for certain political candidates both locally and nationally. The benefits of conducting in-depth FGDs are tremendous compared to opinion polls since the existing opinion polls only reflect the public's vague opinions on only a few of these issues on a numerical scale. As the Chinese state and people have been involved in many aspects of Pakistani society with uneven degrees of involvement and different activities, the public's experiences and opinions are varied often along the ethnic, geographic, and educational lines. Therefore, although consisting of just three discussions, FGDs can bring out people's nuanced opinions and experiences, and coupled with opinion polls, FGDs can guide future research on this topic.

The grant is going to cover the fees for my airfare and living expenses. The fees for recruiting participants and hiring Gallup Pakistan will be covered by the research funding from my home department.

I am confident that having in-depth discussions with everyday Pakistanis will add rich and nuanced evidence for my future work on the efficacy and mechanism of Chinese public diplomacy/propaganda in Pakistan and the wider developing world. The key output from this work will be in the form of a conference paper or a research note for a South Asian journal. I am confident that this pilot study focusing on an emergent and crucial phenomenon meets the intellectual standard of AIPS and brings Pakistan to the center of academic discussions and knowledge production.