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CHINESE DISCOURSE POWER

China's Use of Information Manipulation in Regional and Global Competition

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Executive Summary

New methods of information operations, in the form of interference campaigns and disinformation, outline China's shift toward adopting the principle of "discourse power." China's traditional foreign policy of "non-intervention" into foreign nations is no longer viable, as it has envisioned a different world order with itself ascending to the central role. Discourse power is the concept that a country can attain increased geopolitical power by setting agendas internationally through influencing the political order and values both domestically and in foreign countries. The information space offers China an effective alternative to its prior "non-intervention" stance by allowing the country to project the "China Story"—i.e., to project the positive image through storytelling in the media landscape, both domestic and abroad. Information perception tactics such as the removal, suppression, and downplay of negative information, as well as gamification of certain hashtags, are tools with which China intends to convince foreign audiences that it is "a responsible world leader" and leading power in reforming the international political system.

This study examined the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) use of both Mandarin-language and Western social media platforms as tools for discourse power projection. The DFRLab found China to be effective on Mandarin-language sites that target both Chinese citizens and the Chinese diaspora, employing the use of strict censorship and favorable CCP messaging prioritization. On the other hand, while attempting to engage foreign actors through Western social media platforms, the information operations found to date have resulted in ineffective influence, relied on outsourcing the operation to third parties, and utilized "astroturfing" and "sock puppets."

By its own estimation, China's "peaceful" ascent with the use of discourse power will prove successful when it has rewritten international norms, values, and ethics, as well as changed the structure of the global political system, forcing other nations to accept and adjust to China's new disposition. With increasing technological developments, discourse power as a concept will be increasingly realized—especially through targeted information operations—as China advances its geopolitical goals and increases its international power.

Introduction

A powerful nation at the center of the world, China has not historically been known to venture outside its regional backyard. The tide is changing, however, as state-sponsored companies open ride-sharing businesses in Latin America, build infrastructure in Africa, and lay down global infrastructure for an international internet. While the government directly follows the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) political philosophy in dealing with both domestic and international affairs, the state is more accurately described as a "party-state," where politics is essentially the extension of the party's ideologies.

As a means of overtly controlling the public conversation around its policy and activities—and the political ramifications thereof—the CCP undertakes "discourse power, " its philosophy of forcing a positive global image to achieve global institutional power of agenda-setting and to increase China's prominence on the world stage. There is no need to build another Silk Road when access to the hearts and minds of citizens and foreigners rests on an app in cyberspace. With a hand in every pot, ranging from our supermarkets to our computers, the question now is: who is not influenced by China's new global power? This paper aims to answer the questions of China's success in using social media platforms for foreign interference for political gains and, ultimately, discourse power projection.

China, in its increasingly aggressive international actions to obtain greater geopolitical power, does not need to build that power relatively,as does Russia, for example. Russia is not a fundamentally strong or growing world power and in order to increase its geopolitical power, it must focus on weakening other nations through often covert means intended to destabilize them internally. Conversely, China does not seek to destabilize and polarize foreign countries to advance its own political goals, as doing so would actually be detrimental to its goal of a perceived legitimate ascension to high-power status. As such, the party-state spends more of its resources magnifying positive CCP narratives to shape international perceptions while maintaining control of its domestic population. Separately, Russia's sophisticated understanding of the Western audience places them in a better position to conduct subversive information operations through targeted disinformation to specific populations, such as the 2016 US elections, during which entities affiliated with the Kremlin operated social media pages promoting both pro-Black Lives Matter and pro-police messaging, among other things.[1] Put differently, China, afraid of losing face (丢臉) on the international stage in a way that would interfere with any perceptions of its legitimate power, concentrates its efforts on shaping audience perceptions around its activities and behaviors.

Recent global shifts in the international order witness the transition of China's foreign policy from one that focuses on internal development to one of external influence. According to Barry Buzan, a structural realist, in his 2004 book, in the "4+1" system of global hegemony, China, the European Union, Japan, and Russia are considered to be "Great Powers," while the United States is considered to be the lone "Superpower."[2] In the book, Buzan predicted that China would be the most promising candidate for future superpower status and, as the party-state's capability rises, that it would find a receptive environment internationally to its status claim. Since its publication, Buzan himself, along with Amitav Acharya in 2017, have criticized the theory to be Western-centric and thus reexamined it to incorporate possible Asian international relations (IR) theories.[3] They argue that emerging powers have benefited so much from the US-led order that they have no reason to replace it. With China's rise, however, it could be crucial in assessing whether Buzan's original Western-centric claims remain valid. Since his theory emerged, Asian universities have increased funding for research on a China-centric approach to IR theory. Chinese theorists incorporate traditional Chinese thought—especially around concepts taken from Confucianism—in order to build a more universal discipline. The question remains whether Confucian thought produces a different structure of global order, one in contradiction to Buzan: in Confucian thinking, however, social harmony and international order rests on the precondition of stable hierarchy and balance of power. These views adhere to the Western-centric security structure, therefore aligning with Buzan's "4+1" structure.

While Buzan argues that these powers depend on territorial sprawl to increase their impact, the emerging importance of influence on the internet has marked a new chapter in the power struggle in the international system. China's efforts to establish power through both cyberspace hegemony and territorial ascendancy illustrates its intent to achieve superpower status. This can be seen when China flexes its regional power status by engulfing Hong Kong with new laws designed to further restrict the autonomy the Special Administrative Region notionally, interfering in Taiwan's

1. Ben Nimmo, "#ElectionWatch: Did Putin Elect Trump?" DFRLab (blog), February 20, 2018, https://medium.com/dfrlab/electionwatch-did-putin-elect-trump-8babebe0800d.

2. Barry Buzan and Richard Little, International Systems in World History Remaking the Study of International Relations (Brantford, Ontario: W. Ross MacDonald School Resource Services Library, 2017), 201-220.

3. Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, "Why Is There No Non-Western International Relations Theory? Ten Years On," International Relations of the Asia-Pacific 17, no. 3 (July 2017), 341-370, https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcx006.

election to achieve a more China-oriented government, and capitalizing on border disputes with India. When it comes to foreign interference, China appears to be preparing to interfere in the upcoming US presidential election, establish its first overseas naval base in Djibouti, expand its Belt and Road Initiative, and push for territorial South China Sea "say" in the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea.

The underlying policy principle of increasing China's discourse power is "中国特色社会主义大国外交" ("Great Power Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics" or "Major Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics"), and it is a clear shift from the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence," debuted in 1954. Here, China's use of the verbiage "great power" is different from the academic use illustrated above in Buzan's theories. While academia defines "great power" according to objective standards—a definition this paper intends in its use—China uses it to convey that the Chinese party-state is the moral leader in the international space. The "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" included foreign policy principles of non-interventionism; mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity; mutual non-aggression and non-interference in other countries' internal affairs,which assumed a reciprocal desire; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence. The current foreign policy principle was coined on the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012. This principle refers to the grand strategy that China adopts in a "strategic moment" when it envisions a rapidly changing global order, China's increasing involvement in international affairs, as well as miscellaneous external challenges against its territorial assertion and nation-state power projection.

One of the primary goals of the "Great Power Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics" is to reform the global governance system in order to create "a community with a shared future for mankind" ("人类命运共同体") that would share the "same values," implying the Chinese perception of "peace" based upon socialist ideologies and Confucianism's traditional values. Moreover, at the center of this global governance system stands China's nationalist ambition of the "Great Renaissance" ("伟大 伟大复兴"), a vision that focuses on the country's own development and "peaceful rising" ("和平崛起") after the decades of humiliation in the age of imperialism and during World War II. The switch to "peaceful rising"("和平崛起") coincided with the party's power transition to Xi Jinping. Prior to the adoption of the "peaceful rising" principle, China had held fast to the principle of "peaceful development" ("和平发展"). The adoption of the "Great Power Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics" marks the transition of Chinese foreign policy toward a more assertive position, evidenced by the shift of using "peaceful development" ("和平发展") to "peaceful rising"("和平崛起") in official documents. To make this transition, it was important to take advantage of discourse power. According to the official propaganda website that lays out the CCP's political philosophies, "学习强国," an ideal discourse system should be a systematic and practical one that seeks to communicate the "political ideas, political demands, and national interests" of China to international audiences.

This opening report examines the history, methodologies, and possible future developments around discourse power, placing them in a broader context of increasing Chinese assertiveness in the global arena. To complete its research, the DFRLab looked at official Chinese military documents, Chinese-government-sponsored research, and independent studies by other researchers, as well as original DFRLab research.

4. Ibid.

5. China Internet Information Center explained that the official translation of "中国特色社会主义大国外交" is "Major Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics" instead of "Great Power Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics" because it considers "great power" to be overly aggressive and "major country" is more neutral. See 何 珊, "中国特色大国外交'英文怎么说?," China.org.cn, July 4, 2018, http://www.china.org.cn/chinese/2018-07/04/content_54792060.htm.

6. Sherif A. Elgebeily, "How Non-Interference for China Means Selective Action," South China Morning Post, April 30, 2017, https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/2091502/how-chinas-foreign-policy-non-intervention-all-about.

7. 徐 进, "新时代中国特色大国外交'特'在何处?" April 16, 2020, http://www.iwep.org.cn/xscg/xscg_sp/202004/t20200416_5115144.shtml; "中国特色大国外交," 清华卡内基全球政策中心, 2015, accessed September 22, 2020, https://carnegietsinghua.org/2015/11/27/zh-event-5084.

8. 郑 泽光, "新时代的中国特色大国外交," 国际问题研究, no. 3 (June 7, 2018), https://web.archive.org/web/20200221175020/http://www.ciis.org.cn:80/gyzz/2018-06/07/content_40374244.htm (archived link).

9. 王 毅. "王毅:深入学习贯彻习近平外交思想 不断开创中国特色大国外交新局面." Edited by 朱 英. 中华人民共和国中央人民政府, August 1, 2020. http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2020-08/01/content_5531832.htm.

10. 张 志洲, "张志洲:和平崛起与中国的国际话语权战略," 爱思想, August 7, 2012, http://www.aisixiang.com/data/56190.html.

11. 卢 静, "中国特色大国外交话语体系的基本特征," 学习强国, March 14, 2019, https://www.xuexi.cn/b17ce2e3f8ce3125a75bd2b1daf906e0/e43e220633a65f9b6d8b53712cba9caa.html. The website "学习强国" can be translated as a pun: on one hand, it means to "learn from Xi and increase the national power" and to "study [the party philosophies] and increase the national power."

China's Shift Toward Discourse Power

Discourse power, as described above, is a country's power to set agendas in the international arena by influencing the political order and realigning other countries' ethics and values. In a Chinese context, discourse power is an effective strategy to project a positive image in the foreign media landscape. Therefore, according to President Xi himself, one way to achieve "discourse power" is to promote information that demonstrates the party-state's soft power demonstrated by economic and diplomatic might.[12] On the other hand, the party-state also seeks to remove, suppress, and downplay negative information about the CCP that could jeopardize a benevolent international image. For example, during the 2020 novel coronavirus outbreak originating from Wuhan, China sought to divert the negative conversation by promoting the country's success in containing the virus and donating masks to Italy. In general, discourse power for the party aims to convince foreign audiences with sugarcoated Chinese narratives and, if that fails, seeks to deny unfavorable party-state narratives.

Discourse power employs two complementary principles, one direct and one indirect. The direct principle entails close censorship of online content and influencers and intentionally withholding undesirable information from broader publication. The Great Firewall, a strict government-controlled filter of internet content that prevents the Chinese people from accessing news on major Western media sites, including news outlets such as the New York Times and social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, is not news for both Chinese and foreign citizens—the concept (and its execution) is well known. What is lesser known, however, is that China has exercised influence over content and users on both domestic and international platforms. For example, Google is under pressure from the Chinese government to remove content from its search queries, and the reasons for such requests include government criticism.[13] Moreover, political dissidents with Chinese citizenship face increasing threats of imprisonment, even if abroad.[14] For instance, Zhang Guanghong, a political critic of the party, was arrested in 2018 for reposting defamatory content of Xi Jinping on WhatsApp.[15]

In order to increase its dominance in the international system, China resorts to a strategy of "increasing discourse power." Discourse power is applied as a means of convincing international audiences of China's vision of its responsibilities and gain corresponding institutional power in reforming the international political system. Yang Jiemian (2016), research director at Chinese state-sponsored think tank the Shanghai Institute for International Studies, found a set of the designated narratives that the government institutions use that celebrate traditional Chinese culture, the country's leadership prospect among developing countries, and the promotion of communist ideologies.[16] The image of the country in the desired discourse system, therefore, is one that comes with a demonstration of the country's achievements, popular proposals for multilateral and bilateral cooperation, and its outstanding military and economic capabilities.[17]

While it seems that Chinese discourse power is mostly used to target a foreign audience, the propaganda system starts with the Chinese domestic population, where the state-party's apparatus and tactics are the most sophisticated and complete, while at the same time exerting radiating influence on the Chinese diaspora, seeking to perpetuate pro-China narratives around the globe. The content of the "China story" ("中国故事") and the channels of its dissemination are the CCP's two primary focuses in regards to establishing a Chinese system of narrative spread, one in which—as Xi himself has highlighted—cultural differences between China and foreign countries should be carefully evaluated in order to produce more country-relevant propaganda for the respective country's audience.[18] In Xi's own words, the "China story" is to illustrate the positive image of the country through storytelling, which would embody the spirit of the successful rule of CCP as portrayed through vivid anecdotes.[19]

12. 刘 亚琼. "习近平关于"讲好中国故事"的五个论断," 环球视野 Global Views, April 23, 2019, http://www.globalview.cn/html/culture/info_31253.html.
13. "Government Requests to Remove Content," Google Transparency Report (Google), accessed August 28, 2020, https://transparencyreport.google.com/government-removals/by-country/CN?country_request_amount=group_by%3Areasons%3Bperiod%3A%3Bauthority%3ACN.
14. Javier C. Hernández, "Harsh Penalties, Vaguely Defined Crimes: Hong Kong's Security Law Explained," The New York Times, July 13, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/30/world/asia/hong-kong-security-law-explain.html.
15. Paul Mozur, "China Presses Its Internet Censorship Efforts Across the Globe," The New York Times, March 2, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/02/technology/china-technology-censorship-borders-expansion.html.
16. 杨 洁勉, "中国特色大国外交和话语权的使命与挑战," 国际问题研究 5 (2016): 18-30, http://www.siis.org.cn/UploadFiles/file/20170513/%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E7%89%B9%E8%89%B2%E5%A4%A7%E5%9B%BD%E5%A4%96%E4%BA%A4%E5%92%8C%E8%AF%9D%E8%AF%AD%E6%9D%83%E7%9A%84%E4%BD%BF%E5%91%BD%E4%B8%8E%E6%8C%91%E6%88%98.pdf.
17. 孙 吉胜, "孙吉胜：中国外交与国际话语权提升的再思考," 爱思想, June 1, 2020, http://www.aisixiang.com/data/121550.html; "把握国际话语权 有效传播中国声音--习近平外宣工作思路理念探析," 新华网 Xinhua Net, April 6, 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-04/06/c_1118542256.htm.

Besides the involvement of traditional government-owned media and party officials, the government has increasingly included technology companies, internet influencers, and psychological warfare to increase engagement of both domestic and foreign audiences with the propaganda.[20]

Case study: COVID-19 mask diplomacy

While the world is still mired in the turmoil of the COVID-19 outbreak, the discussion around COVID-19-related disinformation continues to be in the media spotlight. While arousing heated debate over its role in the crisis in the international community, China seized the opportunity to promote its image as "responsible global leader" under the overarching goal of "peaceful rising." According to Stanford Internet Observatory, starting the week of March 16, 2020, there was an increasing intensity of information focusing on China's donations of masks to other countries.[21] Moreover, Chinese officials not only use domestic platforms to circulate such narratives but also use foreign platforms like Twitter to promote these narratives. Meanwhile, the report also revealed that the discourse around "mask diplomacy" toward different countries and the volume of mentions varied across countries, demonstrating the custom-tailoring of messaging to China's foreign policy goal for the respective country.

The DFRLab noticed a drastic increase in the creation of CCP-affiliated Twitter accounts, correlated with the COVID-19 time period, from the months of January 2020 to July 2020. These accounts, mainly in the form of official embassy or consulate accounts, amplified messaging around the Chinese government's positive response to COVID-19 around the globe. The CCP created a number of embassy and consulate Twitter accounts between the years of 2014–2015 and then again in October 2019.[22] Although new accounts gradually emerged in the intervening periods, new government accounts arose in an accelerated time period following the emergence of the pandemic. The CCP likely created these new accounts in order to gain a soft power advantage in disseminating COVID-19 diplomacy worldwide. For the data gathered below, a number of accounts were created in January (three), February (ten), March (nine), April (five), May (three), and July (one), with none in June. Between the months of February and April, a surge in Twitter accounts can be seen, and this strongly correlates with the Chinese government's increase in COVID-19 mask diplomacy.

Another example, the volume of mentions of donations of masks to Japan and Serbia, respectively, reflects China's improving relationship with Japan, notable given the two countries' historic animosity, and the growth in its strategically important relationship with Serbia, a possible ally proximate to Western Europe, which is generally more resilient against Chinese pressure. While it seems that the narratives have been successful back home, they have met harsh criticism in many foreign countries.[23] Critics have described the "mask diplomacy" narratives as a superficially transparent means of gaining geopolitical ascendancy.[24] Between March and mid-April 2020, toward the outset of the international spread of the disease, the discourse of "mask diplomacy" seemed to lose its saliency after challenges to its relevance in light of China's increasingly confrontational and sometimes controversial international activities.[25]

As with most countries' geopolitical strategies, China sees disinformation operations as an effective strategy for its government to achieve foreign policy objectives. In propagating disinformation, China is deliberately undertaking large-scale operations of producing and reproducing false or misleading information with the intention to deceive. The produced content relies on the psychological bias that promotes tribal affiliations within target audiences with the end goal of instilling paranoia, one-dimensional critical thinking, and cognitive blindspots. The People's Liberation Army (PLA), the State Council, and the CCP's Central Committee all take part in organized information operations, whether on domestic or international platforms.

The PLA in particular plays a fundamental role in the government's disinformation operations abroad, and one way to assess the PLA's social media strategy is by examining who authors its social media analysis and strategy. Military Correspondent, a PLA journal published on a monthly basis, provides a look into the heated discussion within the CCP about improving its discourse power. The journal contains ongoing research on tactics, current tracking methods, and future information campaign goals. A vast majority of the PLA's social media experts are trained in political warfare at the PLA's Nanjing Political Institute, which is now a part of the National Defense University (NDU).[26] The PLA's objectives with foreign social media include: "improve and defend the PLA's image," "correct 'misperceptions,'" "address negative reporting," "communicate deterrence signals," communicate resolve, and "undermine enemy resolve."[27]

Articles in Military Correspondent consistently highlight the necessity for engaging in Western social media platforms. In 2012, one article emphasized the importance with the example, "...if a blog has more than 10 million followers,

18 金 伟 and 刘 攀, "在讲好中国抗疫故事中提升话语权," 光明网, April 11, 2020, https://theory.gmw.cn/2020-04/11/content_33732591.htm.

19 徐 姗娜, "加强议题设置 讲好中国故事," 人民网, July 21, 2020, http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0721/c40531-31791926.html.

20"【深论】首次!中央统战部、中央网信办召开网络人士统战工作会议!," 统战新语, November 28, 2019, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/66zaCi7CLVwhbiG8YGCNJw.

21 Alicia Chen and Vanessa Molter, "Mask Diplomacy: Chinese Narratives in the COVID Era," Stanford Internet Observatory Cyber Policy Center, https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/io/news/covid-mask-diplomacy.

22 DFRLab research, September 2020.

23 Alexandra Ma, "China is attempting to win political points from the coronavirus with 'mask diplomacy' — but it mostly isn't working," Business Insider, April 18, 2020, https://www.businessinsider.com/analysis-china-coronavirus-political-points-mostly-not-working-2020-4.

24 Jeffrey W. Hornung, "Don't Be Fooled by China's Mask Diplomacy," May 5, 2020, RAND Corporation, https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/05/dont-be-fooled-by-chinas-mask-diplomacy.html.

25 Alicia Chen, Vanessa Molter, "Mask Diplomacy: Chinese Narratives in the COVID Era," Stanford Internet Observatory, June 16, 2020, https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/covid-mask-diplomacy.

NEWLY CREATED OFFICIAL CCP ACCOUNT TWITTER HANDLES SINCE COVID (2020)

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jul
Consulate General of People's Republic of China to Belfast, Ireland @GCMeifangZhang	**Chinese Embassy in Ireland** @ChinaEmbIreland	**Chinese Consulate General in San Francisco** @ConsulateSan	**Chinese Ambassador to Barbados** @Yxiusheng	**Chinese Embassy in Serbia** @EmbChina_RS	**Chinese Embassy in Greece** @Chinaemb_Hellas
Embassy of China in the Democratic Republic of Congo @AmbCHINEenRDC	**Chinese Embassy in Russia** @ChineseEmbinRus	**Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Cuba** @EmbChinaCuba	**Embassy of China to the Republic of Congo** @chinaembcongobz	**Chinese Embassy in Serbia** @EmbChina_RS	
Chinese Embassy in Iraq @ChinaIraq	**Chinese Consulate General in Strasbourg, France** @consulat_de	**Chinese Consulate Belfast, Ireland** @CCGBelfast	**Embassy of China to Djibouti** @ChineAmbDjibouti	**Chinese Embassy in Trinidad and Tobago** @ChineseEmbinTT	
Minister Counsellor of the Chinese Embassy in The Hague, Ribiao Chen @RibiaoChen	**Chinese Consulate in Edinburgh** @chinacgedi	**Embassy of China in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea** @EmbChinaGE	**Chinese Consulate General in Sydney** @ChinaConSydney		
	Embassy of China in Peru @ChinEmbPeru	**Chinese Embassy in Sri Lanka** @ChinaEmbSL	**Chinese Embassy in Antigua and Barbuda** @ChinaEmbAntigua		
	Embassy of China in Colombia @china_embajada	**Chinese Embassy in Ukraine** @China_Ukraine			
	Chinese Embassy in Papua New Guenia @Chineseemb_PNG	**Chinese Embassy in Ghana** @ChinaEmbinGH			
	Chinese Embassy in Lesotho @ChinaEmbLesotho	**Chinese Consulate General in NYC** @ChinaUSDialogues			
	Chinese Embassy in the Czech Republic @ChineseEmbinCZ	**Spokesperson of Chinese Embassy in India, Ji Rong** @ChinaSpox_India			
	Chinese Consulate in Istanbul, Turkey @chinaconsulist				

A sample of recently created Twitter accounts by the Chinese government since the spread of COVID-19, all of which were created in January 2020 or later. All of these accounts were seen to spread pro-China COVID-19 messaging and to market China's capabilities and other political messages

then one's influence could match that of a TV station."[28] Further capitalizing on the opportunity, the journal wrote in 2013 to "make use of the viewpoints and opinions of third party media and experts, amplifying voices advantageous to our side."[29] Another article in the same year claimed that "international Chinese discourse power was weak" because "more than 80 percent of the important international news in the world is provided by a few major news outlets of developed nations in the Western world."[30]

Between 2015 and 2016, Military Correspondent published a series of articles discussing the possible creation of Western social media accounts, along with strategies on how to employ them to maximum effect. For example, a 2015 article proposed creating targeted content on "mainstream Western social media platforms" as a means of growing the audience for China Military Online, the official English-language resource for the Chinese Armed Forces.[31] Military Correspondent also recommended growing a cohort of PLA opinion leaders or "influencers" and using plain language on Western social media both to not betray foreign origin and to facilitate subconscious acceptance.[32] Since 2015, however, there have been no official CCP accounts on Western social media, though official Chinese state-run media accounts are prolific.

Since 2015, PLA leaders have called for an official presence to be established on Western social media platforms, despite that most have been restricted or banned in the mainland for the last decade.[33] Facebook and Twitter were banned in July 2009 after the Urumqi riots, because protests were being organized over Facebook and the company refused to provide the CCP with identifying information for the activists.[34] YouTube, meanwhile, was blocked many times, including instances in 2007 and 2008, before being blocked permanently in 2009.[35] Similarly, there are bureaucratic roadblocks – or a lack of "policy support" – to establishing an authentic, official PLA account.[36]

The PLA holds a basic understanding of social media analytical tools and how to use them for influence. For example, a 2017 Military Correspondent article mentioned that social media analytic tool Tweet Binder has been used for the purpose of gathering basic statistics on the number of retweets and people reached.[37] Military Correspondent also highlighted a difference between domestic and foreign-targeted efforts, flagging in particular that Chinese Military Online would need to approach an international audience differently than it would a domestic one.[38]

As opposed to the direct principle, which focuses primarily on pro-China messaging, the indirect principle involves an attempt through collective action to distract target audiences away from unfavorable narratives. One example is the use of "astroturfing" (i.e., creating fake persona accounts) to organize online trolling. Gary King et al. in the American Political Science Review discovered a large collection of posts using cheerleading techniques, or "positive sentiment," to distract the public from party-related negativity.[39] The infamous "Fifty cent army" ("五毛"), comprised of civilian government employees who are required to post pro-CCP narratives on the internet as a part of their political position, is a prime example of strategic state-directed cheerleading activities.[40]

Moreover, in the age of disinformation, China has been increasingly assertive in the online media space. Walker and Ludwig (2018) observed that China's presence on the internet belongs to its "sharp power," which, despite being a part of the non-military "soft power," demonstrates a more coercive and aggressive presentation of the party-state.[41] Russell Hsiao from the Global Taiwan Institute described China's use of sharp power as a method that utilizes propaganda, disinformation, and other information operations to

26 Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Michael S. Chase, "Borrowing a Boat Out to Sea: The Chinese Military's Use of Social Media for Influence Operations," John Hopkins School of Advanced Studies Foreign Policy Institute, 2019, https://ac594fe2-a8ef-4a25-a40c-8acd006ea1a4.filesusr.com/ugd/b976eb_ad85a42f248a48c7b0cb2906f6398e71.pdf.

27 Ibid.

28 于 春光, "提升国际热点事件舆论引导能力," 军事记者, 7 (2012):21-22, accessed September 22, 2020, https://mall.cnki.net/magazine/Article/XWCC201207011.htm. As cited and translated in Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Chase, "Borrowing a Boat Out to Sea."

29 陈正中, "加强战时网络新闻舆论管控刍议,"军事记者 7(2014):44-45, accessed September 22, 2020, http://gb.oversea.cnki.net/kcms/detail/detail.aspx?dbCode=cjfd&QueryID=45&CurRec=24&filename=XWCC201407024&dbname=CJFD2014. As cited and translated in Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Chase, "Borrowing a Boat Out to Sea."

30 薛 仁 and 刘 炜, "跨文化传播视野下提升我军对外传播力: 以中国军网英文版为例," 军事记者, 9 (2013): 55-56, accessed September 22, 2020, http://gb.oversea.cnki.net/kns55/detail.aspx?QueryID=83&CurRec=27&dbcode=cjfd&dbname=CJFD2013&filename=XWCC201309027. As cited and translated in Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Chase, "Borrowing a Boat Out to Sea."

31 陈 婕, "打造军事外宣队伍的突击队——关于利用军事英文网站加强我军外宣工作的感想," 军事记者 6 (2015): 53-54, accessed September 22, 2020, http://www.81.cn/jsjz/2015-07/09/content_6579249.htm. As cited in Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Chase, "Borrowing a Boat Out to Sea."

32 张 珈绮, "提高军事外宣能力讲好 中国军队故事", 军事记者 11(2016): 40-41, accessed September 22, 2020, http://www.81.cn/jsjz/2016-12/01/content_7387398.htm. As cited in Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Chase, "Borrowing a Boat Out to Sea."

33 陈 婕, "打造军事外宣队伍的突击队——关于利用军事英文网站加强我军外宣工作的感想."

34 Naomi Xu Elegant, "Zoom's censorship stumble is a familiar narrative for tech stuck between US and Beijing," Fortune, June 12, 2020, https://fortune.com/2020/06/12/zooms-censorship-stumble-is-a-familiar-narrative-for-tech-stuck-between-u-s-and-beijing/.

35 Ben Quinn, "Google services blocked in China," The Guardian, November 9, 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2012/nov/09/google-services-blocked-china-gmail.

36 陈 婕, "打造军事外宣队伍的突击队——关于利用军事英文网站加强我军外宣工作的感想." As cited in Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Chase, "Borrowing a Boat Out to Sea."

37 周 洋, "美军打击ISIS的社交媒体行动探索," 军事记者 7(2017): 61-62, accessed September 22, 2020, http://www.chinamil.com.cn/jsjz/2017-07/25/content_7689390.htm. As cited in Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Chase, "Borrowing a Boat Out to Sea."

38 陈 婕, "打造军事外宣队伍的突击队."

39 Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, "How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, Not Engaged Argument," American Political Science Review, 2017, https://gking.harvard.edu/files/gking/files/how_the_chinese_government_fabricates_social_media_posts_for_strategic_distraction_not_engaged_argument.pdf.

undermine democratic institutions and exploit cultural institutions to affect political activities in ways favorable to the interest of preserving the absolute authority of the Chinese party-state.[42] Moreover, information operations and cyberspace power projection of the CCP have also gained momentum within the military "hard power" realm, particularly with the establishment of the Strategic Support Force in 2015.[43] While mainly focusing on cybersecurity warfare and threats, the unit in question is also responsible for integrating psychological warfare capabilities in coordination with Cyberspace Administration of China.[44]

The PLA's fundamental operating principle for undertaking information operations is the "three strategies of warfare," which consist of "psychological warfare," "public opinion warfare," and "legal war."[45] This concept was first introduced in 2003 and put forth the most direct methods that the Chinese government and military have orchestrated to achieve its discourse power. "Psychological warfare" focuses on propaganda intent on influencing the "hearts and minds" of opposition groups.[46] In this case, "online troops" and narratives around military exercises are both useful tools to intimidate an opposition group with a promotion of strong perception of overwhelming military strength.[47] "Public opinion warfare," used often in coordination with "psychological warfare," focuses more on delivering and disseminating the "Chinese story" to audiences around the globe. This ties back to the traditional Chinese political philosophy of "political morality," which is when political leaders and the government behave both morally and responsibly. In essence, "public opinion warfare" aims to propagate a "morally responsible" picture of China, for example, with the extensive news report on its escort navy operation in Somalia, which ostensibly demonstrated China's international responsibility. Finally, the notion of "legal war" is to use legal infrastructure—both domestic and foreign—to advance China's geopolitical ambition.[48] For example, in 2012, the Chinese government passed a law to recognize the official establishment of "Sansha City" ("三沙市"), which "puts the South China Sea under the direct jurisdiction of the relevant administrative region, and strengthens the legal basis for future actions."[49]

The CCP sees opportunities for operational influence in modern media platforms. The PLA Academy of Military Science defines information operations as the "full use of modern media, electronic information operations platforms, and special operations methods" to support "the overall operational effectiveness of psychological warfare."[50] These methods include, "information deprivation, creating information chaos [...] implanting disinformation and erroneous information into the enemy's information system, and causing the enemy's command to make the wrong decisions and commands."[51] An aggressive form of Chinese discourse power is "public opinion decapitation," which intends to "shock and deter" by "demonizing the leader of the enemy side, and by means of disseminating information that sows discord or produces deterring effects [...] crippling the enemy leader's command authority and weakening his command and control ability."[52]

Chinese scholars recommend using "the combination of official and unofficial propaganda" to deter opponents, boost influence and momentum, and increase power projection.[53] As of now, the PLA has not joined Western social media with official accounts, though many other Chinese government entities have, such as the embassy and consulate Twitter accounts created following the emergence of COVID-19. They have, however, established official accounts on Chinese social media platforms, most notably Weibo and Wechat.

In March 2010, the PLA established an official Weibo account, followed shortly thereafter by the PLA Army, Navy, and Airforce.[54] Among other things, the PLA uses verified, authoritative, and official military public accounts; unverified public military accounts; and unverified accounts for individual soldiers motivated by patriotism and loyalty to the CCP.[55] The PLA also appears to be adopting more emotion-focused methods by targeting foreign audiences with stories that notionally carry strong sentiment. Its

40 Lei Zhang , "Invisible Footprints of Online Commentators," Global Times, February 5, 2010, http://www.globaltimes.cn/special/2010-02/503820.html. Archived link can be found here: https://web.archive.org/web/20100208224640/http://special.globaltimes.cn/2010-02/503820.html. Also, King et al., "How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts."

41 Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, "The Meaning of Sharp Power," Foreign Affairs, January 4, 2018, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-16/meaning-sharp-power.

42 Russell Hsiao, "CCP Influence Operations and Taiwan's 2020 Elections," The Diplomat, November 30, 2019, https://thediplomat.com/2019/11/ccp-influence-operations-and-taiwans-2020-elections/.

43 Elsa B. Kania and John K. Costello, "The Strategic Support Force and the Future of Chinese Information Operations," The Cyber Defense Review 3, no. 1 (2018): 105-122, accessed September 22, 2020, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26427379, 111.

44 Ibid.

45 "舆论战、心理战、法律战三大战法加速战争胜利," Sina News Center, March 8, 2005, https://baike.baidu.com/reference/3891956/c31fpeyymWClD3-LiODpINxXzT0-AIVBKbV1SSiYJ9pTGVImQve9e4xk_n-1NTlBQok7fbEoTWTAcTnpT1GFoVJ1f5AxPlWLLOJCBQGzrWrf4WvM (archived link); 李 东舰, "台军猜测解放军的'三战'策略 开始布局反钳制," CRI Online, August 5, 2004, https://baike.baidu.com/reference/3891956/7873_BtlPtT3RkyyA7J2t92n29Ih__7oFhSawQb4XDoLYHeR-opw5Leyvp01oJVssTQSUiiAp_zTH2oALz43EqqRPtQR1F82Ae9uBEYhnrv9 (archived link).

46 "Psychological Warfare," RAND Corporation, accessed August 28, 2020, https://www.rand.org/topics/psychological-warfare.html.

47 "解放军'三战'策略已进新阶段 直击美军盲区," 新浪军事, September 8, 2014, http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2014-09-08/0910799597.html.

48 Elsa Kania, "The PLA's Latest Strategic Thinking on the Three Warfares," China Brief (August 22, 2016) 16, 13, https://jamestown.org/program/the-plas-latest-strategic-thinking-on-the-three-warfares/.

49 "解放军'三战'策略已进新阶段 直击美军盲区."

50 叶 征, 信息作战学教程 (Beijing:军事科学出版社, 2013), 105. As cited and translated in Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Chase, "Building a Boat Out to Sea."

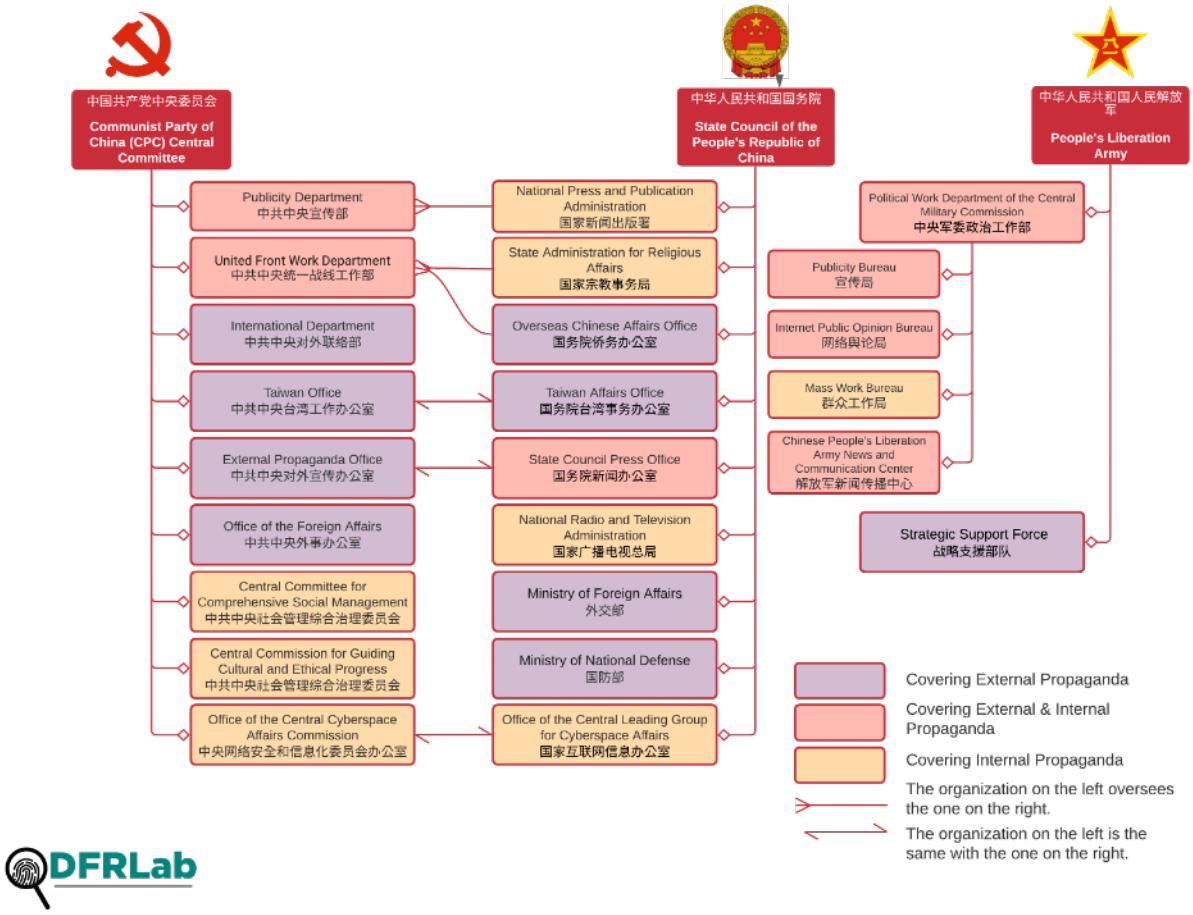
51 Ibid., 105. As cited and translated in Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Chase, "Building a Boat Out to Sea."

52 盛 沛林 and 李 雪, "论'舆论斩首,'" 南京政治学院学报, 5(2006): 114–117, accessed September 22, 2020, http://www.cqvip.com/QK/82095X/20065/23240928.html. As cited and translated in Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Chase, "Building a Boat Out to Sea."

53 Lü Hongjun [吕红军], "Boosting the Use of the Strategic Force through External Propaganda" ["以外宣造势助战略力量运用"], Huojianbing Bao [火箭兵报], March 7, 2017, 3. As cited and translated in Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Chase, "Building a Boat Out to Sea."

ability to capture attention through sentiment has been improving through the use of agenda setting and adaptive messaging. "Agenda setting" is a form of subliminal messaging in which an entity (an organization, a social media account, etc.) "selectively and continuously reports news on a [specifically sentiment-driven] subject."[56] Adaptive messaging, meanwhile, is used to attract and sustain people with intentionally targeted hot topics or trends that draw on emotional sentiment.[57] This can be seen with the PLA's Twitter sockpuppet—i.e., inauthentic—account that blasted news on sports and fashion to capture the audience's attention before intermingling more pro-China content. These two tactics show that the PLA has identified the necessity of finding common ground in order to influence foreign audiences, and it does so through softened content and the propagation of "China stories," both of which can be used to convey and conceal intentions.

Discourse Power Architecture



Organizational structure of the government offices responsible for discourse power.

54 Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Chase, "Building a Boat Out to Sea."

55 宋 明亮 and 黄 裕民, "军队微信公众号是怎样的媒体", 军事记者, 5 (2017): 9-11, accessed September 22, 2020, http://www.81.cn/jsjz/2017-05/10/content_7595213.htm.

56 Yu Chunguang [于春光], "Enhancing Public Opinion Guidance Capability for International Hotspot Events" [提升国际热点事件舆论引导能力"], Military Correspondent [军事记者], July 2012, http://www.81.cn/jsjz/2018-04/18/content_8006811.htm. As cited in Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Chase, "Building a Boat Out to Sea."

57 林 梓栋, 刘 小铭 and谭 依菲, "从 '10万+'看涉军微信公众号如何赢得受众: 以'一号哨位'微信公众号为例," 军事记者 4(2018): 51-52, accessed September 22, 2020, http://www.81.cn/ jsjz/2018-04/18/content_8006811.htm. As cited in Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Chase, "Building a Boat Out to Sea."

Three branches of the government—the CCP's Central Committee; the State Council, which functions as its executive branch; and the CCP's Central Military Commission of the People's Republic of China—are responsible for both domestic and international propaganda and for promoting the discourse power of China. While there are overlaps of responsibilities and personnel across the Central Committee and the State Council, the army branch is more insulated.

Some of the most influential and visible organizations include the Publicity Department, the United Front Work Department, the Taiwan Affairs Office (also known as the Taiwan Work Office), the State Council Press Office, the Ministry of National Defense, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the National Radio and Television Administration. Among these offices, the Publicity Department, the United Front Work Department, the State Council Press Office, and the Taiwan Affairs Office focus on both domestic and international issues and have produced and promoted content targeting both domestic and international audiences. The Ministry of National Defense and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs mostly focus on international issues, but their target audiences are both domestic and international. Lastly, the National Radio and Television Administration focuses mainly on domestic issues for domestic audiences and employs "discourse power" propaganda and content surveillance.

Separately, the Cyberspace Administration of China consists of the Office of the Central Cybersecurity Information Committee under the Central Committee and the National Internet Information Office under the State Council. Although these two offices have different names, they are essentially the same. Within the Cyberspace Administration, there is the Internet News Dissemination Bureau, the Internet Comments Bureau, and the Internet Social Work Bureau. Despite the lack of information regarding responsibilities on the Cyberspace Administration's official page, the activities of its sub-departments are nevertheless known through news articles. The broader organization's general responsibilities include overseeing the domestic information flow, setting rules for online content, and regulating internet companies to ensure compliance with laws and regulations.[58]

The Internet News Dissemination Bureau regulates online news production and dissemination by organizing political training sessions for news professionals and for using the internet for stronger, more compelling storytelling; it also promotes information exchange between domestic and international online media outlets.[59]

The Internet Comments Bureau, meanwhile, is responsible for investigating trends in online comments and providing future projection on the online comment ecosystem. For example, the 2019 Bluebook of Internet Comments: China Internet Comments Development Report, a report released by the Internet Comments Bureau, demonstrated its interest in "exploring the effective ways of expression in the new era of online commenting" to promote "government credibility, communication power, and influence."[60] Potential tactics of the agency include agenda setting; engaging experts, government officials, and influencers to "interfere at the right time"; and targeting the younger generation with a "positive" online commenting environment.[61]

The Internet Social Work Bureau is a more direct channel to engage with the domestic population. For example, in December 2019, the Internet Social Work Bureau organized an event for young professionals working in media to promote "better use of the internet" through positive energy content that aggrandized the power of the party-state.[62] In the same month, the office also organized an event to educate the CCP offices based at internet-focused businesses—which are extensions of the state-party—on relevant legislation through a competition for themed anime video submissions from the companies.[63]

The United Front Department is a department under the CCP Central Committee within the Chinese government responsible for establishing the narratives around strategic issues, especially those concerned with territorial concerns and unification. The department was established in 1938 by the CCP as a means of garnering support from civilians in the country. In the 1950s, after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the department was shouldered with new responsibilities to unite the country in both territorial and nation-state terms. Major concerns of the department regard ethnic minorities issues, citizens not affiliated with the CCP, overseas Chinese, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang.[64]

Methods of engaging these populations include inviting politicians, journalists, businessmen, and civil society organizations from target countries to visit China for

58 余 俊杰 and 陈 爱平, "国家网信办：集中整治商业网站平台和'自媒体'违法违规行为," 新华网, July 23, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/2020-07/23/c_1126277611.htm; "国家网信办指导北京网信办约谈处罚新浪微博：热搜榜停更一周," 澎湃新闻, June 10, 2020, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_7782938.

59 "广东举办全省网络新闻信息服务从业人员培训班," 中共中央网络安全和信息化委员会办公室, August 9, 2017, http://www.cac.gov.cn/2017-08/09/c_1121451631.htm; "中央网信办网络新闻信息传播局巡视员、副局长谢登科在'智能互联时代的传播新语态'分论坛上的致辞（全文）," 央视网(cctv.com), September 11, 2018, http://news.cctv.com/2018/09/11/ARTIszHrarlujdzBdemz1Ewy180911.shtml; 黄 宇, "中央网信办网络新闻信息传播局副局长刘冲：网媒要发挥自身优势讲好中国故事," 搜狐新闻 , May 11, 2020, https://m.sohu.com/n/448844404/.

60 李 晓 and 王 斯敏, "新时代网络评论如何有效表达," 中共中央网络安全和信息化委员会办公室, January 3, 2020, http://www.cac.gov.cn/2020-01/03/c_1579587777415273.htm.

61 Ibid.

62 "这是他们和互联网的故事，你的故事呢?," 中共中央网络安全和信息化委员会办公室, December 9, 2019, http://www.cac.gov.cn/2019-12/09/c_1577427314396666.htm.

63 "互联网企业'知法懂法 依法办网'专题活动暨动漫视频征集圆满结束中国网信网," 中共中央网络安全和信息化委员会办公室, December 30, 2019, http://www.cac.gov.cn/2019-12/30/c_1579250268414331.htm

64 "中共中央统一战线工作部," 中华人民共和国国务院新闻办公室, June 29, 2010, http://www.scio.gov.cn/ztk/dtzt/30/5/Document/683672/683672.htm; Li-hua Chung and Sherry Hsiao, "China Targets 10 Groups for 'United Front'," Taipei Times, January 14, 2018, http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2018/01/15/2003685789.

events like academic conferences, political summits, and civil society organizations seminars. The purpose of these trips is to produce and promote propaganda that portray a positive image of China by influencing the respective population groups in these target countries directly.[65] The United Front Work Department has connections to leading private corporations, as well as with business people, intellectuals, academics, minority groups, Chinese students overseas, and Chinese diaspora groups. According to a Taiwanese government estimate, China spends at least $337.8 million per year on United Front recruiting efforts in Taiwan.[66] The money is spent on engaging Taiwanese students studying in China, organizing academic forums to promote "One China" understanding, drafting policies to benefit Taiwanese businesses in China and trade between Taiwanese and Chinese companies, and influencing media outlets through organized visits and financial donations.[67] The overarching goal of the United Front is to convince its target audience to believe in the Chinese vision of a unified country.

Moreover, the United Front Work Department has also broadened the scope of its operations into Western countries. According to the 2018 US-China Economic and Security Review Commission report, the United Front Work Department is in close contact with organizations in Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and Canada.[68] Although these countries are not directly part of China's vision of a unified country, the primary goals for including these countries in the United Front's work is to influence foreign citizens' perceptions of the successes of the CCP's rule in China and advance the political agenda of the CCP on a broader and more influential Western sphere. For example, Dr. Tung Chee-hwa, a vice-chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference National Committee, funded research endowments at US research institutions through his nonprofit registered in Hong Kong.[69] Although the process of granting the funding abides by the US Foreign Agents Registration Act, it still raised concerns over the possibility of the CCP attempting to influence the academic discussion of US foreign policies on China.[70]

The PLA's information operation capabilities are shared across its political, academic, and militia groups. In China, the political branch of the PLA is the most important as it represents the party and oversees the political ideology development of its officers and soldiers. The academic branch consists of universities and colleges that train both theoretical and practical military theories to future soldiers. The militia group is tasked with executing military and national defense activities against enemies.

The Political Work Department of the Central Military Commission, which is stationed within the political side of the army, is the major organ in the PLA responsible for designing and promoting the ideologies of Chinese discourse power through image and perception abroad. The Political Work Department is tasked with overseeing the political and ideological development of troops. Under the Political Work Department, the Publicity Bureau, otherwise known as Propaganda Bureau, is the office that oversees content production and dissemination, especially regarding the reputation of the PLA both at home and abroad. In an interview this year, Colonel Pan Qinghua, who is in charge of the Propaganda Bureau, released upcoming plans for establishing a more professional group of spokespersons, taking initiative in "storytelling" to shape the image of the PLA, and prioritizing the impact of positive narratives around the CCP's rule.[71] Meanwhile, the Chinese People's Liberation Army News and Communications Center executes the content production and promotion and operates its own media outlets and social media accounts, including official accounts on Weibo and WeChat. The Mass Work Bureau focuses more on the domestic audience and attempts to promote "positive energy" or "zhengnengliang" ("正能量") content, which implies content that portrays a supposedly morally good, economically well-off society, thereby notionally engendering the legitimacy of the CCP rules in those who view the content.

On the other hand, the more hands-on branch openly responsible for online information operations is the Internet Public Opinion Bureau, which was established through the 2015 Deep Reform and Military Reform, the large-scale military reshuffling of the People's Republic of China, signifying the CCP's power transition to Xi.[72] It was around the same time that the Strategic Support Force (SSF), a more covert division of the army, was established. Although it is hard to retrieve its agenda from public records, there are news reports briefing the cross-organizational cooperation between the Internet Public Opinion Bureau with other organizations outside of the army branch. The primary goal of the bureau is to shape a positive reputation of PLA soldiers for both domestic and international audiences. For

65 Ibid.

66 Li-hua Chung and Sherry Hsiao, "China Targets 10 Groups for 'United Front'," Taipei Times, January 14, 2018, http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2018/01/15/2003685789.

67 "因應中共利用「海峽論壇」加大對台統戰分化，政府強化既定政策及管理作為," 中國民國大陸委員會, May 30, 2019, https://www.mac.gov.tw/cn/News_Content.aspx?n=05B73310C5C3A632; 范 笑天, "做好在京台生统战工作的几点思考," 中共中央统一战线工作部, June 21, 2019, http://www.zytzb.gov.cn/jcjyxd/311698.jhtml.

68 Alexander Bowe, "China's Overseas United Front Work: Background and Implications for the United States," United States-China Economic and Security Review Commission, August 24, 2018, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China's%20Overseas%20United%20Front%20Work%20-%20Background%20and%20Implications%20for%20US_final_0.pdf.

69 Alexander Bowe, "China's Overseas United Front Work"; Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "This Beijing-Linked Billionaire Is Funding Policy Research at Washington's Most Influential Institutions," Foreign Policy, November 28, 2017, https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/11/28/this-beijing-linked-billionaire-is-funding-policy-research-at-washingtons-most-influential-institutions-china-dc/.

70 Alexander Bowe, "China's Overseas United Front Work."

71 潘 珊菊, 卜 羽勤, and 王 佳欣, "独家专访潘庆华上校：中国军队形象，要由中国军人来表现和树立_传播," 搜狐新闻 , January 11, 2020, https://www.sohu.com/a/366249134_161795.

72 Dingding Chen, "Take Notice, Asia: China's Military Is Getting Leaner and More Lethal," The Diplomat, December 5, 2015, https://thediplomat.com/2015/12/take-notice-asia-chinas-military-is-getting-leaner-and-more-lethal/.

example, in 2019, the Public Opinion Bureau, together with the aforementioned Cyberspace Administration of China, organized an event for internet media professionals to cover heartening stories about border patrols in celebration of the seventieth anniversary of the establishment of the People's Republic of China.[73] In 2018, the bureau led a seminar titled "Innovation and Development of Army Internet Public Opinion in the New Era," a discussion with academic professionals from the School of Political Science at the National Defense University, officers from the army's political administration, and officers in charge of active duty troops.[74] The topics included "operation and maintenance of novel online media platforms of the army" and "ideological and political work of the army in the era of the internet."[75]

With its establishment in 2015, the Strategic Support Force (SSF) was intended to bring together "space, cyber, electronic, and psychological warfare capabilities" and operate alongside the ground, air, rocket forces, and the navy.[76] The unit oversees the Network Systems Department, which is responsible for developing and implementing cyberwarfare and information operation capabilities.[77] Like most of the organizations above, its routine operations and orientation are not publicly accessible, there are, however, several important known differences about its mission. First, although it is a separate force from the ground, air, rocket forces, and the navy, its operations are incorporated within those of the four other army services and serve the respective needs of those different branches.[78] Second, although one of its primary focuses is on building infrastructural resilience to cybersecurity threats, it is also responsible for orchestrating psychological warfare strategies against enemies.[79] In the 2015 military reform, the SSF was given control of Base 311, which is known as a key location for maintaining the PLA's psychological warfare capabilities.[80] Thus, the SFF is considered to be the military backbone of the Chinese discourse power operation, which takes a more aggressive combination strategy of psychological warfare and public opinion warfare.

73 "'祖国，请放心'网络名人进军营暨网络媒体国防行活动启动," 新华网 Xinhua Net, September 1, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2019-09/01/c_1124947585.htm.

74 葛 志强, "'新时代军队网络舆论工作创新与发展'理论研讨会在上海召开," ed. 杨 帆, 中国军网, October 22, 2018, http://www.81.cn/theory/2018-10/22/content_9485699.htm.

75 葛 志强, "'新时代军队网络舆论工作创新与发展'理论研讨会在上海召开."

76 John Costello and Joe McReynolds, "China's Strategic Support Force: A Force for a New Era," ed. Phillip C. Saunders, National Defense University Press Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs and Institute for National Strategic Studies | National Defense University, October 2018, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/china-perspectives_13.pdf; Kania and Costello, "The Strategic Support Force." As cited in Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Chase, "Building a Boat Out to Sea."

77 Ibid.

78 邱 越, "我军战略支援部队是一支什么样的军事力量?," ed. 冯 玲玲, 中华人民共和国国防部, January 6, 2016, http://www.mod.gov.cn/power/2016-01/06/content_4641635.htm.

79 John Costello and Joe McReynolds, "China's Strategic Support Force: A Force for a New Era"; Kania and Costello, "The Strategic Support Force."

80 Costello and McReynolds, "China's Strategic Support Force," 17.

Methodology of Chinese Strategies on Promoting Discourse Power

Bots and Trolls

Miller et al. (2020) and Uren et al. (2019) suggest that the PLA manages fake personas (or "sockpuppets") and bots to distort public opinion and influence foreign nation-states.[81] "Sockpuppet" accounts are manually administered social media accounts created and used for the purpose of manipulating public opinion, whereas "bots" are automated programs that replicate user activity to undertake a specific action, which—in respect to discourse power—often takes the form of promoting particular messages.

According to a study at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), Twitter accounts, many of which are repurposed spam or marketing accounts, are purchased by the CCP to use for foreign public opinion targeting.[82] These accounts were found to display previous posts in a variety of languages including Indonesian, Arabic, English, Korean, Japanese, and Russian, and the accounts posted on a wide array of topics from British football to Indonesian tech support, Korean boy bands, and pornography.[83] The study found the accounts to have tweeted the phrases "test new owner," "test," and "new own," displaying a lack of effort to conceal the bot's inauthenticity. Although the PLA is not officially present on Western social media, it does not signify a lack of interest in using Western social media as a discourse tool. In 2018, a New York Times article alleged that a Xinhua editor paid a US company hundreds of thousands of dollars for followers and retweets of posts on Xinhua's official Twitter account.[84] The Economist subsequently reported in 2019 that the state-run media's follower counts were artificially high.[85]

On the other hand, these state-sponsored bots' activities attempt to distract audiences away from negative discussions about the party-state. For example, during the 2020 Taiwan election, state-sponsored bots attempted to hijack the conversations around a Chinese spy by posting spam and counter-messaging, all with an intent to suspend meaningful discussion between foreign audiences on the topic.[86] Most of the time, however, these attempts were largely unsuccessful in that they received a low level of engagement by authentic Twitter users.[87] Unlike Russia's sophisticated understanding of Western audiences and organization for content creation and targeted dissemination, China's information operations show less coordinated social engineering skills.

Information operations on China's domestic platforms

China's information operations on domestic social media apps Weibo, Wechat, and TikTok China are both overt and effective, targeting mainly domestic audiences as a means of promoting the political legitimacy of the CCP. While social media companies remain privately owned in China, they are under close scrutiny by the government in terms of trending topics and user management responsibilities. Common methods of information operations on these platforms include the limitation of volume and traffic of politically sensitive topics, promotion of pro-CCP discussion and narratives, and close censorship of users deemed to promote anti-CCP discourse. A majority of the internet-using population is aware of the censorship, of which the support rate for the censorship is around 40 percent.[88] Although the younger generations are exposed to a vibrant internet culture with various locally developed social media apps, they are less concerned about political content than entertainment and consumerism, with the increasing monetization of the platform. Moreover,

81 Carly Miller, Vanesa Molter, Isabella Garcia-Camargo, and Renee DiResta, "Sockpuppets Spin COVID Yarns: An Analysis of PRC-Attributed June 2020 Twitter takedown," June 11, 2020, FSI Stanford Internet Observatory, Cyber Policy Center, https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/io/publication/june-2020-prc-takedown; Tom Uren, Elise Thomas, and Jacob Wallis, "Tweeting through the Great Firewall," International Cyber Policy Center (blog), October 2019, https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/ad-aspi/2019-12/Tweeting%20through%20the%20great%20fire%20wall.pdf?TRGkGXh8FPY5KXLSc_4SfDUy7sMfNkw0.

82 Dr. Jacob Wallis, Tom Uren, Elise Thomas, Albert Zhang, Samantha Hoffman, Lin Li, Alex Pascoe, and Danielle Cave. "Retweeting through the Great Firewall: A Persistent and Undeterred Threat Actor," Australian Strategic Policy Institute International Cyber Policy Centre, June 2020, https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/ad-aspi/2020-06/Retweeting%20through%20the%20great%20firewall_1.pdf.

83 Dr. Jacob Wallis et al., "Retweeting through the Great Firewall," David Gilbert, "China Used Twitter Porn Bots to Spread Disinformation About the Hong Kong Protests," VICE, September 5, 2019, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/gyzv9x/china-used-twitter-porn-bots-to-spread-disinformation-about-the-hong-kong-protests.

84 Nicholas Confessore, Gabriel J.X. Dance, Richard Harris, and Mark Hansen, "The Follower Factory," The New York Times, January 27, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/01/27/technology/social-media-bots.html.

85 "China Is Using Facebook to Build a Huge Audience around the World," The Economist, April 20, 2019, https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2019/04/20/china-is-using-facebook-to-build-a-huge-audience-around-the-world.

86 Dr. Jacob Wallis et al., "Retweeting through the Great Firewall," 50.

87 Ibid, 4.

88 Dakuo Wang and Gloria Mark, "Internet Censorship in China," ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction 22, no. 6 (2015): 1-22, accessed September 22, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1145/2818997, 11.

increasing numbers of youngsters, under the name "Little Pink" ("小粉红"), embrace the positive image of the CCP more than previous generations, under the influence of the party's active engagement with the younger generations to encourage recognition with the party-state identity.[89]

These domestic information operations extended to overseas audiences, as illustrated by the fact that the "Little Pink" initiated organized online attacks on Western social media platforms to defend China's official narratives. For example, in 2015, a group of more than 9,000 Chinese internet users organized by a Bulletin Board System (BBS) community called "帝吧" (pronounced as "Di Ba," literally translated as "the community of the Emperor," a reference to football star Li Yi), flooded the comments of then-presidential candidate Tsai Ing-wen's Facebook page.[90] The comments all promoted similar pro-China themes, including "Taiwan is a part of China," China's national pride, and celebrating China's military strength.[91] Another example is Chinese citizens' increasing attention on foreign companies' positioning on political topics, especially territorial disputes. In 2019, Coach, Givenchy, and Versace all apologized for "insulting China" after they listed Hong Kong and Taiwan as countries.[92] The comments in reply to the apologies, which were posted to Instagram, saw pro-China accounts fighting with pro-independence Taiwanese and Hong Kong accounts and defending China's territorial ambitions.[93] Moreover, under the Chinese Weibo posts of the same luxury brands, similar attacks on the fashion brands could be found in the seemingly organic discussion by authentic Chinese users.[94]

The gradual normalization of internet censorship has indoctrinated a majority of its users, including those who work in online media industries, to believe in the necessity of self-censorship, especially in the public realms. Zhang Zhian and Tao Jianjie (2011) found that online media outlets are more likely to exercise self-censorship in the face of administrative regulations from the government than from pressure on the business side.[95] Moreover, Li and Zhang (2018) highlighted the necessity for the government to propagate "self-censorship" amongst internet users by emphasizing the punishment and rewards system as well as optimizing the internet industry's self-discipline.[96] The self-censorship of social media platforms and online media outlets further limits the realm of public discussion online.

Sina Weibo is a Chinese microblogging website akin to Twitter and is the second largest social media platform in China, after Wechat, with 516 million monthly active users in 2019.[97] Weibo is a robust environment for discussion on a variety of topics, just like its Western counterpart Twitter.[98] Moreover, the platform harbors a highly educated user population: according to a 2017 official Weibo report, about 80 percent of the population holds a bachelor's or other technical degree.[99] Like Twitter, the platform provides people with similar interests to broaden their social interaction network and public discussions are organized around hashtags and "super topics" ("超话").[100]

89 Li Yuan, "Trapped Abroad, China's 'Little Pinks' Rethink Their Country," The New York Times, June 24, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/24/business/china-nationalist-students-coronavirus.html; 王 洪喆, 李 思闽, and 吴 靖, "从'迷妹'到'小粉红'：新媒介商业文化环境下的国族身份生产和动员机制研究," 国际新闻界 38, no. 11 (2016): 33-53, accessed September 22, 2020, http://cjjc.ruc.edu.cn/CN/abstract/abstract605.shtml.

90 刘 子维, "蔡英文脸书帐户突然出现大量中国网友," ed. 董 乐, BBC News 中文, November 11, 2015, https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/china/2015/11/151111_tsai_ing_wen_facebook.

91 "蔡英文脸书遭简体字灌水引发网友骂战," Deutsche Welle, December 11, 2015, https://www.dw.com/zh/%E8%94%A1%E8%8B%B1%E6%96%87%E8%84%B8%E4%B9%A6%E9%81%AD% E7%AE%80%E4%BD%93%E5%AD%97%E7%81%8C%E6%B0%B4%E5%BC%95%E5%8F%91%E7%BD%91%E5%8F%8B%E9%AA%82%E6%88%98/a-18842673.

92 洪 沙 and 石 涛, "一系列国际大牌纷纷陷入'辱华'风波," Deutsche Welle, December 8, 2019, https://www.dw.com/zh/%E4%B8%80%E7%B3%BB%E5%88%97%E5%9B%BD%E9%99%85%E5%A4%A7%E7%89%8C%E7%BA%B7%E7%BA%B7%E9%99%B7%E5%85%A5%E8%BE%B1%E5%8D%8E%E9%A3%8E%E6%B3%A2/a-49994530.

93 Versace (@Versace), "I am deeply sorry for the unfortunate recent error that was made by our Company and that is being currently discussed on various social media channels. Never have I wanted to disrespect China's National Sovereignty..." Instagram Photo, August 11, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/B1BM54AiL7D/; Coach (@Coach), "Coach respects and supports China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In May 2018, we found a serious inaccuracy in the design of a few T-shirts. We immediately pulled those products from all channels ..." Instagram Photo, August 12, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/B1DNXmVgzGF/.

94 Coach 蔻驰, "COACH一贯尊重并维护中国主权及领土完整。在2018年5月，我们当时发现几款T恤设计存在重大失误，我们深刻认识到这次问题的严重性，立刻采取紧急措施，主动在全球范围的所有渠道将所涉商品下架。同时，我们还对产品进行了全面的审视，并加强了内部流程管理，以杜绝同类错误再次发生。我们由此对广大消费者的感情造成的伤害表示万分歉意...," Weibo Post, August 12, 2019, https://weibo.com/1916986680/I1RB0fDvT?from=page_1006061916986680_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime; Versace 范思哲官方微博, " '我对我们公司近期造成的一个失误而深感抱歉，目前该事件正在社交媒体上被讨论。我一直尊重中国国家主权，这就是我为什么想亲自为这种错误以及由此而产生的不良影响而道歉。'--Donatella Versace 我司对该产品的设计再次表示诚挚的歉意，并声明相关的T恤已于7月全球下架。我们接受批评严肃检讨，目前正在探讨改善日常运营方式的措施,以增强谨慎度和觉察性。" Weibo Post, August 11, 2019, https://weibo.com/2356563467/I1Kcm9Glg?from=page_1006062356563467_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1598243917757; Givenchy 纪梵希, "致各位关心纪梵希品牌的朋友：关于今日引起部分网友讨论的海外市场纪梵希印花T恤中的错误而引发大家的关注，对此我们深表歉意。对于任何的人为疏忽与错误，我们一定立即纠正并引以为戒。纪梵希品牌一贯尊重中国主权，坚决拥护一个中国原则，坚定不移," Weibo Post, August 12, 2019, https://weibo.com/1912136333/I1SdUlBMy?from=page_1006061912136333_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1598243951532

95 张 志安 and 陶 建杰, "网络新闻从业者的自我审查研究," 新闻大学 3 (2011): 153-157, http://www.cqvip.com/qk/80902x/201103/39623438.html.

96 李 潇 and 张 彬, "建立内容自我审查机制 营造绿色互联网空间," 通信世界 24 (2008), 23-24, http://www.cqvip.com/qk/83753x/200824/27704850.html.

97 Shulin Hu, "Weibo–How Is China's Second Largest Social Media Platform Being Used for Social Research?" Impact of Social Sciences, March 29, 2020, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2020/03/26/weibo-how-is-chinas-second-largest-social-media-platform-being-used-for-social-research/.

98 "Breakdown of microblog users of Sina Weibo in China in 2018, by age group," Statista, last updated on March 2019, https://www.statista.com/statistics/320940/china-sina-weibo-user-breakdown-by-age-group/.

99 微盘, "#微报告#【2016微博用户发展报告】出炉..." Weibo Post, January 18, 2017, http://weibointl.api.weibo.com/share/181594508.html?weibo_id=4065597639842307&fbclid=IwAR1zKCkdPwM35WLNJ9t3_nEWJ8HeBSkVmVjT-0JJ95siInhjDSdzPvEz218.

100 A separate channel for people to post information under various topics without showing on their own account page. The topics normally would be celebrities, organizations, and a concurrent issues and are different from hashtags or search phrases ("热门话题" or "热搜") as the latter tends to be one-time hits.

Weibo

On the domestic mandarin speaking microblog platform Weibo, which is used by both domestic and overseas mandarin speakers, China uses information operation tactics including censorship of content and users, forced gamification of hashtags, economically incentivized generation of information propagation in an inauthentic environment, bot-like activities, and crowdsourced harassment. The purpose of these information operations is to create a positive image of Chinese domestic politics and foreign affairs, targeting both domestic Chinese and the overseas Chinese diaspora.

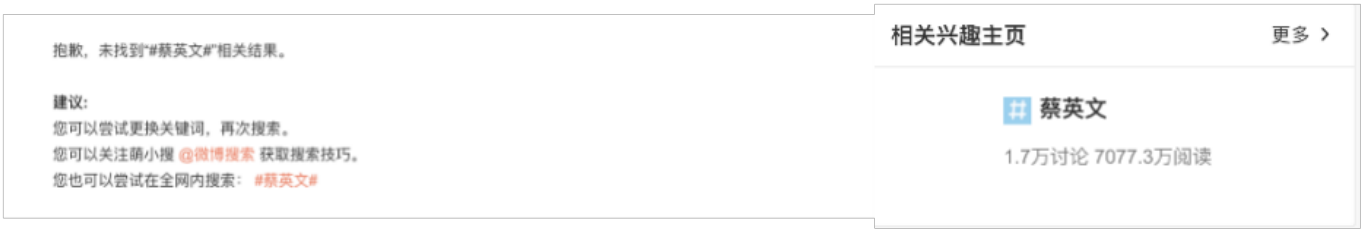
In its early years, Sina Weibo rose as a platform where diverse voices fostered a prototype of nationwide social activism. The 2011 Wenzhou High-speed Rail Incident—in which two high-speed rail trains collided in Zhejiang Province—marked the first time the platform caught the attention of the world, as the platform's users directed vehement anger against and demanded justification from the Ministry of Railways officials in dealing with the rescue work. The incident opened up the possibility that the platform might create space for freer discussion and civil participation to Chinese society, but, facing the backlash, the government instead carried out a series of "reforms" to exert greater control over both content and users on the platform.

Among the reforms, the government expanded the list of taboo words and phrases. Now, when a user initiates a search for a prohibited term or hashtag, the query yields a statement that, "Sorry, no results for [taboo word] have been found." Despite this result, the term or hashtag may nevertheless still appear in posts to the platform. One such example is a query for "Tsai Ing-wen," the name for the current president of Taiwan.

While the government has not released the entire list of banned phrases, by the estimation of Greatfire.org, which collects and monitors taboo words on Weibo, at least 2,500 words are banned on the platform, including words and phrases like "one-party dictatorship" and "today we are all Hong Kong citizens." Banning of specific words or phrases on Weibo prevents communities from mobilizing personnel and garnering support online, both of which proved to be useful for organizing the Arab Spring protests.

Another reform intended to limit traffic around specific topics involved "热搜榜" (the search trending list). In 2018, the central office and the Beijing office of the Cyberspace Administration of China summoned Weibo executives to warn them about vulgar content and the bad influence Weibo's trending list has on society, which led Weibo to suspend the list on its platform for a brief period of time. When the trending list went live again, there was a new section at the top of the trending list devoted to party-affiliated media and "正能量标题" ("topics with positive energy"). Weibo also introduced manual ordering by its staff instead of completely relying on algorithms.

Zenghui Cao, Weibo's vice president, said in an interview that the "power of official voices and traditional media would increase after this reform," as the platform now prioritizes specific messaging at the top space of the trending list.



Search Results for "Tsai Ing-wen" on Weibo: At left, a statement that "no results were found for #Tsai Ing-wen;" yet, at right, the hashtag #Tsai Ing-wen has seeming garnered 17,000 engagements and 70.773 million views.[87]

101 Marielle Stigum Gleiss, "Speaking up for the Suffering (Br)Other: Weibo Activism, Discursive Struggles, and Minimal Politics in China," Media, Culture & Society 37, no. 4, (September 2015), 513-529, https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443714566897.

102 "Chinese Anger over Alleged Cover-up of High-Speed Rail Crash," The Guardian, July 25, 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/25/chinese-rail-crash-cover-up-claims.; James Griffiths, "Weibo's Free-Speech Failure," The Atlantic, April 10, 2019, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2019/03/what-went-wrong-chinas-weibo-social-network/584728/.

103 Screeshots taken from Weibo search of #Tsai Ing-Wen# on August 14, 2020, at 1:32 p.m. Beijing time (left) and Weibo search of Tsai Ing-Wen on August 14, 2020, at 1:33 p.m. Beijing time (right). The block captured by the right screenshot has since been removed from the page.

104 "新浪微博的新屏蔽措施及敏感词变化," GreatFire.org, 2012, https://zh.greatfire.org/blog/2012/oct/new-semi-censorship-sina-weibo-and-lots-keywords-blocked-and-unblocked-during.

105 Jason Q. Ng, "Repository of censored and sensitive Chinese keywords," Citizen Lab (blog), December 10, 2014, https://citizenlab.ca/2014/12/repository-censored-sensitive-chinese-keywords-13-lists-9054-terms/.

106 "新浪微博存违法违规问题被约谈 热搜榜等版块暂时下线整改," Xinhua News, January 27, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/legal/2018-01/27/c_1122326899.htm

107 杨 阳, "微博副总裁曹增辉谈热搜整改：政府和传统媒体的声量会越来越大," 搜狐新闻, February 9, 2018, https://www.sohu.com/a/221906370_250147.

Screenshot of Weibo's trending list on August 7, 2020, at 1:16 p.m. Beijing time showing the government-pushed hashtag #我国又一次成功发射一箭双星# (#OurCountryOnceAgainSuccessfullyLaunchedARocketAndTwoSatellites) unranked at the top of the list, over other more popular, ranked, and organic discussions.[108]

Screenshot of the hashtag discussion page of #我国又一次成功发射一箭双星# (#OurCountryOnceAgainSuccessfullyLaunchedARocketAndTwoSatellites) showing the engagement and view counts, with 91.15 million and 7,729 respectively.[109]

For example, the hashtag #我国又一次成功发射一箭双星# (#Our country once again successfully launched a rocket and two satellites) made it to the top of the list, above the most popular trending hashtag, on August 7, 2020. This specifically promoted hashtag did not seem to engender much organic discussion, as ninety-five out of 130 original posts that used the hashtag generated 91.15 million views and 7,729 engagements. Posts using the hashtag were published by government-owned accounts, including those of central and local government branches, government-owned media, schools, and CCP-related organizations in the schools. Although the engagement and views were not significant, the government nevertheless chose to promote this hashtag above other, more popular hashtags.

108 Taken from Weibo's trending topics list on August 7, 2020, at 1:16 p.m. Beijing time.
109 Screenshot taken from Weibo on August 7, 2020, at 1:16 p.m. Beijing time.

Additionally, amid the booming internet business economy in China, the platform has emphasized users' ability to capitalize on the traffic and attention of their accounts based on active followers and active views. An unspoken fact about achieving income through such activity is that, with government control of content, influencers are incentivized to use "positive energy" content that is already high up on the trending list in order to succeed. These accounts, whose owners are unidentified, mostly promote entertainment news, often employing the hashtags most likely to be specifically promoted at the top of the trending topics list. The economically incentivized generation of content production and promotion in an inauthentic environment, in turn, creates a self-reinforcing mechanism to cause these deliberately promoted hashtags to stay up on the list and furthers the inorganic propagation of these hashtags.

For example, regarding the use of the hashtag #中国驻加大使谈孟晚舟事件# (#ChinaAmbassadortoCanadaComments OnWanzhouMengIcident), the post with the second highest engagement (over 34,000 engagements) as of August 6 belonged to entertainment news account 不二六叔 ("Fu Ni Uncle Six").[110] When researchers checked again on August 15, 2020, the content had been deleted from the account page. On its personal page, however, a majority of the account's content that has received the most engagement is polls on hot topics—including entertainment or political topics—from the trending list.

Screenshot of 不二六叔 ("Fu Ni Six Uncle")'s post using the hashtag #中国驻加大使谈孟晚舟事件# (#ChinaAmbassadorTo CanadaCommentsOnWanzhouMengIncident. The post puts forth the question: "Do you think the Canadians would release Meng Wanzhou?[111]

Screenshot of Fu Ni Uncle Six's page that shows that the operator follows 31 accounts, has 1.7 million followers, and has posted 248 posts.[112]

Another method of building a narrative that promotes a righteous image of the Chinese government is crowdsource doxxing of anti-government protestors, or, as the CCP likes to refer to them, the "evil guys" in the "China story." Such doxxing techniques were especially popular during the Hong Kong protests in both 2014 and 2019–2020. Between June and September 2019, complaints and enquiries about doxxed identities skyrocketed, according to Hong Kong's privacy commission, with both protesters and counter-protesters leaking personally identifying information of people on the opposite side.[113] On Weibo, however, government agencies are responsible for exerting extensive pressure to subdue protesters, including lead Hong Kong student activist Joshua Wong and Jimmy Lai, owner of pro-democracy Hong Kong newspaper Apple Daily who is an open critic of the Chinese government.

For example, the hashtag #梁振英质问黎智英# (#LeungChun yingQuestionedJimmyLai#) —which at one point on August 16, 2020, was the fastest growing hashtag in terms of searches—rose to twenty-third place on the total searches list on the same day that government-operated accounts exposed the nationality of Jimmy Lai as a way to distort his intention and discredit his loyalty to Hong Kong.

A query using Enlightent, a media archive of trending lists history of Weibo and Tik Tok, revealed that the hashtag #梁振英质问黎智英# (#LeungChun yingQuestionedJimmyLai) was the fastest growing hashtag in popularity for three hours on August 16, 2020.[114]

Out of the 161 posts to use the hashtag, which had generated 901 engagements and 21.007 million views as of August 24, 2020, sixty-eight were affiliated with government institutions. Forty-two of those directly represented the institutions while twenty-seven belonged to government-owned media outlets. Six accounts, in addition to those affiliated with governmental institutions, are financially incentivized to promote the hashtag as they demonstrate a pattern of promoting almost every trendy hashtag on the list. Twenty-two additional accounts demonstrated bot-like activity. Some of these accounts are verified by Weibo as information blogs, including those posting very frequently on military issues. Several verified

110 "Fu Ni" is a Japanese surname that is often used by fans of Japanese anime culture on Chinese social media.
111 Screenshot taken from Weibo account 不二六叔 on August 7, 2020, at 2:37 p.m. Beijing time. The post has since been deleted.
112 Weibo Account @不二六叔, screenshot taken on August 7, 2020, at 2:38 p.m, https://weibo.com/u/6210053312.
113 "Hong Kong Protests: Tech War Opens up with Doxxing of Protesters and Police," The Guardian, September 20, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/20/hong-kong-protests-tech-war-opens-up-with-doxxing-of-protesters-and-police.; "Doxxing: the 'Weapon' in Hong Kong's Protests Had Petty Beginnings," South China Morning Post, November 11, 2019, https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/short-reads/article/3036663/doxxing-powerful-weapon-hong-kong-protests-had.
114 A search of the hashtag (#LeungChun yingQuestionedJimmyLai) using the Weibo Trending List History Tool at https://www.enlightent.cn/research/rank/weiboSearchRank.

examples include the accounts named "武力统一,"[115] "武统号"[116] (which literally means "reunification with force," and is the CCP's term for its approach to Taiwan), "义勇军--鬼谷子"[117] (which means the "Army of Volunteers," a reference to the national anthem of China), "英国军情六处"[118] (a reference to Military Intelligence, Section 6), and "三体的铁甲"[119] ("Iron Armor of the Three Body," referring to *The Three-Body Problem*,[120] a sci-fi book by Chinese author Liu Cixin). They all actively post pro-government and pro-PLA news and narratives.[121] Another type of bot-like activity is demonstrated by verified accounts that post on city news, including "兰州微播,"[122] "大兰州,"[123] "大连突发,"[124] and "今日鹭岛,"[125] which refer to the city local news in Lanzhou, Dalian, and Xiamen. The first two accounts, "兰州微播" and "大兰州" on Lanzhou, in particular post almost entirely identical content every day, over sixty times per day.

In sum, information operations on Weibo employ methods of limiting traffic of certain discussions, pressuring social media platforms, and overtly organizing local government institutions to promote a discussion of the government as an internationally responsible leader and a global power adamant in its own territorial ambition.

A separate query using Enlightent revealed that the hashtag #梁振英质问黎智英# (#LeungChun yingQuestionedJimmyLai) was on the trending topics search list for 2.5 hours, achieving a rank of twenty-third place on the topic trending list with a total of 1.29 million searches on August 16, 2020.[126]

WeChat is the most popular social media platform and instant messaging (IM) app in China, with monthly active users exceeding 1.2 billion as of the first quarter of 2020.[127] Besides Chinese citizens, many in the global Chinese diaspora also use the social media app to connect with their friends and business partners in China.[128] Besides the platform's IM capabilities, WeChat also provides a miscellaneous set of supplemental services, including WeChat Moments (a means of creating a circle of friends to which a user can post thoughts and repost articles) and payment services.

Similar to Weibo, WeChat also employs tactics to limit politically sensitive narratives in private messaging channels. An open-source investigation by the University of Toronto's Citizen Lab, the censorship of private chats and WeChat Moments includes not only textual keywords and hashtags, but also pictures and even memes. While not notifying the user who sent the message, the WeChat server identifies politically sensitive information and prevents the message from showing up on the recipients' end.[129]

WeChat

On the domestic Mandarin speaking social media platform WeChat, which is widely used by both domestic and overseas Mandarin speakers, China primarily uses information operation tactics including censorship of content, preventing negative information from flowing freely on the platform, and targeting both domestic Chinese and overseas Chinese diaspora.

115 Weibo Account @武力统一, https://weibo.com/z1818
116 Weibo Account @ 武统号, https://weibo.com/u/6382367593
117 Weibo Account @义勇军--鬼谷子, https://weibo.com/u/5370547595
118 Weibo Account @英国军情六处, https://weibo.com/u/1826843991
119 Weibo Account @ 三体的铁甲, https://weibo.com/u/5699449105
120 Amy Qin, "In a Topsy-Turvy World, China Warms to Sci-Fi," The New York Times, November 10, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/11/books/liu-cixins-the-three-body-problem-is-published-in-us.html.
121 The verification process of Weibo accounts add to the credibility of these accounts when perceived by normal users. Several of the accounts page include: @义勇军--鬼谷子, https://weibo.com/u/5370547595; @武力统一, https://weibo.com/z1818; @ 武统号, https://weibo.com/u/6382367593.
122 Weibo Account @兰州微播, https://weibo.com/577227560
123 Weibo Account @大兰州, https://weibo.com/u/6043311739
124 Weibo Account @大连突发, https://weibo.com/210411520
125 Weibo Account @今日鹭岛, https://weibo.com/amoygk
126 A search of the hashtag (#LeungChun yingQuestionedJimmyLai) using the Weibo Trending List History Tool https://www.enlightent.cn/research/rank/weiboSearchRank
127 "Breakdown of Microblog Users of Sina Weibo in China in 2018, by Age Group," Statistia, last updated on March 2019, https://www.statista.com/statistics/320940/china-sina-weibo-user-breakdown-by-age-group/.
128 Maya Tribbitt and Michael Tobin, "WeChat Users in the U.S. Fear Losing Family Links With Ban," Bloomberg, August 10, 2020, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-08-10/wechat-users-in-the-u-s-fear-losing-family-links-with-ban.
129 Jeffrey Knockel, Christopher Parsons, Lotus Ruan, Ruohan Xiong, Jedidiah Crandall, and Ron Deibert, "WE CHAT, THEY WATCH: How International Users Unwittingly Build up WeChat's Chinese Censorship Apparatus," Citizen Lab (blog), May 7, 2020, https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/101395/1/Report%23127--wechattheywatch-web.pdf.

Figure 1: Evidence of image censorship in WeChat's one-to-one chat feature from Citizen Lab testing conducted in July 2017. [12]

Example of how a picture is blocked from sending to the recipient without notifying the sender. Republished with permission from Citizen Lab.[130]

According to ABC News, sometimes even topically neutral pictures get banned if they are even tangentially politically sensitive.[131] Moreover, this surveillance holds true on both China-registered and non-China-registered accounts. Although the scope of these practices remains unexamined, it is clear that it fits with the larger picture of the Chinese government's efforts to promote "positive energy" content on social media platforms as a way of consolidating its domestic perception of "discourse power" and legitimacy. Their image filtering capabilities rely on a technique called "MH5 hash," which uses cryptography to map photo data, allowing photos to be categorized by WeChat's cloud servers and then blocked.[132]

Technological advancements, meanwhile, have facilitated a greater capacity to filter – and control – information. Although WeChat does not explicitly discuss this capability in its official statements, the company has demonstrated the capability through enabling companies to control their internal information flow. For example, an chat system developed by WeChat for internal use by businesses has enabled those businesses to both store their employees' chat histories and to filter them for certain words to identify potential areas of concern for the company.[133] This indirectly confirms the ability of WeChat to do the same thing with individual public accounts, including filtering and storing certain private conversations.

In sum, information operations on WeChat are concerned primarily with limiting information transmission, jeopardizing both domestic and international users' ability to communicate and organize with other users, therefore providing the government its desired stability, and shielding the majority of the public from taboo topics.

Information operations on foreign platforms

Abroad, China's information operations are more covert and less effective than its efforts on domestic platforms, mostly because, with domestic platforms, they can control the mechanisms themselves at home. Despite the fact that there has been an increasing trend of Chinese officials adopting a more confrontational approach when engaging foreign actors, the tactics rely primarily on outsourcing the operation to third parties and utilizing "astroturfing" and "sockpuppets." For this study, the DFRLab focused on Facebook and Twitter as the main Western social media platforms on which the CCP attempts foreign interference.

According to Puma Shen, assistant professor at National Taipei University, the CCP has "content farms" in Malaysia and in Taiwan, which are used to spread pro-party messaging.[134] A content farm is a website established to create a high volume of highly trafficked articles. Content farms do not actively manage their content—in that they crowdsource articles while providing no editorial control—

Facebook

On the Western social media platform, which is banned in China, China relies on outsourcing content production and propagation to third-party content farms in Malaysia and incentivizing overseas Chinese nationals to spread favorable information.

130 Ibid.

131 Christina Zhou, "Gene-Editing, Huawei, US Trade War: Here Are the Most Censored Topics on Chinese Social Media," ABC News, February 19, 2019, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-02-20/wechat-most-censored-topics-in-2018/10824852.

132 Miles Kenyon, "WeChat Surveillance Explained," Citizen Lab (blog), May 8, 2020, https://citizenlab.ca/2020/05/wechat-surveillance-explained/.

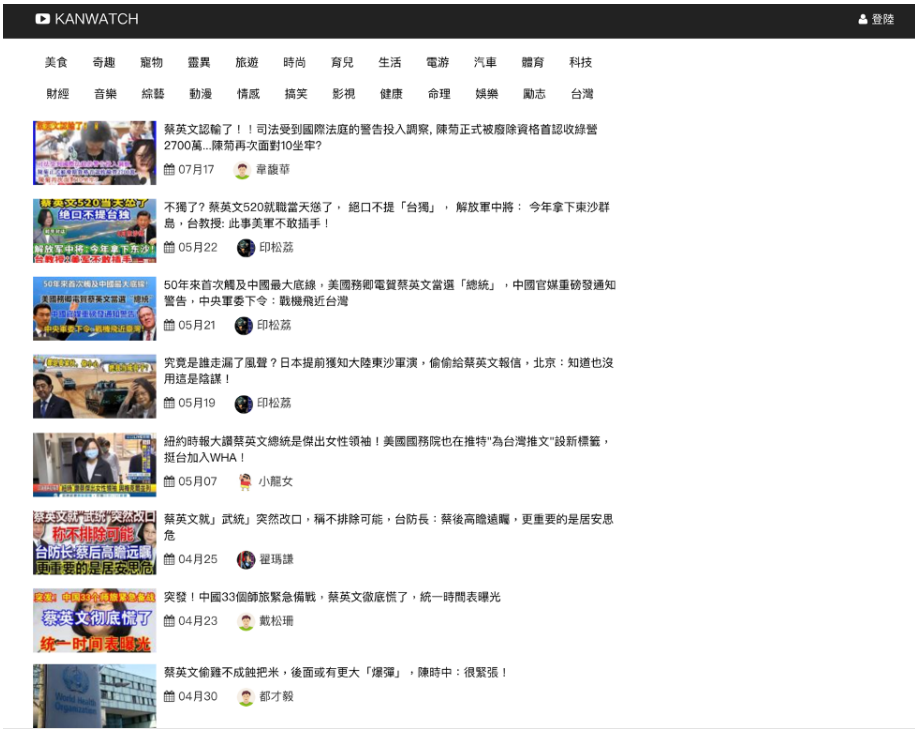
133 "企业如何管理员工微信聊天记录呢?," 点镜软件, January 2, 2020, https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/100678231.

134 Brian Hioe, "Fighting Fake News and Disinformation in Taiwan: An Interview with Puma Shen," New Bloom Magazine, January 28, 2020, https://newbloommag.net/2020/01/06/puma-shen-interview/.

leading many articles to include false and excessive information.[135] After creating the articles, content farm operators recruit—and often financially compensate—individual social media users to help spread them. Researchers, such as Puma, assert that such strategies of hiring third-party contractors are meant to conceal content that would otherwise be able to be traced back to the CCP. Since many of the fake Facebook pages used during the 2020 Taiwanese election were shut down or deleted, the PLA relies on outsourced freelancers in Malaysia or overseas Chinese nationals to disseminate content farm-originating disinformation across Facebook, which avoids detection and direct association between these entities and the government.[136]

One popular content farm, KanWatch, for example, was designed explicitly for users to be remunerated for sharing its content. To sign up for an account, a user must first fill out basic information along with an associated PayPal account.[137] There are two ways to make money off of the platform: a user can either share articles on their social media accounts or they can write articles.[138] According to the Taiwan Gazette, a single user can make about 10 Singapore dollars, or $7 USD, for every thousand views a shared article receives. Users can also easily rewrite articles by pushing a clone button. Other features on the KanWatch platform make it user-friendly and simple to use. For example, a user can track their cash flow to see how much money they have made.[139]

Offering monetary incentives for users to produce and disseminate content, regardless of veracity, has proven to be a highly effective strategy for the CCP. For example, Yee Kok Wai, a KanWatch user located in Malaysia, claims to have acquired 300,000 Facebook followers, and, if Yee's claims are true, it shows that content farms and their output can attract a high volume of attention.[141] Since a majority of content producers are located outside of Taiwan, they are far removed from the political objectives and are more likely to focus on the remuneration. Given the ease with which its participants can make money, and the ease by which content can spread on platforms that are unprepared to stifle such rapid growth enterprises, it is likely that content farm websites similar to KanWatch will continue to proliferate.



A screenshot from KanWatch, a content farm, displays users posting anti-Tsai Ing-wen content.[140]

Twitter

On the Western social media platform, which is banned in China, China has actively utilized its government officials and state medias, as well as purchased and repurposed accounts to promote a positive discourse. Overall, the efforts are sloppy, speedy, disorganized, and overt.

135 劉 致昕, 柯 皓翔, and 許 家瑜, "LINE群組的假訊息從哪來?跨國調查,追出內容農場「直銷」產業鏈," 報導者 The Reporter, December 25, 2019, https://www.twreporter.org/a/information-warfare-business-disinformation-fake-news-behind-line-groups.

136 Brian Hioe, "Fighting Fake News and Disinformation in Taiwan: An Interview with Puma Shen," New Bloom Magazine, January 28, 2020, https://newbloommag.net/2020/01/06/puma-shen-interview/.

137 Jason Liu, Ko Hao-hsiang, and Hsu Chia-yu, "How a Content Farm in Malaysia Turned Fake News Directed at Taiwan into a Moneymaker," The Taiwan Gazette, March 12, 2020, https://www.taiwangazette.org/news/2020/3/10/fake-news-in-taiwan-comes-from-a-trans-national-content-farm-in-malaysia.

138 Ibid.

139 Ibid.

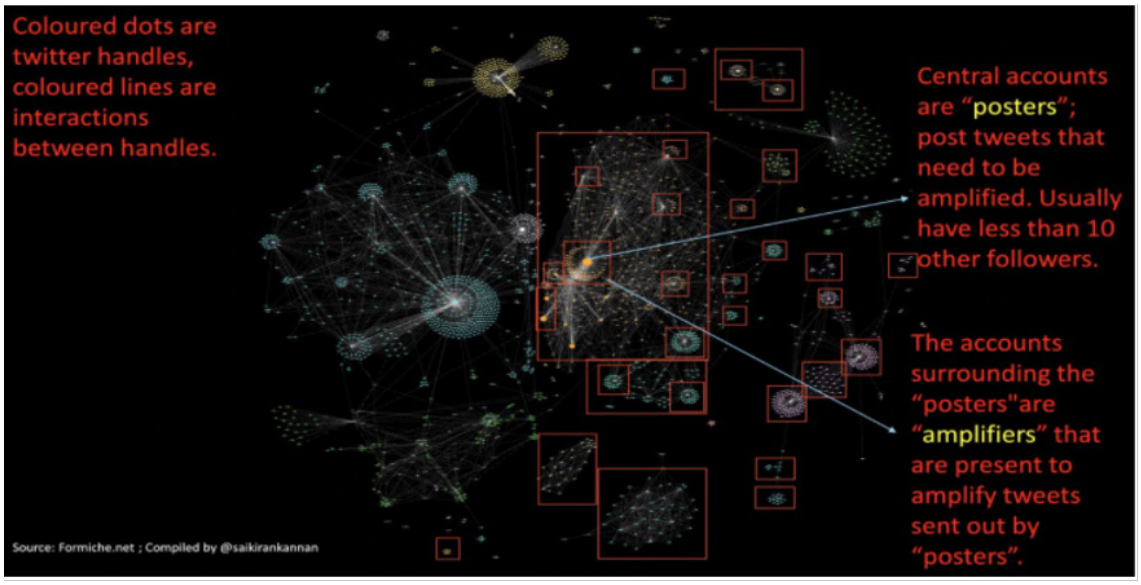
140 Screenshot from KanWatch, http://www.kanwatch.com/?q=%E8%94%A1%E8%8B%B1%E6%96%87, taken on September 16, 2020, at 3:56 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time.

141 Ibid.

Twitter is being used to amplify CCP voices with repurposed accounts, while the CCP is exploring avenues for official Twitter party accounts. In June 2020, Twitter suspended (its term for removing) thousands of accounts linked to China that were a part of a "manipulated and coordinated" campaign to spread disinformation about COVID-19 and Hong Kong.[142]

Although the PLA does not maintain an official Twitter account, open-source researcher Saikiran Kannan found a spike in the creation of Twitter accounts since January 2020 by Chinese Ministry of Foreign affairs spokespeople, diplomats, embassies, and state media.[143] These newly formed accounts pointed toward a possible shift in the CCP's perceived importance of Western social media.

According to The Wall Street Journal, the CCP bought a large number of Twitter accounts from foreign entities and repurposed them for political content, but these repurposed accounts have—so far—lacked the sophistications needed for a successful information campaign.[144] Chinese influence operations on Twitter have shown their operators to be sloppy, speedy, disorganized, and overt.



An annotated network map detailing the effective coordination between "posters" and "amplifiers" in a Twitter bot system. Tweets here are amplified and managed in an autonomous fashion. Tweets here are amplified and managed in an autonomous fashion. The red boxes are clusters that operate within this network to post and amplify the campaign's agenda. The system is sustainable because when a mass number of Tweets are deleted, it can simply create new accounts to support the model. This image is republished with permission from Saikiran Kannan and Bellingcat.[146]

The Twitter account handles are often comprised of a random string of numbers and letters, a common sign of inauthenticity, and the accounts either had an absurdly high number or a nearly complete lack of followers, another sign of inauthenticity. These accounts also present clear indicators that they were repurposed, as they retained old content originally published by the original Chinese commercial resellers who had previously posted on travel, fashion, or sports topics. These indicators also pointed to a number of these accounts and pages as formerly belonging to operators in Bangladesh.[145]

The ease with which platforms can spot these obviously inauthentic accounts, in part, led to a significant takedown of accounts during the 2020 Taiwan election. This, in turn, led Military Correspondent to push the PLA to improve the outward quality of—i.e., better obscure the inauthentic nature of—these accounts, so it is likely that similar state-operated accounts will be built with increasing sophistication going forward. Overall, clear indicators of repurposed accounts and corporate removal of content, accounts, or other related assets to demonstrate the PLA's general lack of success on Twitter.

142 Twitter Safety, "Disclosing networks of state-linked information operations we've removed," Twitter, June 12, 2020, https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/information-operations-june-2020.html.

143 Saikiran Kannan, "How Blocked Accounts Are Just Tip of China's Propaganda Iceberg," India Today, June 12, 2020, https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/how-blocked-accounts-are-just-tip-of-china-s-propaganda-iceberg-1688387-2020-06-12.

144 Eva Xiao, "China Relies on Persistence in Social-Media Propaganda Push," The Wall Street Journal, June 12, 2020, https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-relies-on-persistence-in-social-media-propaganda-push-11591958546.

145 Tom Uren, Elise Thomas, and Jacob Wallis, "Tweeting through the Great Firewall," International Cyber Policy Center (blog), October 2019, https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/ad-aspi/2019-12/Tweeting%20through%20the%20great%20fire%20wall.pdf?TRGkGXh8FPY5KXLSc_4SfDUy7sMfNkw0.

146 Graphic by Benjamin Strick of Bellingcat with additional annotations from Saikiran Kannan, 2020. Also included in Kannan's article for India Today: Saikiran Kannan, "How Blocked Accounts Are Just Tip of China's Propaganda Iceberg," India Today, June 12, 2020, https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/how-blocked-accounts-are-just-tip-of-china-s-propaganda-iceberg-1688387-2020-06-12. Original graphic produced for Bellingcat: Benjamin Strick, "Uncovering A Pro-Chinese Government Information Operation On Twitter and Facebook: Analysis of The #MilesGuo Bot Network," Bellingcat, May 5, 2020, https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2020/05/05/uncovering-a-pro-chinese-government-information-operation-on-twitter-and-facebook-analysis-of-the-milesguo-bot-network/.

Conclusion

With China's growing assertiveness in the international domain, the government has prepared to deploy new technologies to achieve its foreign policy goals, including cheerleading the image of "responsible global power" and increasing interference with its "political enemies." These ongoing efforts are closely related to the geopolitical interests of China, including its territorial demands around the South China Sea; its increasing aggression toward Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet; and its institutional power projection in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. Although its information operations have not yet achieved what the country desires for its discourse power, the expanding channels and more advanced technologies would enhance its penetrating impact into other countries in the near future.

The question of whether Chinese disinformation operations in 2020 have been successful is hard to answer. On one hand, information operations targeting Chinese citizens have led to the domestic perception of an increasing discourse power. With increasing involvement of traditional government-owned media and government-affiliated propaganda bodies on domestic social media platforms, it is easier for the government to establish convincing narratives and propagate to an ever-growing audience. A combination of censorship and leadership on content production and reproduction seems to work effectively as a means of engaging with the domestic audience.

On the other hand, China's lack of an official PLA presence on Western social media platforms and its sloppy efforts to conceal sockpuppet accounts have demonstrated that China still has a long way to go. Content farms remain easy to identify by Western social media platforms, which can easily detect these inauthentic assets. Despite the strong and consistent narratives produced by Chinese information operations on issues including Tibet, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the country's treatment of its Uyghur population, positive engagement with these narratives remains insignificant with foreign audiences. The Chinese government's goal of convincing its foreign audience of the salience of its "China story" has failed to achieve its potential, in part because of the superficially obvious indicators of their inauthentic assets.

China's "peaceful rise" ("和平崛起") will be proven successful when the superpower itself rewrites the rules and structure of international society, while at the same time the great powers adapt and adjust those rules to the new disposition. China's entry onto Western social media platforms and its development of its own platforms display intent to propagate and dominate the discourse around the government's participation in international society to a wider group of global audiences. At the same time, they still assert the CCP's heavy arm on censorship and content regulation. Although China has elevated its presence within the international community, it has not necessarily won the acceptance and recognition of its cultural and political appeal that it seeks. Organized narratives around the "China story" in the form of disinformation and cyberwarfare are essential to China's ascendance on the international stage.

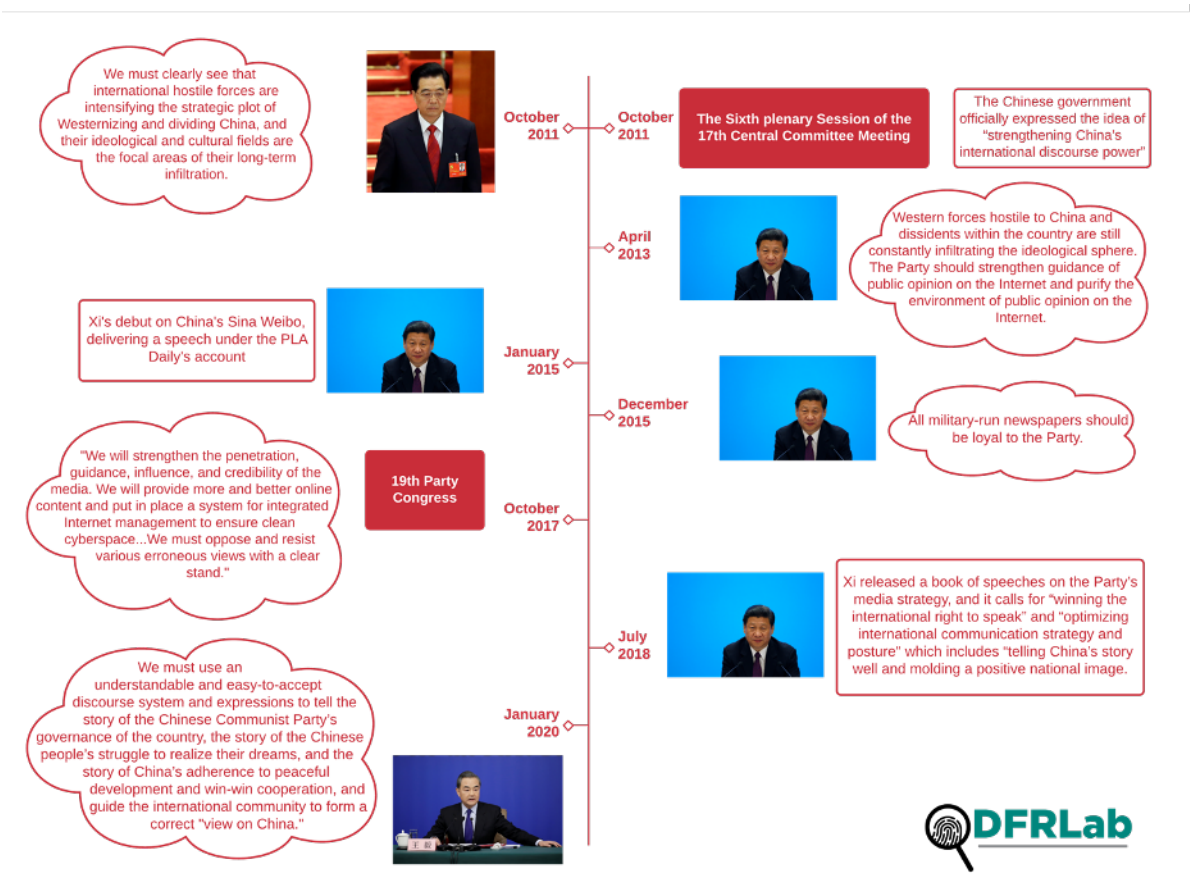
Contributors

Alicia Fawcett conducted principal research and served as a principal writer. Iain Robertson was lead editor. DFRLab staff conducted additional research and writing. Romain Warnault created the cover, and Eric Baker and Donald Partyka designed the layout.

Disclosure

This report was updated from its original version to include revised citations and additional sourcing.

Appendix: Chinese Discourse Evolution Timeline



148 Chris Buckley, "China Takes Aim at Western Ideas," The New York Times, August 19, 2013, http:// www.nytimes.com/2013/08/20/world/asia/chinas-new-leadership-takes-hard-line-in-secret-memo.html. For a translation of the original document, see "Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation," ChinaFile, November 8, 2013, http://www.chinafile.com/ document-9-chinafile-translation.; "军报评论之二：坚持军报姓党", 解放军报, December 28, 2015, http://www.81.cn/jfjb60years/2015-12/28/content_6833403.htm.; Edward Wong, "Xi Jinping's News Alert: Chinese Media Must Serve the Party," The New York Times, February 22, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/23/ world/asia/china-media-policy-xi-jinping.html; Xi Jinping, 习近平新闻思想讲义(2018年版), (Beijing: 人民出版社, 2018). This book was covered by Xinhua [新华社], reflecting military awareness. "习近平新闻 思想讲义(2018年版)出版发行", 新华社, June 14, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-06/14/c_129894076.htm. For highlights of the book, see "习近平新闻思想的七个 '新',"中国青年网, July 10, 2018, http://news.youth.cn/sz/201807/t20180710_11665503.htm; "王毅：加强公共外交是推进中国特色大国外交的必然要求 - 中华人民共和国外交部," 中国外交部, January 15, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbzhd/t1732676.shtml.

Images: President Xi - China's President Xi Jinping attends a meeting with representatives of entrepreneurs at the Boao Forum for Asia (BFA) annual conference in Boao town, Hainan province April 8, 2013. REUTERS/Tyrone Siu; Hu Jintao - China's President Hu Jintao attends the opening ceremony of the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) at the Great Hall of the People, in Beijing November 8, 2012. Chinese Communist Party leader Hu Jintao's opening speech at the ongoing 18th Party Congress was a disappointment to many listeners, offering no major signals that the leadership is willing to advance political reform. Picture taken November 8, 2012. REUTERS/Jason Lee; Wang Yi - China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi attends a news conference during the ongoing National People's Congress (NPC), China's parliamentary body, in Beijing, China March 8, 2018. REUTERS/Jason Lee

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