

China, Open-Source Information, and Transparency

Dean Cheng

KEY TAKEAWAYS

As the coronavirus pandemic has underscored, America and her partners need to better understand the People's Republic of China and the Chinese Communist Party.

The U.S. government's former role in translating Chinese documents has evaporated, leaving no single, generally available body of reliable, open-source literature.

Given the growing focus on China, policymakers and thought leaders should increase mutual information-sharing and research across multiple lanes and areas.

As the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored, there is a vital need to better understand the People's Republic of China (PRC). This involves not only specific areas, such as China's military capabilities or role in medical supply chains, but also across disciplines. This is because the Chinese operate in a multidisciplinary, multi-domain approach. The Chinese concept of political warfare, for example, specifically ties together political, economic, military, and diplomatic elements, and exploits not only traditional political and diplomatic channels, but also media, academia, and informal networks. Similarly, China's influence is not tied to just economic or military developments, but includes all of these elements—and they are often wielded as a single, coherent tool.

To better understand the PRC, it is therefore necessary to have better exploitation of Chinese

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open-source (i.e., unclassified, openly published) information and better coordination among those researchers and organizations already undertaking such exploitation.

Chinese Open Sources

The PRC is often characterized as opaque. This is true in important respects, especially when it comes to various policies and processes. How China sets its overall budget, the actual size of its military budget, the relationship among various political factions, and even how specific decisions may be staffed are all elements that the PRC deliberately strives to conceal. Nonetheless, as the world's second-largest economy, as a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, and as a major power, the PRC has to provide some information about its economy, its political positions, and its various national and international endeavors, if only to interact with other states and economies.

China publishes a range of yearbooks, statistics, work reports, and white papers. A good starting point for gaining greater insight into the PRC would probably have to begin with the following governmental and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) documents, which reflect the official, and therefore most authoritative, data:

- **Chinese planning documents.** China's economy continues to adhere to five-year plans. Many research and investment projects are, in turn, keyed to those five-year plans. Similarly, China issues a number of other longer-term research and investment documents and plans, such as "Plan 863" and "Made in China 2025." While these documents often do not have specific details, they nonetheless provide researchers with an indication of directions, trends, and policy emphases.
- **Chinese statistics.** China's various ministries all publish statistics, ranging from coal production to ships built to number of Internet users. These are not all published regularly or in coordination.
- **Chinese work reports.** These are usually published consistent with the "two congresses," the CCP's Party Congress and the governmental National People's Congress (NPC). These are held every five years; the last was in 2017. Other work reports are published at various plenums of the NPC.

- **Chinese Foreign Policy Yearbook.** Published annually by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this provides an overview of the previous year's Chinese diplomatic activities.
- **Chinese defense white paper.** This was published annually from 1995 to 2015, then again in 2019. While lacking in statistics, these documents, in combination, provide insight into overall Chinese military strategy such as the "strategic guidelines" and what the Chinese mean by terms such as the "Active Defense."
- **Other white papers.** China publishes a variety of other white papers, although rarely on a regular basis. There have been Chinese white papers on human rights, Hong Kong, the Uighur situation, and environmental issues, among others.

In addition, provincial-level statistics and reports should also be examined. Often these will not only provide important insights into specific areas and issues (coal production, for example, which can often be better understood by looking at provincial-level data than national data aggregating all of this), but also indications of national-level trends. Overall Chinese internal security spending, when provincial-level data is included (and available), is apparently greater than Chinese external security spending. One problem is that much of this data is not available in English.

There is also a need to examine Chinese corporate and state-owned enterprise data and reports. Many key sectors (aerospace, airlines, chemicals, telecoms, and petroleum) are run through one or more state-owned enterprises. In some industries, provincial- and township-owned enterprises are major players. The reports issued by these companies can often provide important insights into these industrial and economic sectors. Recent controversy over China's COVID-19 deaths was sparked by indications that China Telecom, one of China's state-run telecommunications corporations, has had a significant drop in accounts, some of which may be attributed to COVID-19 deaths. As with provincial-level documentation, however, many of these reports are not available in English.

Ongoing Efforts

This survey will not include the various U.S. government reports, which include Congressional Research Service reports; assessments of China's military (for example, the annual U.S. Department of Defense report to

Congress on Chinese military developments) and human rights; and the U.S.–China Economic and Security Commission reports. Nor does this attempt to detail the various individual academics at various universities and think tanks.

What is clear from a recent teleconference organized by The Heritage Foundation is that there is already a number of researchers and organizations that examine various Chinese data sources and combine it with additional research, on-the-ground data gathering, and interviews. Other groups are examining more specific aspects of China or are focused on certain sectors.

Economic Data

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund all have their assessments of China's economy. The American Chambers of Commerce and the U.S.–China Business Council, among others, have access to corporate data regarding individual companies' activity in China. The *China Beige Book* assembles data on Chinese business activities from many sources.

In the financial realm, there are a number of efforts already underway to examine Chinese investments and financial activities. The American Enterprise Institute has a Chinese investment tracker, which reports on Chinese investments in the rest of the world.¹ This effort, which has been proceeding for over a decade, provides a long view of Chinese outbound investment, and includes Chinese corporations, dates of projects, dollar figures, and industrial sectors. Boston University is tracking Chinese global energy financing.² Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies has a number of databases on various aspects of China's financial activities.³ William & Mary University is tracking Chinese official financing.⁴

There are also individual sub-fields that have groups collecting and publishing data on Chinese economic activity, such as maritime shipping, container traffic, port traffic, oil and gas purchases, steel production, airline purchases and activity, airline passenger traffic, etc.

One commonly noted problem, both with economic and other data, is that Chinese information is hard to verify. Chinese data sources may suddenly no longer be available for unexplained reasons, or resume without necessarily noting changes in metrics or what is counted. The Chinese also deliberately obscure or conceal data—and will at times issue misleading or false data.

This exacerbates the problem that various analyses may not always use the same metrics themselves. For example, the threshold for inclusion in an investment database may differ from analysis to analysis, making comparison of outcomes difficult.

Human Rights Data

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch create reports on China's overall human rights situation and highlight individual cases.⁵ Expatriate communities for Uighurs and Tibetans have well-developed sources of information regarding ethnic concentrations and Chinese policies there. The Catholic Church, Falun Gong, and China Aid (Bob Fu) monitor Chinese repression of religious organizations.

One effort to monitor official Chinese news is Hamilton 2.0, an effort to tie together data on Chinese social media, official messages, Youtube, and other videos, as well as officially provided data to international organizations such as the United Nations. This can provide analysts with a better sense of official Chinese positions on groups such as the Uighurs or Hong Kong dissidents.

Security/Defense Data

The International Institute for Strategic Studies' *Military Balance* is widely considered the gold standard for a compendium of basic data non-military forces around the world.⁶ The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's yearbooks provide one standard guestimate of Chinese defense spending.⁷ The China Studies Center at the Center for Naval Analysis and Defense Group, Inc., are two of the largest non-governmental American groups analyzing China's defense activities. The RAND Corporation and the U.S. Naval War College also have substantial China security studies groups.

The Minerva project, a U.S. government-funded effort, has supported a number of China-oriented programs for over a decade. This includes a group at the University of California-San Diego, led by Professor Tai Ming Cheung, that looks at China's defense industrial complex.

The Center for Strategic and International Studies' Maritime Studies group regularly provides updates on Chinese activities at sea. In particular, the Center for Strategic and International Studies' Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative produces reports specifically on China's military maritime activities, especially in the South China Sea, employing satellite imagery.

Various parts of the U.S. government produce periodic reports on Chinese military and security developments. This includes a database by the National Defense University on the People's Liberation Army's military diplomacy, and another on claimant tactics in the South China Sea. A major loss has been the receding role of the Open Source Center (OSC), formerly the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS).

Recent decisions by the OSC to move all access to classified computer networks means that one of the foremost sources of translated Chinese documents, news reports, journal articles, and broadcasts is no longer accessible by the vast majority of China analysts. It is noteworthy that the old FBIS translated not only military and defense materials, but also Chinese articles detailing economic policies and developments, scientific and technical reports, and synopses of Chinese television programs—all of which provided analysts with a wealth of additional context for understanding Chinese developments.

Chinese Political/Governmental Data

Foreign policy expert Cheng Li at the Brookings Institution is a long-time observer of Chinese politics, and every five years (linked to the various Party Congresses) publishes studies looking at the top Chinese leaders. The Hoover Institution has long published the *China Leadership Monitor*, with analyses of various aspects of China's leadership, both at the individual and group level, including backgrounds and policies, etc.⁸

The China Vitae site was a poorly organized—but nonetheless useful—source of information on Chinese leaders, providing useful information, such as backgrounds and previous offices held. It also included not only national but provincial-level figures. Unfortunately, it was unable to continue operations, despite being ceded to the Carnegie Endowment.

Germany's Mercator Institute for China Studies is perhaps the best non-American source of data and analysis on Chinese political developments.⁹

Environmental Data

Western non-governmental organizations have a mixed record of tracking Chinese environmental developments. Yale University maintains an Environmental Performance Index, which includes an entry for China.¹⁰ This is an attempt to provide a quantifiable statistic that would have relatively constant metrics.

Other Scientific, Technical, and Academic Data

These data include developments in everything from artificial intelligence and high-energy physics to epidemiology. CitizenLab at the University of Toronto has regularly published updates on new Chinese cyber activity and various Advanced Persistent Threats, not just those in China, but worldwide. Various cybersecurity and telecommunications firms (Mandiant, Verizon) publish reports on the state of Internet security, often highlighting Chinese activities.

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute has produced a database and tracker of Chinese universities that have known or suspected ties to the Chinese security establishment. They rank a number of Chinese universities and institutions of higher learning on the risk they present.¹¹

On the American side, it is not clear who, if anyone, tracks foreign/Chinese students in the U.S. or the state of the PRC-sponsored Confucius Institutes. Many universities have made clear that they do not wish to cooperate with the U.S. government in monitoring these figures, believing that it jeopardizes freedom of speech and privacy and may be used to institute surveillance or other problematic activities.

While this is a brief survey by topic, it does not mention a range of institutions that look at China, including the German Marshall Fund, the Asia Society, the Asia Foundation, the National Bureau of Asian Research, and others. These all support a range of researchers, many of whom have deep individual knowledge on a variety of topics. The same is true for many universities.

Challenges

As should be evident from even this brief survey, there is a wide variety of sources for each of the broad categories (and often sub-categories) of study. This makes it difficult not only for the interested observer (e.g., congressional staffers, journalists) to pull together information on China, but also for analysts to relate developments in one field (say, economics) with another (say, human rights). While the Congressional Research Service does do some of this, its main client is Congress, and its reports have not always been available to the general public.

At the same time, the disappearance of the OSC has meant that there is no real “single source” of good open-source information about China. This situation is exacerbated by Beijing’s deliberate efforts to deny foreign analysts access to information. Whether it is removing documents (or access

to them) from Chinese databases such as the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), failing to publish various figures (for example, the size of the Chinese space budget), or changing metrics and counting rules to make longitudinal studies impossible, the PRC is actively seeking to ensure that analysts cannot accurately assess China's political, economic, and military situation.

Recommendations

- **Promote data sharing across multiple lanes and research areas.** Given the growing focus on China, it is essential to the policy debate to facilitate data sharing across multiple lanes and areas of research. Similarly, discussions by experts across multiple specialties needs to be promoted in order to gain a better understanding not only of the overall situation in China, but potential impacts of policy recommendations. The idea, for example, of halting payments on Chinese holdings of T-bills may make sense to military strategists and politicians, but would raise objections from businessmen, economists, and financial experts. Yet such recommendations have been made by people whose focus is on the security side, apparently without consultation with their business and economic counterparts.
- **Facilitate dialogue among various analysts.** By facilitating dialogue among various analysts, it might be possible to determine patterns of Chinese behavior. Tai Ming Cheung of the University of California-San Diego, for example, has noted that there are some analysts who focus on Chinese “civil-military fusion,” but they do not necessarily interact regularly. Indeed, he described the effort as “balkanized.” By promoting dialogue, not only might there be cross-fertilization of information, but also of research methods. This would also help leverage available data sources, which are apparently drying up. Chris O’Dea, at the Hudson Institute, for example, has adopted an investment analysis approach to some aspects of security, such as infrastructure construction. By examining trade publications on infrastructure development, one can derive a sense of Chinese investments that can complement other, traditional methods of analysis.
- **Improve multidisciplinary analysis.** The PRC is engaged in a whole-of-society, rather than whole-of-government, approach to

great-power competition. This requires that the U.S. and other nations think beyond traditional topics and fields. For example, to better understand if there are particular regions that are being prioritized by the Chinese, researchers should include examinations of not only military diplomacy and direct investment, but diplomatic outreach and academic exchanges. Similarly, comparing Chinese efforts across different fields might reveal patterns in how China tries to influence various states. For example, do less-developed states receive more economic pressure, while more-developed states are to be subjected to academic or political pressure?

- **Develop an informational “information desk” or “air traffic controller.”** The need for greater awareness of data, research, and findings highlights the need for an “air traffic controller,” directing researchers to the best sources for various types of information and providing analyses along the way.

Ideally, such a “traffic cop” would both bring to light less well-known institutions and centers of excellence or ones less known to Washington policymakers, while also constructing a bipartisan/nonpartisan approach strictly focused on the data organizations are providing and promoting it.

Dean Cheng is Senior Research Fellow in the Asian Studies Center, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation.

Endnotes

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