



# CHINA SPEKTRUM REPORT

China's fragile online spaces for debate

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# China's fragile online spaces for debate

**Between entertainment and heavy state guidance,  
citizens raise social concerns and create new communities**

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# CHINA SPEKTRUM

## Debates beyond the party line

**China Spektrum** strengthens our knowledge about China by providing nuanced insights into domestic Chinese debates. Despite increasing censorship and efforts by the Communist Party to steer discourse, Chinese intellectuals, experts, entrepreneurs and citizens hold diverse views on China's current challenges and development.

**China Spektrum** analyzes relevant current debates and positions among Chinese intellectuals and experts, as well as public discussions unfolding on social media and platforms online, focusing on three themes, namely China's:

- Visions for the future
- Digital transformation
- Role in the world

A collaboration between think tank and university, **China Spektrum** translates findings rooted in qualitative and quantitative research methods into short and easy-to-read formats. In our regular *China Spektrum Analyses*, we showcase the spectrum of opinions on various issues and explain how these relate to official party-state positions. The annual *China Spektrum Report* summarizes key developments in China's public discourse sphere. Project results are presented in events and podcasts.

**China Spektrum** started out in German and has evolved into an English language publication to meet the growing international demand for insights into debates and discussions inside China.

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## Key takeaways

- China's social media landscape is remarkably diverse. A host of platforms and services cater to hundreds of millions of users, spanning social interaction, entertainment, news, and in-depth knowledge exchange.
- Platforms such as TikTok and RedNote have global reach – making it increasingly relevant for policymakers and interested citizens abroad to understand these communications platforms.
- China's leadership seeks legitimacy by shaping and responding to public sentiment. Official media narratives aim to guide public perception and create support for domestic and foreign policy, aided by a powerful censorship apparatus. In addition to efforts by party-state institutions and media to spread “positive energy,” new laws and regulations seek to maintain control and further reign in spaces of exchange.
- Despite tight restrictions, European and other stakeholders should pay close attention to Chinese news reporting, expert discussions and online conversations to assess China's domestic developments and international ambitions.
- Censorship around topics such as the state of the economy is an important indicator for key policy challenges China's leadership faces. Gaps between official narratives and expert and citizen voices showcase public concerns, perceived shortcomings of state policy and even the potential for social unrest.
- Chinese citizens and scholars weighing in on online spaces reflected socio-economic tensions in China in 2024. Despite a slew of economic growth measures and further efforts to boost consumption in late 2024, debates show public confidence in the economy and job market has not recovered. More proactive policies will be needed – a topic to watch in 2025.
- Analyzing the top 10 daily headlines of China's most prominent news aggregator Toutiao in 2024 sheds light on Beijing's key foreign diplomacy narratives: The United States is depicted as a rival, Russia as a dependable ally. Europe remains secondary. Media coverage highlights China's strategic orientation toward Global South countries as trading partners and for political support in reshaping global governance.
- In its international engagement, the leadership is messaging reform, openness and cooperation. But domestically, it is increasingly rallying patriotism as an antidote to social friction. There is a notable anti-Western narrative and emphasis on systemic rivalry in internal campaigns – a trend that may grow if US-China relations worsen.

# Introduction: Watching China's online spaces helps understand citizens' concerns

As a ban on TikTok loomed in the US in early 2025, content creators flocked to an unlikely new home: RedNote, or Xiaohongshu as it is called in Chinese. TikTok is the international version of China's popular short video app Douyin. Though created by the same parent company, TikTok itself is restricted in the People's Republic of China (PRC). By attempting to ban one Chinese communication platform for security reasons, US regulators inadvertently created a spike in new user registrations on another major Chinese platform. This unintended effect created a rare space for personal exchanges between the recent "TikTok refugees" and Chinese users. Livelihood, culture and food were at the forefront of this intersection, as sensitive political topics remained off limits and the platform scrambled to hire English language censors.<sup>1</sup>

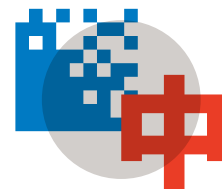
In international rankings on press freedom and freedom of the internet, China is regularly ranked as one of the most restricted online environments for speech, at 172 of 180 in the 2024 Reporters without Borders index.<sup>2</sup> China's government has established an expansive regime to control the flow of information. Access to international news sites and communication platforms is largely restricted, and use of VPNs to circumvent this Great Firewall is penalized. Laws and regulations forbid sharing of content that may be politically undesired. Technology-driven and human monitoring and censorship are meant to purge online spaces of "unhealthy" content. Platform companies, media outlets and content creators are required to spread "positive energy" and support the party state's policies.

Digital media platforms can help take the social pulse

Policy analysis often focuses heavily on Xi Jinping's directives and government measures. Xi's New Year's message on December 31, for example, projected a one-sided image of an all-round successful and strong China, ready to face external and internal challenges, provide for its people and offer its modernization model to the world. Clearly this does not provide a full picture. Despite constraints, experts, scholars, average citizens and at times even officials themselves hold a variety of views on social developments, government policy and international affairs – and make their voices heard in journals, public postings and online communities.

A systematic analysis of these debates in China shows a more fractured, nuanced and often more holistic picture of China's path and progress in different policy fields. It offers insights to assess the veracity of official statements and effectiveness of policy initiatives, and a better understanding of the current and longer-term challenges – the issues the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) pays close attention to, even if they are rarely acknowledged publicly. Mapping the space for debate and the range of opinions and solutions experts present is crucial to anticipating room for policy action. Despite censorship, digital media platforms can help take the social pulse and understand citizens' concerns and expectations for China's future.

# China's online ecosystem still manages to offer entertainment, news and space for debate

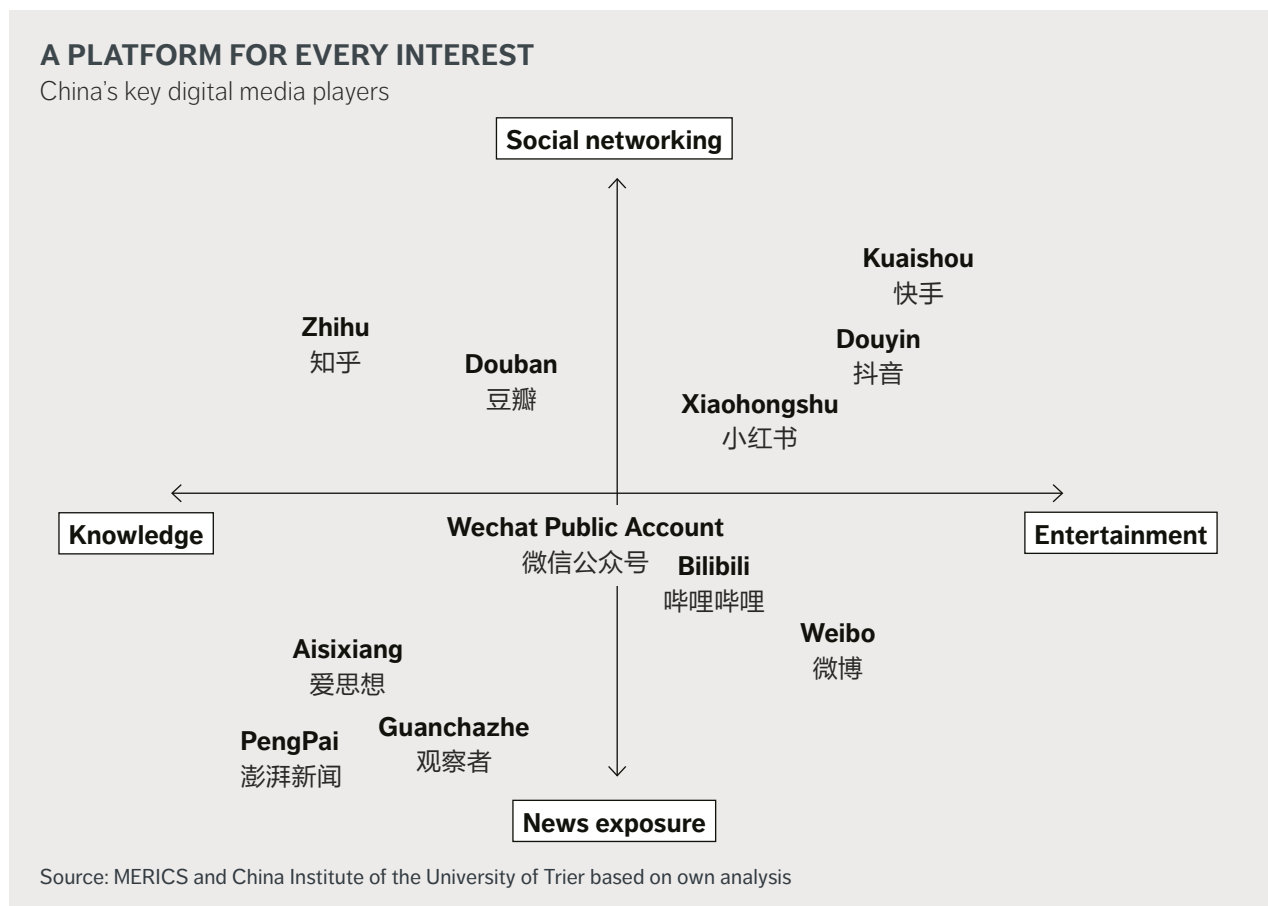


China's social media landscape is remarkably diverse, sophisticated and popular. A host of platforms and services cater to the needs of hundreds of millions of users, reflecting the varied preferences and behaviors of the country's vast and dynamic population. But new government measures seek to further contain the room for debate these platforms offer.

## Platforms serve different purposes and communities

Platforms are designed to address different user needs, spanning social interaction, entertainment, serious news consumption, and in-depth knowledge exchange. China's main platforms can be roughly categorized in different types to better understand their role in shaping how Chinese netizens consume content, foster connections, and engage online.

Exhibit 1



## Entertainment and social interactions

The upper right quadrant in exhibit 1 includes platforms that emphasize entertainment and social connection. These are built around fun, creativity and interaction, drawing users who enjoy lighthearted content and connection with others.

**Douyin** (抖音) – the domestic Chinese version of TikTok – leads this space with its short video content and live-streaming features. Initially popular among Millennials and Gen Z, Douyin thrives on trends, humor and creativity, making it a hub for social entertainment. It has gained great popularity across all age groups now and draws over 1.1 billion monthly users with its engaging videos and live-streaming capabilities. Similarly, the short-video platform **Kuashou** (快手), with 697 million monthly users, focuses on grassroots and relatable content, attracting users from smaller cities and rural areas. It fosters a warm, down-to-earth sense of community where people share their everyday lives.

### Knowledge sharing communities

The upper left quadrant is home to platforms designed for meaningful discussions and the exchange of ideas. These platforms bring together individuals who value cultural exploration and intellectual engagement.

**Douban** (豆瓣) is a key player here, offering a space for discussions about books, movies, music and other cultural topics. It's known for its thoughtful reviews and niche communities, known as Douban Groups (豆瓣小组), that thrive on shared interests. As of 2024, Douban has approximately 60 million monthly active users, making it a smaller but highly engaged platform compared to other social media giants.

**Zhihu** (知乎), often compared to Quora, focuses on in-depth Q&A and expert insights. Professionals, students, and intellectuals use Zhihu to exchange knowledge and engage in detailed discussions on a wide range of topics. In the second quarter of 2024, Zhihu reported 81 million active users per month.

### Trending news and popular culture

The platforms in the lower right quadrant bridge the worlds of entertainment and news, offering spaces where users stay updated on current events while enjoying engaging, trend-focused content.

**Weibo** (微博) is the most dominant outlet here, blending real-time updates, trending topics and casual entertainment. With 588 million monthly users, it bridges formal communication and informal networking, making it a go-to platform for public discourse, especially when it comes to hot topics.

### Serious news and thoughtful exchange

The lower left quadrant caters to audiences seeking depth, reliability, and academic-leaning analysis. News and commentary thrive on platforms like **Pengpai** (澎湃 The Paper), **Guanchazhe** (观察者) and **Aisixiang** (爱思想), which serve educated audiences. Pengpai is renowned for its investigative journalism, while Guanchazhe, affiliated with a party-state institution, aggregates news and international affairs with a nationalist tilt. Aisixiang offers a relatively liberal space for academic discussions, targeting scholars and students.

## Platforms in between

Some platforms sit at the intersection of all four quadrants, offering a mix of entertainment, knowledge, social interaction, and news. **WeChat Public Accounts** (微信公众号) is a versatile feature of the WeChat ecosystem that combines content publishing, social interaction and knowledge sharing, drawing all types of users. With 1.3 billion monthly active users on WeChat, WeChat Public Account serves a broad audience across various tiers of cities.

**Bilibili** (哔哩哔哩) blends niche entertainment, like gaming and anime, with a strong focus on community and creativity. With 342 million predominantly millennial and Gen Z users, its base includes both creators and fans who enjoy a wide variety of interactive and engaging content from political commentary to food reviews. It supports interactive engagement through its **Danmaku** (弹幕) feature, where comments fly across the screen, enabling real-time debates and discussions on diverse topics.

**Xiaohongshu** (小红书) – literally “Little Red Book,” internationally now known as Red-Note – stands out in the area of fashion, beauty and lifestyle. Its 300 million active users, predominantly young women with strong purchasing power, leverage the platform for product reviews, lifestyle tips and brand discovery. It also fosters a close-knit community that discusses social topics, offering insights from an affluent, educated and largely female demographic.

## The party state is increasing efforts to sanitize online discussion

The CCP's propaganda departments and China's media and internet regulators are on a continuous mission to keep this expansive and diverse information ecosystem free from substantial threats to the authority and legitimacy of the party state. Over the years, they have carried out a series of campaigns to create a “clear and bright” internet (清明行动). Such measures address legitimate problems like the protection of minors, consumer privacy, online gambling, fake traffic and scams. But under the same banner, the government also cracks down on unwanted influencers, content and discussions. One example is the campaign in late 2024 to “standardize online language use,” which served to suppress alternative terms and homophones netizens use to circumvent censorship.<sup>3</sup>

Legal and political concerns often coexist in government action, such as when the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) issued a notice in November to regulate the fast-growing “micro-drama” industry (short, fast-paced film series designed for mobile consumption). While tackling copyright infringements, the measure also served to steer content creation toward party-approved stories and narratives.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to wide-ranging efforts by party-state institutions and state media to spread “positive energy” and shape public perception by boosting the creation and visibility of party-aligned content, the Patriotic Education Law that came into effect at the beginning of 2024 and the revised National Defense Education Law now require an expansion of education measures and public campaigns to instill loyalty and willingness to defend the country and party. New legislation on state secrets that includes reference to work secrets may also have a chilling effect on the availability of online information and may make it easier to penalize those who share critical information online, even when merely factual.

Legal and political concerns often coexist in government action



A key concern of Beijing is preventing spillover from online discussions into offline action. To this end, tracking online dynamics and individual behavior has long been a top agenda item. In 2024, China’s Ministry of Public Security and the Cyberspace Administration of China (“CAC”) proposed a draft measure to establish a “public authentication service platform” that allows citizens to apply for an individual online ID (a kind of “digital token”) to be used for all online services. The measure would initially be voluntary and add another layer to the real-name verification regulations phone and internet providers and communication and digital service platforms must implement already.

Despite its sensitivity, the topic triggered a debate among well-known professors from Tsinghua University and Peking University before their articles were censored. Their key concerns were the centralization of information on online behavior and the possibility that such digital tokens could later become mandatory.<sup>5</sup>

Exhibit 2

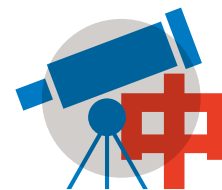
## THE PARTY-STATE CONTINUES TO “HARMONIZE” THE INTERNET

Regulatory measures and campaigns in 2024

Date	Measures
January 2024	 Patriotic Education Law takes effect; demands media and online platforms to produce more related content
April 2024	 “Clear and Bright” online campaign targeting social media, especially entertainment and influencers flaunting wealth
May 2024	 Newly revised Law of the PRC on Guarding State Secrets takes effect; references new category of “work secrets”
July 2024	 Draft measures for plan to establish an individual “Internet ID” released for public consultation
August 2024	 Release of regulations on the management of violent information on the internet, but lacks a definition
September 2024	 Newly revised National Defense Education Law takes effect; expands education measures and public campaigns
October 2024	 “Clear and Bright” campaign on “standardizing online language” to control tactics to circumvent censorship
November 2024	 “Clear and Bright” online campaign on “Governance of typical algorithm issues on internet platforms”
November 2024	 National Radio and Television Administration issues notice on regulating content of “micro-dramas”
December 2024	 National Radio and Television Administration issues notice on regulating AI modification in short videos

Source: MERICS and China Institute of the University of Trier based on policy documents and media reporting

# Recent debates: From the economy to revenge against society



2024 was noteworthy for public debates and discussions on domestic socio-economic developments – at a time when the leadership in Beijing was trying to instill and project confidence at home and abroad. Throughout 2024, high-level party and state meetings issued a steady stream of policy buzzwords and initiatives. The annual National People's Congress and the twice-a-decade Third Plenum of the Central Committee in July were framed around the themes of reform and modernization, with promises of higher quality economic growth, jobs, and social policy that spoke to public expectations.

The Central Economic Work Conference in December focused on measures to stimulate consumption. A host of policy measures to restabilize private sector development and the real estate market were enacted throughout the year, albeit with limited effect. The State Council and government departments released policy blueprints for pension reform, new family policy measures and for a loosening of China's *hukou*, the country's household registration system that controls internal migration and access to social benefits. All of these measures had long been called for by policy experts – in some cases for over a decade.

Yet expert and public reactions point to shortcomings of recent policy actions. Debates show public confidence in the economy and job market have not recovered. Censorship around topics such as the state of the economy is an important indicator for key policy challenges China's leadership faces. Gaps between official narratives and expert and citizen voices showcase citizens' concerns, perceived failings of state policy and even the potential for social unrest. More proactive policies will be needed – a topic to watch in 2025.

Censorship is an important indicator for key policy challenges Beijing faces

## Economic woes remain front and center

Ahead of the 2024 Third Plenum, experts capitalized on the perceived space for debate. They voiced concerns and diverging views on the best measures to revitalize the business environment: stronger state guidance and collaboration between private and state-owned enterprises, or structural reforms for fair competition and a more predictable business environment and legal framework.

Harsher criticism of recent economic challenges remained a red line, however. One recent example are the speeches and transcripts of two economists, Gao Shanwen and Fu Peng, both chief economists at securities brokerages, regarding the bleak labor market situation, which went viral in December 2024 and were erased almost in real time as people forwarded them.<sup>6</sup> Even critical articles written by well-known economists many years ago have quickly disappeared after being re-posted. Censors do not stop with information shared in the public domain. Zhu Hengpeng, deputy director at the Institute of Economics at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, was placed under investigation for comments made in private WeChat chat groups that were critical of Xi Jinping and the government's economic policies.<sup>7</sup>

Skepticism about the positive official messaging is not limited to just a few experts. In summer 2024, the phrase “garbage time of history” (历史的垃圾时间) reemerged as an internet buzzword. Along with older phrases like “lying flat” or “involution,” it is used

to express dwindling optimism about the future. Responses to this term show government intervention isn't limited to censorship. Articles quickly appeared by experts toeing the party line, criticizing the phrase and people using it. But continuous online debates about high youth unemployment and people sharing experiences about the difficulty of finding stable and properly paid jobs highlight the underlying challenges of these online catchphrases.

The state of local government finances is another source of unease. Netizens have been quick to circulate local government documents containing the phrase “smashing pots and selling iron” (砸锅卖铁). This refers to the liquidation of publicly owned assets to avoid local debt defaults and the establishment of new task forces to clear the balance sheet in some localities. Similarly, Chinese media reports and online forums exposed a nationwide pattern of cash-strapped local governments targeting small private companies with arbitrary compliance investigations and hefty fines as a way to raise funds. Censors intervened to curtail some of the criticism – but the government also responded with debt relief measures and a new guideline by the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) forbidding “profit-driven inspections.”<sup>8</sup>

Online debates reflect changing social attitudes, especially among women

### Social policy progress falls short of public expectations

For the first time in over 70 years, lawmakers raised the country's famously low retirement age in a bid to reduce the country's looming pension deficit. Although there will be a gradual adjustment to new pension age brackets of 55–63 years (depending on gender and profession), the measure has been hotly contested, especially the requirement to pay into the system for 20 years to qualify. Older workers fear being pushed out of their jobs by the vast number of unemployed young people, while younger Chinese say raising the retirement age would block their opportunities. All share worries about the lack of well-paid jobs to build up pension benefits.

The State Council's new birth and family support measures to encourage more babies were lauded by state media and experts as a key policy step in easing the pressure of demographic change. But here, too, it is not clear if the new measures will ease the work and financial pressures on prospective parents amid current job and economic anxieties. Online debates also reflect changing social attitudes, especially among women. After decades of birth restrictions, the pro-family shift has triggered some consternation after reports that local authorities had called women to ask if they were pregnant or planning to have children.<sup>9</sup>

Reforms of the *hukou* household registration system, too, have been discussed and announced for many years. Despite gradual changes, the system still is a key cause of structural inequalities between people from rural and urban areas, as it restricts access to social security and school education. At the National People's Congress (NPC), the government vowed to “ensure that all rural migrant workers in cities can obtain permanent urban residency if they so desire” and that “urban residents without local household registration enjoy equal access to basic public services.”<sup>10</sup>

The government's ability – or lack thereof – to provide opportunities, care, and security for its citizens is set to become a stronger focus of public attention. In 2024, China saw a series of violent attacks in different parts of the country, killing and wounding a number of people – three incidents alone in November. In Zhuhai, for example, a man killed 35 people by driving a car into a sports center. Citizens and news outlets have questioned the reasons for the incidents, dubbed “revenge on society attacks” (报复社会), especially the underlying social pressures.

With over 19 reported attacks, leaving 63 dead and 166 injured, even China's party and state leader Xi Jinping responded, highlighting the need for "social stability measures," "strengthening prevention measures," and the control of risks "at the local source."<sup>11</sup> Local police and neighborhood cadres were instructed to be on the lookout for people who may pose a risk, such as those without a spouse or children, a job, stable income, financial assets or normal social interactions. They should also watch for those who have experienced any of "five frustrations": failed investments, estranged relationships, feelings of being marginalized, loss of emotional equilibrium, or mental illness.<sup>12</sup>

Despite heavy censorship, people online questioned the effectiveness of the measures and expressed concerns over excessive surveillance that may inadvertently target less-privileged citizens at a time when many are experiencing economic stress. The public perception of these attacks reflect an underlying concern over social grievances and structural inequalities – both social and regional – that will require policy attention, not just more surveillance and political control.

### The party sees political risk even in youthful revelry

While terms such as "lying flat" – opting out of the rat race and being content with the bare minimum – are indicators of a shifting mindset among some young Chinese, most are concerned with finding secure jobs and career opportunities. But like young people everywhere, they seek out online spaces to express their aspirations and frustrations and to amuse themselves in activities with their peers. In recent years, authorities have shown through crackdowns both on and off social media just how sensitive they are – even to benign youthful activities, which they fear could hold the seeds of political discontent.

Young Chinese seek out online spaces to express their aspirations and frustrations

Authorities met planned Halloween celebrations in Shanghai and elsewhere in October 2024 with a heavy police presence and zero-fun attitude. Social media posts documented the police in nightlife areas in Shanghai even before the actual day and showed them questioning partygoers in costume. This oversensitivity was sparked by the 2023 Halloween celebration where young people used costumes to express social and even political discontent about recent harsh Covid policies and gloomy economic prospects. In the leadership's memory, the 2022 "White Paper" protests that erupted in different parts of the country still loom large, even if authorities have largely erased evidence and references to the events from public debate. Mainly directed against arbitrary Covid restrictions, some protesters had called for an end of censorship, democracy, rule of law and Xi Jinping's removal from power.<sup>13</sup>

The element of fear helps explain why a similar dynamic was at play in the government's response to night-cycling trips from Zhengzhou to Kaifeng in November 2024. Started by a small group of students, the bike rides grew into a mass event with more than 100,000 cyclists. While local authorities initially encouraged the rides, viewing it as a way to boost tourism consumption, they quickly grew concerned about their size, and reacted by blocking bike lanes, geo-blocking bike-sharing apps and requiring passes for students to leave campus. On social media, viral videos of nightly travels gave way to media discussions about the harmfulness of such mass events – and student reports about restrictions.<sup>14</sup>

## What the headlines say: Media supports the leadership's views – but with some nuance and human touch



China's leadership seeks legitimacy by shaping and responding to public sentiment. The tightly controlled media generally highlights state-approved narratives, which reflect efforts to guide perception and ensure public support for domestic and foreign policy decisions. Both state media coverage and public debates provide a window into China's current socio-economic path and the government's strategic focus and evolving international interests.<sup>15</sup>

Tracking the top 10 headlines on Toutiao, China's largest online news aggregator, reveals what information the public is consuming and how editorial choices shape sentiment. Toutiao delivers news from state, commercial, and social media sites to readers, based on their preferences. How countries are portrayed plays a crucial role in shaping the worldview of Chinese citizens, influencing how they perceive domestic and international affairs.

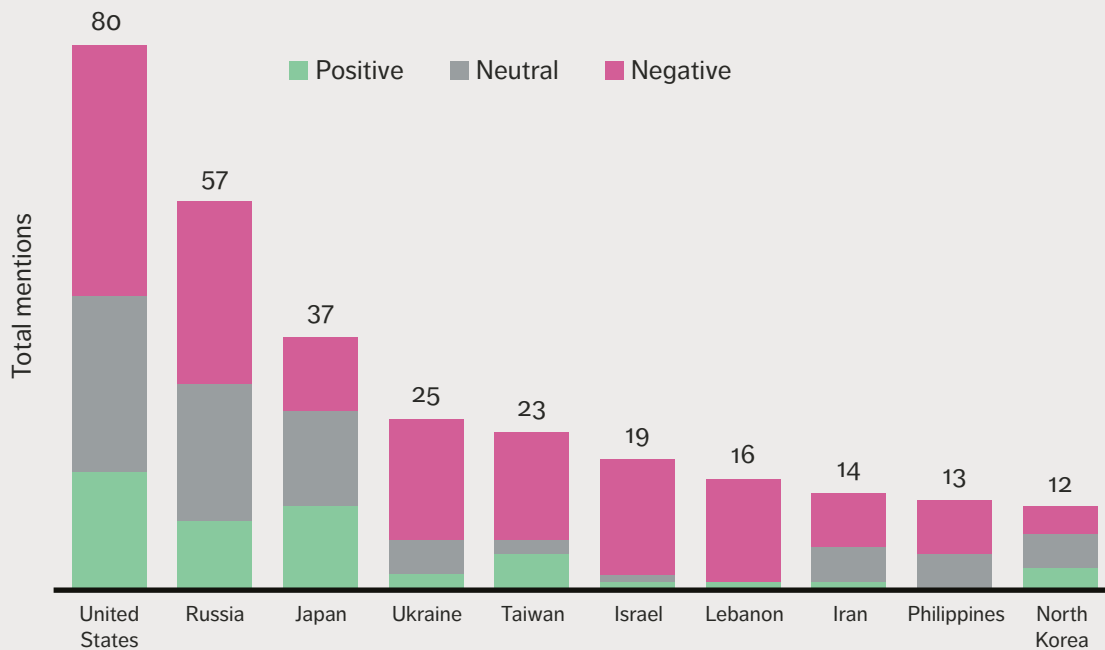
Among the countries mentioned in 1,260 daily headlines from July 28 to December 1, 2024, stories about the United States take the lead, followed by Russia and Japan, reflecting their global and regional significance to China. The US, a central figure, is depicted as a rival. Russia emerges as a dependable ally, and Ukraine largely as a dependent of Western power. Europe, though culturally acknowledged, remains secondary, whereas the Global South is shown as a welcoming arena for China's constructive global role.

News about Japan, Taiwan, and North Korea reflect mixed sentiment, with Japan portrayed through the lens of both cooperation and skepticism. Reporting about North Korea shifts between the country's successes, for example in sports, and regional tensions. While Taiwan is drawing a lot of attention, it is not reported on as a country, but as a region of the PRC over which Beijing claims sovereignty. Coverage is split between articles promoting reunification and lambasting attempts at independence. Countries like Lebanon, Iran, Israel, and the Philippines are often portrayed more negatively, usually due to conflicts in the Middle East and the South China Sea.

Beijing seeks legitimacy by shaping and responding to public sentiment

## MAJOR POWERS CLAIM MOST ATTENTION

Top 10 most-mentioned countries on Chinese news website Toutiao



Source: MERICS and China Institute of the University of Trier based on data from Toutiao.

© China Spektrum

### US sentiment: Geo-economic rivalry with cultural interactions

The US-China relationship is captivating headlines around the world, especially as the new administration of President Donald Trump takes shape. On Toutiao, the relationship is framed as a multifaceted rivalry, involving sovereignty disputes (e.g., arms sales to Taiwan), cybersecurity concerns, and global competition. Economic ties are shown as both interdependent and tense. Discussions on whether US monetary policy affects China's economy illustrate that American financial decisions are closely watched.

Alongside critical reports, Toutiao features occasional positive elements. A headline about Elon Musk's achievements with SpaceX highlights interest in American innovation. Human-interest angles are also present, such as an American donating historical wartime photos to a Chinese museum or a conversation between a sports reporter at the US Open and Chinese tennis player Zheng Qinwen.

The portrayal of the US on Toutiao serves multiple purposes: it informs domestic audiences about global events, critiques perceived American overreach, and underscores China's own ascendance. However, the narrative is not one-dimensional. Stories of cultural exchanges, technological breakthroughs, and moments of camaraderie add nuance, acknowledging the complexity of US-China relations.

By featuring moments of goodwill – even from the United States – Toutiao makes its news more relatable and interesting to its users. This suggests, despite editorial constraints, there remains some public demand in China for more human-centered international reporting.



## Toutiao's contrasting depictions of Russia and Ukraine

China's relationship with and support of Russia is an issue of continued concern abroad and has dampened relations, especially in the EU. Hopes that China will flex its economic and geopolitical muscle to force Russia to the negotiation table are wearing thin. While the reporting on both Russia and Ukraine on Toutiao reflects the devastation and atrocities of war, and thus by definition is generally negative, the narratives diverge significantly in tone and emphasis.

Coverage of Russia on Toutiao takes a largely positive view, focusing on its military capabilities, economic collaboration with China, and diplomatic rapport. For example, mentions of advanced Russian aircraft arriving at the Zhuhai Air Show in Southern China highlight its technological strength. Reports of Russia-China trade settled in local currencies emphasize both nations' efforts to reduce reliance on Western financial systems. Diplomatic exchanges, such as leaders exchanging congratulations, reinforce the depth and stability of the partnership, accompanied by occasional human-interest pieces that showcase camaraderie and familiarity.

In contrast, the portrayal of Ukraine centers on aggression and its heavy dependence on the West. Headlines like "Ukrainian Troops Enter Russian Territory, Russia Vows Tough Retaliation" depict it as actively confronting Russia. Other reports, such as "Ukraine Requests Lifting of Weapon Strike Restrictions Rejected by the West," highlight Ukraine's reliance on external aid and underscore its limited autonomy. By framing Ukraine as a pawn of Western interests rather than a fully sovereign actor, Toutiao subtly supports Russia's position while still appearing neutral.

## Europe is a secondary player, the future lies in the Global South

Europe's mentions on Toutiao are relatively limited. When it appears, Europe is often cast as a secondary actor aligned with the United States. A headline quoting Russian President Vladimir Putin's remark that "Europe is America's Dog When It Comes to China" encapsulates the sentiment. Incidents like a German warship passing through the Taiwan Strait are framed as following American strategy as well. Economic tensions, including the EU's anti-subsidy measures on Chinese electric vehicles, highlight friction. Subtle critiques, like a story about a famous Chinese businessman swapping a Maybach for Chinese EVs, reflect Germany's disappearing edge in the auto industry. Not all coverage is negative. Reports on the Paris Olympics, tributes to the late French movie star Alain Delon, and the China-Europe Express Trains emphasize cultural heritage, shared ventures, and practical cooperation. Lighthearted anecdotes about interactions between Chinese and EU citizens add relatability. Nevertheless, Europe remains peripheral, a player in global affairs but not central to Toutiao's immediate media focus.

Europe's mentions on Toutiao are relatively limited

In comparison, Toutiao's headline selection reflects the rise of the Global South in world affairs and its increasing importance to China in light of the population size and growing geopolitical clout of the vastly different countries and regions referred to under this term. High-level meetings – such as "Xi Jinping Holds Talks with East Timor's President Ramos-Horta" – are framed as milestones in cooperative development. Initiatives like "Using China-Africa Modernization to Help Modernize the Global South" emphasize China's envisioned constructive leadership role in global progress. Similarly, features about Latin America, such as "3 Minutes to 'Travel' Through Ancient Inca Civilization," highlight cultural depth and shared heritage.

By spotlighting foreign policy and trade successes with emerging powers and minimizing negative coverage, this upbeat portrayal of the Global South tries to reduce domestic skepticism about overseas ventures, foster national pride and bolster domestic support for China's foreign policy and broader global ambitions.

Domestic policy language, news reporting and expert discussions highlight the depth of China's strategic orientation toward Global South countries as trading partners and for political support in reshaping global governance – developments European and other stakeholders should pay more attention to as they consider plans to reform multilateral institutions and provide effective, convincing policies for global challenges.

## Conclusion: The coming year will bring more friction – domestically and in China's international relations

Domestically, the state of the economy and livelihood issues will remain front and center. While there has been significant movement on long-delayed social policy issues such as pensions, family policy and the *hukou* household registration system, challenges lie ahead – both in providing sufficient financial resources for these measures in light of high local government debt and in ensuring their effectiveness and public buy-in.

The coming year will likely bring an expansion of digital control

Faced with current socio-economic challenges and generational change, the coming year will likely bring an expansion of digital control, censorship and internet “clean-up” campaigns, as well as proactive propaganda seeking to instill patriotism and a sense of urgency to “struggle” for the country and make personal sacrifices. The room for critical news and reflection on China's policies in the digital ecosystem will be important to watch.

Despite its vibrancy, China's debate space remains quite tightly curated and close to the official line, especially when it comes to international affairs. This shapes the views of the general public and that of current and future leaders in policy, industry and other fields. Domestically, the party leadership increasingly relies on rallying patriotism as an antidote to social friction. There is a notable anti-Western narrative and emphasis on systemic rivalry in internal campaigns – a trend that may grow even more widespread if US-China relations worsen.

US politics and the development of China-US relations under Trump will remain a key focus of attention, both in traditional media and social media discussions. Chinese netizens are not easily muzzled and express a range of views. Online, many still express admiration for and a connection with the US. Amid calls to unify Taiwan, even by force if necessary, they voice concerns about the political and economic impact, for example of sanctions by liberal democracies against China.

Against the backdrop of a rocky US-China relationship, Beijing is transmitting messages of reform, openness and cooperation to international counterparts. To what extent the official charm offensive vis-à-vis Europe and the strategy to drive a wedge between Washington and Brussels is also picked up by Chinese citizens and scholars, will be interesting to follow.



## Endnotes

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- 15 This analysis examines the frequency and sentiment consistency of foreign countries in headlines from Toutiao, a Chinese news aggregator combining state-owned content and commentary, between July 28 and December 1, 2024. Headlines mentioning countries were analyzed using the OpenAI API to extract country names and classify sentiment as positive, neutral, or negative linguistically. Sentiment was uniformly applied to all countries mentioned in a headline, and results were manually validated for accuracy. Frequency determined the top 10 mentioned countries, while sentiment consistency was measured using the standard deviation of sentiment scores, highlighting the variability in portrayals. Examples, such as Taiwan (split between patriotic and separatist narratives) and Japan (positive cooperation vs. public skepticism), illustrate the diversity in sentiment. This provides insight into the patterns of China's digital discourse on foreign nations.

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