



Ινστιτούτο Διεθνών Οικονομικών Σχέσεων
Institute of International Economic Relations

Sino-Greek Relations in Greek and Chinese Media, 2020



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FOREWORD

The Institute of International Economic Relations (IIER) has carried out systematic research into Sino-Greek relations in recent years, including in-depth studies of 'Chinese Investment in Greece and the Big Picture of Sino-Greek Relations' (2017) and 'China's Image in Greece, 2008-2018'. Since 2016, the institute has regularly contributed chapters on Greece to the annual reports released by the European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC).

This report is yet another step forward in enriching IIER's China expertise. What is qualitatively new about this specific research is the comparative analysis of Greek and Chinese media in 2020 and early 2021. It is hoped that the report will contribute to a growing body of international literature on the crucial role of media in shaping perceptions and, in particular, the way China projects its narratives as foreign policy tools.

The study is based on a mix of: (i) quantitative media monitoring within a representative sample of influential Greek print media outlets, while several TV channels are also covered by the research; (ii) a qualitative appraisal of Greece-related themes presented by major Chinese media; (iii) comparative analysis of media coverage of the two countries and their relations by Greek and Chinese media. After an extensive review of data on both sides, the team dove beneath the surface for possible explanations of the trends identified. The research methodology is presented in the Annex.

While writing this report, the authors have identified areas for further research into the specific audience targeted by Chinese media in Greece or appropriate metrics that could help capture the effectiveness of China's policies in the media sector. As such, this report is merely the start of a much longer intellectual journey.

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Disclaimer:

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the view of the Institute of International Economic Relations.

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Executive Summary

China and Bilateral Relations in Greek Media

In 2020, COVID-19 dominated the discourse in Greek media and China was a big chunk of it:

- During the first quarter of the year, many media reports stressed the responsibility of Chinese authorities for the outbreak and spread of the coronavirus across the globe. Subsequently, as Chinese authorities contained the outbreak and the pandemic hit the West, the attention of Greek media turned to China's role as a producer of personal protective equipment and controversies surrounding its 'mask diplomacy' in Europe.
- The intense Sino-American confrontation, exacerbated by the coronavirus crisis and entangled with the presidential election in the US, was another key feature of the discourse on China in Greek media in 2020.
- In addition to these key themes, Greek media covered an extraordinarily broad spectrum of China-related issues, from poverty eradication and human rights violations to geopolitics and the 'Thucydides' trap' to new digital platforms for music that can be accessed by Chinese citizens.

Sino-Greek relations accounted for slightly more than one-third of all China-related media coverage in Greece:

- Between March and June 2020, there were numerous media reports about the delivery of personal protective equipment donated by and purchased from China.
- At the same time, economic cooperation, mainly revolving around COSCO's investment in the port of Piraeus, remained the single biggest cluster of Sino-Greek topics covered by Greek media throughout the year.
- Over the last quarter of 2020, a large number of news items referred to growing disputes between the COSCO-controlled Piraeus Port Authority and local stakeholders.
- Notably, the share of Sino-Greek cultural ties in the total coverage of China-related topics was extremely limited, despite the fact that 2021 is the Greece-China Year of Culture and Tourism.

Greece and Bilateral Relations in Chinese Media

Major Chinese media outlets reviewed in the framework of this study followed a different trajectory:

- Over the initial period of the pandemic, Chinese media vehemently dismissed accusations of Beijing's responsibility for the coronavirus crisis. Subsequently, they started reporting the provision of medical supplies to other countries.
- There were many stories of donations in Greece and regularly quoted expressions of gratitude by Greek beneficiaries.
- Piraeus was consistently mentioned by Chinese media as the biggest commercial port in the Mediterranean and 'the dragon head of the Belt and Road Initiative in Europe'.
- Economic cooperation between the two countries enjoyed ample coverage by Chinese media outlets, with statements made by Greek officials, who acknowledged China's potential as a source of investment capital, a technological powerhouse and an innovation champion. Shipping, tourism, green energy, e-commerce and services were highlighted, *inter alia*, in Chinese media reports as promising areas of continued Sino-Greek cooperation.
- In September, the high-profile visit of China's top diplomat Yang Jiechi to Greece was covered extensively by Chinese media.

Two Very Different Stories

It is quite clear that Greek and Chinese media carry very different stories about China and Greece, and their bilateral relations. Notably, both the content and tone of Greek print media coverage of China and Sino-Greek relations were marked by a negative sentiment: at - 27.3% and - 10.3%, respectively. By contrast, Chinese media painted a remarkably positive picture of Greece and its relations with Beijing. It appears that media in both countries are interested in bilateral economic cooperation, whereas the themes of cultural ties and political affinity frequently covered by Chinese reporters are hardly reciprocated by their Greek counterparts.

To a certain extent, this striking contrast could be attributed to the fact that coverage of Sino-Greek relations in Greek and Chinese media does not comply with high standards on accuracy and objectivity, though to different degrees and for different reasons:

- While the Chinese news agency Xinhua has a fully operational office in Athens, there are no Greek correspondents accredited in Beijing. As a result, Greek media rely almost exclusively on foreign, mostly western, sources. However, it is worth noting that at times Greek media outlets present the 'Chinese side of the story', e.g. by republishing Xinhua reports.
- Some Greek media outlets are affiliated with political parties or pressure groups, but nonetheless there is a wide array of perspectives and opportunities for a public discussion on China and Sino-Greek relations. Conversely, Greece is portrayed in Chinese media in relation to a rather short list of issues. In addition, Chinese media coverage of Greece and Sino-Greek relations is tightly aligned with official government policies and follows a script, which steers reporting towards oft-predictable conclusions.
- A key finding relates to the systematic omission of certain topics by Chinese media. A prime example of this half-truth template is the tension in Piraeus, which was widely covered by Greek media outlets in late 2020 and, yet, related issues did not make it into Chinese media reports.
- The Golden Visa programme of the Greek government, seen as a source of foreign capital for the national economy, is yet another telling example. While Greek media report that more than 75% of all Golden Visa holders at the end of 2020 were Chinese citizens, the IIER research team did not record a single reference to this issue in the official Chinese media outlets reviewed.

China's Charm Offensive

There are two key narratives systematically projected by China in the media of the two countries:

- One of them relates to China's standing as a benign superpower, which is promoting a new set of harmonious international relations, based on rapid socio-economic development and 'win-win cooperation'.
- The second narrative pertains to Sino-Greek relations, with China's image carefully crafted as one of a true friend that offers generous assistance to Greece.

While Chinese media should be examined in the framework of Beijing's broader public diplomacy, in projecting these narratives in Greece China appears to deploy a 'customised', country-specific, strategy:

- Chinese authorities and media alike have chosen a friendly and accommodating stance to Greece rather than the 'wolf warrior diplomacy' reported in other European countries in 2020.
- Unlike developments in other parts of Europe, no Greek media outlet is directly controlled by Chinese interests. However, Beijing seeks to use Greek media as amplifiers of its messaging, through cooperation agreements with central institutions, such as the national news agency of Greece, or influential media outlets.
- China's charm offensive does not seem to be geared towards winning the hearts and minds of the general public in Greece – rather, Chinese media tend to serve a targeted approach focusing on Greek political and economic elites.

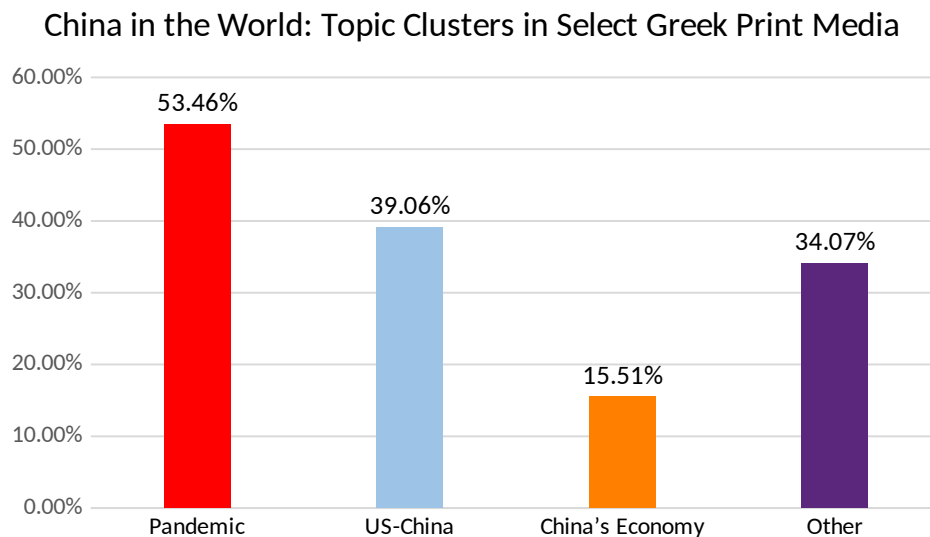
Abbreviations

ACF - Ancient Civilizations Forum
AIIB - Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
AMNA - Athens Macedonian News Agency
BRI - Belt and Road Initiative
CAI - Comprehensive Agreement on Investment
CEE - Central & Eastern Europe
CEIS - China Economic Information Service
CGTN - China Global Television Network
CPC - Communist Party of China
CRI - China Radio International
EIA - Environmental Impact Assessment
FDI - Foreign Direct Investment
HRADF - Hellenic Republic Asset Development Fund
HPCS - Hellenic Port Community System
IPTO/ADMIE - Independent Power Transmission Operator
MoU - Memorandum of Understanding
PCCI - Piraeus Chamber of Commerce and Industry
PCT - Piraeus Container Terminal
PRC - People's Republic of China
PPA - Piraeus Port Authority
PPE - Personal Protective Equipment
RCEP - Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
SHIC - Sino-Hellenic Investors' Confederation
SOE - State-Owned Enterprise
TEU - Twenty-Foot Container Equivalent Unit
WHO - World Health Organization

1. China in Greek Print Media

The monitoring exercise carried out by the IIER research team revealed that China-related coverage by Greek print media could be broken down to four main topic clusters that broadly reflect the *Zeitgeist* of 2020: the COVID-19 pandemic, the US-China confrontation, the global economic slump and China's partial recovery, and various 'other' issues (Figure 1). As expected, the pandemic that broke out and spread across the globe in 2020 largely overshadowed all the other topics. COVID-19 was the single biggest China-related topic cluster (53.46%) in Greek print media, which covered the outbreak in Wuhan, the heated debate about the origin of the pathogen and the responsibility of Chinese authorities, as well as a raft of conspiracy theories that mushroomed afterwards. 2020 was also marked by the intense Sino-American confrontation (39.06%), which was only exacerbated by the pandemic and became entangled with the run-up to the presidential election in the US later that year. China's economy accounted for 15.51% of media coverage in Greece, while a wide array of other topics made up 34.07% of the total. Notably, these topic clusters were intertwined to a large extent, e.g. many news items referred simultaneously to the pandemic, the Chinese economy, and the stand-off between Washington and Beijing.

Figure 1:



N.B. Total exceeds 100% due to overlaps across groups of topics.

Source: Institute of International Economic Relations

1.1. COVID-19 Pandemic

Throughout all of 2020 media reports in Greece referred to the COVID-19 crisis, starting from the outbreak in Wuhan and covering the spread of the pandemic globally. During the first quarter of the year, many reports were clearly negative, as they stressed either [the cover-up of the outbreak by Chinese authorities](#) at the outset of the crisis or [China's moral responsibility](#) for its belated response and the spread of the virus beyond its borders. A number of articles conveyed accusations that [China withheld crucial information from the WHO](#), with some of them highlighting [China's international isolation](#) at the initial stage of the coronavirus outbreak. The EU was reportedly one of the international actors exerting [pressure on China for increased transparency](#). After strenuous efforts and a lot of arm-twisting reported by Greek media, in November 2020 it was announced

that a ten-strong team of the World Health Organization (WHO) would be sent on [an evaluation mission to China](#) to look into the origin of the coronavirus. It should be noted, however, that in some cases Greek media outlets hosted [views expressed by Chinese experts](#), who presented the Chinese side of the story.

The second quarter of the year saw a number of media reports about the increasingly confrontational rhetoric between China and the West, with [cyber attacks on Australia](#) and growing tension between Canberra and Beijing. In Europe, [France reacted to provocative posts](#) on the website of the PRC embassy in Paris. The role of Russia and China in a pandemic-related [‘infodemic’](#) surfaced in several media reports, amid allegations that [China followed Russian disinformation techniques](#). China’s [wolf warrior diplomacy](#), one of the widely discussed topics in 2020, also had its fair share of coverage by the Greek media outlets monitored in the framework of this research. Subsequently, the Greek media reported cases of China’s ‘vaccine diplomacy’, e.g. the import of the [Sinovac vaccine in Turkey](#).

1.2. US-China stand-off

Topics relating the US-China stand-off was the second largest cluster recorded by the IIER team. It includes reports about the [US-China trade war](#) launched in mid-2018 with the imposition of higher tariffs on Chinese imports into the US. The race for technological supremacy between the two powers, with American sanctions on Huawei or the [closure of TikTok in the US](#), was a prominent theme throughout the year. In the same vein, the United Kingdom’s [hardening stance towards China on Huawei and 5G](#) was also covered in the Greek media. In April, Naftemporiki presented an IIER webinar dedicated US-China relations and [Graham Allison’s theory about the ‘Thucydides’ trap’](#). On the dispute over the South China Sea, an area marked by a dangerous military build-up and turning into a potential flashpoint, there were some media reports about [US sanctions on Chinese officials](#). Other articles related to China as a rising priority for NATO or Henry Kissinger’s warning about the risk of sabre-rattling and an [armed conflict between Washington and Beijing](#).

In 2020, Greek media devoted considerable space to the US-China confrontation.

At the same time, not all the news items in the Greek media reviewed by IIER were hawkish on China or necessarily endorsed western rhetoric. In May, for instance, a [satirical Chinese video titled ‘Once upon a virus’](#) relentlessly mocking the US for its failure to handle the pandemic was presented by the Kathimerini daily. Given the Sino-American stand-off which reached its climax in 2020, the US-China-EU triangle and EU-China relations also drew the attention of Greek media. Thus, Emmanuel Macron’s vision of [European strategic autonomy](#) vis-à-vis the US and China was given sufficient space in Greek media reports and there were some commentaries on the [question of whether the EU and China should be viewed as partners or rivals](#).

1.3. China’s Economy

The state of the Chinese economy amid the pandemic has also been of interest to Greek media. As a consequence of the grinding halt of China’s industry and services in early 2020, a [wave of defaults and cases of insolvencies](#) in the country were reported. However, it was duly acknowledged that China recovered faster from the pandemic than any other big economy in the world and its rebound in the second half of 2020 was hailed as good news with a view to the prospects of the global economy. A significant development, the signing of the [Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership](#) (RCEP) by China and fourteen other countries from the Asia-Pacific region in November 2020, was duly reported by Greek media and commented on.

Relations between the European Union and China were also covered. For instance, on the occasion of the June 2020 EU-China summit, the complex EU definition of [China as a partner, competitor and systemic rival](#) was discussed in an interesting op-ed reviewed by IIER. In addition, Kathimerini presented a report released by the

EU Chamber of Commerce in China and titled '[The Road Less Travelled](#)', which argues that the lack of transparency and a fair procurement mechanism allows Chinese contractors to benefit from Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects to the extent of some 90%. [EU tariffs imposed on Chinese aluminium](#), due to alleged dumping, were also reported by Greek media. The IIER team recorded analyses of EU FDI screening mechanism 2019/452, which came into force on 1 October 2020 and constitutes a defensive tool against the growing presence of Chinese companies in Europe.

On a more positive note, as [China's economy returned to growth](#), Volkswagen also recorded gains thanks to sales on the vast Chinese market. In one case, EU-China economic cooperation is expected to yield considerable benefits to [Greek products under protection](#) on the basis of an agreement on geographical indications (GIs). According to the specific media report, the list of protected EU products includes Greece's feta cheese, Samos wines, Lasithi olive oil, Kalamata olives and Chios masticha.

1.4. Other China-Related Topics

Human rights, democracy and the rule of law constituted another set of newsworthy issues in 2020. The clashes in Hong Kong, which broke out the previous year, were one of the topics that persistently appeared in Greek media. The Proto Thema daily presented a [Human Rights Watch report](#) about human rights violations in Hong Kong as well as the province of Xinjiang. Reactions of western governments to the [national security law promulgated in Hong Kong](#) and dissidents being placed behind bars were also reported. Interestingly, apart from political issues, life in China in 2020 also drew the attention of Greek media. Many reports referred to life under lockdown in large swathes of China. On an entirely different note, there were news about the [agreement between Tencent Music Entertainment Group and Peermusic](#), with the latter's catalogue now being accessible through digital platforms, such as QQ Music, Kugou Music, Kuwo Music and WeSing.

Once again, not all the news items relating to China were negative. An op-ed, published by Kathimerini in June and titled '[Pandemic: Could it be that China is not the problem?](#)', points out that it was Donald Trump who started the trade war against China, not least because of the presidential race in the US. The author, a distinguished Greek researcher, argues that, instead of levelling accusations at China, western governments will have to accept the inevitability of its rise and learn to work with Beijing, e.g. in combating climate change. In October, former foreign minister George Katrougalos hailed [the eradication of absolute poverty in China](#) during a virtual conference organised by the Communist Party of China (CPC).

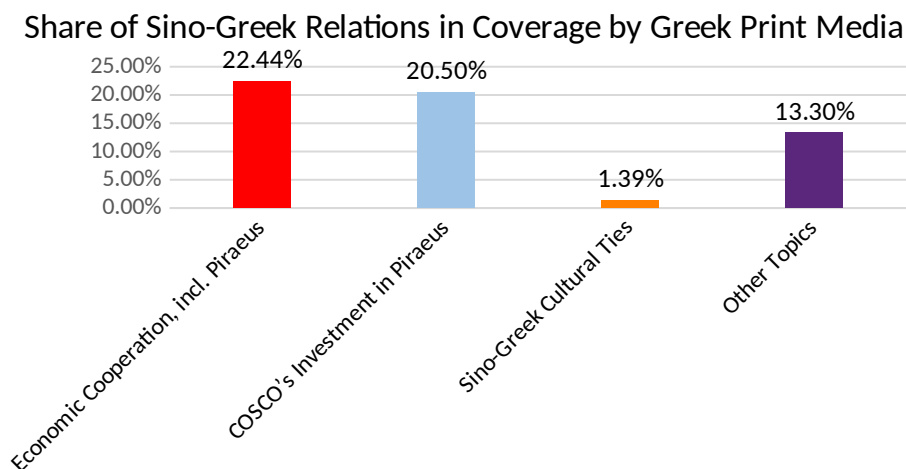
2. Sino-Greek Relations in Greek Media

Sino-Greek relations accounted for slightly more than one-third of media coverage of China-related topics. While the pandemic dominated media reports throughout 2020 and China was a big chunk of it, Sino-Greek relations largely revolved around economic cooperation (22.44%), including the import of medical supplies from China. However, news items relating to Sino-Greek economic cooperation focused predominantly on COSCO's investment in the port of Piraeus, which alone accounted for one-fifth (20.50%) of the overall China-related media coverage or more than 90% of this topic cluster. Interestingly, the share of Sino-Greek cultural ties in the total coverage of China-related topics was extremely limited (1.39%), despite the fact that 2021 is the Greece-China Year of Culture and Tourism (Figure 2).

News items relating to Sino-Greek economic cooperation in 2020 focused mainly on COSCO's investment in Piraeus.

The set of 'other' topics covered an array of broader issues, such as the growing volume of foreign direct investment (FDI) from the US as a counterweight to China's economic presence, Greece's position as a logistics and transportation hub in Southeast Europe, the China-CEE cooperation format (17+1), or China's potential role as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Golden Visa issue, also covered by Greek media, stands out as an interesting case at the interface of economic cooperation and people-to-people exchanges.

Figure 2:



N.B. Total does not add up to 100%, as Sino-Greek relations are presented as a share of the entire sample of China-related media reports.

Source: Institute of International Economic Relations

2.1. Economic Cooperation

Notably, the first three months of 2020 saw a rather negative media coverage of China in Greece, driven by news about the worrying developments in Wuhan and, subsequently, across the entire country. When the coronavirus reached Europe, including Greece, the mood started changing. This is clearly reflected in numerous media reports about the [arrival of the first batch of masks](#) at Athens airport and the delivery of much-needed personal protective equipment (PPE) between March and June 2020. While there were some Chinese donations, the vast majority of medical supplies from China were [commercial orders](#) paid for by the Greek state and donors, which is why they were viewed in Greek media as a form of economic cooperation.

An overview of [Sino-Greek economic cooperation in their entirety](#) was offered by an article in the Proto Thema newspaper in June. According to this report, the worth of Chinese investment in Greece amounted to \$1.2 billion, and the PRC ambassador Zhang Qiyue provided assurances that there would be a growing capital influx 'if no other factors stood in the way' - presumably, a veiled reference to the US or Greek red tape. In July, Naftemporiki published an [article about China's State Grid](#), holder of 24% of the stock of the Independent Power Transmission Operator (IPTO/ADMIE). Shortly afterwards, the same newspaper carried two more interesting stories on: (i) a set of [agreements between the Thessaloniki Port Authority and the Chinese conglomerate CMPort](#), and plans for the expansion of the port, so that it could host ultra large container vessels with a transportation capacity of up to 24,000 twenty-foot container equivalent units (TEUs); (ii) [Chinese Golden Visa applicants who could not complete the purchase of their properties](#) due to travel restrictions and related announcements made by the chairman of the Sino-Hellenic Investors' Confederation (SHIC). In October,

the portal liberal.gr published an article about growing [US investment in Greece](#) in the sectors of transport, energy and telecommunication, as a response to what was presented as Chinese penetration into the Greek market.

2.2. COSCO's Investment in Piraeus

The spring of 2020 being marked by the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Greece, in April the liberal.gr portal reported the [delivery of medical equipment](#) to local authorities in the broader area of COSCO's investment, i.e. the municipalities of Piraeus, Drapetsona-Keratsini, Perama and Salamina. With regard to the performance of the Piraeus Port Authority (PPA), in August the English edition of Kathimerini ran a story on the extent, to which [the port of Piraeus was weathering the pandemic](#), with data from the first seven months of the year showing only a marginal drop in its main activity, namely container handling.

At the same time, in 2020 Greek media reported a growing number of controversial issues surrounding COSCO's investment in Piraeus. The number of news items about opposition to PPA's expansion programme increased steadily throughout the year, as local stakeholders and authorities, including the [Piraeus Municipal Council](#), reportedly expressed disquiet about the implementation of COSCO's plans. For instance, criticism in Greek media focused on the absence of an environmental impact assessment (EIA) for the construction of a new cruise terminal. Another point of friction highlighted in media reports related to congestion and pollution caused by the transfer of debris through the city, with [local activists stopping PPA lorries in the streets of Piraeus](#) (Figure 3), and accusations levelled at COSCO and competent Greek authorities alike.

Figure 3: Local activists stop PPA/COSCO lorries in Piraeus



Source: left.gr, 13 November 2020

In addition, many media outlets referred to local ship repair businesses, which strongly objected to [COSCO's plan to construct a new shipyard](#) in Perama, to the west of Piraeus. In November, their grievances were taken to Parliament by the main opposition party. Reports about a pushback against a Chinese-controlled shipyard persisted, despite a previous [Council of State ruling in June 2020](#) that found no legal impediment to this project

on environmental grounds. Another media report suggests a [possible quid-pro-quo logic](#) behind this dispute and quotes a statement by prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis during his visit to China in 2019 that local communities and Greece in general would expect some meaningful benefits in return.

One of the main points of friction covered by Greek media relates to PPA's plan to construct a [new container terminal, known as Pier IV](#). The PPA/COSCO management seeks to boost the throughput of the port up to some 11 million TEUs by 2024, so that Piraeus could compete on an equal footing with Europe's biggest ports. It was reported, however, that Greek authorities did not yet agree to the construction of Pier IV, which is why [COSCO proceeded to upgrading the existing facilities](#) as an interim solution. Another bone of contention that made it into Greek media in 2020 was a proposal put forward by COSCO for the creation of an e-platform for the management of all functions of the port. The so-called [Hellenic Port Community System \(HPCS\)](#) was reportedly opposed by a number of business actors in Piraeus who argued that this would lead to a 'monopoly on services' in the hands of the Chinese company. In the end, the Ministry of Shipping announced that it would replace HPCS with a National Integrated Port Community System controlled by the state and included relevant provisions (under Art. 24) in a [law adopted by Parliament in early 2021](#).

The portal liberal.gr reported that the Piraeus Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PCCI), an erstwhile supporter of COSCO's investment, had turned against the Chinese company and defended [local businesses that fear they are losing out](#). Since November 2020, the charge against the Chinese company has been led by Vangelis Marinakis, a prominent Greek shipowner and president of the immensely popular local football club Olympiacos, who is quoted by Efimerida ton Syntakton as saying that '[Piraeus can expect no benefit from COSCO](#)'.

Amid these mushrooming disputes, in late 2020 various media outlets reported [COSCO's decision to claim an additional 16% of the PPA stock](#), on the basis of the 2016 agreement with the Greek government. In a 21-page letter, dated 23 November 2020 and addressed to ministries and the Hellenic Republic Asset Development Fund (HRADF/TAIPED), COSCO blamed Greek authorities for delays resulting in the fact that many of the mandatory investments envisaged in the 2016 PPA share transaction contract were behind schedule. The letter was widely reported and several articles reviewed by the IIER research team referred to the risk of [diplomatic tension between the two countries](#) as well as the prospect of [an impasse possibly leading to arbitration](#). A number of reports highlighted the active role played by the PRC ambassador to Greece in negotiations with Greek ministries and other public services. The Greek prime minister has also spoken about the frictions in Piraeus and has stated that [existing problems will be resolved](#), and efforts for an [amicable settlement in Piraeus](#) were reported in late 2020 and early 2021.

2.3. Sino-Greek Cultural Ties

2020 saw some media reports, to pick an example from Kathimerini, about 2021 as the [Year of Culture and Tourism China – Greece](#). In 2021, China will celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and Greece its 200th anniversary as a modern state. In line with the spirit of this auspicious coincidence, the author of the article argues that the two countries will further promote the implementation of the China-led Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), which '*has Piraeus as a focal point*', and '*will expand bilateral cooperation in all areas, so as to bring Sino-Greek relations to new heights*'. In September, the Greek parliament ratified a 2017 [agreement between Greece and China on film co-production](#). At about the same time, the Naftemporiki daily carried a detailed story about a virtual ceremony held on the occasion of a [twinning agreement between the Attica region and Sichuan province](#) for cooperation in areas, such as health, tourism and culture. Notably, the article has the high-sounding title '*The deal with China reinforces the two-way relationship between the West and the East*'.

2.4. Other Topics

Geopolitics could not have been left out of Sino-Greek relations. Some commentaries in Greek media touched upon Greece's position between the US and China, and the risk of the country being sucked into a geopolitical rivalry between the two superpowers. For instance, in February the Kathimerini daily hosted an op-ed by an American politician of Greek descent who warned that, while Greece needed foreign investment, it had to be honest about the [drawbacks of getting too close to China](#). Some other op-eds focused on what is presented as questionable expectations that Greece would benefit from a flurry of Chinese investment projects and a [Sino-Greek alliance](#).

In September 2020, a Kathimerini report on [Yang Jiechi's visit to Greece](#) offered a largely positive assessment of the status of Sino-Greek relations, though some problems in the port of Piraeus were also hinted at. For his part, Greek prime minister Mitsotakis was keen on highlighting the tension between Greece and Turkey, with a view to China's position as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.

2.5. Greek TV Reports

In addition to the print media, the IIER research also reviewed a large number of Greek TV reports. The set of themes and timeline of their emergence broadly confirmed findings coming out of the print media monitoring exercise. The pandemic caught the attention of Greek TV channels as early as the very beginning of 2020 and, while China was initially in the spotlight, shortly afterwards the focus shifted to the West and Greece itself.

In January, the Antenna TV channel showed the construction site of the two new hospitals in Wuhan and referred to the [decision of the World Health Organization \(WHO\) to declare a state of emergency](#), while avoiding to use the term 'pandemic'. A report aired by the state-run ERT also focused on the [question whether the COVID-19 outbreak qualified for the initial term 'epidemic'](#) or should be deemed a 'pandemic'. Shortly afterwards, the SKAI TV channel presented a story about the imposition of a strict lockdown in Hubei province and the [brutal removal of infected citizens from their homes](#).

In an [interview for ERT](#) in February, the PRC ambassador Zhang Qiyue was asked about the possible impact of the pandemic on bookings made by Chinese citizens planning to visit Greece, as tourism is a major source of revenue for the country. In April, the PRC ambassador gave yet another interview to the SKAI TV channel and stressed that '*now that [China's situation regarding the epidemic is changing for the better](#), we would like to help countries like Greece*'. In May, the attention of Greek TV channels started turning to [China's economic rebound](#) and the geopolitical benefits it could draw amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which was heavily affecting the West by then.

In 2020, China figured prominently on Greek TV, particularly at the initial stage of the pandemic.

In late summer TV reports started focusing on the presidential race in the United States, including Donald Trump's frequent references to China. In September, [Yang Jiechi's discussion with prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis](#) was aired live by the state TV. Meanwhile, tension started surfacing in the port of Piraeus. In November, as soon as COSCO sent its letter to Greek authorities, the Mononews.gr portal released a short, but informative, video about the Chinese company's [claim to the additional 16% of PPA's stock](#). An 18-minute [documentary aired on the state-run ERT TV channel](#) in February 2021 presented both pros and cons of the Chinese investment in Piraeus. While there is universal acknowledgement of the spectacular growth of the port's container handling capacity (throughput), problems encountered by local small and mid-size enterprises were also highlighted.

3. Greece and Sino-Greek Relations in Chinese media

The sample of official Chinese English-language media outlets reviewed in this research is relatively small, as they do not display conflicting views – in fact, the degree of diversity of the information provided by them is next to nil. Therefore, the IIER team opted for a purely qualitative, rather than quantitative, analysis.

3.1. COVID-19 in Mainstream Media

The coronavirus crisis being an overarching theme in early 2020, Chinese media vehemently dismissed accusations of Beijing's responsibility for the outbreak and spread of the pandemic. Over the initial period, China's public diplomacy efforts were geared primarily towards 'damage containment'. Subsequently, Chinese officials started touting China's generosity in providing medical equipment to other countries, including Greece, an issue that was covered extensively by Chinese media. In March, Global Times and other Chinese media outlets reported the [delivery of 550,000 masks and sets of protective gear](#) at Athens international airport, in the presence of the Greek minister of health Vasilis Kikilias and the Chinese ambassador Zhang Qiyue, who invoked Aristotle's saying 'friendship is a single soul dwelling in two bodies' (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Arrival of Chinese medical supplies in Greece, 21 March 2020, in the presence of the Greek minister of health and the PRC ambassador



Source: Xinhua/Marios Lolos

Another Global Times article released in April reminds readers of the twinning relationship between Piraeus and Shanghai, and quotes municipal staff who express gratitude for a batch of [20,000 masks sent to Piraeus by the Shanghai city council](#). In May, Xinhua reported that seven municipalities in the region of Attica had also benefited from the [donation of protective masks and gloves](#). In the same month, PPA and COSCO donated 10,000 protective masks and 10,000 gloves to municipalities in western Athens. Greek alternate minister of foreign affairs Miltiadis Varvitsiotis stated to Xinhua: 'This is an act that is highly appreciated by us, because it shows that [COSCO is here to stay and engage with the local community](#)'.

In an [interview with the Greek ambassador to China](#) given to Global Times in June, he stated that ‘China was Greece’s main provider of large quantities of medical and prevention equipment purchased by the government and donors from Greece’. He also commented on the decision of the Greek government to include China in the list of 29 countries with positive epidemiological characteristics and thus let Chinese tourists in as a ‘vote of confidence’ for China’s efforts in containing the pandemic. One of the questions posed to the Greek ambassador was clearly meant to steer the conversation in a direction of interest to China and he referred to ‘the fact that China’s help to the international community in the fight against [the] coronavirus [is] smeared by some’. At about the same time, Chinese media reported the [donation of COVID-19 testing equipment](#) to the microbiology laboratory of the national university of Athens. Greek officials thanked China, whose ambassador stressed that ‘we are living in a community of shared future’. In September, the governor of the Attica region George Patoulis expressed gratitude for the shipment of personal protective equipment (PPE) from China and commended ‘the [wisdom, health diplomacy, and humanitarian policy](#) mankind calls for at such times’.

3.2. Economic and Cultural Cooperation in Mainstream Media

Economic relations between Greece and China were also one of the key themes in Chinese media in 2020. The Xinhua news agency covered the launch of a [Sino-Hellenic Investors’ Confederation](#) (SHIC) launched in January to facilitate Chinese investment in Greece. Greek deputy prime minister Panagiotis Pikrammenos and Nikos Papathanasis, deputy minister of development and investments, welcomed Chinese investors and wished them success in all their projects. Shortly afterwards, a Xinhua story presented the prospects of [Sino-Greek cooperation in green transition](#) by quoting Alexandra Sdoukou, secretary general at the Greek ministry of environment and energy: ‘We always look with admiration and attention at the technological developments in this great Asian country. Moreover, China has undoubtedly become an innovation champion in green energy and of course this knowledge and experience are now transferred to Greece’. Another Xinhua report released in February focused on [the construction of a new cruise pier](#) as ‘a significant investment not only for the Piraeus port, but also for the local and national economy’.

In May, Xinhua interviewed former Greek prime minister George Papandreou, who stated that China and Greece should join forces to offer the world new approaches to healthcare, and that they should view [the Belt and Road Initiative as a joint project](#). At about the same time, the Greek minister of development and investments Adonis Georgiadis was quoted by Xinhua as having stated: ‘All our investment plans continue normally, and [we are waiting for our Chinese friends](#) to continue with [an] even greater momentum”. Nicolas Vernicos, vice chair of the Silk Road Chamber of International Commerce, and Fotis Provatas, chairman of the Chamber of Greek-Chinese Economic Cooperation, highlighted the success of the flagship investment project of COSCO in Piraeus.

Another China Daily article points out that ‘globally, [China has established a huge network of port cities](#). The most notable success of a hub port could be the Athens’ ancient harbor Piraeus. Piraeus may overtake Valencia in Spain to become the biggest port in the Mediterranean and the seventh biggest in Europe, saving time and money compared with unloading in other giant ports of northern Europe, such as Rotterdam’. The Greek prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis is quoted by Xinhua (9 November 2020): ‘It has been a good deal for COSCO, it has been a good deal for Greece [and] [Piraeus has been transformed into a very successful port](#). We have made it very clear. We want to make it the largest port in the Mediterranean’.

On another occasion, the Greek minister of development and investments Adonis Georgiadis was quoted as stating that ‘we continue even faster and stronger than before to make our ties stronger. We are [very happy with the Chinese presence in Greece](#), very proud of our cooperation in the port of Piraeus’. Attending the same Sino-Greek forum, the Chinese ambassador Zhang Qiyue also expressed her conviction that ‘bilateral relations will come into full bloom to benefit our two peoples’. In June, a virtual webinar took place on the occasion of the

[48th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties](#) between the two countries. According to a statement attributed to Gregory Dimitriadis, secretary general for international economic affairs at the Greek foreign ministry and reported by Xinhua, Athens wants to see ‘*new partnerships between Greek and Chinese companies*’, and to explore ‘*more opportunities in tourism and shipping, the two traditionally strong engines of the Greek economy*’. ‘*The Dragon Head of the Silk Road in Europe must continue in all sectors*’, according to Vasilis Korkidis, president of PCCI.

In July, Xinhua quoted PPA Chairman Yu Zenggang as stating that the Piraeus Container Terminal (PCT) had handled 5.65 million TEU of cargo, a [new record in the port’s throughput](#). He stressed that ‘*this high performance had several positive effects on the national and local economy*’. According to another Xinhua report, in August the Greek minister of investment and development Adonis Georgiadis was impressed with the ‘*confidence and positive attitude demonstrated by ZTE*’ and ‘[welcomed Chinese high-tech companies](#) to participate in the construction of Greek telecommunications infrastructure’.

In September, Chinese media reported [Yang Jiechi’s visit to Greece](#): China’s top diplomat spoke about the Belt and Road Initiative and the prospects of Piraeus into a world-class port. In some cases, Sino-Greek relations are viewed in a broader regional – and even global – framework, e.g. within the 17+1 format of cooperation between China and Central & Eastern Europe (CEE) or in light of Sino-American competition. In November, Xinhua carried a story titled ‘[Greek officials invite Chinese investment in post-COVID 19 Greece](#)’. In it the PRC ambassador Zhang Qiyue is quoted reiterating that ‘*the new platforms provided by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and ‘17+1’ opened new opportunities for collaboration between China and Europe, China and Greece*’. Furthermore, she referred to Sino-Greek collaboration in the port of Piraeus as a ‘good example’ and went on to identify other promising sectors, such as ‘*green energy, digital infrastructure, innovation, e-commerce, and the services sector*’.

Chinese media persistently highlight the bright prospects of Sino-Greek relations.

In addition, a China Daily article, titled ‘[US tricks won’t work in Central and Eastern Europe](#)’, argues that ‘*the US has been trying to use the Central and East European (CEE) countries as tools to restrain China and counterbalance the EU’s influence*’. Another China Daily article, ‘[Central companies stoke BRI cooperation](#)’, is a true ode to Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and indirectly China’s development model. It mentions the investment in Piraeus alongside BRI projects in other continents, e.g. the China-Belarus Industrial Park, the Mombasa-Nairobi Railway and the China-Laos Railway.

Cultural cooperation between the two countries, in conjunction with tourism, is another prominent theme actively promoted by the Chinese side. For instance, during his visit to Athens in September 2020, Yang Jiechi spoke about the [Ancient Civilizations Forum \(ACF\)](#) as a response to the ‘*fallacy of the clash of civilizations*’. While the make-up of this forum has now changed, the ten countries invited to the first ACF in Athens in 2017 were Greece, China, Bolivia, Egypt, India, Iraq, Iran, Italy, Mexico and Peru. In addition, the news agency Xinhua covered the [twinning agreement between the Attica region and Sichuan province](#), signed in September 2020, as well as plans for the opening of a Greek consulate in Chengdu and a prospective direct flight between the two sister regions in the future.

Apart from print reports, Chinese mainstream media are increasingly using videos, such as televised interviews or documentaries, which are then available on YouTube. In March, [ambassador Zhang Qiyue spoke to CGTN](#) about the supply of masks to Greece and stated that ‘*we’re not trying to play some kind of diplomacy – we’re actually trying to save lives [and] not to have extra influence, as some of the media have suspected*’. In arguing that this is genuine Sino-Greek friendship, she reminded the audience of the way Greece helped in 2011 with the evacuation of Chinese workers from Libya. In November, Xinhua posted on YouTube a video which includes

a [statement by prime minister Mitsotakis at the Delphi Economic Forum](#): 'It's been a good deal for COSCO, it's been a good deal for Greece - Piraeus has been transformed into a very successful port'.

In December 2020, Xinhua ran a story about Piraeus, which was accompanied by a short [documentary, titled 'We are a family'](#). The soundtrack from a well-known Greek movie, *Never on Sunday*, also known as *The Children of Piraeus*, is dear to many Greeks. The 3-minute video is centred upon an interview with Tasos Vamvakidis, Commercial Director of the Piraeus Container Terminal (PCT), who speaks about president Xi's visit a year earlier: 'I was shocked, I was very impressed that he was so close, so friendly'. In addition, the TV crew interviews his wife, who tells the spectators how proud she was to meet president Xi. Next in line is their son, also a PPA/COSCO employee, who makes an equally enthusiastic statement. The minister of shipping, Ioannis Plakiotakis, is featured as well and states that president Xi's presence in Piraeus 'has opened the door for more Chinese investment in Greece'.

3.3. Social Media

For the time being, Sino-Greek relations are not well-presented on Facebook by the Chinese side, but this is increasingly becoming a popular topic on the specific platform. Thus, SHIC maintains a Facebook page, with 546 followers as of December 2020. It presents its January 2020 [SHIC opening ceremony](#), with pictures of a number of Greek officials in attendance. In March 2020, SHIC called on its members who had apartments to [accommodate front-line medical staff for free](#) as a contribution to the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic in Greece. The page also hosts footage from the discussion between [prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Yang Jiechi](#) in September 2020. A month later, SHIC posted a [video with a patriotic message](#) on the occasion of Greece's national holiday, the 28 October.

The list of China-related Facebook pages on Sino-Greek relations also includes the one maintained by the [China Greece Friendship Association](#), a private group with 894 members as of late February 2021. The [Hellenic-Chinese Business Chamber](#) (HCBC), with 968 followers as of December 2020, facilitates mostly contacts between entrepreneurs from the two countries. The Facebook page of the Greek Service of [China Radio International](#) (CRI) has an astounding 141,775 followers, most probably from China, as the figure is too high for the scale of Greece. Another page, with 864 followers in December 2020, belongs to [China Greece Times](#), which hosts pictures and footage from official Chinese state-run sources. For instance, it presents a [documentary in Greek](#), produced by the Greek service of CRI, about life in China during the lockdown in 2020.

However, not all the Facebook pages seem to relate to China, despite their titles. [Greece-China TV News](#), with 10,356 followers as of December 2020, is a case in point. This Facebook page is extremely hostile to Turkey and often posts inflammatory nationalistic content or comments. In reality, the page has little to do with Sino-Greek relations and the choice of its title remains a mystery.

As for PPA/COSCO, it has a Facebook page and a [Twitter account](#) displaying identical content, which is geared primarily towards public relations campaigns. For instance, the donation of medical supplies and sanitary material to beneficiaries in the broader area of Piraeus as well as other charity activities are amply featured. In some cases, COSCO uses the social media to send messages across to Greek authorities and other stakeholders, e.g. through an interview given by [Yu Zenggang, BOD Chairman of PPA](#) to the Greece Investor Guide in September 2020.

Twitter has only recently been included in the toolbox of China's public diplomacy. The PRC embassy in Athens acquired a Twitter account in July 2020 and tweets both in Greek and English. As of February 2021, it had slightly more than 1,000 followers. The content is roughly split between praise for China's achievements and enthusiasm for the bright prospects of Sino-Greek relations. For instance, in September 2020 the PRC embassy retweeted a China Daily article about [President Xi Jinping who presented medals to four outstanding individuals](#)

for their contribution to China's fight against COVID-19. As a quote from his address, it is mentioned that '*China has achieved another heroic feat in humankind's fight against [the] disease*'. Another tweet provides a link to a live report on the China Global Television Network (CGTN) on [the return journey of the Chang'e-5 spaceship from the Moon](#) in December 2020.

One of the first tweets in July 2020 referred to an [interview given by the PRC ambassador](#) to a Greek business magazine, in which she hailed Sino-Greek partnership '*in the BRI framework and the 17+1 format, as well as the promotion of peaceful coexistence, thus setting an example of win-win cooperation between countries with different cultures, sizes and systems*'. The Chinese diplomat identified four sources of finance for possible investment projects, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Silk Road Fund, the Sino-CEE Fund and the Inter-bank Union.

Apart from economic cooperation, Sino-Greek cultural ties are another area persistently covered by China on Twitter. Thus, in November 2020 the PRC embassy tweeted the news about the signing of the MoU for the organisation of the [Year of Culture and Tourism between China and Greece](#) in 2021. A month later, other tweets presented a pilot programme launched at the University of the Aegean in the form of [online Chinese language classes](#), as well as [wishes by Chinese students learning Greek](#). Ahead of the Christmas holidays, the PRC embassy presented the dialogue between the Greek writer Evgenios Trivizas and his Chinese counterpart Cao Wenxuan on [overcoming stereotypes in children's cognitive development](#).

4. Comparative Analysis

4.1. Range of Topics and Tone of Coverage

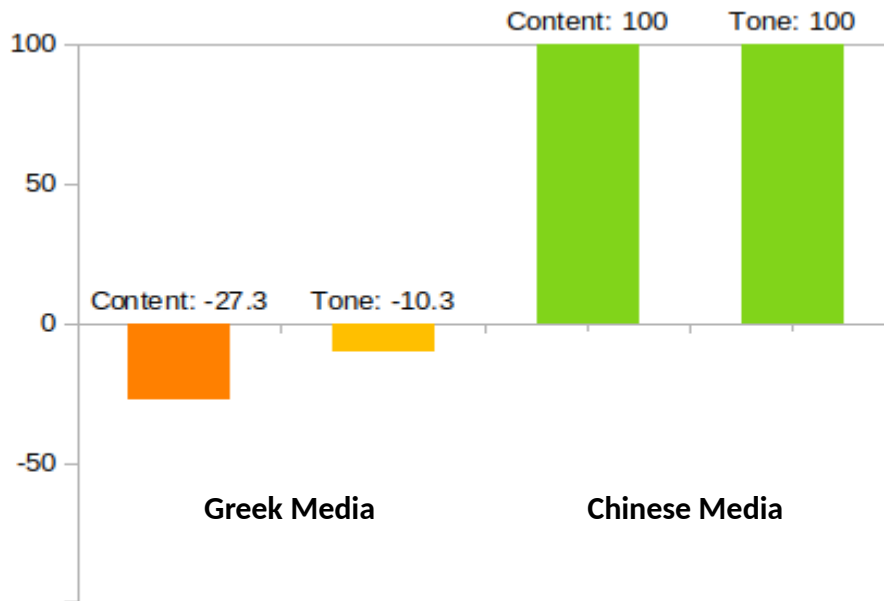
It should be noted that, despite the dominance of two key themes in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-China stand-off, Greek media covered a wide range of China-related topics. The Greek public is provided with abundant information about China, in terms of both domestic developments in the country and its international standing. By contrast, Greece is related to a conspicuously short list of issues touched upon in Chinese media, e.g. Chinese donations of medical equipment to Greek beneficiaries, Sino-Greek cooperation in combating the pandemic, the prospects of Sino-Greek economic cooperation, COSCO's investment in the port of Piraeus, and cultural ties between the two countries.

There is a stark contrast in the way Greek and Chinese media portray the two countries and their bilateral relations.

On a scale between -100 points (negative) and +100 points (positive), and 0 indicating neutrality, the content of coverage of China and Sino-Greek relations in the Greek print media reviewed by IIER is marked by a negative sentiment and stands at - 27.3 points. The tone of media coverage is slightly better, but still negative, at -10.3 points. (Figure 5). Conversely, Sino-Greek relations are painted in an extremely positive light in Chinese media and the respective rates stand at + 100 points. Obviously, there is a stark contrast in the way Greek and Chinese media portray the two countries and their bilateral relations.

Another interesting finding is that 24.64% of the news items in the Greek print media reviewed by the research team were opinion pieces, such as op-eds, or contained elements of comments and personal views on China and Sino-Greek relations. However, a large portion of these cases corresponds to statements made by Greek officials at bilateral events or during interviews to media and do not necessarily point to a well-informed public opinion in Greece.

Figure 5: Content and Tone of Coverage of Sino-Greek Relations in Greek Print Media and Chinese Media



Source: Institute of International Economic Relations

4.2. Accuracy of Reporting

It should be acknowledged that, in covering China-related topics, Greek media depend exclusively on foreign, mostly western, news agencies. Some Greek media outlets have formally accredited correspondents in major EU member states, the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia and Turkey, but not in China. Therefore, Greek reporters do not have direct access to first-hand information about China. Presumably, this could be attributed to a lack of resources required to maintain the costly positions of correspondents in China, particularly at a time when the Greek media industry is struggling with declining revenues.

Greek media, mostly TV channels, occasionally got in touch with Greeks living and working in China at the height of the lockdown in Hubei province. For instance, there were relevant stories aired in January 2020 on [Antenna TV](#) or the following month on [Open TV](#) and [SKAI TV](#). These testimonies do not allow for a comprehensive picture to emerge, nor do they constitute a profound analysis of what really happens in China. It would be reasonable to assume that, due to their dependence on third-party sources, Greek media may not be in a position to render an entirely accurate picture of China's domestic policies or international standing.

On the other hand, there is a fully operational Xinhua office in Greece. Yet, Greece-related media reports and commentaries in Chinese media are often marked by inaccuracy and, just as frequently, hype. For instance, in June 2020 Global Times published an [op-ed titled 'BRI lights future for Greece-China ties'](#) and written by a Greek consultant, who specialises in the promotion of Chinese investment in Greece. Apart from arguing that Greece 'is particularly sympathetic to Chinese investment, despite pressure from various parties, such as the EU and the US', the author goes overboard by asserting that 'when a Chinese company invests in Greece, it immediately acquires access to a market with a population of more than 350 million in southeastern Europe' - the overall population of the region, even if one includes Turkey, does not exceed 140 million. Similarly, an article published by China Daily under the title '[China eyes forging closer ties with Greece](#)' argues that COSCO's

investment in the port of Piraeus has helped create 10,000 jobs in total, while COSCO itself announces a much smaller number: [4,100 in 2018](#), including direct, indirect and induced ones.

However, while exaggeration in Chinese reports from Greece could arguably be attributed to excessive enthusiasm or poetic license, there is no explanation for cases when significant topics are systematically omitted by Chinese media. Thus, while the animosity in Piraeus around COSCO's investment was covered extensively in Greek media reports in late 2020, there was complete silence on the part of Chinese media. Another topic, systematically omitted by Chinese media, relates to the Golden Visa programme, which is widely reported in the Greek media – and for good reason. As of November 2020, [75.3% of all Golden Visa holders in Greece were Chinese citizens](#) and, as per the statistics of the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum, the share of [Chinese holders accounted for 86% in 2019 alone](#). Yet, while this is a prominent theme in Greek media, it is not mentioned by Chinese media at all and this omission can only be deliberate. A possible explanation for the reluctance of Chinese media to cover the Golden Visa story is offered in the final chapter of the report.

Overall, coverage of Sino-Greek relations in Greek and Chinese media does not comply with high standards on accuracy and objectivity, though to different degrees and for different reasons. In the case of Greek media, potential bias may be attributed to sources of information or political affiliation. In the case of Chinese media coverage of Sino-Greek relations, it is inherently based on a discernible agenda, a half-truth template and all too obvious hype. The examples of Piraeus and the Golden Visa scheme showcase what appears to be a pattern in Chinese media coverage of Greece and Sino-Greek relations, which relates to the projection of specific narratives by Beijing.

4.3. Editorial Independence

It is quite clear that Greek and Chinese media adhere to different sets of journalistic standards and have very different degrees of editorial independence. Greek media outlets may either be neutral or lean towards specific political parties or pressure groups, thus presenting developments in different ways by shedding light on different aspects. In designing this study, the IIER research team made sure that its media monitoring sample covered both categories. In 2020, the anti-COSCO rhetoric was particularly harsh in media outlets affiliated with the left-wing opposition in Greece. For example, in September Efimerida ton Syntakton carried a story titled [‘A Chinese torpedo in the \[Piraeus\] port’](#) about what was presented as COSCO's arbitrary interpretation of its contract with the Greek state. In an article posted by the left.gr portal in December and titled [‘Who will rein in COSCO?’](#), it is argued that Piraeus is being treated by the Chinese conglomerate in colonial terms as a Third-World sea port.

Greek and Chinese media adhere to different reporting standards and have different degrees of editorial independence.

At the same time, even media outlets that are deemed politically neutral or display a considerably more positive attitude towards the Greek government have offered extensive coverage of [the storm in the port of Piraeus](#). Remarkably charged words like ‘war’ in Piraeus or ‘ceasefire’ (in relation to the mediation efforts put by the PRC ambassador) are quite common in the phraseology used in Greek media reports across the political spectrum. However, it should be noted that the Chinese investment in Piraeus has enjoyed a lot of positive media coverage, too, and [PPA press releases](#) presenting the COSCO side of the story are regularly published by Greek media outlets.

In general, it is fair to say that Greek media cover China and Sino-Greek relations by offering a range of options in news reporting and a considerable degree of diversity as to perspectives and possible interpretations, thus contributing to a relatively informed and meaningful discourse on Sino-Greek relations. In the case of Chinese media, it is obvious that they toe a specific top-down line and have a clear-cut agenda. Chinese media reports are tightly aligned with official government pronouncements and follow a script, which steers reporting towards

predictable conclusions. Stress is persistently laid on the demand for cooperation with China as a source of capital and state-of-the art expertise, as well as a model for socio-economic development. Furthermore, Chinese media reports are often peppered with standard soundbites, which are direct quotes from speeches by president Xi and other Chinese officials.

4.4. Sino-Greek Relations as Presented in Greek and Chinese Media

It is these diverging patterns and sets of journalistic standards that explain why Sino-Greek relations are presented in strikingly different ways in Greek and Chinese media. The IIER research team has recorded the media coverage of key issues in the port of Piraeus and Sino-Greek relations at large on a comparative basis, so that these differences are better understood. In the case of Piraeus (Figure 6), Greek media reported a host of thorny issues that relate to PPA/COSCO's plans for expansion of economic activities and have caused reactions, be it from local stakeholders or the Greek government. By contrast, Chinese media continued to tout the bright prospects of the Piraeus port in general terms, but kept silent on specific points of friction.

Figure 6: COSCO's Investment in Piraeus in Greek and Chinese Media, 2020

Topic	Greek media	Chinese media
Construction of Pier IV	Greek government: Conditions are not conducive at this stage; further consultations needed.	Piraeus as the biggest container-handling port in the Mediterranean; prospects of catching up with Europe's three biggest container ports. No reference to frictions.
COSCO shipyard in Perama	Grievances of local ship repair businesses taken up to Parliament. Ministry of Shipping: Shipyard not envisaged in 2016 agreement between the Greek state and COSCO.	No reference to frictions.
Construction of new cruise pier	Lack of environmental impact assessment (EIA) prior to construction. Congestion and pollution due to transfer of debris through the city of Piraeus.	A significant investment not only for the Piraeus port, but also for the local and national economy. No reference to frictions.
Hellenic Port Community System (HPCS)	Reactions from a large number of business actors in Piraeus. Intervention of the Ministry of Shipping; adoption of a law on a state-controlled electronic system.	No reference at all.
Transfer of extra 16% to COSCO	Greek government: COSCO has not completed mandatory investments. COSCO: progress on mandatory investments delayed by red tape and pending court rulings.	No reference to frictions.
Dispute settlement	Attempts at amicable settlement being made; Active participation of PRC ambassador in negotiations. Discussions about a possible arbitration.	No reference at all.

With regard to other aspects of Sino-Greek relations (Figure 7), IIER recorded a very similar pattern. Chinese media reports were overwhelmingly positive and highlighted issues, such as Greece's participation in the China-CEE cooperation (17+1) or bilateral cultural ties, which were of very limited interest to Greek media. Conversely,

at least one topic, the Golden Visa programme, seemed to be sidestepped by Chinese media, despite its extensive media coverage in Greece.

Figure 7: Other Aspects of Sino-Greek Relations in Greek and Chinese Media, 2020

Topic	Greek media	Chinese media
State Grid's investment in IPTO/ADMIE	Rarely mentioned in Greek media.	Mentioned more frequently, though not as often as COSCO's investment in Piraeus. References to future State Grid projects.
Bilateral trade	Mentioned occasionally. References to trade deficit and wishes for increased Greek exports.	Mentioned occasionally. References to the prospects of Greek exports to the Chinese market.
Belt and Road Initiative	Few references, both positive and negative. Occasionally mentioned in relation to the Chinese investment in Piraeus.	Mentioned in nearly all articles about Greece. Invariably positive tone.
China-CEE cooperation (17+1)	Very few references.	Frequent references, invariably positive tone.
Cultural ties	Very few references. Mentioned in a meagre 1.39% of media reports in 2020. Twinning between Attica region and Sichuan province.	Ancient Civilizations' Forum, mentioned by Yang Jiechi as a response to the 'fallacy of the clash of civilizations'. Twinning between Attica region and Sichuan province. Frequent references to 2021 as the Greece-China Year of Culture and Tourism.
Golden Visa	Prominent topic in Greek media. Key element in the Greek government's foreign capital attraction policy.	No reference.

5. China's Narratives Promoted in Greek and Chinese Media

The last chapter of the report aims to shed light on the rationale behind the themes promoted – or not – by Beijing in Greek and Chinese media. IIER has identified two key narratives systematically promoted by China in the media of the two countries. One of them relates to China's international standing as a benign superpower, which has no hidden agenda and is promoting a new set of harmonious international relations, based on rapid social and economic development. The second narrative pertains to Sino-Greek relations, with China's positive image carefully crafted as one of a true friend that offers assistance to Greece. A significant element of this country-specific strategy is cultural diplomacy, building on the glorious antiquity of both nations.

5.1. China as a Benign Superpower

In posturing as a benign superpower, in 2020 China clearly sought to contain the damage of being the country where the coronavirus crisis started, before it spread on a global scale. Apart from dismissing Beijing's

responsibility for the outbreak of COVID-19, Chinese media regularly present what is touted as a successful model of containing the pandemic and, subsequently, the generous provision of medical supplies and relevant advice to other countries. The core idea behind this strategy is China's attempt to market itself as a responsible global actor, eager to cooperate with all nations, including Greece.

China's persistent pursuit of positive media coverage abroad predates the outbreak of the pandemic. It is based on an elaborate policy, which the Communist Party of China (CPC) has put in place for more than seven years now. The ['telling China's story well'](#) concept (*jianghao zhongguo gushi*) was first put forward at the National Propaganda and Ideology Work Conference of the CPC in Beijing in August 2013. A key goal of the 'telling China's story well' policy is to redirect the world's attention from negative perceptions of the country – e.g. as a manufacturer of low-quality products, an intellectual property rights violator, a global polluter, an authoritarian regime, etc. - towards the image of a benign powerhouse and a respectable norm-setter. Hence the standard phrases 'win-win cooperation' and 'a community of shared destiny' recorded by the IIER research team in a number of Chinese media reports.

5.2. Unique Sino-Greek Friendship

It is clear that, in order to enhance the impact of its economic and political presence in Greece, China seeks to cultivate a positive narrative about Sino-Greek relations. Chinese media regularly highlight the role of Piraeus as a hub of strategic importance in terms of connectivity between Asia, Europe and the eastern coast of the US. On a regional scale, Athens is viewed by Beijing as a significant actor both in the Mediterranean and Central and Eastern Europe, particularly in the framework of the 17+1 club which Greece joined in April 2019. In this sense, friendly Sino-Greek relations are consistently presented by Chinese media as a gem along the Belt and Road, and a model for Beijing's cooperation with Europe, if not all the West.

Cultural diplomacy is another prominent strand of China's soft power and public diplomacy strategy in Greece - hence the frequent references to their glorious past. At the centre of China's charm offensive to Greece is an appeal to the two nations' mutual identity as ancient civilisations - supposedly, a feature that is distinct from and transcends differences in political systems and geopolitical orientation. This concept is based on the assumption that natural Sino-Greek kinship and cultural parity would warrant a close economic and political relationship between the two nations. During the financial crisis in Greece in the 2010s, China's cultural approach was fairly effective, as the strong anti-western mood in Greece back then was conducive to the embrace between Athens and Beijing.

Sino-Greek cultural kinship is a steady narrative projected by Chinese media.

Yet, while a number of statements by Greek and Chinese officials in 2020 related to antiquity and the *Leitmotif* of cultural affinity between the two nations, this narrative is not supported by IIER findings as to media coverage in Greece. It is not quite clear why Sino-Greek cultural ties, with a meagre 1.4% share in Greek print media, are underrepresented to such an extent in the public discourse on China, despite lofty statements by official representatives on both sides. A possible explanation would be that 2020 was dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which squeezed other topics into a marginal position. At the same time, the limited interest of Greek media in Sino-Greek cultural cooperation is corroborated by a previous IIER report on ['China's Image in Greece, 2008-2018'](#), which revealed that the share of related media coverage over an 11-year time span did not exceed 9.2%.

5.3. The Story Behind Outcast Topics

Apart from China's narratives, an equally interesting question relates to topics that are carefully avoided by Chinese media. Trouble in Piraeus was one of the two topics that were consistently shut out of the repertoire of Chinese media in 2020, despite the fact that there were multiple grievances of local stakeholders. Notably, most of these grievances are not new - some of them were highlighted in a report released after an [IIER conference on COSCO's investment in Piraeus](#) held as early as February 2020. However, they made it to the Greek media towards the end of 2020 in an explosive way. These disputes feed into a growing debate in Greece on whether or not the indisputable strategic importance of the Piraeus port translates into proportionate benefits drawn by local stakeholders and the Greek economy at large. The omission of this topic by Chinese media is all the more striking, given that related news in 2020 was covered by other international media, so in a way the cat is out of the bag.

Apart from China's narratives, an equally interesting question relates to topics that are carefully avoided by Chinese media.

For instance, in October a well-informed portal, PortSEurope, highlighted concerns caused by [the 'new digital container handling in Piraeus port'](#), i.e. the Hellenic Port Community System (HPCS) proposed by COSCO. A month later, the same portal ran a story about the [COSCO letter to Greek authorities](#) about the additional 16% claim. In December, another portal specialising in global shipping, Seatrade Maritime News, published an article titled '[Opposition to Cosco's port expansion plans in Piraeus grows](#)'. The reporter points out that '*the Piraeus town hall has joined the business-led front against the COSCO-managed PPA plans to expand facilities in the Mediterranean's top container and passenger ship hub*'. Shortly afterwards, Nikkei Asia carried a detailed story titled '[COSCO faces backlash as it moves to tighten grip on Greek port](#)'. Apart from analysing the reasons for opposition to the controversial electronic port access system HPCS, the authors of the report quote Vasilis Kanakakis, president of the local union of shipyard contractors: '*With its actions and inaction, COSCO has united against it a wide spectrum of political and social actors in the city - this has never happened before*'.

The conspicuous silence of Chinese media on the above disputes shows that decision-makers in Beijing view this issue as an 'irritant' that affects negatively the Piraeus 'success story', which was built meticulously over the past decade or so. The investment in Piraeus is indeed a significant achievement of China's foreign policy along BRI routes, amid [a growing number of controversies](#) that surround this gigantic endeavour. In fact, the relative weight of Greece's largest port may be even higher now that [the BRI is expected to change in the wake of the pandemic](#), with a diminishing share of investment in infrastructure.

The other thorny issue that was systematically neglected by Chinese media in 2020 relates to Greece's Golden Visa programme. While related stories have always been deemed newsworthy by Greek media, they remain completely off the radar of Chinese media. It is noted that there are [Chinese portals facilitating the purchase of property abroad](#), including through [Greece's Golden Visa programme](#), or related [WeChat accounts](#). The omission of the Golden Visa issue from the agenda persistently promoted by Chinese media cannot be coincidental. A possible explanation for this obvious discrepancy would be that a growing number of Chinese applicants for Golden Visas in Greece and other EU member states are effectively abandoning their country, and this points to an emerging trend in Chinese society that national authorities may not be comfortable to discuss in public.

For instance, a report aired by Alpha TV in January 2020 includes interviews with Chinese holders of Golden Visas who state that '[Greece has a much better environment and quality of life \[than China\]](#)'. Obviously, these statements do not dovetail with the dominant Chinese narrative of a '[moderately prosperous society](#)' to be attained in 2021 after doubling the 2010 Gross Domestic Product (GDP). There are many indications of what has

aptly been called '[China's GDP paradox](#)', i.e. a divergence between China's economic growth in aggregate terms and the less-than-bright personal prospects of ordinary people.

There are some additional factors that render the Golden Visa story even more controversial. Many [Chinese citizens defy capital controls](#) and find ways to move money out of the country for the purchase of property overseas. In addition, in August 2020 Naftemporiki ran a story about the [protests of some 120 Chinese Golden Visa applicants](#) who were not allowed to travel to Greece because of pandemic-related restrictions: SHIC had reportedly sent a letter to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Migration of Greece as well as the Greek consulates in China. To make matters even more complicated, in October 2020 an extensive piece of investigative journalism revealed that a number of Chinese property buyers and Golden Visa applicants had been [swindled by Greek real estate agents](#). Reportedly, this has generated a raft of litigation cases. Most probably, for all the above reasons, Chinese media would rather stay silent on this embarrassing issue.

5.4. Channels for the Projection of Chinese Narratives in Greece

Unlike developments in other parts of Eastern Europe – e.g. in the Czech Republic, where the Chinese company [CEFC has invested in the local Empresa Media group](#) or in Croatia, where [attempts at the acquisition of local media](#) have been reported –, no Greek media outlet is directly controlled by Chinese interests. However, what can be witnessed in the country is a manifestation of another policy of the Chinese authorities which encourage official state-run media to establish cooperation agreements with overseas counterparts for the publication of China-friendly content. China's strategy for the projection of its narratives in Greece includes targeting Greek media as useful allies and amplifiers. Using third-party outlets to mask Chinese content has become such a common tactic that CPC officials have reportedly given it a name - '[borrowing boats to go to sea](#)' (*jian chuan chu hai*), meaning to use other actors' resources to fulfill one's goals.

Thus, the Athens Macedonian News Agency (AMNA) has had a [cooperation agreement with China's state news agency Xinhua](#) since May 2016. Furthermore, in December 2017 AMNA signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the China Economic Information Service (CEIS), an affiliate of Xinhua, for the establishment of a [Belt and Road Economic and Financial Information Partnership](#). In November 2019, during president Xi's visit to Greece, yet another MoU was signed by the China's National Radio and Television Administration (a ministry-level executive agency directly under the State Council of China) and the Greek state television ERT.

China's strategy includes cooperation with Greek media as amplifiers of its messaging.

Of the significant daily newspapers in Greece, [Kathimerini signed a cooperation agreement with Xinhua](#) in April 2017. In 2020 alone, the English edition of Kathimerini republished 66 Xinhua reports, i.e. approximately every fifth day or more than once a week. The topics of these reports range from a rebuttal of China's responsibility for the coronavirus outbreak to praise for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to Beijing's position on various international issues or a rosy picture of Sino-Greek relations.

5.5. China's Broader Strategy vis-à-vis Greece

It should be noted that in the case of Greece the PRC embassy in Athens and Chinese media have not indulged in [wolf warrior diplomacy](#). It is obvious that Chinese authorities and media alike have chosen a friendly and accommodating stance to Greece rather than the confrontational attitude displayed in other European countries. Compared to the spats between Beijing and national authorities in Sweden, France or some Baltic republics, the Chinese media and the PRC embassy in Athens have exercised noteworthy self-restraint. An intriguing question then would be: why, despite all the disputes in Piraeus, is China so patient with Greece?

The reasons for this conspicuously friendly stance of the Chinese media to Greece could well be the subject-matter of further research. An initial working hypothesis to be explored is that COSCO's investment in Piraeus is emblematic for both sides. For Athens, it is partly a way of boosting business activities in the port and its broader area and, just as importantly, a proof that Greece is an investment-friendly economy ready to attract FDI from many other sources. For the Chinese side, COSCO's investment in the port of Piraeus is a centerpiece of China's strategy and part of a standard menu of success stories touted by Beijing, without a single reference to controversies surrounding them. The Piraeus project is a BRI showcase and a proof that western nations are ready and willing to work with China, particularly now amid the Sino-American confrontation and indications that the West in its entirety may be bracing up for a hard-nosed stand-off with Beijing.

This may be why China's portrayal of Sino-Greek relations is so positive, as if aimed at socialising, winning over and eventually co-opting the Greek political and business elite – or, at least, segments of it. This working hypothesis has stimulated the IIER team to formulate some additional research questions, such as: (i) Is China targeting an audience willing to embrace its narratives and build an ecosystem of local partners willing to work with it? (ii) If so, which segments of Greek society and economy are more likely to do so? (iii) What can be appropriate metrics that could help capture the effectiveness of China's public diplomacy in the media sector? These are some of the areas that call for much-needed further research.

Annex: Note on Research Methodology

Research Questions

The project sought to address three key research questions (RQ):

- RQ1: How are China and Sino-Greek relations viewed in Greece, as reflected in a sample of Greek print media outlets in 2020?
- RQ2: How were Sino-Greek relations presented in Chinese media? A comparative analysis of content and tone (if applicable) in the Greek and Chinese media outlets reviewed?
- RQ3: Narratives about Sino-Greek relations promoted by China in the Greek and Chinese media reviewed?

Component 1: Media Monitoring and Review (RQ1 and RQ2)

The project covered the time span from January to December 2020, and in a few cases into early 2021. The media sample included six Greek media outlets broadly covering the political spectrum in the country, namely: the dailies Proto Thema, Efimerida ton Syntakton, Naftemporiki and Kathimerini (incl. the English editions of Naftemporiki and Kathimerini), as well as the web portals liberal.gr and left.gr.

Breakdown of News Items in Greek Print Media Reviewed

Media Outlet	liberal.gr	Proto Thema	Kathimerini/ E-kathimerini	Naftemporiki/ English edition	Efimerida ton Syntakton	left.gr
No. of articles	56	62	60	61	59	63

Classification of ‘Content’ and ‘Tone of Coverage’

Indicator	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Content	An item relates to achievements and praiseworthy developments that leave the reader likely to approve the content of the article read.	An item merely reports the facts and is marked by its exclusive purpose to inform the audience about a newsworthy development.	The news item presents events that most probably evoke a feeling of sadness, e.g. when relating to accidents, natural disasters or negative aspects of individual or public life.
Tone of coverage	An item is marked by a more or less obvious editorial commentary that breeds a certain feeling or is meant to leave the reader likely to approve the content. For instance, the selection of strong wording with optimistic connotations may well betray positive bias on the part of the author.	An item: (i) contains no sentiment or (ii) includes both positive and negative sentiment and, therefore, the resulting overall tone and perception of the reader are balanced. For instance, the item contains no wording that may be perceived as an indication of the author’s personal attitude.	An item is marked by a more or less obvious editorial commentary that breeds a certain feeling or is meant to leave the reader less likely to approve the content. For instance, the use of strong words or idioms with ironic connotations may well suggest a negative attitude of the author.

A large number of Greek TV reports were reviewed as well. In addition, the project team covered major Chinese media outlets, such as Xinhua, China Daily and Global Times. Chinese posts on social media, such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter), were also covered by the research. This strand was based on a qualitative, rather than quantitative, analysis of themes.

In total, the research team reviewed approximately 600 items, namely:

- 360 news items from a representative and politically balanced sample of influential Greek print media and web portals;
- 100 reports aired on Greek TV networks;
- 40 articles from Chinese print media outlets;
- 40 tweets of the PRC embassy in Athens;
- 60 posts on seven Facebook pages presenting China-related content.

A comparative analysis of the way Sino-Greek relations are covered by Greek and Chinese media yielded findings as to:

- Range of topics (content) and tone of coverage in print media;
- Accuracy of reporting;
- Degree of editorial independence;
- Topics left out of media coverage.

Component 2: Projection of China's Narratives (RQ3)

This component included:

- Identification of Chinese narratives projected through Greek and Chinese media;
- Analysis of topics left out of media coverage and interpretation of this trend;
- Channels for the promotion of Chinese narratives in Greece.

Last but not least, while the research team sought to establish a correlation between narratives promoted by China and its broader strategy vis-à-vis Greece, some questions for further research were also formulated.