

# China's Cyber-Influence Operations

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International  
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Published in 2021 by

**Vivekananda International Foundation**

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ISBN: 978-81-952151-7-1

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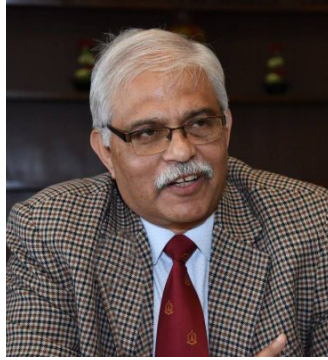
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# China's Cyber-Influence Operations

*"Wherever the readers are, wherever the viewers are, that is where propaganda reports must extend their tentacles", — Xi Jinping, February 2016*

## Introduction

The digital era has transformed the way we communicate. Using social media like Facebook and Instagram, and social applications such as WhatsApp and Telegram, one can be in contact with friends and family, share pictures, videos, messages, posts and share our experiences. Social media has become an effective way of influencing human society and behavior, and shaping public opinion. By sharing a post, tweeting an idea, contributing a discussion in a forum and sharing a sentimental picture, we can influence others and sometimes convince into with our opinion.

Use of cyber tools and methods to manipulate public opinion is called 'Cyber Influence Operation'. In the present day, many countries use cyberspace, especially the social media, to accomplish *Cyber Influence Operations* as a part of *Information Warfare*. Most of these operations are done covertly. It is difficult to differentiate between legitimate or malicious influence operations.<sup>1</sup>

Influence operations are meant to shape the perceptions of individuals, groups, and/or the public at large. In September 2020, General Paul Nakasone, Commander of the United States (U.S.) Cyber Command, called foreign influence operations as the “the next great disruptor.” Russia is the most active player in this domain and uses many methods, including the social media. The U.S. is now much concerned with the spread of pro-Chinese propaganda in the country and has taken measures to reduce the “news employees” of the Chinese media organizations Xinhua, China Daily, the China Global Television Network (CGTN), China Radio and People’s Daily from 160 to 100.<sup>2</sup>

China seeks a critical role in impacting the current international system. It conducts influence operations as a national strategic objective by targeting media organizations, cultural institutions, academic, business and policy communities in the U.S. as well as other countries and international institutions. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) wants to condition public opinion and foreign and multilateral political establishments to accept China’s narrative of its strategic priorities.<sup>3</sup>

## **Definition**

There is no official definition of the term ‘Influence Operations’. Influence operations include a broad range of non-kinetic, communications-related and informational activities that aim to affect the cognitive, psychological, motivational, ideational, ideological and moral characteristics of a target audience.<sup>4</sup> China sees the cyberspace domain as a platform providing opportunities for influence operations.

In 2009, the RAND Corporation defined influence operations as a coordinated, integrated and synchronized application of national diplomatic, informational, military, economic and other capabilities in peacetime, crisis, conflict and post-conflict situations to foster such attitudes, behaviours or decisions among foreign target audiences that further U.S. interests and objectives.<sup>5</sup>

## Cyber-Influence Operations (CIO)

CIO use new digital tools like the 'bots' or social media. It focuses on utilising cyberspace to shape public opinion and decision-making processes through social bots, dark ads, memes and spread of misinformation.

Matteo E. Bonfanti defines CIO as “activities that are run in cyberspace, leverage this space’s distributed vulnerabilities and rely on cyber-related tools and techniques to affect an audience’s choices, ideas, opinions, emotions or motivations, and interfere with its decision making processes.”<sup>6</sup> Influence operations thus encompass not only the activities referred to as information operations but also the non-military and coercive activities. These operations are designed to influence a target audience by changing, compromising, destroying or stealing information by accessing information systems and networks.<sup>7</sup>

If the purpose is to control the responses of the group members, it is called perception management. Russia follows the concept of reflexive control, a theory similar to perception management. Reflexive control is a means of expressing to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him/her to voluntarily decide the predetermined decision desired by the action initiator.

Herbert Lin and Jackie Kerr have coined the term ‘Information/Influence Warfare and Manipulation’ (IIWAM). They define this as “the deliberate use of information by one party on an adversary to confuse, mislead, and ultimately to influence the choices and decisions that the adversary makes.” It is thus a hostile non-kinetic activity whose targets are the adversary’s perceptions. IIWAM realm focuses on “damaging knowledge, truth, and confidence, rather than physical or digital artefacts. . . . IIWAM seeks to inject fear, anxiety, uncertainty, and doubt into the adversary’s decision making processes.”<sup>8</sup>

CIO refers to actions designed to influence people through the combined use of sophisticated computational and social manipulation techniques. China’s idea of CIO is stated as “cyber media warfare is a kind of combat operations with the

Internet as the platform. . . . Targeted information infiltration is made through the Internet media for influencing the convictions, opinions, sentiments, and attitudes of the general public to effectively control the public opinion condition, shape strong public opinion pressure and deterrence over the adversary and win an overwhelming public opinion posture for one's own side.”<sup>9</sup>

The people's Republic of China (PRC) conducts influence operations for achieving outcomes favourable to its strategic objectives by targeting policy communities, cultural institutions, media organizations, business and academics in the U.S. as well as other countries and international institutions. The CCP wants to condition domestic, foreign, and multilateral political establishments and public opinion to accept Beijing's narratives. People's Liberation Army (PLA) organizations responsible for information operations include the Central Military Commission (CMC), particularly the Joint Staff Branch and its Intelligence Bureau, the Political Work Division's Liaison Branch and the Office for International Military Cooperation, the Strategic Support Force and PLA-controlled media enterprises. Free exchange of information also permits criticism of the ruling party. Therefore Chinese authorities go to great lengths to prevent access to Internet sites deemed subversive. The Great Firewall of China blocks the following:-<sup>10</sup>

- Any content considered unfavourable to China. There are over 18,000 websites;
- Gmail, Google, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram;
- Many VPN providers;
- Intermittently, also the Twitter, Hotmail, and Flickr.

China has been trying to influence foreign thoughts and opinions for long. China's influence activities have moved from their focus on diaspora communities to target a far broader range of Western societies' sectors. These are stretching from universities, think tanks and media to national government, state and

local institutions. The Hoover Institution, in a paper published in November 2018, claimed that over 30 of the West's foremost China scholars collaborated in disseminating findings of a working group on China's influence operations abroad.<sup>11</sup> China wants to:-

- Promote views kind to the Chinese culture, society and government policies;
- Suppress alternate views and co-opt key American players to support China's foreign policy goals and economic interests.
- These Chinese inference and influence operations come in various forms:-<sup>12</sup>
- Manipulation of leading former European politicians working to promote Chinese interests;
- Penetration of regional organizations (Interpol, the Council of Europe) to orient their activities to align with Chinese interests;
- Manipulation of diasporas and Chinese communities living abroad, which the United Front Work Department (UFWD) agents can mobilize during diplomatic visits;
- Pressure on researchers and the academic research apparatus using the issuance of visas and financial programs;
- Distribution, in exchange for remuneration, of a news supplement 'China Watch' in major European daily papers, to create economic dependence and stimulate self-censorship in the treatment of news about China;
- To be in charge of the majority of Chinese-language European media;
- Retaliatory measures against governments that are critical or judged to be "unfriendly."



PLA's influence operations are summarised in the 'Three Warfares' concept of media or public opinion warfare, psychological warfare and legal warfare. Media warfare is the control and exploitation of communications channels for disseminating propaganda. It sets the circumstances for dominating communications channels for the conduct of psychological and legal warfare. Psychological warfare uses propaganda, deception, threats and coercion to affect the adversary's decision-making. It conducts military operations through perception management and deception while countering opponent psychological operations. Legal warfare uses international and domestic laws to claim legal high ground, to sway target audiences, gain international support, manage political repercussions and to assert Chinese interests. The PLA uses online influence activities to support its overall Three Warfares concept and undermine an adversary's resolve in a contingency or conflict.

China has employed cyber operations to exert influence over opponents and potential partners. China's repetitive penetration of Taiwanese networks is part of a more extensive effort to wield economic and military pressure on Taiwan to lessen its autonomy. China has undertaken many network operations to harass sub-state actors, many of which are associated with its "Five Poisons": Tibetan separatism, Uighur separatism, Falungong activity, Taiwanese independence and pro-democracy activism. Many sophisticated operations against dissident groups indicate that China considers their suppression to be a high priority and worth the risk of an international backlash as they pose threats to China's internal stability.

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 to deceive. The PLA, the State Council and the CCP's Central Committee participate in organized Information Operations, whether on domestic or international platforms. China utilises advancements in technology and uses 'deep fakes', 'deep voice' and artificial intelligence (AI) on Chinese social media. It is important to distinguish the political intent and

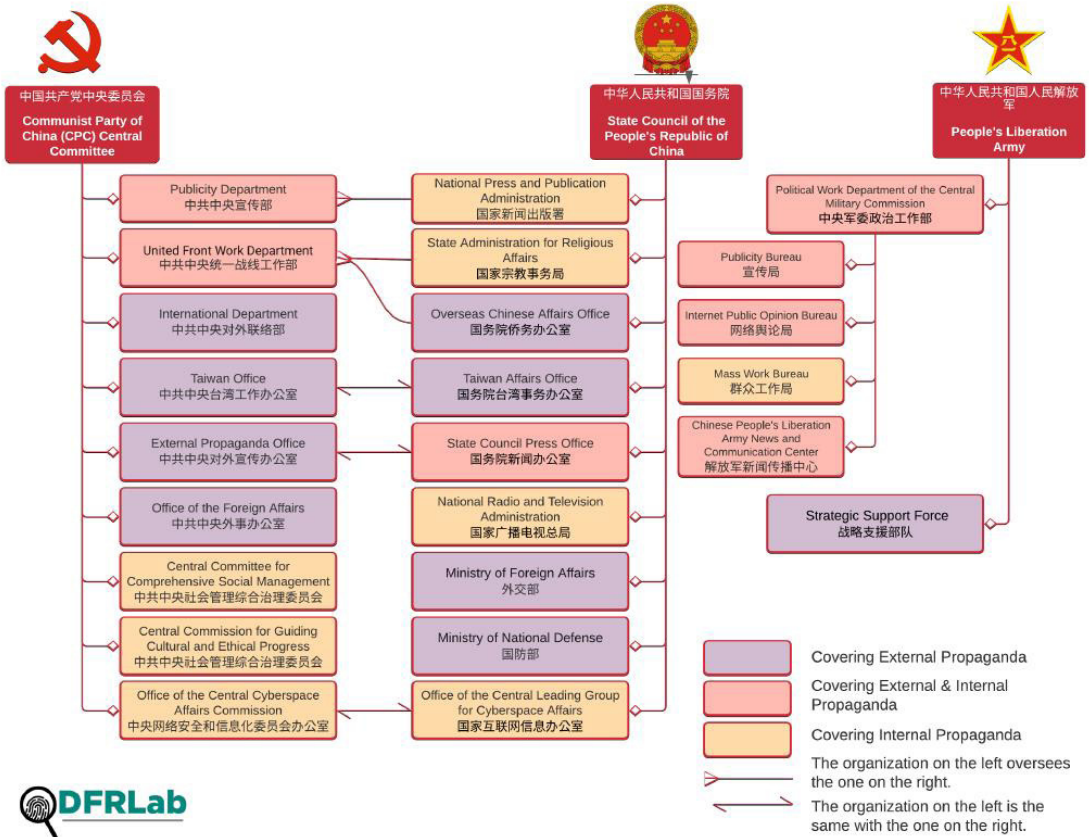
national strategies underlying these campaigns from another perspective on the news.

French researchers, in an influential 2018 joint research report on Chinese influence operations, used the term ‘information manipulation’.<sup>13</sup> They define information manipulation as “the intentional and massive dissemination of false or biased news for hostile political purposes.” According to the French researchers, nation-state information manipulation comprises three conditions:-

- A coordinated campaign;
- The political intention is to cause harm;
- Diffusion of information or false information that is consciously distorted.

## **Organization**

The CCP uses a wide range of party, state and non-state actors for its influence operations. In recent years it has considerably increased its investment and intensity of these efforts. In China, there is no single institution that is entirely responsible for China’s influence activities. However, the CCP reigns supreme. Actors, who are nominally independent in other countries like academia, civil society, corporations and religious institutions, are obliged to the Chinese Government and are frequently made to press forward the its state interests. The organization and structure for carrying out influence operations are given below:-



**Organizational structure of the government offices responsible for discourse power.**

Source: Alicia Fawcett, Chinese Discourse Power China's Use of Information Manipulation in Regional and Global Competition, Atlantic Council, December 2020 available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/China-Discourse-Power-FINAL.pdf>

The central organization responsible for influence operations include the CCP's UFWD, the Central Propaganda Department, the State Council Information Office, the International Liaison Department, the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries and the All-China Federation of Overseas Chinese. These organizations are augmented by various state agencies like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council. However, these two agencies were merged into the UFWD in March 2018.

## **Overall Organization for Influence Operations**

Three branches of the Government are responsible for domestic and international propaganda and carrying out China's influence operations. They are the CCP's Central Committee, the State Council, which functions as its executive branch and the CCP's CMC. While there are overlaps of responsibilities and personnel across the Central Committee and the State Council, the PLA branch is more insulated.

### **Organizations under CPC Central Committee**

Out of the nine departments/offices, the Publicity Department, the UFWD, the State Council Press Office, and the Taiwan Affairs Office concentrate on domestic and international issues.

The cyberspace administration of China comprises the Office of the Central Cybersecurity Information Committee under the Central Committee and the National Internet Information Office under the State Council. Under the Cyberspace Administration, there is the Internet News Dissemination Bureau, the Internet Comments Bureau and the Internet Social Work Bureau. The organization's duties are: supervising the domestic information flow, making rules for online content and regulating internet companies to make sure compliance with laws and regulations.

The Internet News Dissemination Bureau controls online news production and dissemination by organising political training sessions to use the internet for more compelling storytelling and news professionals. It encourages information exchange between domestic and international online media outlets. The Internet Comments Bureau is responsible for investigating online comments trends and providing future projection on the online comment ecosystem. In a report on the 2019 Bluebook of Internet Comments, the China Internet Comments Development Report released by the Internet Comments Bureau, revealed its interest in "exploring the effective ways of expression in the new era of online

commenting to promote government credibility, communication power and influence.” Likely tactics of the agency include engaging experts, agenda-setting, government officials, and influencers to ‘interfere at the right time’ and targeting the younger generation with a ‘positive’ online commenting environment. The Internet Social Work Bureau is a more direct channel to engage with the domestic population.

## **The United Front Work Department (UFWD)**

The United Front has been vital to China’s soft power offensive. The UFWD is a department under the CCP Central Committee, one of four Central Committee departments. The department was created in 1938 by the CCP to garner support from civilians in the country. After the emergence of the PRC in the 1950s, the department was given the responsibilities to unite the country in both territorial and nation-state terms. Major worries of the department were: ethnic minorities issues, citizens not associated with the CCP, overseas Chinese diaspora, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, Xinjiang and Tibet.

Methods adopted to engage these populations include inviting politicians, businessmen, journalists and civil society organizations from target countries to visit China for events like political summits, academic conferences and civil society organizations seminars. The purpose of these trips is to produce and promote propaganda that directly portrays China’s positive image by influencing the respective population groups in these target countries. The UFWD has relations with prominent private corporations, business people, academics, intellectuals, minority groups, Chinese diaspora groups and Chinese students overseas.

The United Front cultivates pro-Beijing perspectives in the Chinese diaspora and the wider world by rewarding those it deems friendly with accolades and lucrative opportunities, while orchestrating social and economic pressure against critics. This pressure is intense but indirect. Clear attribution is difficult. But it has had an overwhelming effect on Chinese-language media in the diasporas.<sup>14</sup>

The Chinese President and General Secretary of the CCP, Xi Jinping, has energized the UFWD's operations. He has added 40,000 officials to its roster and raised it to the top tier of party organs. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, UFWD organizations play a crucial role in China's foreign policy. The UFWD performs targeted, low-intensity influence operations to shape influential individuals' perceptions of the CCP's goals and objectives. The UFWD is taking particular actions to co-opt and subvert ethnic Chinese individuals who are citizens of other nations. In the U.S., the 'Thousand Talents Program' initiatives result in powerful business implications, including the loss of critical intellectual property, from some of the country's leading corporate giants.

UFWD's primary target audience is Chinese diaspora. The mission of engaging and influencing non-ethnic Chinese audiences, individuals and foreign institutions is allocated to other specialized Chinese entities like the Ministry of State Security (e.g., China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations), the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Education and other institutions that have well-trained professionals with long-standing ties with their counterparts overseas.

## **Organizations under the State Council of the PRC**

The Ministry of National Defense and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs generally focus on international issues. However, they target both domestic and international audiences. The National Radio and Television Administration focuses primarily on internal issues for domestic audiences. It uses propaganda and content surveillance.

## **Organizations under the PLA**

Political Work Department of the CMC seeks to influence foreigners by sponsoring visits to China by foreign groups with military affiliations. It maintains a liaison department, subordinate to which is an intelligence bureau and the China Association for International Friendly Contact (CAIFC). The group that is very

active in such activities is the CAIFC. The Political Work Department controls CAIFC, but it works closely with the CCP's International Liaison Department and the PLA's Military Intelligence Department for selecting its foreign targets.

## **The International Liaison Department**

The CCP's International Liaison Department is in charge of 'party-to-party relations'. Its primary mission is cultivating foreign political parties and politicians around the world. It maintains ties with over 400 political parties in 140 countries, receives about 200 delegations, and dispatches about 100 abroad every year. Through its dealings with political parties worldwide, the International Liaison Department identifies promising foreign politicians before achieving national prominence and office. After identifying such people, the department usually brings them to China on all-expenses-paid visits and makes the best possible impression on them.

The International Liaison Department performs the following functions:-

- Administering private sector liaison organizations to facilitate contact with think tanks, NGOs and individuals around the world.
- Collecting up-to-date intelligence and information on the foreign policies, domestic political scene and political parties and societies in various nations.
- Sending special study teams overseas to research important topics related to China's reforms.
- Contributing to the work of Chinese embassies around the world.
- Working with other CCP Central Committee departments and State Council ministries to assist their work overseas.

- Arranging overseas visits of central/ provincial/ municipal/ sub-provincial level CCP officials.
- Introducing foreign political leaders, officials, ex-officials and foreign policy specialists on tours of China.
- Hosting biannual World Political Parties High-Level Meeting and the annual 'CCP in Dialogue with the World' meeting.

The International Liaison Department carries out very important roles overseas and is a crucial instrument in China's international influence activities.

## **Role of Intelligence Agencies**

The *People's Daily*, China's largest newspaper group, is used by both the Ministry of State Security (MSS) and China's military intelligence department as cover for sending intelligence agents abroad and presents itself as offering a humane, Chinese viewpoint on global news. It also operates an English-language news site and regularly performs several U.S.-based social media platforms.

The intelligence agencies and the MSS have a significant task in shaping and influencing Western perceptions on China, similar to the UFWD's role, and the state-run media and propaganda systems. The strategic objectives are determined, prioritised, and disseminated from Xi Jinping downwards. Each ministry and system uses its own methods and resources to achieve those goals. Each system has the same objectives but similar and dissimilar tools. Sometimes, there is an overlap of these resources, tools and competition against each other, degrading their efforts' effectiveness.

Traditionally, the intelligence services do not have a prominent role in influence operations. However, as Peter Mattis noted, they are one of multiple professional systems operating in parallel within China to achieve national-level goals and objectives.<sup>15</sup>



## Gathering Intelligence from Non-Intelligence Sources

The CCP, to gain information relies on, in addition to the MSS, other non-intelligence sources. Chinese state-affiliated think tanks - for example, China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and China Center for Contemporary World Studies (CCCWS) - not only seek to influence perceptions of China among scholars and policy makers but also function as sources of information for the Chinese Party-State. The China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) is a direct extension of the MSS.

Foreign contacts are an important part of China's intelligence efforts. Chinese intelligence agents rarely approach targets directly. As Peter Mattis notes, "for the Chinese, intelligence services seem to facilitate meetings and contacts rather than handling the dirty work of influencing foreign targets themselves."<sup>16</sup>

PLA's influence operation capabilities are shared across its political, academic and militia groups. The Political Work Department of the CMC is the most crucial organ in the PLA, responsible for designing and promoting Chinese influence operations abroad ideologies. The Publicity Bureau or Propaganda Bureau, subordinate to the Political Work Department, supervises content production and dissemination, especially regarding the PLA's reputation both at home and abroad. Colonel Pan Qinghua, who is in charge of the Propaganda Bureau, released upcoming plans for establishing a more professional group of spokespersons, prioritising the impact of positive narratives around the CCP's rule and taking the initiative in 'storytelling' to shape the image of the PLA. PLA News and Communications Center implements content production and promotion and operates its media outlets and social media accounts, including official accounts on Weibo and WeChat. The Mass Work Bureau concentrates on the domestic audience and attempts to promote "positive energy" content. The Internet Public Opinion Bureau, which was established under the 2015 Deep Reform and the military reform, is responsible for online information operations. The Chinese influence operations bureaucracy is given at Appendix.

There is cross-organizational cooperation between the Internet Public Opinion Bureau with other organizations outside of the army branch. The Bureau's main aim is to shape PLA soldiers' positive reputation for both domestic and international audiences. The Public Opinion Bureau, with the Cyberspace Administration of China, organized an event in 2019 for internet media professionals to cover heartening stories about border patrols in celebration of the 70th Anniversary of the establishment of the PRC. In 2018, the bureau organized a seminar titled 'Innovation and Development of Army Internet Public Opinion in the New Era', with academic professionals from the School of Political Science of the National Defense University, officers from the army's political administration and officers in charge of active-duty troops participating. 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."

## **The Media**

### **The Traditional Media**

China Central Television (CCTV) has a number of stations operating overseas, broadcasting in the native language of the host country and in Chinese. It transmits the targeted messages of the CCP. State-owned Chinese media companies have created a substantial footing in the English-language market in print, radio, television and online. Simultaneously, the Chinese Government has restricted the U.S. and other Western media outlets' ability to conduct normal news-gathering activities and provide news feeds directly to Chinese listeners, viewers, and readers within China.

Since 2012, China has increased foreign direct investment in U.S. entertainment, media, and education from nearly zero to some \$9 billion. In 2015, the Reuters reported that China state-run media employed a series of shell companies to hide its ownership of 33 radio stations in the U.S. and 13 other countries.

In the digital television sector, Chinese firms like *Star Times* in Africa have become dominant players. They indirectly benefit Chinese state media. The most affordable and popular packages feature a combination of local stations and Chinese state-run outlets. The global news sources like the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) or Cable News Network (CNN) are considerably more expensive. Chinese companies are also expanding its roles in countries like Pakistan, Cambodia and East Timor.

## Digital Media

The Chinese Government has used social media for its influence operations extensively. The proliferation of social media platforms, the progressively broad range of services offered and the ability to engage with the intended audience provide a lucrative platform for influence operations. In the U.S., Americans spend more than 11 hours per day on average in social media reading, listening, watching or interacting with media.<sup>17</sup> They get their news equally from social media<sup>18</sup> and news sites and trust the reliability of the information on social media.<sup>19</sup>

*Xinhua* and the *People's Daily* are the two widely distributed and heavily digitised Chinese news services to promote the Party's will and protecting its authority. Xinhua News Agency is the authorised news agency of China. The 'Reporters Without Borders' has termed it as "the world's biggest propaganda agency." Since joining Twitter and Facebook in 2011 and 2013, People's Daily has accumulated 4.4 million and 41 million followers. Mobile applications of its media organizations, including the CGTN, brings out another aspect of China's propaganda outreach. It has delivered over 1 million downloads on the Android platform.

PLA's Nanjing Political Institute is the home of its research and training for political warfare. Majority of the PLA's social media experts come from this institute. The PLA's premier academic journal on propaganda, the *Military Correspondent*, provides a fair idea of how the CCP wants to go about its

influence activities. The journal contains ongoing research on tactics, current tracking methods and future information campaign goals. As per the Military Correspondent, the PLA's objectives with foreign social media include: improve and defend the PLA's image, correct misperceptions, address adverse reporting, communicate deterrence signals, communicate resolve and undermine enemy resolve. It calls upon the PLA to improve employment tactics in social media, advance its psychological warfare strategies and develop home-grown AI and data solutions.

Some of the recommendations from various publications in Articles in Military Correspondent are as under:-

- The necessity for engaging in Western social media platforms. "...if a blog has more than 10 million followers, then one's influence may match that of a TV station". Make use of the viewpoints and opinions of third-party media and experts, amplifying voices advantageous to our side."
- China's global discourse power was weak because more than 80 per cent of the essential international news in the world is provided by a few major news outlets of developed nations in the Western world. So create Western social media accounts, employ them to maximum effect.
- Target audiences with tailored content to draw them to the official English language resource, China Military Online, with hyperlinks.
- Cultivate a group of opinion leaders or 'influencers' from within the PLA and using realistically plain language on the Western social media sites, facilitate subconscious acceptance without betraying its foreign origin.
- The Chinese Military Online could be used for foreign interference. It can seek to understand what the Western target audience wants and project different perspectives over domestic propaganda.

## Chinese Investments in the Media

The U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission's report to the Congress in 2011 noted that *China Daily*, a Communist Party-affiliated state-owned newspaper, paid for inserts in newspapers such as *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*.

A U.S. scholar has estimated that the Chinese Government is spending on propaganda in foreign countries \$10 billion per year. The Government has paid to place news like propaganda supplements in prominent international newspapers.<sup>20</sup> China has been playing propaganda videos on billboards in New York City's Times Square since 2011, likely to cost millions of dollars.<sup>21</sup>

Since 2012, China has increased foreign direct investment in the U.S' entertainment, media, and education from nearly zero to some \$9 billion. A 2015 Reuters investigation reported that China state-run media employed a series of shell companies to obscure its ownership of 33 radio stations in the U.S. and 13 other countries. These radio stations actively sought to influence U.S. listeners' perceptions of key topics, from the South China Sea to democratic elections in Hong Kong.

Mobile applications of its media organizations, including the CGTN, brings out another aspect of China's propaganda outreach. It has delivered over 1 million downloads on the Android platform.<sup>22</sup>

A New York Times report confirms that the Chinese Government does pay to deliver its propaganda to foreign audiences. China "spends hundreds of thousands of dollars" on Facebook advertising alone to promote its content on the network. It was observed that Xinhua's Twitter followers were growing at an unnatural rate. It was felt that other Chinese propaganda organizations might also be buying influence and followers on the Western social media. The New York Times investigated in January 2018 and found that Xinhua had bought social media followers and reposts from a "social marketing" company called 'Devumi'.

The Chinese Government is ready to exploit U.S. social media companies for its propaganda purposes.

It was reported that China Daily, mouthpiece of the CCP, paid \$19 million to American newspapers in advertisement and printing charges alone between 2016-2020. In its report to the US Department of Justice, China Daily stated that it had spent \$11 million in advertising in prominent U.S. newspapers like Chicago Tribune, The Los Angeles Times, The Houston Chronicle, etc. It disclosed that it spent \$2,65,822 on Twitter advertisements. The U.S. President Trump found propaganda ads in various newspapers by China, including The Wall Street Journal and Washington Post, disturbing.

*Is there a link that these newspapers try to defame India and Indian Government's policies?*

The People's Daily, China's largest newspaper group, is part of a collection of papers and websites. The Daily is used by both China's military intelligence department and the MSS as cover for sending intelligence agents abroad.<sup>23</sup> It Daily operates an English-language news site and is active on several U.S. based social media platforms.

## **Chinese-Language Media**

By 2018, all of the significant official Chinese media outlets had developed deep roots in the communications and broadcasting infrastructure of the U.S. CGTN or CCTV, the semi-official Hong Kong-based Phoenix TV and some Chinese local TV channels are available as add-on packages of two major satellite TV providers in the U.S. - DirecTV and DISH Network. CCTV channels (English and Chinese) are included in the cable systems of all the major metropolitan areas of the U.S.

The CCTV, major Chinese provincial TV networks and the quasi-official Phoenix TV, are all available in the Chinese TV streaming services that are popular among Chinese communities in the U.S. There are four primary Chinese

streaming services in the U.S. : Charming China, iTalkBB Chinese TV, KyLin TV and Great Wall . All these services are accessible nationwide and carry the major official Chinese TV channels, including major provincial channels. The principal official Chinese media organizations - the People's Daily, and China Daily (the only major official newspaper in English), Xinhua, CCTV (CGTN), have a substantial presence on all major social media platforms of the U.S. and have many followers. Even though Facebook and Twitter platforms are blocked in China, these outlets use the same platforms in U.S. Quasi-official Phoenix TV, a global TV network with links to the PRC's Ministry of State Security and headquartered in Hong Kong with branches worldwide, has a significant presence on all the major social media platforms in the U.S.

#### Chinese media social media presence

(E) = English version; (C) = Chinese version

Platform	Official organizations and subscribers/followers				Quasi-official
	CCTV (CGTN)	Xinhua	People's Daily	China Daily	Phoenix TV (fully controlled by Chinese government)
Twitter	CCTV: 532K (E+C) CGTN: 7.19M (E)	11.8M (E) 11.6M (C)	4.54M (E) 221K (C)	1.8M (E)	7K (C)
Facebook	CCTV: 48.04M (E); 3.44M (C) CGTN: 58.28M (E) CGTN America: 1.2M (E)	46.92M (E)	43.15M (E) 171K (C)	35.17M (E)	14K (C)
YouTube	289K (C)	173K (E)	25K (E)	3K (E)	75K (C)
Instagram	550K (E)	111K (E)	696K (E)	23.5K (E)	N/A

alication.

Source: [https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/14\\_diamond-schell\\_app3\\_web.pdf](https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/14_diamond-schell_app3_web.pdf)

## Social Media

In the social media domain, Chinese companies' growing role in content delivery systems creates opportunities for the CCP to influence foreigners' views about China and the news they receive about their own countries and political leaders. On social media platforms, Xinhua, CGTN and the Global Times were the most active content generators. Posts by the People's Daily, Xinhua, and CGTN were

liked at the highest rates.

The role of WeChat in the 2016 U.S. election is interesting.<sup>24</sup> Reuters reported in August 2020 that the Chinese tech firm *ByteDance* had censored articles critical of the Chinese Government on its Baca Berita (BaBe) news aggregator app based on instructions from a company's team's Beijing headquarters. Millions use this app in Indonesia. The regulated content included references to 'Tiananmen' and Mao Zedong', as well as to China-Indonesia tensions over the South China Sea and a local ban on the video-sharing app TikTok, which ByteDance owns.



Source: [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org)

## Influence Operations on China's Domestic Platforms

China's influence operations targeting mainly the internal audiences on domestic social media apps Weibo, Wechat and TikTok China are both overt and effective. Social media companies are under close scrutiny by the Government regarding trending topics and user management responsibilities. The methods of information operations on these platforms comprise of the limitation of volume and traffic of politically sensitive issues, promotion of pro-CCP discussion and



narratives and censorship of users considered to promote anti-CCP discourse. Under the name ‘Little Pink’, growing numbers of young people embrace the positive image of the CCP more than the previous generations.

Chinese state-owned internet service providers such as China Telecom, China UniCom and China Mobile, besides the nominally ‘private’ technology platform operators, such as Baidu Sina Weibo and Tencent’s WeChat, also play essential roles in enforcing censorship and compliance by users inside China.

## **We Chat**

*WeChat* is the most popular social media platform and instant messaging (IM) app in China. It is owned by *Tencent*, a Chinese internet company with close ties to the Chinese Government. As of the first quarter of 2020, the monthly active users of WeChat exceeded 1.2 billion.<sup>25</sup> In addition to Chinese citizens, many people of the global Chinese diaspora use WeChat to connect with their friends and business partners in China. Numerous reports indicate that Chinese-Americans had initiated political groups on WeChat to mobilise voters for their preferred candidate, mostly Trump.<sup>26</sup> Besides the IM capabilities, WeChat also provides a miscellaneous set of supplemental services and payment services. It limits politically sensitive narratives.

WeChat was found to censor Chinese activists’ posts and the independent media while allowing pro-Beijing media and narratives to spread widely among Chinese diaspora communities. Its server identifies politically sensitive information and prevents the message from showing up on the recipients’ end without informing the user who sent the message. The growing use of WeChat among non-Chinese speakers in locations ranging from Malaysia and Mongolia to Australia and Canada creates a solid base for future CCP disinformation campaigns or election meddling.<sup>27</sup> Its Influence Operations deal with limiting information transmission, jeopardising domestic and international users’ ability to communicate and to organize with other users. It provides the Government with desired stability and protects the majority of the public from taboo topics.

## Sina Weibo

*Sina Weibo* is a Chinese micro-blogging website similar to Twitter. With 516 million monthly active users in 2019, it is the second-largest social media platform in China, after Wechat.<sup>28</sup> It is a robust environment for discussion on a variety of topics, like Twitter. This platform has a highly educated user population; about 80 per cent of the population holds a bachelor's or other technical degrees. The 2011, the Wenzhou High-speed Rail Incident, in which two high-speed rail trains collided in Zhejiang Province, put the platform in the limelight. At that time, the platform's users directed passionate anger and demanded justification from the Ministry of Railways officials in dealing with the rescue work. Facing the criticism, the Government carried out a series of "reforms" to exert greater control over content and users. 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 specific words or phrases on Weibo prevents communities from mobilizing personnel and garnering support online, which proved to be helpful in organizing the Arab Spring protests.

## Western Social Media Platforms

Western social media platforms have been restricted or banned in China for the last decade. Facebook and Twitter were banned in July 2009 after the Urumqi riots. YouTube was blocked permanently in 2009. Since then, there have been no official CCP accounts on Western social media. While Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are blocked in China, Chinese Party-State media have put together lively presences on these platforms. Chinese ambassadors worldwide have been opening Twitter accounts to feed their government's positions into global debates on China.<sup>29</sup> The CCP aims to change international discussions about China and bring them closer in line with its own position. It intends to gradually shift the conversation and increase, what they call, the Party's "discourse power."<sup>30</sup>

Initially, the focus was on English and Chinese language content. It remains the principal languages used even today. However, since 2015 CCP media has been

following a media localisation strategy, offering content in other languages and targeting specific countries. Xinhua started, in 2015, a German language Twitter account, *@XHdeutsch*, and its country-specific Romanian and Italian Twitter channels (*@XinhuaItalia* and *@XHRomania*). In the same year, Xinhua and the China Daily newspaper started using automatic geo-location to redirect users to a specific language version of their page on Facebook. China's influence operations for engaging foreign actors depend mainly on outsourcing the operation to third parties and utilising 'astroturfing' and 'sockpuppets'.

*Astroturfing* is the exercise of obscuring the source of an idea or message that would look less reliable if the audience knew its true source. Government or political organization could conceal an influence operation by making it appear as if it were originating from local politicians, civil society organizations or civilians. *Sockpuppet* accounts are manually administered social media accounts created and used to manipulate public opinion. In this method, the account stresses news on sports and fashion to capture the audience's attention then combines with more pro-China content, while *bots* are automated programs that replicate user activity to undertake a specific action for promoting particular messages.

Puma Shen, assistant professor at National Taipei University, states that the CCP has 'Content Farms' in Malaysia and Taiwan to spread pro-party messaging. A *Content Farm* is a website that creates a high volume of highly trafficked articles. Content Farms crowdsource articles without any editorial control. It leads to many articles having false and with excessive information. After creating the articles, the Content Farm operators recruit and pay individual social media users to spread them. As many of the fake Facebook pages used during the 2020 Taiwanese election were shut down or deleted, the PLA depends on outsourced freelancers in Malaysia or overseas Chinese nationals to disseminate Content Farm originated dis-information across the Facebook. It circumvents detection and direct association between these entities and the Chinese Government.

For example, a popular Content Farm, *KanWatch*, was considered to be remunerating for sharing its content. To sign up for an account, a user has to

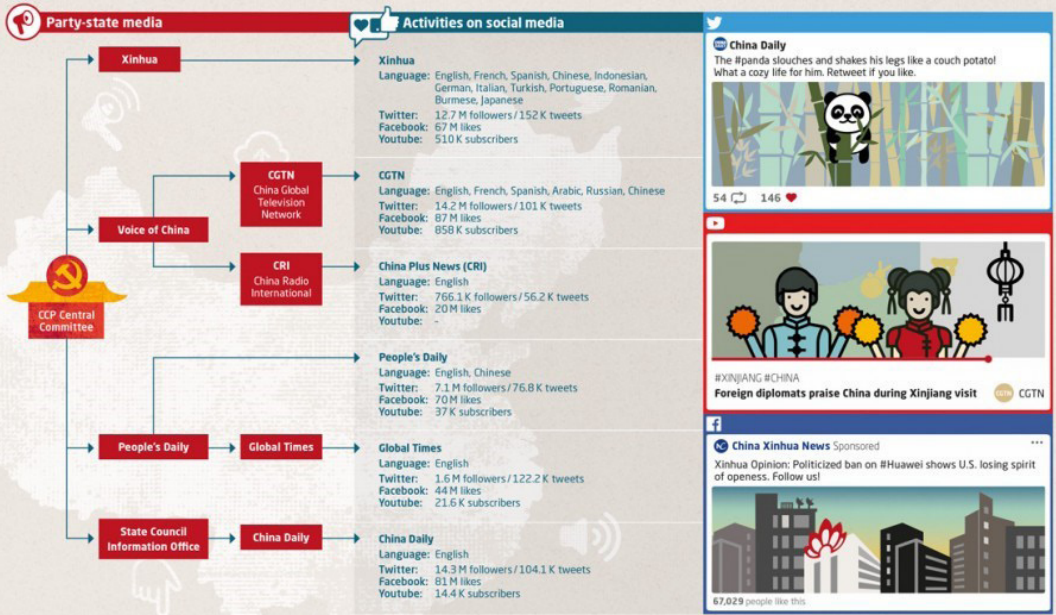
fill up basic information and an associated *PayPal* account. User can then share articles on their social media accounts or write articles. A single user can make about \$7 for every thousand views a shared article receives. Users can also rewrite articles by using a clone button. They can track their cash flow to see how much money they have made. Given the ease with which its participants can make money and the ease by which content can spread on platforms, it is likely that Content Farm websites similar to the KanWatch will continue to increase.

While the PLA does not maintain an official Twitter account, there has been a spike in creating Twitter accounts since January 2020 by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokespeople, embassies, diplomats and the state media. The Wall Street Journal reported that the CCP bought a large number of Twitter accounts from foreign entities and used them for political content. These lacked the sophistications needed for a successful influence campaign. Chinese Influence Operations on Twitter have shown their operators to be sloppy, speedy, disorganized and overt. The Twitter account handles repeatedly consist of a random string of numbers and letters, and either have an absurdly high number or a nearly complete lack of followers, both being signs of inauthenticity. These accounts present clear indicators that these are repurposed. These indicators also pointed to a number of these accounts and pages formerly belonging to operators in Bangladesh.<sup>31</sup>

Most of the content comprises regular news stories. The emphasis is on more positive news and success stories about China, such as development achievements in minority areas like Tibet and Xinjiang. The *#Tibet* and *#Xinjiang* hashtags are filled with images of animals and landscapes by Party-State media on Twitter. Most CCP media use attractive visuals and human-interest stories featuring cuddly pandas, other baby animals, impressive landscapes and China's technological achievements to draw in users. Some editors of state media are quite active on platforms such as Twitter. Hu Xijin, editor-in-chief of the English-language newspaper *Global Times* has over 100,000 followers, so has the China Daily's Europe bureau chief Chen Weihua.

# Propaganda beyond the Great Firewall

Chinese party-state media on Facebook, Twitter and Youtube



Source: Mareike Ohlberg, Propaganda beyond the Great Firewall, Dec 05, 2019 available at:  
<https://merics.org/en/short-analysis/propaganda-beyond-great-firewall>

In June 2020, Twitter suspended 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. Chinese Influence Operations try to cultivate relationships with key foreign decision-makers, opinion leaders, and the business community; inject Chinese narratives into foreign educational establishments, media, and public opinion; and tarnish the reputation of foreign politicians. China is largely interested in achieving longer-term policy objectives.

It is difficult to guess how successful these operations are. The vast number of followers suggest, though do not prove, that Chinese Party-State media may have artificially inflated their followers and their 'likes'. On Facebook, China's international news channel CGTN, Xinhua and the People's Daily have 87 million, 67 million and 70 million 'likes' respectively. On Twitter, the English language version of Xinhua's principal news account @XHNews has 12 million followers, and the People's Daily has over 5.5 million. In comparison, CNN has 31 million and the BBC has 49 million 'likes'.

*The Economist* has reported in 2019 that the state-run media's follower counts were artificially high. These state-sponsored 'bot' activities attempt to distract audiences away from negative discussions about the Party-State. These attempts were largely unsuccessful. Unlike Russia's sophisticated understanding of Western audiences and organization for content creation and targeted dissemination, China's influence operations show less coordinated social engineering skills.

From the above, the following can be inferred:-

- China's English-language social media Influence Operations are seeded by state-run media, which present a positive, kindly and helpful image of China.
- China used paid advertisements to target the American users with political or nationally important messages.
- State propaganda authorities issue weekly guidance to propagate positive messages regarding special events.
- China did not attempt a large-scale campaign to influence American voters in the run-up to the November 6, 2018 midterm elections.
- China's state-run social media operations are mainly positive and coordinated because those techniques support Chinese strategic goals.

## **Domestic Issues**

Chinese state-owned internet service providers like China Telecom, China UniCom and China Mobile, and private technology platform operators such as Baidu, Sina Weibo and Tencent's WeChat play essential roles in enforcing censorship and compliance by users inside China. CCP appointments to managerial positions control such firms. They are subject to being fined or shut down if they host banned content.<sup>32</sup>

Other than the restrictions imposed by the *Great Firewall* and content censorship, the Chinese state also uses several active disinformation and distortion measures to influence domestic social media users. One of the most widely studied organization is the *50 Cent Party*. It is a group of people hired by the Chinese Government to covertly post large numbers of fabricated social media comments to show them the genuine opinions of ordinary Chinese people.

## The Great Firewall

The *Great Firewall*, introduced in the mid-90s, is 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. It was designed to keep Chinese cyberspace free of the outside world's influence by mandating internet service providers to block access to problematic sites abroad. Ever since, the techniques of information control have expanded exponentially. China's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology undertook a drive against illegal internet connections, including Virtual Private Network (VPN) services that enable internet users to bypass the Great Firewall.

The Great Firewall of China is constantly updated to restrict transnational internet connections and to block potentially subversive sites. A research project from Counter-Power Lab at the School of Information, UC Berkeley, has measured the blocking technology deployed by the Chinese Great Firewall in recent years. The *HikingGFW.org* website has displayed domain names of 1382 blocked websites, compiled from *Alexa's* top 10,000 globally ranked websites. These websites include YouTube, Google, Facebook, Flickr, Twitter and WordPress. The Great Firewall of China is constantly updated. Some of the techniques used are:-

- Blocking traffic via IP address and domain.
- Mobile application bans.
- Protocol blocking, specifically Virtual Private Network protocols and

applications.

- Filtering and blocking keywords in domains (URL filtering).
- Resetting TCP connections.
- Packet filtering.
- Distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks (the so-called *Great Cannon*).
- Man-in-the-middle (MiTM) attacks.
- Search engine keyword filtering.
- Government-paid social media commenters and astroturfers.
- Social media account blocking, topic filtering, content censorship.
- State-run media monopoly and censorship.
- Social Credit System.
- Mandatory real-name account registration.

The above toolset, along with the mass physical surveillance systems, put China at the vanguard of integrating influence operations, information technology, surveillance and censorship.

## Methods of Influence Operations

China's influence operations have become far more sophisticated. It has moved from its focus on diaspora communities to target almost all sectors of Western societies, including media, universities, think tanks and state/local/ national government institutions. China wants to promote views sympathetic to Chinese government policies, Chinese society and culture; suppress different perspectives,



and get critical Western players on board to support China's foreign policy goals and economic interests. These Chinese inference and influence operations come in the following forms:-<sup>33</sup>

- Manipulation of leading former European politicians working to promote Chinese interests.
- Penetration of regional organizations (Interpol, the Council of Europe) to orient their activities so that they align with Chinese interests.
- Manipulation of diasporas and Chinese communities living abroad, which UFWD agents can mobilize during diplomatic visits.
- Pressure on researchers and the academic research apparatus using the issuance of visas and financial programs.
- Distribution, in exchange for remuneration, of a news supplement (China Watch) in major European daily papers, to create financial dependence and to stimulate self-censorship in the treatment of news about China.
- Taking control of the majority of Chinese-language European media.
- Retaliatory measures against governments that are critical or judged to be “unfriendly.”

The PRC's Influence Operations are coordinated at the highest level and executed by a range of actors such as the Propaganda Ministry, UFWD, the State Council Information Office, the MSS and the PLA. The CCP has been using Influence Operations for domestic purposes, including its 'United Front Work', even before the formation of the PRC and thereafter. The CCP strives to condition domestic, foreign and multilateral political establishments and public opinion to

accept Beijing's narratives. It considers open democracies as more susceptible to Influence Operations than other types of governments.

China depends heavily on its citizens living overseas and members of Chinese diaspora populations, regardless of their citizenship, to advance the Party's objectives. The PRC is not averse to using pressure or threat to its citizens overseas to conduct Influence Operations on behalf of the PRC. One example is of threatening ethnic Uyghurs living in the U.S. with their family members' imprisonment in China.

China has been increasingly assertive in the online media space. China's presence on the internet belongs to its 'sharp power'. It reveals a more coercive and aggressive presentation of the Party-State. Russell Hsiao from the *Global Taiwan Institute* described China's use of sharp power as a process that employs propaganda, disinformation and other information operations to weaken democratic institutions and abuse cultural institutions to affect political activities for preservation of absolute authority of the Chinese Party-State. Notable Chinese scholars recommend using a combination of official and unofficial propaganda to deter opponents, boost influence and increase power projection.

## **'Wolf Warriors' on Social Media**

Many new and very active official social media accounts of Chinese embassies and leading diplomats have been observed in recent times. This has become termed as "wolf warrior" diplomacy. The most visible account belongs to Zhao Lijian of the Chinese foreign ministry. He tweeted articles suggesting that coronavirus originated in the U.S., which caused massive controversy in March, 2020. As per research from the Digital Forensic Research Lab, these Tweets have been shared more than 40,000 times and referenced in 54 different languages.<sup>34</sup> In China, popular hashtags referencing posts have become viral. These have been viewed more than 300 million times by users of the Chinese social network Weibo.<sup>35</sup>

In December 2020, Zhao Lijian was widely condemned for sharing an Australian soldier's fake image killing an Afghan child. China did not apologise for this. China also disseminates propaganda through Chinese 'institutes' on American campuses.

## **The 'Thousand Talent Progra' (TTP)**

China's *Thousand Talents Program*, a massive and sustained talent recruitment campaign, aims to encourage and recruit the best talent available worldwide to support China's modernisation drive. The stress is on science, technology, engineering, and manufacturing (STEM). Initially, the program aimed to recruit one thousand overseas talents over a period of five to ten years. Official Chinese TTP websites show more than three hundred U.S. government researchers and six hundred U.S. corporate personnel have accepted TTP money. These individuals, in many cases, do not disclose receiving the TTP money to their employer, which is illegal for US government employees. Financial rewards and peer pressure are used to obtain advanced technologies, including often evolving trade secrets, from laboratories and university research centres.

The Chinese Government has established and funded over 500 institutes or research bodies in many universities worldwide. There are 86 in the U.S. While the professed purpose is to develop friendship, the institute staff have been involved in spying on Chinese students abroad and other such espionage activities.

## **The 'Fifty Cent Party'**

To control online public opinion, China utilises many internet commentators, known as the *Fifty Cent Party*. *Fifty Cent Party* refers to internet commentators who are organized and paid by the government to write online in favour of government policies, boost Xi Jinping's image and monitor netizens' activities, often using fake identities. The Fifty Cent consists of civilian government employees who are required to post pro-CCP narratives on the internet as a part of their political position. This is a significant example of strategic state-directed

cheer-leading activity. China uses astroturfing which means the creation of fake persona accounts to organize online trolling.

Scholars at the University of Michigan found that the government fabricated at least one in every six posts on Chinese domestic social media. Less than 40 per cent of astroturfed comments could be classified as 'cheerleading'. The rest were a combination of racism, vitriol, insults and rage against events or individuals. In August 2019, the Facebook and Twitter deleted accounts associated with the PRC which were promoting disinformation regarding the protests in Hong Kong. There is much disagreement among scholars of the Chinese domestic social media environment regarding government-paid astroturfers' goals or objectives. They believe that censors and state-sponsored influence campaigns focus most on opinion leaders and users with many followers.<sup>36</sup>

In recent years, China has mobilised over ten million college students through its *Communist Youth League* organization to take on "online public opinion struggle" tasks. A website, *fiftycentsleaks.info*, has been set up by *China Digital Times* to publicise the leaked emails, making them searchable and accessible by the general public outside of China.

## **Role of The PLA**

Chinese military thinkers have propagated a theory of "cognitive domain operations" to defeat the enemy by employing the method of "mind superiority." According to the PLA, the next evolution of warfare will be cognitive warfare. Dai Xu, a professor at the National Defense University in China, relates "information-driven mental warfare" to a modern day Trojan horse, arguing that the internet is a newly "deformed domain shaped by the interweaving of people's minds and the main form of power competition between nations." The CCP realises that subsets of Information Warfare, such as cyber, electronic and psychological, are a new way to win without kinetic war.

The PLA has a basic understanding of social media analytical tools and how to use them for influence. It used social media analytic tools, *Tweet Binder* and *BuzzSumo* to gather basic statistics on the number of re-tweets and people reached. The PLA uses intangible spaces like social media as a place to deploy psychological warfare. Here the generation, transmission, and influence of information can be manipulated for shaping its targets' perceptions. According to Zeng Huafeng of the PLA, "the ultimate goal is to manipulate a country's values and achieve strategic goals without an actual overt military battle." Zeng identified disinformation as a perfect tool for achieving an unnoticeable victory.

The PLA conceives and executes influence operations through the use of social media.<sup>37</sup> Chinese military theorists have written extensively on information dominance. To achieve information dominance, the PLA employs social media to engage in the three warfare strategy: public opinion warfare, legal warfare and psychological warfare.<sup>38</sup> An example of the PLA's use of social media for strategic messaging is releasing a photo of a PLAAF H6-K strategic bomber flying over the disputed Scarborough Shoal in July 2016 through the PLA Air Force's (PLAAF's) official Weibo microblog account. The PLAAF has also taunted Taiwan on Weibo after increasing flights around the Island in 2017.

A vast majority of the PLA's social media experts come from the home of its research and training for political warfare, the PLA's Nanjing Political Institute. The PLA's premier academic journal on propaganda, the *Military Correspondent*, contains ongoing research on tactics, current tracking methods and future information campaign goals. It provides a close look into the heated discussion within the CCP about improving its discourse power. According to *Military Correspondent*, the PLA's plans for foreign social media are to enhance and defend its image, address adverse reporting, correct misperceptions, communicate deterrence signals, communicate resolve and undermine enemy resolve. The Journal calls on the PLA to develop its tactics on social media, advance its psychological warfare strategies and improve home-grown AI and data solutions.

PLA authors have argued that by leveraging propaganda spread through email, short messages, cell phone communications and other interpersonal communications, including social media, China can do all of the following:<sup>-39</sup>

- Seize the initiative.
- Bolster debilitating psychological and morale-killing effects of kinetic attacks.
- Deceive enemy intelligence operations and degrade adversary understanding of the battlespace, making it “hard for people to distinguish the true from the false and thus more easily drive the enemy into a trap.”
- Target enemy leadership more precisely and at lower costs.
- Defend one’s morale and decision making autonomy.
- “Sow discord in the enemy camp . . . to perplex, shake, divide and soften the troops and civilians on the opposing side.”

Under General Secretary Xi Jinping, the CCP has put enormous resources, estimated at \$10 billion a year, into influence operations abroad. As stated, the CCP aims to suppress dissenting and negative voices at home and overseas, and influence civil societies and governments abroad. Its targets range from prominent politicians and business people to academics, students, the media, Chinese diaspora communities and the general public. With deep pockets and Western enablers’ help, the CCP uses money, rather than Communist ideology, as a potent source of influence. CCP funding has meddled into the realm of ideas, influencing think tanks, academia, newspapers and other media outlets. Cash-starved Western media is increasingly willing to accept doubtful sources of revenue. Prominent news outlets publish Chinese propaganda knowingly, labelled as an advertisement. Retired Western politicians readily push pro-CCP agendas for monetary benefits.

## **Tactics to Influence Foreign Information Environments**

'Beijing's Global Megaphone', a Freedom House report of January 2020, found that the PRC's media techniques' constant evolution and expansion have accelerated since 2017. The pace of change has intensified as the CCP attempts to restore its international reputation after its initial cover-up of the COVID-19 outbreak and take advantage of the economic weakness and political divisions within and among democracies during the crisis.

Different tactics employed by China to manipulate foreign information environments can be divided into four categories: propaganda, disinformation, censorship and gaining influence over crucial nodes in the information flow. Over the past decade, these tactics have developed to such a level that millions of news consumers worldwide are routinely reading, viewing or listening to information created or influenced by the CCP without knowing its origins.

### **Propaganda**

Soon after becoming the general secretary of the CCP, Xi Jinping stated at the August 2013 National Meeting on Propaganda and Ideology that China needed to "strengthen media coverage ... use innovative outreach methods ... tell a good Chinese story, and promote China's views internationally." Propaganda has been an essential part of the CCP's United Front strategy since the 1940s to convince people to join the Communist cause and justify Mao's draconian policies. Leading agencies for carrying out external propaganda are the Central Propaganda Department, the State Council Information Office, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) and state-owned media groups. These agencies make every effort to promote the CCP-sanctioned version of domestic and international events. China is also funding and indirectly owning cash strapped Western media through intermediaries.

Propaganda has been the foundation for Chinese state-run foreign influence operations. A Rand Corporation Report found that the overt propaganda efforts of China are highly effective due to the following reasons:-<sup>40</sup>

- People are poor judges of actual versus wrong information. They do not necessarily remember that certain information was false.
- Familiar messages or themes or can be appealing, even if they are wrong.
- Information overload makes people take shortcuts in determining the trustworthiness of messages.
- Statements are more likely to be believed if backed by evidence, even if that evidence is false.
- Peripheral cues, such as the appearance of objectivity, can increase the credibility of propaganda.

China is spending huge money to spread its messages around the world. Some of these activities can be within the ambit of public diplomacy or soft power strategies. But there are sufficient clues to suggest that Beijing uses dishonest and corrupt methods to send its messages.

The Chinese state media have been diversifying their foreign-language output. Major state media like the CGTN expanded from providing English and Chinese to Spanish, French, Russian and Arabic programmes. Today, their footprint is in a much broader range of languages and markets. Thai vernacular media is full of content produced by Chinese state media. Content-sharing agreements signed by Xinhua and other such partnerships established over many years are now resulting in vast amounts of Chinese state media content dominating portions of the news in places like Italy and Thailand. Most of the China-related news coverage of one of Italy's major news agencies is from Xinhua. In Portugal, Kevin Ho, a Macau-based businessman, purchased a 30 percent ownership stake in the Global Media Group in 2017. He has got a seat as a delegate in China's



parliament, the National People's Congress. This media group is looking for new partnerships in other Portuguese-language markets like Brazil and Mozambique.

There is a trend of hostile and belligerent narratives targeting CCP adversaries. As protests against a proposed Extradition Bill flared in Hong Kong during the summer of 2019, videos appeared comparing Hong Kong activists to the Islamic State militant groups and the rise of student protesters to use of child soldiers in Twitter and Facebook feeds of Chinese state media. With U.S.-China relations going south following the coronavirus outbreak, anti-American narratives have been aggressively promoted.

## **Disinformation**

China thinks of disinformation operations as an effective strategy to achieve its foreign policy objectives. In propagating disinformation, China is deliberately undertaking large-scale operations of producing and reproducing false or misleading information to deceive. The created content depends on the psychological bias to promote paranoia, one-dimensional critical thinking and cognitive blind spots. The PLA, the State Council and the CCP's Central Committee participate in organized Information Operations on domestic and international platforms.

Russians, in 2016, used disinformation tactics to influence the U.S. elections. There was no evidence of China getting involved in any such activities. This has since changed, though the Chinese methods and goals are different from that of the Russians.<sup>41</sup> Both the Chinese and Russian state-run media proclaim themselves as simply countering the conventional English-language media's narrative and bias against their nations and peoples. The state-run English-language media in both the countries hire confident western-educated journalists and hosts. The difference between Russian and Chinese approaches are their tactics, strategic goals and efficacy.

The Oxford Internet Institute reported in 2019 that the Chinese government displayed “new-found interest in aggressively using Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.”<sup>42</sup> These social media platforms have taken down many inauthentic China-linked accounts in the last two years. There has been repeated and persistent campaigns to spread false and demonising information about Hong Kong pro-democracy protesters, Taiwanese politicians, electoral candidates from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), CCP critics, Chinese civil society activists inside and outside China, and COVID-19.<sup>43</sup>

Tools employed by the Chinese are varied. These are: content farms that push out information simultaneously across multiple platforms; purchased or hijacked Facebook groups, pages and accounts; coordinated trolling activities meant to manipulate search results; text-messaging campaigns; automated ‘bot’ networks to affect Twitter hashtags etc.<sup>44</sup> Though direct attribution to Chinese Party-State actors is difficult, enough evidence of such ties has been found in several instances.<sup>45</sup> In all such cases, the campaigns and networks seemed to support well-documented political and content preferences of the CCP.<sup>46</sup>

## **Propagating Influence Tools**

China’s drive to finance and build infrastructure empowering online surveillance and censorship through its *Digital Silk Road* has helped widespread adoption of systems that mirror China’s own. This has affected information environments worldwide, particularly in the Indo-Pacific regions. Outside the Southeast Asia, Tanzania and Uganda have passed strict laws on online media based on China’s models of censorship that sacrifice individual freedoms to support broader social stability.

### **GONGO**

China has created a ‘Government Organized Non-Government Organizations’ (GONGO). These organizations promote China’s party line in the international arena.

## Use of Economic Ties as Political Leverage

China has formed a global network of strategic partners through its Ministry of Commerce, the National Development and Reform Commission, the State-Owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council (SASAC), Chinese state-owned enterprises and private companies. This allows the CCP to gain political leverage. The attraction of market access to China or Chinese investments is an encouraging factor. For example, Greece and Hungary, both major beneficiaries of Chinese financing and investments, have refused to sign European Union (EU) statements criticising China's human rights record and actions in the South China Sea.

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### THE RISE OF CHINESE “GONGOS”

One tactic employed by China to marginalize its critics within international organizations and promote favorable voices is the creation of government-organized nongovernmental organizations, or GONGOs. This is a type of international astroturfing. A nonexhaustive list of China's GONGOs includes the following:

#### Internet and Media

- China Writer's Association
- All-China Journalists Association
- Internet Society of China

#### Environment

- Huai River Eco-Environment Research Center
- Center for Legal Assistance to Pollution Victims
- Center for Environment Development and Poverty Alleviation

#### Labor and Migrants

- Beijing Yilian Labor Law Aid and Research Center
- Suzhou Migrant Workers Home
- Shenzhen Chunfeng Labor Disputes Services Center

#### Ethnic Minorities

- Preservation and Development of Tibetan Culture
- Yothok Yonden Gonpo Medical Association
- Lanzhou Chongde Women Children Education Center

#### Law and Governance

- Justice for All
- Equity & Justice Initiative
- Dongjen Center for Human Rights Education and Action

#### Education

- Guangzhou Grassroots Education Support Association
- China Zigen Rural Education & Development Association
- Beijing Hongdandan Education and Culture Exchange Center

Source:

Organizations retrieved from China Development Brief's NGO Directory, <http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.cn/directory/>.

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The CCP frequently exploits economic leverage and market access for Western companies in China as powerful leverage. In January 2018, under CCP pressure, the Marriott International was forced to apologise for listing Tibet, Taiwan,

Hong Kong and Macau as separate countries. BMW apologised after posting an innocent self-help quote from the Dalai Lama on its Instagram account.<sup>47</sup> Of late, different Chinese government agencies have forced companies like American Airlines, Marriott, and Zara to remove references to Taiwan as a country on their websites. The Apple Inc. bowed under pressure from the Chinese government and took out the app *HKmap.live* from its online store. The app helped Hong Kong protesters in 2019 in tracking police movements. Apple also deleted the Taiwanese flag emoji from iPhones in Hong Kong and Macau during the same period.

Simultaneously, China's crackdown on VPNs makes American social media platforms very difficult to access within China's borders. China's technology remains responsive to Beijing's domestic system of digital censorship and control. China funds Western enablers through Chinese institutions and companies. After retirement, Top Western politicians look for well-paid jobs, which Chinese companies can offer. Former British Prime Minister Cameron is now working for a British-Chinese fund, promoting the Chinese state-driven project with geopolitical ambitions - the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative.

There are also accusations of corruption by proxy, where Western enablers and family members get paid through less-traceable funding. Another method is politicians selling their houses to connections or mysterious third parties for above the market prices.

## **Weaknesses in China's Influence Operations**

There are apparent weaknesses in China's strategy. Chinese state actors have amassed large numbers of followers on social media sites, including Facebook and Twitter. But they find it difficult to build up much follower engagement, whether measured by likes or retweets. China was not able to create real influence to sway the result of elections. In the 2020 Taiwanese presidential elections, the DPP's Tsai Ing-wen won convincingly.

China's disinformation campaigns need refining. Twitter, in August 2019, took down 936 troll accounts that it linked to Chinese state actors. The accounts pushed conspiracy theories about pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong. As per the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab analysis, little effort was put into making the accounts look like plausible human personas. Many of the accounts had been used earlier to push spam-like promotional links. They would tweet in a wide range of languages, including Chinese, Indonesian, Arabic, English and Spanish. China's efforts to win 'hearts and minds' in Hong Kong and Taiwan, have rebounded. Heavy-handed Chinese messages attacking student protesters and promoting reunification made young people in both places increasingly unwilling to identify as Chinese. They felt alienated and scared by the prospect of being under the thumb of the CCP.

Researchers at the *Graphika* recognised a pro-Chinese network called *Spamouflage Dragon*. It posted ineptly made English language videos attacking U.S. policy and the Trump administration on Twitter, YouTube and Facebook. The videos with robotic voice-overs in English criticised the U.S. over issues like how police treated anti-racism protesters.<sup>48</sup>

## Censorship

Earlier, the CCP's efforts to censor external media focused on international outlets operating within China and Chinese-language outlets abroad, including those in Hong Kong and Taiwan. This has changed now. PRC officials use economic leverage to hush up adverse reporting in local-language media with more frequency.

The CCP's censorship methods can be grouped into four main categories: direct action by Chinese government representatives; indirect pressure through proxies like advertisers and local governments; positive and negative incentives for self-censorship among media owners; and physical, cyber or verbal attacks.

## Controlling Content Delivery Systems Outside China

Over the past decade, Chinese companies have become ever more active in building information infrastructure and content delivery systems abroad. Technology giants like Huawei and Tencent, although privately owned, maintain close ties with the PRC Government and its security services. They usually make available censorship and surveillance assistance to the Party-State within China.<sup>49</sup> The international expansion of these companies has got the explicit blessing of the CCP.<sup>50</sup>

### Case Studies

The Stanford Internet Observatory, on July 20, 2020, published a joint White Paper<sup>51</sup> with the Hoover Institution examining China's covert and overt capabilities in Influence Operations. The CCP depends on extensive influence machinery covering a range of print and broadcast media to consolidate its domestic monopoly on power and its claims to global leadership. The White Paper looks at the impact of technological innovations on these strategies and tactics. The questions asked are: what is the scope and nature of China's covert and overt capabilities and how do they complement each other?

	Official Presence On Platform			
Outlet	Twitter	Facebook*	Instagram	YouTube
Xinhua News	12.6M	79.9M	1.2M	894K**
CCTV	1M	49M	779K	857K**
CGTN	13.9M	105M	2.1M	1.66M**
<i>People's Daily</i>	7.1M	84M	1M	64.3K
<i>Global Times</i>	1.7M	54M	174K**	34.5K**
<i>China Daily</i>	4.3M	93M	603K	27.9K**
China.org.cn	1.1M	32M	N/A	11K**

Number of followers of official Chinese state media accounts on social media as of 5/29/20.

\*Facebook number represents how many people have Liked the Page (\*\*indicates the account has not been verified).

Key takeaways of the study are:-

- China's overt propaganda apparatus is vigorous. It manages both inward and outward-facing messaging, which is a top priority for the CCP.
- This apparatus's two pillars are the Central Propaganda Department (CPD) and the United Front, which organizes state organs and manages influence groups outside the Party.
- Xi Jinping has improved the UFWD's operations, enhancing 40,000 officials to its roll and elevating it to the Party organs' top level.
- China's overt messaging efforts cover both broadcast and social media.

## **U.S. Elections**

A study on U.S. elections gave out the following:-

- China's English-language social media influence operations are started by the state-run media, presenting China's positive, benign and cooperative image.
- China uses paid advertisements to target American users with political or nationally important messages and distorted news about China.
- State propaganda authorities' weekly guidance drives accounts to publicise positive messages regarding special events once or twice a month.
- China did not attempt a large-scale campaign to influence American voters in the run-up to the midterm elections of November 6, 2018. However, on a small scale, state-run influence accounts propagated breaking news and biased content concerning President Trump and China-related issues.
- Russian social media influence operations are disruptive and destabilising.

Conversely, China's state-run social media operations are mainly positive and coordinated.

- The Government fabricates one in every 178 social media posts. The comments and campaigns are focused and directed against specific issues.<sup>52</sup> Domestic social media influence operations focus mainly on 'cheerleading' or presenting or furthering a positive narrative about the Chinese state.

A report on Foreign Threats to the 2020 U.S. Federal Elections by the National Intelligence Council states that:-<sup>53</sup>

“Key Judgment 4: We assess that China did not deploy interference efforts and considered but did not deploy influence efforts intended to change the outcome of the U.S. Presidential elections. We have high confidence in this judgment. China sought stability in its relationship with the U.S., did not view either election outcome as being advantageous enough for China to risk getting caught meddling, and assessed its traditional influence tools – primarily targeted economics measures and lobbying – would be sufficient to meet its goal of shaping U.S. China policy regardless of the winner ... however, that China did take some steps to try to undermine former President Trump's reelection.”

## Taiwan

The focus of the CCP's international Influence Operations is Taiwan. This may well be the assessment of how China will operate elsewhere. Taiwan's local elections in 2018 were subjected to numerous online disinformation campaigns. China tried to weaken democratic integrity and methodically attacked democratically elected politicians who did not align with China's strategic interests.<sup>54</sup> The 'Base 311', the PLA unit formally known as the 'Public Opinion, Psychological Operations and Legal Warfare Base' was the lead agency for this operation. The Taiwanese government and social media platforms were caught off guard by the amount of disinformation, the extent of actors and issues it targeted, and its impact on



political discourse. Targets included government's policies, political parties and political figures.

**Tactics.** China aims to subvert democracy and weaken governance in any target country by planting doubts and chaos in its society, weakening its self-confidence and increasing polarisation and disunity. Its tactics are:-

- Worsen existing political, social, economic and generational divides;
- Exploit weaknesses in the informational system;
- Financially control traditional media;
- Employ its cyber army;
- Obscure the attack source through technological, commercial, and legal means;
- Make the attacks partisan so that one side will not condemn it at worst and magnify the effects of its attacks at best.

**Agencies.** The Chinese Cyberspace Administration, United Front Department, Central Propaganda Department, State Council's Taiwan Affairs Office, People's Liberation Army Strategic Support Force, 50-Cent Party or the Cyber Army, its Content Farms and agents employed by the Chinese government from the target country are the leading players. The CCP used its Cyber Army to exercise sharp power in three ways: spreading disinformation online and *PTT* (Taiwanese equivalent of Reddit), creating and circulating depressing propaganda about Taiwan and spreading fake news in *LINE* (similar to WhatsApp). These were enlarged online, on television and in newspapers by compromised Taiwanese media. These fake news stories changed perceptions and dictated the narrative and topic of the day. Sixty per cent of controversial information and fake news on the LINE came from China.

**Obfuscation of Attack Sources.** China conceals and hides its attack sources by technological, commercial and legal means. IP addresses of its Cyber Army accounts and locations bounce to Australia, Singapore and other places. It was very difficult for Taiwan's national security apparatus to obtain technical proof of where the cyber information attacks were initiated. For 'advertisements or propaganda in traditional media, China formed companies such as 'Jiuzhou Culture Communication Center' and 'Publishing Exchange Center' to purchase stories. Reporters are not told that what they were writing are advertisements. When a Financial Times journalist blew the whistle on China's influence on the *Want Group*, the Group sued her, sent people to harass her and attempted to make an example out of her to warn anyone who wished to speak out.

**The Private Sector.** Facebook and LINE were vital in combating Chinese sharp power. Facebook does not have a policy that everything on its platform has to be true, but it does remove content and accounts that violate its community standards, hide contents that break local laws and downgrade fake news. Facebook did all these during the election. As part of the effort to protect Taiwan's election integrity, Facebook removed 118 fan pages, 99 groups, and 51 duplicate accounts for artificially inflating their posts' reach. In December 2019, Facebook cooperated closely with Taiwan's Central Election Commission during the election period to remove false election information that could suppress votes and to hide posts that broke Taiwanese electoral laws. Facebook worked with a third-party fact-checking organization to downgrade incorrect information.

One of Facebook's most significant contributions to countering Chinese sharp power during the elections was establishing an 'Election Operation Center' or the 'war room'. Its goal was to ensure the elections' integrity by rooting out disinformation, monitoring false news and deleting fake accounts as quickly as possible. The *war room* brought together Facebook's policy, legal and security representatives, content moderators and local experts on politics, elections, and law, so they could meet face to face and expedite the decision-making process on what accounts to delete and what fake news to downrank/remove. The war room operated 24/7. The war room was able to block a significant amount of

foreign-produced fake news. It was one of the main reasons as to why Chinese propaganda and disinformation did not affect Taiwan's elections this time.<sup>55</sup> The Taiwanese government's success against these operations was due to increased public communication, enhanced credibility with Taiwanese society, and swift and uniform reaction.

## Instagram



Instagram post from the People's Daily

An example of *Instagram* was taken to see how the Chinese state exploits Western social media. Both Xinhua and The People's Daily are regular users and have verified accounts on Instagram. On average, both accounts posted around 26 times per day. Both have a huge number of followers and follow a few other accounts. The posts are mainly photographs and videos. These are significantly positive and present many variations of a few core themes. Some of the themes are:-

- China's immense natural beauty.
- Appealing heritage and cultural traditions .
- Visits by Chinese leaders Overseas or visits of overseas leaders to China.

- Positive impact of China in the world of science, technology, sports etc.
- Breaking global news.

## Paid Advertisements

It was observed that People's Daily, Xinhua, CGTN and China Daily run paid advertisements. Many of these paid advertisements were recognised and retained by Facebook as part of their collection of 'ads related to politics or issues of national importance'. For Facebook, advertisements of this kind are required to be authorised and reviewed. Besides the notation indicating that the post is a paid advertisement, it carries a specific "paid for by" disclaimer.

## Chinese Model of English-Language Social Media Influence Operations



**China Xinhua News**  
Sponsored

What has China achieved over 40 years of #ReformAndOpeningUp?  
President Xi Jinping sums up:



Xi summarizes achievements of China's 40-year reform,  
opening-up

XINHUANET.COM

In late 2018 and early 2019, a study was carried out about the English-language social media posts from accounts run by the People's Daily, Xinhua and four other Chinese state-run media organizations concentrating on the foreign audience in Western social media platforms. It was found that China has taken a completely different approach to influence foreign audiences from its policy in the domestic social media space.

Chinese state-run accounts, on average, posted 60 to 100 times per day across several Western platforms. CGTN, Xinhua and the Global Times were the most active content generators on these social media platforms. Posts by Xinhua, People's Daily and CGTN were favoured or liked at the highest rates.

## **Confucius Institutes (CI) and Targeted Organizations**

*Confucius Institutes* are education organizations sponsored by the CCP to teach Chinese culture, language and history at the primary, secondary and university level worldwide. China likes to compare the Confucius Institutes with branches of France's *L'Alliance Francaise*, U.K.'s *British Council*, Germany's *Goethe Institute* and Spain's *Cervantes Institute*. As per Xinhua, there were more than 500 Confucius institutes in 142 countries as of late 2017. There were at least 110 Confucius Institutes and 501 Confucius Classrooms in secondary schools) across the U.S alone.<sup>56</sup>

According to Li Changchun, a former CCP Politburo Standing Committee member responsible for propaganda, Confucius Institutes' Chinese-language instruction serves as an essential platform for a more extensive program to increase China's soft power and advance Beijing's version of history. In the sphere of perception management and image shaping, this idea of Confucius Institutes from the Chinese Communist Party's UFDW and PRC's Ministry of Education is a sophisticated example of the Chinese Government's and the Communist Party's Influence Operations.

As per Richard Fadden, former director of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, Confucius Institutes are funded by the CCP Propaganda Department, formally affiliated with the UFWD. CIs are supervised by personnel based in Chinese embassies and consulates. Liu Yandong, a former Chinese vice-premier and Politburo member, was the head of the UFWD when she launched the program in 2004. Ms Liu now serves as chair of the Office of Chinese Language Council International, the Confucius Institutes' parent organization, known as the 'Hanban'. Confucius Institutes provide the Chinese government with access to U.S. student bodies.

In late 1970s, when the Chinese government first allowed its citizens to attend western universities, the CCP created a 'Chinese Students and Scholars Association' (CSSA) to monitor Chinese students and mobilize them against views different from the CCP's stance. This has not changed. Directly supported by the Chinese embassy and consulates, CSSAs now report on and compromise other Chinese students' academic freedom as well as the American faculty. Events that are considered politically offensive by the CCP have been subject to increasing pressure and retaliation by diplomats in the Chinese Embassies, consulates, and CSSA branches. Some essential aspects of CSSA are:-

- CCP's UFWD oversees the CSSAs, whose purpose is to influence local elites and community leaders.
- Many of the 150 CSSA chapters on U.S. campuses limit membership to Chinese citizens, violating the principle that student organizations should not differentiate based on nationality.
- PRC diplomatic missions regularly provide guidance and funding to separate CSSA chapters, such as directing members to disturb lectures or events that question CCP ideology or views.
- Academic brilliance requires the free flow of ideas. Chinese students are valued contributors. However, CSSA chapters actively inhibit debate and interactions with non-Chinese peers.

- In 2018, the congressional U.S.-China Commission stated that CSSAs “frequently attempt to conceal” their ties to the CCP and “are active in carrying out overseas Chinese work consistent with Beijing’s United Front strategy.”

## Funding

The Associate Editor of the *Weekly Standard*, Ethan Epstein, argued that the key reason for the spread of Confucius Institutes in U.S. universities is “an alarming willingness to accept money at the expense of principles that universities are ostensibly devoted to upholding.” According to expert John Fitzgerald, “Universities that accept Confucius Institutes on Beijing’s terms with all the compromises they entail, they signal their willingness to set aside academic principles to build good relations with China and indicate that normal due diligence does not apply to relations with Chinese universities and firms.”

Confucius Institutes are co-founded by several host universities and secondary schools. The *Hanban* arranges a Chinese university to supply teachers, textbooks and other materials. The Chinese university pays the teachers. They do not have to hold green cards or pay U.S. taxes. On average, depending on the institution, the Hanban provides a \$150,000 start-up grant with \$100,000–\$ 200,000 per year follow-on funding directly to the American university. Secondary schools usually receive \$50,000 in initial funding and \$15,000 subsequently per annum. There are two worrying provisions in the Hanban contracts with U.S. host institutions: forbidding the Confucius Institutes from piloting any activities that contravene Chinese law and the enabling contract remain confidential, making oversight by the academic community difficult.

In addition to sending many teachers to provide Chinese language instruction, China sponsors trips for U.S. students to study in China. Through its ‘Chinese Bridge Program for Secondary School Students’, the Hanban has paid for more than 6,000 U.S. high school students to visit China since 2007. These exchanges’ main goal is to build a friendly environment for China’s interests by giving

participants favourable views of China, which they then propagate.

Many universities worldwide see China as a fund provider and think that partnering with it and establishing Confucius Institutes is a practical way of getting more funding. With schools in Latin America and the Caribbean in need of funding and the generous amounts of funding provided by the Hanban, it would be interesting to see how much influence the Confucius Institutes will have in the region.

## Adverse Opinions

Allegations against the CIs are mainly about the exclusive use of PRC materials that support Chinese viewpoints, terminology, and simplified characters; the avoidance of discussion in American classrooms and programs on controversial topics such as Tibet, Tiananmen, Xinjiang, the Falun Gong and human rights; and potential infringement on theoretically independent studies curricula on American campuses.

U.S. policymakers, in recent years, have increased their scrutiny of the activities of Confucius Institutes and their relationship to the Chinese government. Their concerns are propaganda, censorship and interference in U.S. universities' decision-making processes, for which some universities had to withdraw from the program. A U.S. organization advocating for intellectual freedom, the National Association of Scholars, in its 2017 report on Confucius Institutes, made several observations:-

- Institute faculty “face pressure to self-censor”.
- Contracts between Confucius Institutes and host universities are “rarely publicly available.”
- Universities with financial incentives not to upset China “find it more difficult to criticise Chinese policies.”



- Confucius Institutes present students with “selective knowledge” of Chinese history, including “avoiding Chinese political history and human rights abuses.”

## Headwind

Some of the steps taken by the U.S. policymakers are:-

- Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL), Chairman of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, in February 2018, wrote to five universities in Florida asking them to end their affiliations with the Confucius Institutes, citing the risk posed by Beijing’s “increasingly aggressive attempts to use Confucius Institutes to influence foreign academic institutions and critical analysis of China’s history and present policies.”
- Representative Seth Moulton (D-MA), in March 2018, urged Tufts University and the University of Massachusetts, Boston, to close their Confucius Institutes.
- Two Texas representatives, Michael McCaul (R) and Henry Cuellar (D), in April 2018, urged several Texas universities to sever ties with the Confucius Institute.
- Some legislative measures undertaken are:-
  - Representative Joe Wilson (R-SC) and Senators Rubio and Tom Cotton (R-AK) presented legislation in March 2018, titled the Foreign Influence Transparency Act. It would require organizations that promote foreign governments’ political agendas to register as foreign agents and would require universities to disclose gifts and donations from foreign sources.
  - Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) announced the Stop Higher Education Espionage and Theft Act in May 2018, which tries to strengthen the U.S. government’s ability to counter foreign intelligence organizations

working inside the U.S. educational system.

- Senator Rubio and his Congressional-Executive Commission on China co-chair Representative Chris Smith (R-NJ), along with co-sponsors, introduced bills in the Senate and House in June 2018 for the creation of an inter-agency task force to prepare an unclassified report on CCP influence operations targeting the U.S. and certain allies.
- The National Defense Authorization Act for 2019 covers important provisions to coordinate the U.S. government's response to harmful foreign influence operations and campaigns, including specifically by China.

The PRC has been carrying out its influence operations through Confucius Institutes aggressively. A July 20, 2015 report by the 'Council on Hemispheric Affairs on Big Dragon on Campus', on China's soft power-play in the academia states, "The administrations of many universities hosting Confucius Institutes worldwide have self-censored their activities to keep from offending China". North Carolina State University, in 2009, cancelled a visit by the Dalai Lama. This was due to the director of the school's Confucius Institute's warning stating that hosting the Tibetan leader would disrupt "strong relationships we were developing with China." In Australia, Sydney University cancelled a lecture by the Dalai Lama in 2013.

U.S. policymakers believe that more rigorous standards of academic freedom, transparency and university oversight be exercised over the Confucius Institutes. Though the U.S. is open to Chinese scholars studying American politics or history, China restricts access to American scholars and researchers seeking to explore politically sensitive areas of China's political system, society and history.

A non-profit advocacy group, The National Association of Scholars, informed that the number of Confucius Institutes in the U.S. fell from 103 in 2017 to 55 in 2021. Universities quoted several reasons for terminating the Institutes, including the potential for Chinese government influence and risks to U.S.

national security; concerns about academic freedom; differences between U.S. educational institutions and the Institutes over missions and objectives; declining interest or enrollment; changing curricular needs; difficulties of the operation due to the COVID-19 pandemic; the desire to keep DOD Chinese Language Flagship funding; and encouragement by Members of Congress.

Some Confucius Institutes and Classrooms have recently been shut down in countries including Australia, Canada, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, and Sweden. The Vrije University of Brussels shut its Confucius Institute in 2019 after 13 years. Other universities that have or are doing the same include the University of Chicago, Penn State, Tulane, Texas A&M, NC State, Michigan (a total of 33 in the U.S. and abroad), the Université of Lyon in France, Stockholm University, and the University of Leiden in the Netherlands.

## **Targeting Societies**

Today, as stated, China's Cyber influence operations target a broad segment of Western societies, including universities, think tanks, media and state, local and national government institutions. It has moved far beyond the traditional focus on diaspora communities. China wants to promote views sympathetic to the Chinese Government's policies, stifle different ideas and co-opt important players to support China's foreign policy goals and economic interests. China also exploits usual public field diplomacy like paid media inserts, visitor programs, educational and cultural exchanges, and government lobbying, which many countries use to project soft power. But, besides, China makes use of assertive and opaque 'sharp power' activities.

In the U.S., China tries to identify and cultivate promising politicians. It employs top lobbying and public relations firms and obliges influential civil society groups. China arranges visits to the middle kingdom by members of Congress and their staffs. In some rare cases, It has used private citizens or companies to take advantage of loopholes in U.S. regulations prohibiting direct foreign contributions to elections for funding. China uses its business, companies to press

forward their strategic objectives abroad and gain political influence. China has supported the dozens of local Chinese chambers of commerce in the U.S. to have ties to the Chinese Government.<sup>57</sup>

## **Other Chinese Programs.**

### **Thousand Talents Programs**

China's Foreign Thousand Talents Program wants to attract "high-end foreign scientists, engineers, and managers from foreign countries." Chinese research institutions that manage individual programs send invitations and advertisements to participate. These institutions report to and are supervised by the government and the party, which provides financial compensation for participation.

### **Film industry**

There is growing apprehension over PRC-directed control and censorship of the film industry. It is implemented through purchases of theatre and production companies by Chinese companies, editorial changes demanded by the CCP and visa denials to directors, actors and others critical of Chinese policies. *PEN America*, a free-speech watchdog, in a report titled 'Made in Hollywood, Censored by Beijing', describes how Hollywood has almost wholly submitted to China's censorship demands through production modifications or anticipatory self-censorship.<sup>58</sup>

### **Think Tanks**

The CCP has also turned to think tanks to expand its influence in the U.S. and Europe. Chinese diplomats and other intermediaries' regularly attempt at think tanks, researchers, scholars and other staffers to influence their activities. The Chinese-U.S. Exchange Foundation, linked to the Chinese Government, provides grants to prominent American think tanks like the *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, *Brookings* and *the Asia Society*. The PRC has made networking

arrangements in Europe, such as the *16+1* think tank network and *eSilks*, a think tank network aligned with the OBOR.<sup>59</sup> The *Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*, a government think tank, in 2017, opened a branch in Budapest as a reward for Hungary's political cooperation and to influence future European debate on cooperation with China.<sup>60</sup> As a result of their connections to the Chinese Government, think tanks may significantly undermine their credibility as centres of independent expertise on China.

While China is establishing its network of think tanks in the U.S., it has been restricting American think tanks operations in China. It curbs the access of American think-tank researchers and delegations to China and Chinese officials. The U.S. Department of Education has investigated to determine whether U.S. academic institutions had correctly reported foreign contracts and gifts. Its report disclosed that many American universities accepted billions of dollars in unreported foreign funds. Though receiving foreign funds is not illegal, the law requires disclosure. Georgetown University did not report more than \$2 million from an arrangement with the CCP Central Committee to host academic exchanges with CCP officials through the Central Committee's Party School. Cornell University did not disclose more than \$1 million in contracts with Chinese telecommunications company Huawei Technologies.

Georgetown and Cornell Universities were not alone. Nearly every U.S. institution investigated had received some finance from Huawei. Moreover, most of Huawei's sponsored arrangements involved sensitive industries like robotics, cloud computing services and se-conductors. The University of Maryland was cooperating with Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba Group Holding Ltd. to develop algorithms for crowd-surveillance technology. The U.S. Justice Department declared criminal indictments involving a Harvard department chair who lied to federal authorities about his ties to Chinese government entities and his acceptance of Chinese funding.

U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo issued an ultimatum in November 2020 to think tanks and academic institutions worldwide: either publicly

disclose funding received from foreign governments or risk losing access to State Department officials. This move was initiated due to growing concerns about foreign governments' role in shaping academic and policy debates, especially the risk posed by the CCP's robust influence apparatus.<sup>61</sup>

In contrast to China's investments in U.S. academic institutions, Chinese government funding for U.S. think tanks is negligible when compared to that of other foreign countries. This was revealed by a review of information compiled by the Center for International Policy (CIP), an independent nonprofit center for research, public education, and advocacy on U.S. foreign policy. According to CIP's research, only three U.S. think tanks received Chinese government funding. However, the report acknowledges that think tanks have no legal obligation to reveal their funders, foreign or domestic, publicly.

## Cyber Penetrations

China has no hesitation in using cyber penetration for influencing its adversaries and potential partners. China penetrated the Taiwanese networks to exert economic and military pressure to reduce its autonomy. Even when China does not have a hostile relationship with the target entity, it uses cyber operations to support diplomatic and trade efforts.<sup>62</sup> Significantly, many of the cyber penetrations undertaken by China target sub-state actors, which the Chinese call a "Five Poisons": Uighur separatism, Tibetan separatism, Falungong activity, Taiwanese independence and pro-democracy activism. There have been many instances of Chinese cyber penetrations harassing activist groups abroad who fight for the rights of minority ethnicities within China. Extremely sophisticated cyber-attacks targeting Tibetan advocacy groups were made by the *Red Alpha* and *Ghostnet* campaigns. These featured *phishing* and *watering hole* attacks with malware, software exploits designed to work across multiple platforms.

## The Covid – 19 Campaign

### Wolf Warrior Diplomacy

China has an old stratagem known as “Borrowing a Boat Out to Sea” to exploit foreign media to deliver Chinese propaganda. During the COVID-19 pandemic, PRC government officials aggressively used social media through ‘wolf warrior’ diplomacy and global disinformation campaigns to sow confusion and promote conspiracy theories. Named after two action movies in which the Chinese military conquers American forces and coined by Chinese state media, *wolf warrior diplomacy* pronounces the new ethos of Chinese diplomat - a more aggressive push of CCP messaging through various mediums. As the coronavirus outbreak originated from Wuhan city, China’s main effort was to suppress information about it. When China could control the pandemic within its borders, it launched an influence campaign to sidetrack blame from Beijing’s failings and highlight other governments’ failures to portray China as the model and first-resort partner for other countries.

China uses both overt and covert tactics for its Influence Operations on COVID-19. It used domestic censorship, state media messaging in English-language, and fake accounts to influence Western social media platforms’ conversations. Chinese diplomats and embassies took active part in overt messaging to augment the CCP’s narratives on COVID-19. Covert state-sponsored activity leveraged fake Twitter accounts to acclaim the CCP’s pandemic response and criticised the U.S., Hong Kong and Taiwan’s responses.<sup>63</sup>

In 2019, the CCP created many official accounts of its government offices and embassies on Twitter and Facebook through which the Chinese state media started posting actively. Between the end of December and mid-March, the Chinese media published seven thousand articles on coronavirus in English on Facebook alone. The Chinese profiles on social networks regularly share Russian Television *RT*, *Sputnik* and *Iranian PressTV*. However, direct cooperation between the Chinese and pro-Russian media could not be confirmed. Chinese diplomats

used Twitter extensively during the COVID-19 crisis to strengthen its 'mask diplomacy' charm offensive, deluge the internet with the propaganda about the virus' origin and rebut any criticism about the CCP's handling of the outbreak.

The wolf warrior tactics have largely backfired. The French Foreign Ministry summoned the Chinese Ambassador after Chinese diplomats claimed France negligently allowed its elderly to die of COVID-19. European public attitudes toward China are hardening and the EU approach toward China is stiffening. According to recent *Pew* polling, negative views of China reached historic highs in Australia, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the U.S. COVID-19 is not the only cause of this shift, but it certainly it is an accelerant.

China started sending medical aid to European countries facing Covid-19. There was an increase in forceful messaging to publicise this assistance focusing on China's donations of masks to other countries. It was supplemented by negative messages on the failings of the U. S. and its slow response to the virus. Some of the examples are:-

- Zhao Lijian, the Foreign Ministry spokesperson, tweeted, "Countries like Singapore, ROK took necessary measures & put the epidemics under control because they made full use of this precious time China bought for the world. As for whether the U.S. availed itself of this window, I believe the fact is witnessed by US & the world." He tweeted again, "Be transparent! Make public your data! US owe us an explanation!"
- Hu Xijin, the editor in chief of *Global Times* tweeted, "What really messed up the world is failure of the U.S. in containing the pandemic."
- In Paris, the Chinese embassy issued a press release hailing the success of China's "dictatorship" over the United States' "flagship of democracy," pushing the message that Beijing's model was superior.



China made clandestine efforts to manipulate information and propagate chaos using false messages that went viral in the U.S. It cautioned that President Trump was about to order a two-week national quarantine. The messages triggered such panic that the National Security Council had to tweet that this was false.<sup>64</sup> When China was facing criticism over its management of the early stages of the pandemic and some U.S. officials stated that the virus could have escaped from a Wuhan lab, CGTN started its own conspiracy theory. The station advocated, without any evidence, that the virus originated at a military base in Maryland in the U.S. and was brought to China by American soldiers during an athletics competition.

## Mask Diplomacy

While the world was stuck in the chaos of the COVID-19 outbreak, China grabbed the opportunity to improve its image as a “responsible global leader” under the claim of “peaceful rising.” The discourse on mask diplomacy concerning different countries and the volume varied across nations. It showed the custom-tailoring of messaging for the respective country. There was a radical increase in CCP-affiliated Twitter accounts, connected with the COVID-19 time period, from January 2020 to July 2020.<sup>65</sup>

One example of this is the media coverage of the donations Jack Ma, the founder of Alibaba and a Party member. On 16 March, 2020, Jack Ma announced that his foundation would send 500,000 testing kits and one million masks to the U.S. as well as 20,000 testing kits, 100,000 masks, and 1,000 sets of personal protective equipment to all 54 African countries.<sup>66</sup> Depending on China’s exact relationship with the respective country, China’s donation are portrayed as an iron-clad friendship/all-weather friendship. Examples are Cambodia, Serbia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Zimbabwe. It also tries to depict a jointly built community of shared future with U.S., Japan or South Korea.<sup>67</sup> An example is when Aleksandar Vučić, the Serbian president, on 15 March, stated that “European solidarity does not exist. That was a fairy tale, the only country that can help us is China.”<sup>68</sup>

Anti-US messaging is spread through unofficial channels, which provide a level of plausible deniability. An appropriate example of this is the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs' spokesman Zhao Lijian's Twitter post on 12 March, blaming the US Army for deliberately spreading COVID in Wuhan. This was shared by over a dozen Chinese diplomats on Twitter.<sup>69</sup>



## Analysis

China's influence strategy on COVID-19 involved a full spectrum of overt and covert tactics to manage Beijing's image both domestically and abroad. Some of the critical aspects are:-

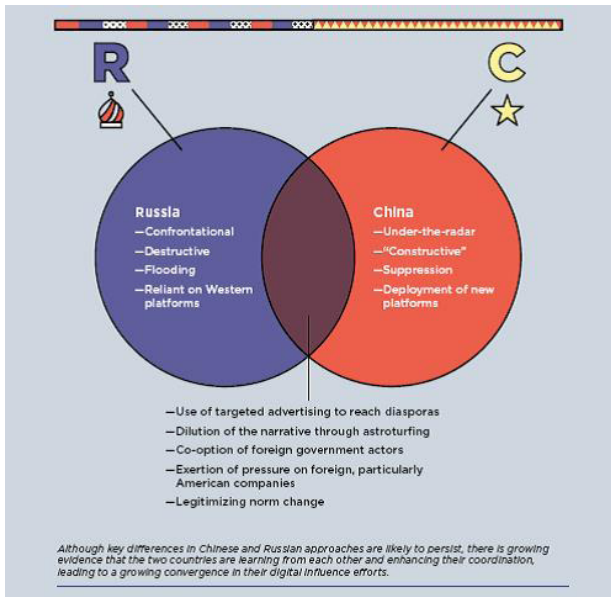
- Censorship of individuals and information channels offered China control over the virus's domestic perception and limited international reporting on China's emerging outbreak.
- English-language state media Facebook Pages, with over 50 million followers, bolstered their reach even further via targeted ads on the platform, allowing China's desired narratives to reach many worldwide

audiences.

- Chinese diplomats and embassies engaged in increasingly hostile messaging toward other countries on Twitter to criticise other governments and amplify the CCP’s preferred narratives to demonstrate China’s strength and to combat its negative images internationally.
- Covert state-sponsored activity on Western social media platforms paralleled overt narratives by praising the CCP’s pandemic response and criticizing other actors’ responses, such as the U.S., Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

## Comparison with Russia

The Chinese and the Russian approaches for Cyber Influence Operations are different. Comparison between the Chinese and Russian Influence Operation is given below:-<sup>70</sup>



Source: <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/dangerous-synergies> at page 13.

Russia overwhelms readers with disinformation. China rewrites the reality with positive news. The Stanford Cyber Policy Center analysis of the COVID-19 social media landscape shows that China's state media in times of pandemic emphasised the positive international responses to Chinese aid, the pace of China's crisis response and on the numbers and stories of people cured. China is more confident about its brand than Russia. While RT only mentions Russia in 4 percent of its reports and prefers to focus on other countries' mistakes, Chinese CGTN and CCTV talk about China in 50 percent of its articles.<sup>71</sup>

While crucial differences in Chinese and Russian approaches are likely to continue, there is growing evidence that the two countries are learning from each other and enhancing their coordination, leading to an increasing convergence in their digital influence efforts.<sup>72</sup>

## AI and Big Data

*“China to explore the application of AI for news collection, production and dissemination to comprehensively increase our ability to lead public opinion” - Xi Jinping, National Academy of Governance, January 25, 2019.*

The next frontier for Chinese influence operations is in big data and AI. The PLA uses AI to run its bot networks on social media and manage its clandestine accounts' attributions better. The Military Correspondent pressed for AI's use in foreign influence operations. It called for the PLA to “fully exploit AI technology to recommend military information to broad media platforms accurately, and for different audiences and make even more international audiences see our PLA reporting and think that they chose the content.” China is using data-driven analytics to exercise social control over their own population. Over 1 billion Chinese users conduct over 60 percent of their transactions through the app WeChat. WeChat “is state-recognized, electronic social-security identification and ID card that is the dream of the surveillance state.” China uses WeChat to crack down on anything that threatens the state's harmony and stability.

China's data collection from abroad and domestic environments are not separate issues. These are linked to national security. Examples are:-

- The China-owned company Tencent is one of the largest gaming companies in the world. It owns significant stakes in popular games like console-based computer games Fortnite Riot Games and mobile Supercell. Lately, the U.S. Congress has raised questions about as to what data is being gathered and collected by the company and sent back to China's servers.
- Due to lack of clarity over what is gathered from individuals' devices and sent back to China, Tiktok and Zoom have also come under enquiry.
- WeChat has 75 behavioural indicators such as growing a beard or calling a relative overseas that allegedly indicate potential religious radicalisation.
- Chinese companies Tik Tok, Baidu and Douyin have explored the possibility of making deep fakes available to the consumer on their apps. These tools can be deployed as a part of influence operations later.

The CCP's latest Influence Operations project is propaganda powered by AI. It is meant for domestic and international application. The system will identify early warning pointers of social turbulence, assist state journalists in producing effective content and propagating approved narratives to target audiences. It is expected that AI will strengthen the Party's voice and increase its influence over public opinion. The CCP's Central Propaganda Department (CPD), with several government ministries, in August 2019, issued a document titled "Guiding Opinions on the Promotion of Deeper Integration of Culture and Technology." The paper recommends exploring "the use of AI for newsgathering, production, distribution, reception, and feedback; for comprehensively improving the state's ability to guide public opinion; and for making personal customization... and intelligent push notification services to serve positive publicity".

In 2017, the Institute for Cyberspace Studies stated that the PLA could use AI and big data to improve public opinion detection, determination and handling

especially sensitive topics.

## Thought Management

The CCP is emphasising propaganda and ideological indoctrination throughout Chinese society.<sup>73</sup> The recent Chinese government statements, publications in government publications, state media and academia points to China's propaganda and 'thought management' apparatus and the intent of the CCP to dominate the electronic media. China's current propaganda foundation will integrate domestic and international thought management. The Communist Party thinks of the internet as "the frontline in the struggle over people's opinions."<sup>74</sup>

The CCP perceives a weakness in its control over the issues that people focus on, and its failure to respond to those issues in a timely and compelling manner. This weakens its influence over public opinion on the internet. The heart of these challenges is the plurality of voices and the speed at which public opinion changes online.<sup>75</sup> The CCP's communications specialists especially stress the necessity to reform the type (text, video, etc.), the superiority of Party content, and improvement in its dissemination speed.

China's method to next-generation thought management is built on three main pillars: early warning, practical content and targeted distribution.

## Early Warning

To create effective propaganda content, the CCP thinks authorities and state media must record the issues around which ideologically improper thinking exists and detect future crises. AI is therefore a mean to "continuously monitor websites, forums, blogs, Weibo, print media, WeChat and other information to reach a timely, comprehensive and accurate understanding of trends in public opinion and public attitudes and sentiment."<sup>76</sup> AI can: - <sup>77</sup>

- Build and correctly interpret audiences' "comprehensive profiles of ideological behaviour" from big data.

- Identify “ideological confusion”.
- Support the development of “personalised counter-measures.”

Chinese experts hope that natural language processing and machine learning will permit authorities to identify potentially contentious domestic and international stories before unapproved narratives go viral.<sup>78</sup>

## **Effective Content**

China’s AI systems help to generate compelling and ideologically correct content. This improves the quality and production speed of content for managing public opinion. AI assists with content planning, lead identification, data collection, data visualisation, writing and video production.<sup>79</sup> For international audiences, AI would help identify the keywords so that the journalists can use the correct terms to maximise viewership and resonance.<sup>80</sup> Machine translation will thus increase the reach of China’s messaging around the world.<sup>81</sup>

## **Targeted Distribution**

Big data on the audience’s online behaviour helps the state media officials to tailor content distribution to meet personalised needs. AI selectively sends propaganda based on ‘interest tags’ derived from the individual’s profile.<sup>82</sup> AI helps tailor content based on variable factors such as how long individuals spend consuming news, what time of day they are online, the type of content they engage with etc.<sup>83</sup>

AI is envisioned to support real-time distribution to improve the timeliness of propaganda. Interest-based distribution is possible because CCP propaganda is frequently not overtly political. Narratives are economic, cultural and social in nature. For international audiences, the contents highlight the positive aspects of the country’s culture, history, economy, and global affairs participation.<sup>84</sup>

## Future Trajectories in AI and Big Data

For foreign interference, especially around elections, China is likely to employ AI and aggregated social media management software, especially on *WeChat* and on Southeast Asian messaging app LINE. Using AI to generate fake content would give the PLA chance to use 'deep fakes'. Deep fakes are digital representations created with AI to produce realistic but wholly fictitious images and sounds. Chinese companies TikTok and Zao could develop deep fake capabilities, which the PLA could easily use to propagate biased or false deep fake content.

Facial scanning raises fears of possible adoption for facial recognition purposes by law enforcement agencies. The parent company of Chinese apps TikTok and Douyin, the ByteDance, as of January 2020, was reportedly developing deep fake technology that the app refers to as 'face swap'. This capability would enable a biometric scan of a user's face to be applied to various videos. However, as of August 2020, TikTok was banning deep fakes altogether from its platform.

China's news services are vigorously working to enlarge their reach and messaging across the media matrix, including websites, newspapers, online interactive and mobile apps, personal social media, official social media, and third-party representations.<sup>85</sup> AI requires vast amounts of data to generate perceptions. This data is mined from the media matrix, pulled from sources like WeChat, Weibo or the mobile apps developed by state media outlets.<sup>86</sup> Internationally, the data will be harvested from news websites, Facebook, Twitter and other platforms.

The PLA plans to use sentiment analysis to detect high-profile or very high trafficked events and provide earlier warning of items to censor. This would create another comprehensive and intelligent information dissemination model.

## Challenges

Changing over to AI and big data would face a lot of challenges. Collecting, organising and integrating information would necessitate advanced computer



applications. China is already building an industrial base to harness big data. Dependence on AI to disseminate content may reduce editors' discretion to determine what content is consumed. Not surprisingly, Xinhua's vice president told the 2018 China Internet Media Forum attendees that "humans lead, machines assist."<sup>87</sup> CCP experts on propaganda and communications see AI as a means for a sustained and responsive online presence. AI will anticipate, identify and take action on emerging crises in public opinion, send government messaging before unapproved narratives go viral, and circulate personalised content to individual readers and viewers. As in every communications revolution, processors and algorithms will form the foundation of next-generation 'thought work'.<sup>88</sup>

At its present state, PLA is far from perfecting its influence operations. It has not been successful in connecting with non-Chinese audiences. However, PLA is trying hard. It has displayed a significant learning capacity in adjusting and combining its strategies. This trend is likely to continue.

## Conclusion

China is now the world's second-largest economy. It has become the world's largest trading nation and produces many of the top multinationals' prized products. It plays a leading role in global financial institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, in global bodies like the World Health Organization, and is one of only five countries with a veto-power seat on the United Nations Security Council, a power it increasingly uses. It has one of the most powerful militaries globally and is testing the once-untouchable US forces in places like the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. China unquestionably has become more dominant in hard power, but its ability to push a "China story" and its soft power capability is suspect.

China is promoting its image as a stable, strong and leading country to the rest of the world. It is using civil unrest in the U.S. following police violence against African Americans to counter criticism of police abuse against protesters in Hong Kong. China is using propaganda and the manipulation of social media

at home to reinforce popular support for the CCP. This is important now as its economy faces significant obstacles as demography, debt and unfinished reforms are slowing down growth.

With its growing assertiveness in the international arena, China uses new technologies to achieve its foreign policy goals and project an image of “responsible global power”. These efforts closely correspond to China’s geopolitical interests - territorial demands around the South China Sea, institutional power projection in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond and increasing aggression toward Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Tibet.

China is spending billions on influence operations across the world. This fits in with China’s larger aim of expanding its soft power alongside its growing economic and military power. The reach of Beijing’s overseas media is impressive and should not be underestimated.<sup>89</sup> But the results are mixed.

China has been successful at home to effectively censor unwanted content on the Web and shaping online conversations. The Chinese online propaganda campaigns targeting Taiwan and protesters in Hong Kong are not as effective as China struggled to weaponise social media. Here, China has to contend with competing narratives that cannot be suppressed easily.

China’s influence operations are different from the Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Chinese influence operations are long term. Its actions are highly targeted, long-winded and aim to influence critical American people who can shape U.S. policy. China strives to shape influential businesspeople and companies’ perceptions and enlist them as advocates for China by irregular means, like bribery, coercion, and information distortion.<sup>90</sup>

China is learning its lessons. China’s Internet regulator advertised for a contract to help it “operate and grow” overseas social media accounts on platforms such as Facebook. The project sought a team of experts who could “tell China’s stories with multiple angles, express China’s voice and get overseas audience recognition and support for Jinping Thought.” The *China News Services* announced that it had

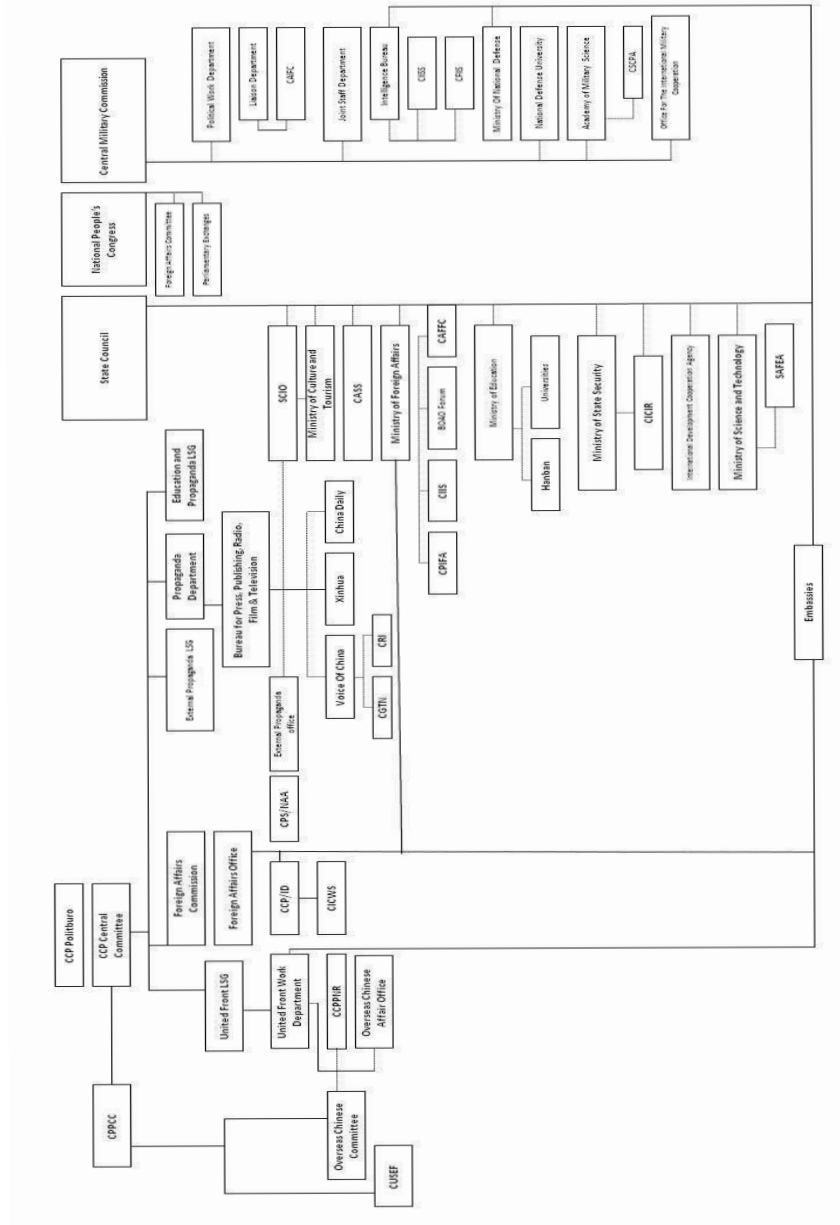
started a new project to build its social media presence overseas. It specifically seeks to increase Twitter followers on its two accounts by 580,000 within six months. It wants at least eight per cent of the accounts to come from North America, Australia, and New Zealand. Overall, China is spending more than \$1 million on both accounts.

On the domestic front, China has successfully established convincing narratives and propagated those to its citizens with the help of censorship and government-affiliated content production. China has shown its intent to propagate its ideology by entering Western social media platforms and developing its platforms. Simultaneously, the CCP uses censorship and content regulation heavily. But China has not won the acceptance and recognition of the international community.<sup>91</sup>

China has a long way to go internationally. China does not have an official PLA presence on Western social media platforms. Its efforts to conceal *sockpuppet* accounts are sloppy. Western social media platforms can easily identify content farms. Foreign audiences are not impressed by the Chinese influence operations on Taiwan, Tibet, Hong Kong and the country's treatment of its Uyghur population.

The PLA still has a long way to go in perfecting its influence operations. However, The PLA has displayed a remarkable aptitude to learn, adjust and merge their strategies. This trend is likely to continue.

Chinese Influence Operations Bureaucracy



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