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Editor’s Note:

This is a special theme issue of China Brief, focused on the rapidly developing topic of Chinese disinformation and information operations (IO) more broadly. Although the control and weaponization of information has always been a priority for the leadership of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), historically, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) focused its information operations abroad to a narrow range of core issues: primarily border and sovereignty issues related to Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang, and most recently Hong Kong. Yet over the past decade or so, the CCP has invested massive resources and effort in its aim to shape global media narratives, or, to use the exhortation of CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping, to “tell China’s story well” (讲好中国故事, jianghao Zhongguo gushi). After these developments, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic—which initially put China on a defensive footing as it sought to counter blame for being the first epicenter of the novel coronavirus—has proved to be a fertile testing ground for previously unseen Chinese

information operations, including a much-noted shift to more destructive and conspiratorial disinformation tactics. For the purposes of this publication, disinformation is defined broadly as the deliberate dissemination of false or inaccurate information for political purposes.

In her brief, China Brief Editor Elizabeth Chen looks at how Chinese propagandists seek to learn from Russia. Although it can be argued that concerns about China “adopting Russia’s playbook” are overblown, it should not be overlooked that Chinese researchers are closely studying Russia’s expertise in external messaging. In the first article of this issue, Ryan Fedasiuk finds that China’s modern-day propaganda and censorship apparatus draws on complementary systems of both “professional” and “grassroots” internet commentators, and that the organization of these groupings is surprisingly militant. Such forces are also being increasingly directed outward to wage a “global public opinion war.” Next, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Jessica Drun take a close look at the publicly available analysis and commentary of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) on cross-strait social media manipulation, filling a much-needed gap in the existing analysis of Chinese disinformation campaigns against the Taiwanese public. Martin Hála, Filip Jirouš and Petra Ševčíková report on how Chinese influence operations in the Czech Republic shifted in the wake of a 2018 scandal that rocked bilateral relations. Following the Czech Senate Speaker Miloš Vystrčil’s controversial visit to Taiwan in August 2020, the CCP mobilized an extensive network of united front and propaganda organs for a narrowly targeted disinformation campaign in the so-called “Vystrčil affair.” Finally, in the first of a planned two-part series, John Dotson analyses recent examples of the Chinese state media agency Xinhua’s “advertorial” content and its relationships with American media organizations. He finds that the CCP’s practice of “borrowing foreign newspapers” has evolved with the digitization of news media, and that Xinhua has continued to spend significantly on this effort.

It is the Jamestown Foundation’s modest hope that this special issue will contribute towards a greater understanding of the wide-ranging and constantly evolving nature of the CCP’s information operations, to the benefit of policymakers, scholars, and civil society worldwide.

China Learning From Russia’s “Emerging Great Power” Global Media Tactics

By Elizabeth Chen

Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers observed that China has employed newly assertive tactics—including spreading widespread Russian-style disinformation—which suggested that “Beijing is increasingly seeking to shape the global information environment beyond its borders” ([Alliance for Security Democracy](#), March 30, 2020). At the same time, Chinese propaganda researchers and academics have closely studied the example of Russian media organs such as Russia Today (RT), and explicitly view

the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to improve external propaganda, including deepening cooperation with their Russian counterparts.

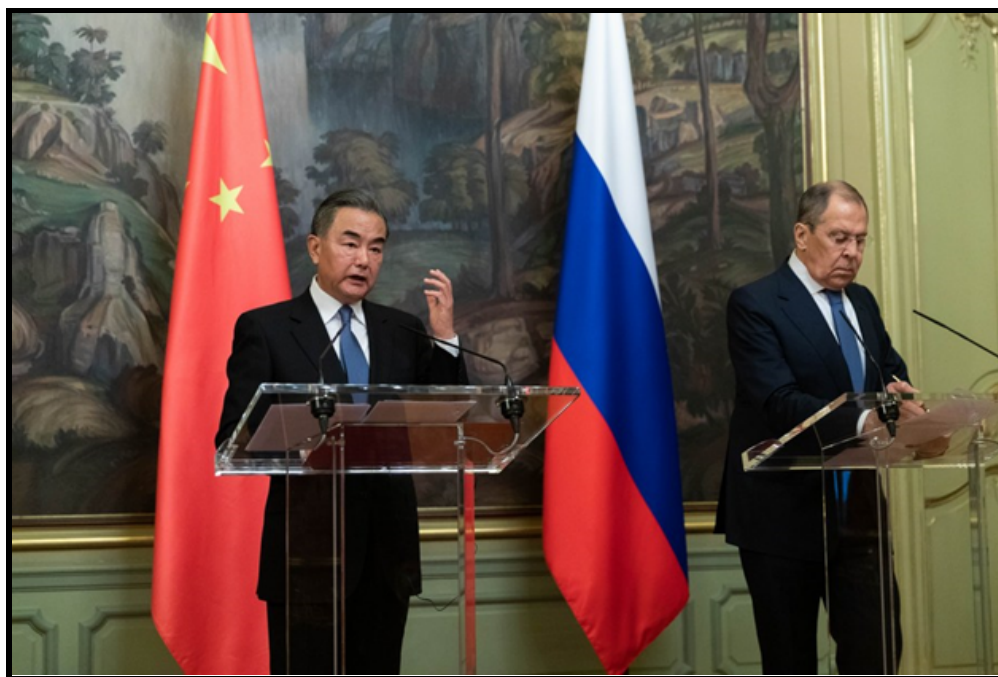


Image: Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his counterpart Sergei Lavrov speak to the press after their meeting in Moscow, Russia on September 11, 2020. The two sides agreed to “make comprehensive preparations for future high-level interactions and...further cooperation in various areas” including cyber and information security (Image source: [Xinhua](#)).

Overcoming a Persistent Discourse Deficit

China’s leadership has long perceived that the country has a “discourse deficit,” (话语赤字, *huayu chizi*) especially relative to its relative development and current standing in the world ([Qiushi](#), May 25, 2020). At a 2013 National Propaganda and Ideological Work Conference, General Secretary Xi Jinping declared that China must strengthen its external propaganda (外宣, *waixuan*) for the new era and “tell China’s story well,” (讲好中国故事, *jianghao zhongguo gushi*), baptizing what has since come to be a catchphrase for China’s foreign propaganda in the Xi era ([Xinhua](#), August 21, 2013). Following this, the Xinhua news agency propagated a decision to “Strengthen the Construction to International Communication Abilities and Foreign Discourse Systems And Promote Chinese Culture to the World.” But even though the authors noted that China’s external communication capabilities had rapidly improved since 2010, with Xinhua opening up a record-breaking 171 overseas branches and China Central Television (CCTV) becoming the only television organization in the world to broadcast in all six UN working languages, “the overall situation has remained in a position where the West is strong and we are weak” ([Gov.cn](#), January 31, 2014).

Learning From RT's Example

A 2014 opinion piece in the *People's Daily* described RT as an “external propaganda aircraft carrier” (外宣航母, *waixuan hangmu*) that could penetrate into foreign mainstream media and leverage social media to influence “people who are easily influenced” (容易被影响的人, *rongyi be yingxiang de ren*), ie. young netizens and audiences in developing countries in Latin American and Africa ([People's Daily](#), May 19, 2014). RT's example was held up for emulation by Chinese media: a cursory search of open-source analysis returns a variety of studies about the “external propaganda strategies” of RT, which included detailed reports of its structure, funding, personnel and daily operations, as well as discussions of RT's creative use of Internet platforms and social media to improve agenda setting capabilities.[1] A 2018 article in *People's Daily* noted RT's successful penetration of the three major social media platforms, Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube, and its cooperative ventures with foreign and private media. This was held up as an example to follow as China's external propaganda shifted from the phase of “going out” (走出去, *zouchuqu*) to “walking in” (走进来, *zoujinqu*), ie., using new (ie. internet) media to successfully penetrate and influence foreign public opinion ([People's Daily](#), August 2, 2018).[2]

A 2017 research paper published by the Academy of Contemporary China and World Studies (当代中国与世界研究院, *dangdai zhongguo yu shijie yanjiu yuan*) summarized Russia's external propaganda strategy as having two main parts. The first was to “express Russia's views, perspectives, and positions” using international media platforms such as RT and the establishment of norms-setting organizations such as the Valdai International Debate Forum promoting an “independent, objective and scientific” understanding of Russia. The second would “display the Russian culture and national spirit” through the dissemination of domestic “patriotic films” and the hosting of large-scale international sporting events such as the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics and the 2018 World Cup ([Accws.org.cn](#), accessed April 5).

The paper concluded that although Russia's foreign propaganda could not “substantially change its relationship with Western countries, it is of great and far-reaching significance to Russia.” In other words, the biggest success of Russia's external messaging would be its ability to the country's perceived global competitiveness and image in the eyes of domestic audiences. Wang Weijia (王维佳), a journalism professor at Peking University, argued that RT had been able to exploit the weakening of the U.S.'s foreign propaganda system in the wake of the Cold War to create “horizontal divisions in international communication” and establish an “opposition media” (反对派媒体, *fandui pai meiti*) that presented alternative viewpoints outside of mainstream (Western) public opinion ([Guancha.cn](#), January 19, 2017).

A 2018 article published in the media industry magazine *TV Guide* (电视指南, *dianshi zhinan*) similarly held RT as a model for the development of “how emerging great powers improve their external communication power,” and argued that its success in effectively challenging the “hegemony of Europe and the U.S. in the field of international news” showed that system and ideology should not preclude non-Western “late-comer” countries from achieving external propaganda successes. The authors concluded that Chinese media should

learn from RT's integration of resources, more relaxed working environment, and vigorous use of new media ([CNKI](#), accessed April 5). A June 2018 article in the *Military Correspondent* (军事记者, *junshi jizhe*) observed RT's "negative tendency" in its reporting on the U.S. in particular and its creative use of automated bots to disseminate information on social media. The author also noted that by "raising more questions," RT's international reporting differentiated itself from mainstream Western media, and concluded that in the face of aggressive Western propaganda, presenting multiple angles helped the international audience to understand "alternative and different views of the world" ([81.cn](#), June 14, 2018). For context, the Russian media expert Peter Pomerantsov has called such tactics a "propaganda of unreality" and "firehose of falsehood" ([MIT](#), October 23, 2019).

The China-Russia Internet Media Cloud Forum

To promote cooperation and exchanges on information security and external messaging, China and Russia have held an annual joint Internet Media Cloud Forum since 2016. The most recent event took place on December 18, 2020, and featured keynote speeches by the editor-in-chief of *China Daily*, the chairman of the China Internet Development Foundation (a government-organized industry group), and the Russian Deputy Minister of Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media ([Xinhua](#), December 19, 2020). Forum attendees discussed strengthening Sino-Russian cooperation using new information technologies, including artificial intelligence, big data, and 5G, and working together to improve international discourse power. They also discussed strengthening media cooperation through the creation of media innovation research centers and talent exchange products ([China Daily](#), December 19, 2020).



Image: The 2020 China-Russia Internet Media Cloud Forum was held in Beijing on December 18, 2020. The event was jointly organized by the State Internet Information Office of China and the Ministry of Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media of the Russian Federation. It was co-hosted by China Daily and the China Internet Development Foundation, and attended by guests from TASS News Agency, and Russia Today, among others. (Image source: Cac.gov.cn).

Conclusion

A recent study by the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) found limited cooperation agreements between Chinese and Russian state media and the circular amplification of disinformation narratives during the pandemic, but concluded that the available evidence did not (yet) amount to evidence of strategic Sino-Russian media coordination ([CEPA](#), March 15). Meanwhile, the intelligence experts Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer and Paul Charon have argued that because, broadly speaking, Russia operates as a rogue in the international sphere while China is a peer, disinformation researchers should not apply the Russian model to Chinese activities too enthusiastically. Among other differences, China has so far avoided tactics like hack-and-leak operations and has primarily focused on image-centric positive messaging to shore up its international reputation, while more narrowly targeting the so-called “five poisons” (aka: Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang, Falun Gong, and pro-democracy activists, 五毒, *wudu*) and the Chinese diaspora. Instead, Jeangène Vilmer and Charon suggest that, despite some signs of the “russianization” of Chinese information operations, the two countries’ different approaches to information warfare should be viewed as: “Russia as a hurricane, China as climate change” ([War on the Rocks](#), January 21, 2020). Camille François, Chief Innovation Officer at the disinformation research firm Graphika, has also argued that broadly applying a so-called “Russian playbook” trope to describe information operations risks obscuring “a complex and evolving network of actors and techniques” that continuously experiment, evolve and adapt ([Lawfare](#), September 15, 2020).

Although both states view information control as a key strategic issue, they have different institutional frameworks and different approaches to controlling information domestically. At the same time, Chinese researchers show a willingness to closely learn from Russian external propaganda and a strong sense of shared adversity against the “hegemony of Western propaganda.” They have taken a particularly close look at the success of RT to present “alternative” views to global audiences—particularly in the developing world. And as both countries dramatically expanded disinformation operations over the last year, they have also signaled a deepening of their quasi-alliance and a desire to cooperate in leveraging “new opportunities” presented by the COVID-19 pandemic ([163.com](#), January 8). For this reason, it is worth taking a closer look at the specific lessons that China is choosing to learn from Russia’s external propaganda.

Elizabeth Chen is the editor of China Brief. For any comments, queries, or submissions, feel free to reach out to her at: cbeditor@jamestown.org.

Notes

[1] For examples, see: Zhao Xiaohang (赵晓航), "'RT' Television Platform's External Propaganda Strategy, ['今日俄罗斯'电视台的对外传播策略]" National Institute of Strategic Communication, Peking University [北京大学国家战略传播研究院], February 3, 2016, http://www.360doc.com/content/16/0203/18/30529733_532536895.shtml; Guo Jinfeng (郭金峰), "Russian Media External Propaganda Strategy Research—Taking RT As an Example [俄罗斯媒体国际传播策略研究—以RT电视台为例]", Social Sciences Abroad [国外社会科学], 4, 2020, <http://www.ssaj.org.cn/UploadFile/Issue/hqvwk3c1.pdf>; "Russian External Messaging and Propaganda's Experience and Lessons Learned," [俄罗斯对外舆论传播的经验与借鉴], April 14, 2020, http://fjlib.net/zt/fjstsgjcx/zbzl/rdzt/202004/t20200414_432091.htm.

[2] For more details on the history of China's media transformation, see: Jiang Fei (姜飞), Zhang Nan (张楠), "The Three Waves of Chinese External Propaganda (1978-2019)[中国对外传播的三次浪潮(1978-2019)], November 6, 2019, Global Media Journal (全球传媒学刊), <https://www.huxiu.com/article/325011.html>.

A Different Kind of Army: The Militarization of China's Internet Trolls

By Ryan Fedasiuk

Introduction

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) believes it is engaged in a global struggle for China's "image sovereignty" (形象主权 *xingxiang zhuquan*).^[1] Party leaders recognize that "the main battlefield for public opinion" is on the internet, and are adamant that "the main battlefield must have a main force" (Central CAC, April 4, 2017). For China, that force is embodied in an array of "internet commentators"—trolls tasked with artificially amplifying content favorable to the CCP. Their mission is to "Implement the online ideological struggle" (落实网络意识形态斗争; *luoshi wangluo yishi xingtai douzheng*).^[2] Their tactics are well-known to anyone who has spent time on the internet: "Quickly and accurately forward, like, and comment on relevant information on Weibo, blogs, websites, forums, and post bars, to effectively guide online dynamics" (Huailai County CAC, 2020). Still, English-language information about China's internet trolls remains discordant and contradictory.^[3]

This article illuminates the shifting size and mission set of the forces behind China's struggle to control online public opinion. It finds that, in addition to 2 million paid internet commentators, the CCP today draws on a network of more than 20 million part-time volunteers to engage in internet trolling, many of whom are university students and members of the Communist Youth League (CYL; 共产主义青年团, *gongchan zhuyi qingnian tuan*). It concludes that although internet commentators are primarily concerned with shaping China's domestic information environment, they are growing in number, and the scope of the Party's public opinion war (舆论战; *yulun zhan*) is broadening to include foreigners.



Figure 1. How the Party Views its Trolls (Image source: [Central CAC](#), April 2020).

Raising China's Internet Troll Army

Shortly after taking office in 2013, China's paramount leader Xi Jinping began a drastic shift in the CCP's approach to governing cyberspace.[4] The CCP had experimented with public opinion management throughout the 2000s and early 2010s, with local and provincial Party committees establishing teams of several hundred commentators ([Hefei Municipal Propaganda Department](#), May 24, 2006; [Gansu Provincial CAC](#), January 20, 2010; [Zhejiang Provincial CAC](#), November 30, 2012). At his first Propaganda and Ideological Work Conference as CCP General Secretary in 2013, Xi emphasized the importance of China's "public opinion struggle" (舆论斗争; *yulun douzheng*) and stressed the need to "tell Chinese stories well" ([China Media Project](#), September 24, 2013). That fall, the CCP announced the "seven baselines" (七条底线; *qi tiao dixian*), which became the foundational political and moral principles underscoring Chinese censorship ([China Media Project](#), August 27, 2014).

The most momentous shift in China's internet ecology came in 2015. After a sweeping ban on foreign VPNs, the Ministry of Education and the Central Communist Youth League issued a notice requiring Chinese universities to recruit teams of network commentators, called "network civilization volunteers" (网络文明志愿者; *wangluo wenming zhiyuan zhe*), and mandated quotas commensurate with the number of students enrolled in each province (China Digital Times: [January 19, 2015](#), [January 20, 2015](#)). The guidelines began with modest requirements, remanding teams of commentators that represented just 0.5-1.5 percent of each university's student body. But in September the Central CYL released new guidance clarifying that Provincial CYLs would have to supply 10 million volunteers—3.8 million of whom were to be students at Chinese colleges and universities.[5] The effect was to raise an army of internet trolls at breakneck speed. In Zhejiang province, what began as a team of 800 commentators in 2012 ballooned to more than 500,000 in 2016 ([Zhejiang Provincial CYL](#), May 5, 2016). Contemporary reports from CYLs in Anhui, Guangdong, and Yunnan indicate similar surges and reveal that each manage hundreds of thousands of commentators, consistent with the Party's requirements.[6]

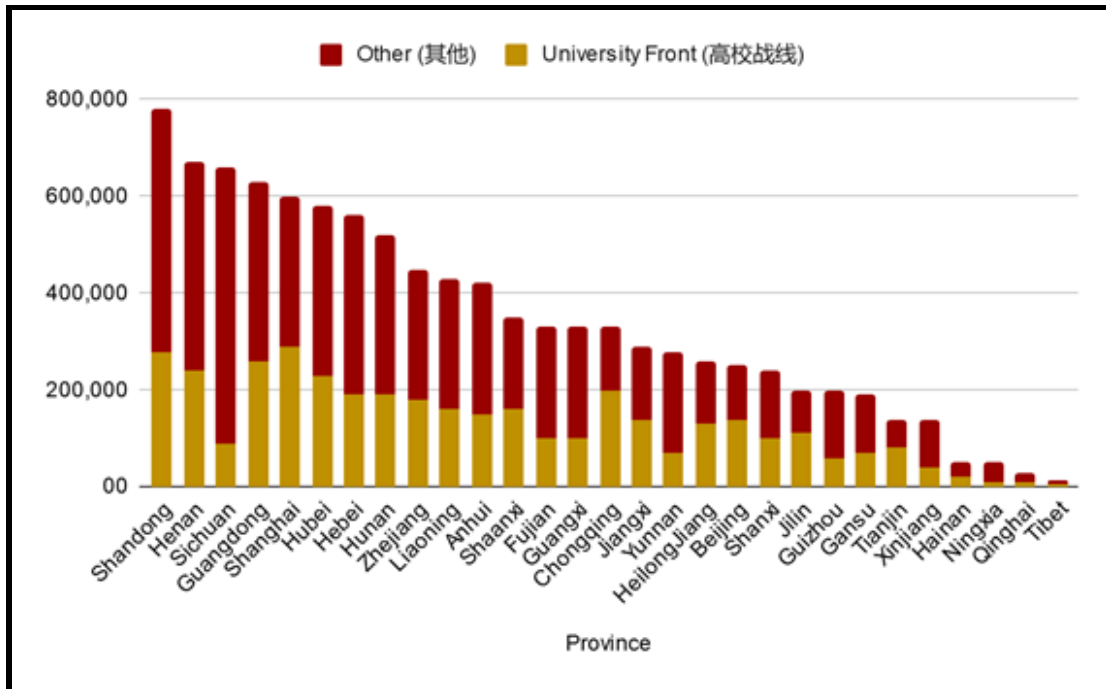


Figure 2. Number of “Network Civilization Volunteers” Required in Each Province in September 2015
(Source: Compiled by author based on data from the [Central CYL](#)).

Today, the CCP relies on an expansive network of more than 20 million “network civilization volunteers” to serve as “an ‘amplifier’ of positive online voices, a ‘collector’ of online public opinion information and a ‘reducer’ of negative voices on the Internet.”^[7] They operate in concert with a professionalized corps of 2 million internet commentators (评论员; *pinglunyuanyuan*), employed directly by Cyberspace Affairs Commissions (CAC) and Propaganda Departments nationwide ([China Brief](#), January 12).^[8] By drawing on complementary systems of “professional” and “grassroots” internet trolls, the CCP harnesses the organic nationalism of young Chinese netizens while maintaining a tight grid of hired hands capable of responding to public opinion “emergencies.”

Defending Forward on Social Media

Although paid commentators tend to attract more attention from foreign analysts, the CCP’s network civilization volunteers form the backbone of its struggle to control public opinion inside and outside of China. The charters of network commentator teams at numerous universities specify that applicants should be CCP members, have high-quality writing ability, and acutely grasp the Party’s political theory and propaganda work ([Guizhou University](#), September 29, 2017; [Zhengzhou University of Light Industry](#), April 17, 2019).^[9] A list of 100 volunteers mobilized by a college in Anhui province reveals that the average volunteer is just 19 years old.^[10] They are mechanics, nursing students, preschool class monitors—all politically zealous young

Chinese who, in their spare time, are supposed to “stop the spread of various illegal and harmful information on the internet, and contribute to the construction of a clean cyberspace.”[11]

Despite their youthfulness, China’s teams of internet trolls are surprisingly militant in character and structure. The budget justification documents of CYLs, CACs, and Propaganda Departments routinely refer to internet commentators as a “young cyber army” (青年网军; *qingnian wang jun*) and describe them as a “reserve force” capable of “resolutely resisting false statements and rumors, and fighting online public opinion wars.”[12] In Shandong province, for example, volunteers are organized into a five-tier command structure designed to “resolutely resist, actively refute, and actively report erroneous statements on the internet”:[13]

Table 1. Command Structure of Network Civilization Volunteers in Shandong Province

Unit (English)	Unit (Chinese)	Composition	Max No. of Volunteers
Corps	总队 (<i>zongdui</i>)	≤ 20 Detachments	Total Province
Detachment	支队 (<i>zhidui</i>)	≤ 20 Brigades	160,000
Brigade	大队 (<i>dadui</i>)	≤ 20 Squadrons	8,000
Squadron	中队 (<i>zhongdui</i>)	≤ 20 Groups	400
Group	小组 (<i>xiaozhu</i>)	≤ 20 Volunteers	20

(Source: Adapted from [Qingdao CYL](#), 2015).

Each commentator team follows unique guidelines, but volunteers are generally asked to post between 1–25 comments per month and are governed by a merit-based point system that determines whether they may be promoted or fired.[14] They coordinate closely with paid internet commentators, internet companies, Public Security Bureaus, and CACs to “monitor online speech and discover illegal activities” so that “uncivilized behaviors in cyberspace and real space will have nowhere to hide” ([Legal Evening News](#), November 20, 2020). The end goal is to “create a diversified network team consisting of online commentators, public opinion officers, and network civilization volunteers” that are “seamlessly connected.”[15]

The Party views its deployment of these volunteers as a defensive measure against hostile foreign forces looking to smear the good name of China. Yet applications for these positions clarify that volunteers are expected to launch “targeted public opinion struggles” in response to unflattering web content that the CCP views as an attempt to “falsely split the motherland” ([PLA Daily](#), May 2017). They also participate in “public opinion actual combat drills” (舆情实战演练; *yuqing shijian yanlian*), which simulate PR crises and train

commentators in online public opinion management, press relations, and “credibility restoration” ([Huzhou Municipal CYL](#), 2019; [China Youth Net](#), July 26, 2015; [People’s Daily](#), May 19, 2017).

Internet Reviewer Application	
<p>I will voluntarily join the internet commentator team and do my utmost to serve in the work of campus internet propaganda and channeling of public opinion.</p> <p>From this day forward, I will be more confident in the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, in its theory, and in its systems. I will actively support the Party line, directives, and policies. I will consciously abide by national laws and regulations, strictly practice social morality and professional ethics, and adhere to the “seven baselines” that internet practitioners, internet celebrities, and ordinary internet users should obey. In my daily work, I will conscientiously complete drafting and publishing work according to the instructions and requirements of the online propaganda departments. With a focus on the central work and major tasks of Party committees and the government, I affirm that I will do a good job in the publication of positive propaganda online and public opinion channeling work.</p>	<p>With a focus on online hotspots and livelihood issues related to the vital interests of the people, I will resolve doubts, soothe emotions, and resolve conflicts. I will consciously monitor, collect, and track major online public opinion trends, discover biased information and major sudden incidents, promptly report and provide guidance, disseminate authoritative information, clarify the truth, and channel online public opinion. In response to malicious attacks by hostile forces, unhealthy information, and online rumors, I will promptly engage in targeted public opinion battles. In accordance with the relevant regulations for online review work, I will do a good job of security and secrecy protection work.</p> <p>Applicant: (Signature)</p> <p>Date:</p>

Figure 3. The Pledge Taken by Chinese Internet Commentators (Source: Propaganda and United Front Work Departments of the [Jiangxi Teachers College](#)).

Waging Global Public Opinion War

Chinese netizens bear the brunt of the CCP’s online influence operations. Based on data from CYLs in four provinces, the Party likely employs at least 120 “network civilization volunteers” for every 10,000 Chinese internet users.[16] They have harassed Weibo users into silence on important social issues and flagged—at a minimum—tens of thousands of Chinese social media accounts for company censors to close based on moral and ideological grounds ([The Diplomat](#), April 3, 2020; [RestofWorld](#), October 22, 2020). As the CCP has made strides in quashing dissent at home, it has also pivoted toward shaping public opinion in other countries—and seems to be growing more comfortable with using its army of internet trolls as a weapon of foreign influence.

CCP offices and state media outlets are not shy about describing what they perceive to be a “public opinion war” (舆论战; *yulun zhan*) with the United States, and they emphasize the value of internet commentators in winning that war. The phrase originated as a way of describing China’s longstanding, asymmetric approach to information warfare, even before the internet became mainstream in China ([China Brief](#), August 22, 2016). However, in the Xi era, Chinese authors have been more forthright in describing an actual, ongoing conflict with much of the Western world, and are applying the lens of “public opinion war” to cyberspace ([China Brief](#), September 6, 2019). Various issues of *New Media*, the journal of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission, have discussed how China should win a “soft power competition in which countries seize international discourse power and lead international public opinion.”^[17] Observers in the People’s Liberation Army believe that, “in the face of the powerful online public opinion manipulation capabilities of the United States and other Western countries,” China should “construct a network discourse system with the characteristics of our military” to “exert public opinion influence on the enemy and even third-party countries in the wartime online public opinion struggle” ([Military Reporter](#), May 2017). Newspapers such as Xinhua and People’s Daily likewise view themselves as being on the front lines of a “China-U.S. Public Opinion War” (中美舆论战; *zhong mei yulun zhan*), and—by their own admission—seek to frame foreign audiences’ perceptions of current events (most recently including COVID-19 and trade tensions) in ways that benefit the state and Party ([People’s Daily](#), January 6, 2018).^[18] The task before internet commentators is to amplify that content and to refute foreigners who would question or criticize the Party’s worldview.

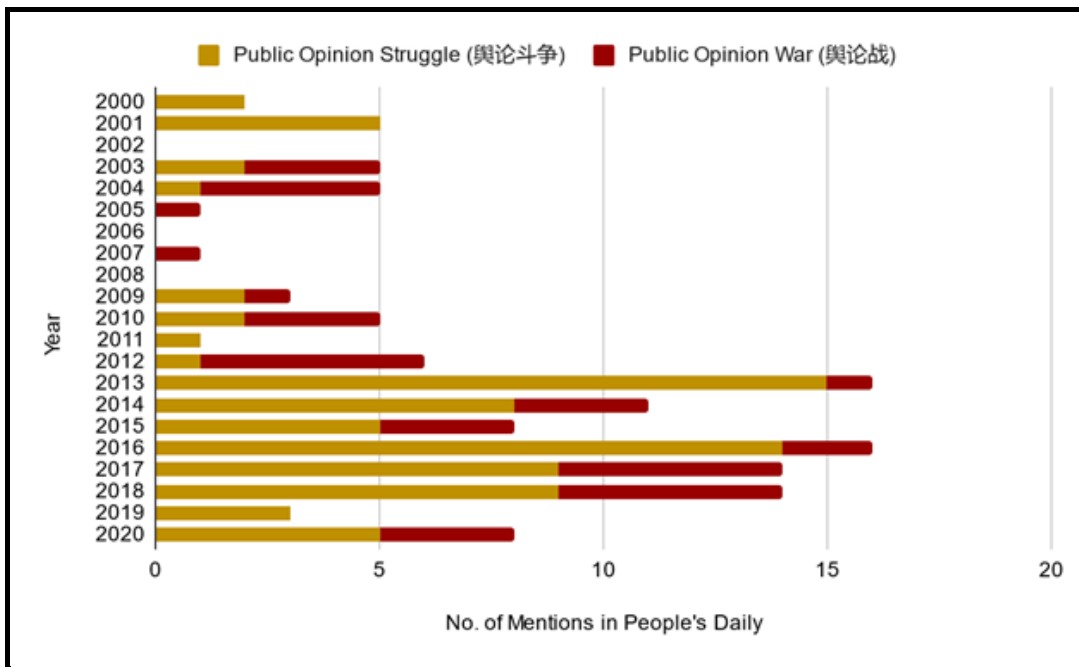


Figure 4. Number of People’s Daily Articles Mentioning Public Opinion Struggle and War (2000–2020)
(Source: Compiled by author).^[19]

Considering the immense capacity for trolling it has developed over the past six years, the CCP so far seems to have directed its army of internet commentators relatively sparingly against foreign social media networks. Internet commentators have selectively mobilized around China's core interests, such as promoting the Hong Kong National Security Law and China's handling of COVID-19, as well as most recently defending against allegations of forced labor in Xinjiang ([WSJ](#), October 16, 2019; [NYT](#), [December 19, 2020](#); [March 29](#)). For example, the Guangdong Provincial CYL operates a "young cyber army team consisting of 100 internet commentators, nearly 5,000 internet propagandists, and over 800,000 internet civilization volunteers" who "take the initiative to speak up during major public opinion events."^[20] The organization lists two examples of when volunteers spoke up in 2018: supporting China's interpretation of the Hong Kong Basic Law and opposing deployment of the THAAD missile defense system in South Korea.

Conclusion

By many accounts, the CCP is failing in its mission to sway global public opinion of China. The country's botched handling of the COVID-19 outbreak; military aggression in the Himalayas and maritime Southeast Asia; and ongoing detention of more than a million Uyghurs have placed indelible stains on its reputation abroad ([China Brief](#), December 6, 2020; [Pew](#), March 4). On the few occasions that the Party has mobilized trolls to meddle on foreign platforms, they have been thwarted—with disastrous consequences for its broader propaganda apparatus.^[21] Simply put, by starting to swing around its bully pulpit, the CCP has spurred foreign social media platforms—already on guard against domestic and foreign disinformation campaigns—to respond forcefully, hurting the Chinese state's global reputation and its ability to "tell Chinese stories well."

But it would be a mistake to discount the CCP's struggle to control foreign public opinion. On the contrary, China's global influence apparatus is learning and evolving, as it has done for the past two decades. The Central CAC is studying how information propagates in the American media environment, and is learning to maximize the reach of its propaganda by studying *NowThis* viral videos, Cambridge Analytica's microtargeting strategies, and Russia's disinformation campaign during the 2016 election ([Central CAC](#), January 23, 2017; [Central CAC](#), January 23, 2017). The Party has experimented with large-scale botnets to compensate for language deficiencies among its internet trolls, and communication experts are identifying ways to "choose information sources intelligently, hide opinions in facts, package content carefully, and dilute ideological colors" ([ChinaTalk](#), October 29, 2020; [New Information](#), April 4, 2020).

State-owned news agencies are likewise beginning to recognize that the heavy handed approach to propaganda at home—literally "report the good, but not the worry" (报喜不报忧; *bao xi bu bao you*)—is counterproductive abroad, because it only invites criticism from skeptical consumers ([People's Daily](#), January 10, 2018). Instead, they have begun "replacing the original propaganda tone with the language organization of 'storytelling,'" so as to "reduce the traces of propaganda, allowing foreign audiences to subtly change their impression of China, without causing disgust" ([People's Daily](#), January 10, 2018). The bottom line is that China's internet trolls are here to stay. And if the past twenty years are any indication, foreigners should

expect the CCP's influence operations to continue growing in size and sophistication, alongside the objectives of its public opinion war.

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Notes

[1] The term refers to a country's right to manage its international brand or reputation. Chinese authorities believe they are the target of an unfounded smear campaign on behalf of the United States—an “information opium war” (信息鸦片战; *xinxi yapian zhan*) ([People's Daily](#), January 2018; [China Civilization Net](#), 2014).

[2] For the exact quote, see [Songjiang District CYL](#), 2019. For other examples of responsibilities assigned to network commentator teams, see [Huadu District CYL](#), 2018; [Huzhou Municipal CYL](#), 2019; [Foshan Municipal CYL](#), 2019; or [Yunnan Provincial CYL](#), 2021. For further analysis of China's public opinion management, see [Harvard University](#), 2017; and [Atlantic Council](#), December 2020.

[3] See differing conclusions about the number of trolls and whether they are paid in [Harvard University](#), May 2013; [Business Insider](#), October 18, 2014; [Foreign Policy](#), August 25, 2016; [VOA](#), October 7, 2016; and [New York Times](#), October 19, 2020. The myriad labels for China's internet trolls often grow out of internet subcultures and are sometimes applied in bad faith by political opponents ([SupChina](#), November 2017). To make matters more complicated, the common, formal name for web trolls—“commentators” (评论员; *pinglunyuanyuan*)—is synonymous with being a professional newspaper columnist or editorial writer.

[4] See analysis in [Cyber Defense Review](#), 2017; [Guardian](#), June 2018; [The Atlantic](#), 2018; and [USCC](#), 2020.

[5] Central Communist Youth League 共青团中央, “Gongqingtuan zhongyang wenjian” 共青团中央文件 [Communist Youth League Central Document], September 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20201205194641/http://www.hgtc.org.cn/admin/webedit/UploadFile/201531113553606.pdf>.

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[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Guangxi University of Science and Technology Committee of the Communist Party of China 中共广西科技大学委员会, “Xuanchuan bu wen jian” 宣传部文件 [Propaganda Department Documents], 2013,
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[15] Publicity Department of Shangyi County Party Committee of the Communist Party of China 中共尚义县委宣传部, “Zhonggong shang yi xianwei xuanchuan bu 2019 nian bumen yusuan xinxi gongkai” 中共尚义县委宣传部2019年部门预算信息公开 [Publicity Department of Shangyi County Party Committee of the Communist Party of China's 2019 Departmental Budget Information Disclosure], 2019, <https://perma.cc/2RNP-QJXH>.

[16] This estimate comes from comparing the average number of network civilization volunteers reported by Communist Youth Leagues in [Anhui](#), [Guangdong](#), [Yunnan](#), and [Zhejiang](#) (489,000 volunteers) to the average number of internet users in those provinces, according to [Knoema](#) in 2016.

[17] Central CAC, *Wangluo chuanbo* 网络传播 [Internet broadcast] no. 164 (July 2017), https://web.archive.org/web/20210226231456/http://www.cac.gov.cn/wxb_pdf/201707wangluochuanbo.pdf.

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[21] Along with banning thousands of the CCP’s sockpuppet accounts, Twitter affixed permanent labels to Chinese state media outlets operating on its platform, yielding a significant drop in likes, shares, and retweets of their content ([Twitter Safety](#), June 2020; [China Media Project](#), January 18, 2021).

How the CCP Mobilized a Cross-Border Disinformation Campaign Against the Czech Senate Speaker

By Martin Hála, Filip Jirouš and Petra Ševčíková

Introduction: Propaganda and Disinformation

Recent events in the Czech Republic (CR) offer an interesting case study in Chinese propaganda and disinformation. For the purpose of this article, the distinction between propaganda and disinformation is understood to be the following: Propaganda creates a strategic, mostly positive “grand” narrative that promotes a general agenda, designed to win people over. For the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), propaganda typically pushes sweeping claims that can include the historical role of the Party in liberating and developing China; the superiority of the CCP-led political system and the inevitability of China’s rise.

By contrast, disinformation is a tactical (sub)narrative that is mostly negative and defensive in nature and aims to counter inconvenient facts or to subvert opponents’ narratives. It is not chiefly designed to win people over, but rather to sow confusion and distrust. A typical example would be the various alternative “theories” about the origins of the coronavirus ([China Brief](#), February 4), which seek to neutralize Beijing’s initial mishandling of the pandemic. In practice, disinformation provides the tactical support for strategic propaganda narratives. Propaganda tends to be more permanent, while disinformation, which is constantly evolving, seems particularly well-suited to fast-paced and ephemeral online formats.



Image: Chinese Ambassador to the Czech Republic Zhang Jianmin gives a talk in September 2018. Chinese diplomats, local partners, and high-level events such as trade conferences all play a role in building positive propaganda narratives (Image source: [Global Times](#)).

From “Economic Diplomacy” to “Rationalizing the Discourse”

The first phase of closer Czech-China relations was characterized by a steep rise in China's influence in the CR (2013–2018), marked by extensive “elite capture” and feeble resistance from the political and media establishment. During this time, public discourse on the bilateral Czech-China relationship was dominated by a grand and largely unquestioned narrative of “economic diplomacy” ([China Brief](#), May 9, 2019), which claimed that closer political relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC) would result in (yet unmaterialized) billions of dollars in Chinese investments.

This period ended after the 2018 collapse of the now-notorious CEFC China Energy (中国华信能源, *Zhongguo huaxin nengyuan*)—once hailed as a “flagship” company for Chinese foreign investment—and the disappearance of CEFC Chairman Ye Jianming (叶简明) ([Sinopsis](#), March 11, 2019). News came that the state-backed CITIC Group would take over CEFC and oversee its investments in the CR ([iHned](#), March 22, 2018). A range of tactical narratives emerged explaining that CEFC's fall was not really a crisis, but rather the random failure of a lone “faulty individual” (Ye), and that CITIC—an even bigger company than CEFC—would finally bring the long-awaited investments to the CR ([Czech TV](#), March 23, 2018). But skepticism about China was growing, and even the pro-Beijing Zeman expressed mild dissatisfaction with the bilateral relationship in an early 2019 interview with the Chinese state broadcaster CCTV ([Czech Radio](#), April 23, 2019).

The CEFC scandal marked a sea change in Czech-China relations. Positive propaganda could no longer be deployed without the support of disinformation (sub)narratives countering dissent. The financial conglomerate PPF—a large Czech company with substantial exposure to the Chinese market—orchestrated a campaign to “rationalize” the debate on China by planting pro-Beijing stories and attacking critical voices with media rebuttals and even legal threats. When this campaign was exposed in late 2019 it further undermined the reputation of pro-Beijing forces in the CR ([China Brief](#), January 17, 2020).

The Vystrčil Affair

The new tide of disinformation in the CR coincided with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to a new propaganda offensive: “economic diplomacy” was swiftly replaced with “face mask diplomacy” that aimed to paper over cracks in the Czech-China bilateral relationship ([Aktuálně.cz](#), March 19, 2020).

Over the course of 2020, the so-called Vystrčil affair demonstrated how the CCP combined threats with disinformation to manage the crisis in bilateral relations. The incident also offers interesting insights into the cross-border coordination of disinformation campaigns, the role of United Front-linked organizations in the cross-border spread and obscurement of disinformation, and the way disinformation supports more overt forms of pressure such as “wolf warrior” diplomacy.

In late 2019, then-President and Speaker of the Czech Senate Jaroslav Kubera unexpectedly announced his plan to pay an official visit to Taiwan in 2020 ([Czech TV](#), November 28, 2019). Kubera had previously been known for his good relations with the PRC and the pro-Beijing Zeman. It seems that Kubera was not fully aware of the political implications of such a trip. At one point, he apparently planned to visit Beijing on the same trip, which suggests that the Taiwan trip was not intended as a provocation ([Aktuálně.cz](#), January 14, 2020). Nevertheless, his announcement drew the ire of both Beijing and its friends in the CR. Kubera came under strong pressure to cancel his trip from the Chinese Embassy in Prague and from the Czech President's Office ([Czech TV](#), April 26, 2020).

Kubera suddenly passed away on January 20, 2020, not long after a one-on-one meeting with the Chinese Ambassador Zhang Jianmin (张建敏). Amid ensuing speculations, his widow found an unsigned letter from the Chinese Embassy, which threatened that an official trip to Taiwan would bring dire consequences for the CR ([Aktuálně.cz](#), February 19, 2020; [Sinopsis](#), February 20, 2020). The letter's discovery caused an outcry. Czech public figures—including Prime Minister Andrej Babiš—called for the Chinese ambassador to be declared *persona non grata* ([iDnes](#), March 8, 2020). Kubera's successor, Miloš Vystrčil, declared that he would fulfill Kubera's legacy and pay a visit to Taiwan.

A shortage of protective personal equipment (PPE) during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in the CR offered an opening for Chinese interests to stage a comeback. The former defense minister, Jaroslav Tvrdík, now a key pro-Beijing lobbyist and former representative of CEFC in the CR, partnered with Minister of the Interior Jan Hamáček, who was in charge of the crisis response, to secure medical supplies from China. ([Sinopsis](#), March 19, 2020). Amid the pandemic, Vystrčil's Taiwan trip came to be seen as a move that could endanger medical supplies from China, with life-threatening consequences for the Czech population.

By late spring, questions had emerged about the quality and procurement of the Chinese medical supplies. These concerns would be vindicated almost a year later when the Czech Supreme Auditing Office issued a damning report listing all the failures of substandard medical supplies that had been sourced almost exclusively from China ([Nejvyšší kontrolní úřad](#), March 2021). The Czech public's gratitude quickly gave way to skepticism and anger. Facemask diplomacy had failed to ease bilateral tensions.

In late August, Vystrčil visited Taiwan with a delegation of 89 Czech civic and political leaders. The visit was well-received by Taiwan, but Beijing was not amused. During a joint press conference with his German counterpart, the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (王毅) complained that the CR had crossed a "red line" and would pay "a heavy price" for Vystrčil's trip ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), September 1, 2020; [CGTN](#), September 2, 2020).



Image: (Left) Czech Senate President Miloš Vystrčil bumps elbows with Taiwanese Foreign Minister Joseph Wu upon arriving at National Chengchi University on August 31, 2020 during a visit to Taiwan. (Right) PRC State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi complained that “adherence to the One China Principle is the political foundation of China-Czech Relations” and that the Czech Senate Speaker’s visit to Taiwan “seriously interferes in China’s internal affairs” during a September 1, 2020 press briefing with the German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas (Image sources: [Taiwan News](#), [PRC Foreign Ministry](#)).

The Chinese embassy’s January 2020 letter to Kubera listed vague economic punishments for the then-planned Taiwan trip. Yet given the minimal outcomes from the 2013-2018 period of “economic diplomacy,” China had little credible threat. According to Czech analysts, China contributed to around 1 percent of the CR’s total GDP, 0.42 percent of foreign direct investment, and 1.5 percent of Czech exports ([VOA](#), September 5, 2020). Instead, the “heavy price” would consist of political pressure from Beijing’s allies in Prague and a disinformation campaign orchestrated with the assistance of a cluster of United Front-linked organizations in Switzerland.

A few days after Wang Yi delivered his ominous threat in Germany, the Chairman of the Communist Party of Czechia and Moravia (KSČM) Vojtěch Filip was instructed in a video call with the head of the CCP International Liaison Department (ILD) Song Tao (宋涛) to “draw a clear line” (划清界限, *huaqing jiexian*) between himself and Vystrčil ([ILD News Office on WeChat](#), September 9, 2020). Filip is a deputy speaker in the Czech Parliament and a minor political player. More consequentially, President Zeman announced at the same time that he would draw a “clear line” with Vystrčil and stop inviting the Senate President to the meetings of the highest constitutional representatives ([iHned](#), September 6, 2020). This would have theoretically meant a major change to the Czech constitutional framework, although the actual impact has been hard to discern in practice.

The Swiss Connection and the Propaganda-United Front Nexus

A second part of the forewarned “heavy price” came in early November, when the editors of Aktuálně.cz, a major Czech news site, received two unsolicited emails originating in Switzerland that tipped them off to an

obscure French website claiming that Vystrčil had been paid \$4 million by the Taiwanese government in exchange for his official visit ([Aktuálně.cz](#), November 11, 2020). The “evidence” consisted of a few deleted posts on Reddit and Twitter. Both emails were signed by unaffiliated Swiss citizens purportedly acting out of individual concern. Aktuálně.cz approached the Prague-based Project Sinopsis, which specializes in contemporary China research and has closely tracked Chinese influence operations in the CR.

Ralph Weber, a Swiss-based Sinopsis research associate, quickly established that the two emails had been sent by the principals of a pro-Beijing website, EurAsia Info (欧亚时报, *Ou-Ya Shibao*). This Chinese and English-language news outlet is based in Switzerland but is linked to both the CCP propaganda and the united front systems. Its leader, Zhu Ailian (朱爱莲) is a member of the World Association of Chinese Mass Media (WACMM, 世界华文大众传播媒体协会, *Shijie Huawen Dazhong Chuanbo Meiti Xiehui*) an international Chinese media grouping partnered with the All-China Journalists Association ACJA (中华全国新闻工作者协会, *Zhonghua Quanguo Xinwen Gongzuozhe Xiehui*), an organization embedded in the PRC propaganda system ([EurAsia Info](#), April 20, 2017; [China.org](#), February 28, 2018).

Zhu also serves as honorary and acting president of the European Jiangxi Hometown Association (欧洲江西同乡会, *Ou-Ya Jiangxi Tong Xiang Hui*), which also includes a leader of the top Czech united front group ([Sinopsis](#), December 18, 2020; [European Jiangxi Chamber of Commerce](#), October 8, 2017). While often overlooked, such diaspora groups are linked with China’s united front and contribute to larger CCP influence activities in their countries that go beyond diaspora community-building work ([China Brief](#), September 16, 2020). The Vystrčil affair presents another example of local united front groups participating in transnational, non-diaspora-focused influence activities.

The united front-propaganda nexus is most visible in EurAsia Info’s links to the China News Service (CNS, 中国新闻社, *Zhongguo Xinwen She*), the CCP’s main propaganda organ targeting overseas Chinese. Unlike most domestic and external news outlets, which are a part of the CCP propaganda system, CNS is a united front agency. It has been supervised by the United Front Work Department (UFWD) of the CCP Central Committee since 2018 ([China Brief](#), May 9, 2019). Senior UFWD cadres often attend events that gather CNS-partnered Chinese-language media, such as the biennial Global Chinese Language Media Forum (世界华文传媒论坛, *Shijie Huawen Chuanmei Luntan*; [China News Service](#), August 6, 2018). Partners abroad regularly reproduce CNS content. In this way, the CCP’s information control extends to Chinese-language media outlets abroad.

CNS’s media partnerships often go beyond content sharing, with some amounting to covert ownership ([Australian Strategic Policy Institute](#), December 17, 2020). Besides direct partnerships and regular event programming, CNS cultivates its network of affiliates through international Chinese-language media associations. In 2009, CNS initiated the formation of the Global Chinese Media Cooperation Union (GCMCU, 世界华文媒体合作联盟, *Shijie Huawen Meiti Hezuo Lianmeng*). Today, GCMCU counts some 700 members, with over 150 located in North America ([Global Chinese Media Cooperation Union](#), accessed

October 26, 2020; [Global Chinese Media Cooperation Union](#), accessed March 27). It duly came to EurAsia Info's defense following the exposure of its links and activities by Western scholars last year ([World Chinese Journalists](#), December 27, 2020).

Conclusion

A background check on the clumsy email "tips" to Aktuálně.cz exposed their connection to a web of influence machinery at the intersection between the CCP united front and propaganda systems. Although the results of this particular disinformation campaign were underwhelming, the organizational structure behind it is formidable. While the smear campaign against Vystrčil failed, it demonstrates the potential for the simultaneous deployment of disinformation, "wolf warrior" pressure tactics by Chinese diplomats and diaspora assets mobilization to punish individuals abroad who have run afoul of the CCP.

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Exploring Chinese Military Thinking on Social Media Manipulation Against Taiwan

By Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Jessica Drun

Introduction

Much has been written about China's social media manipulation in Taiwan following the 2018 nine-in-one local elections, but both Taiwanese and Western analyses have skewed heavily towards the impact of this disinformation, overlooking how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) developed its interest in social media manipulation, its planning and preparation against Taiwan specifically, and the evolution of its tactics over time.



Image: Supporters of the Kuomintang (KMT) candidate Ting Shou-chung watch Taipei City mayoral election results come in on November 24, 2018 (Image source: [Taiwan News](#)).

This article seeks to address a gap in the current policy discussion and provide evidence of PRC planning for covert manipulation of Taiwanese social media. So far, too much of the academic and policy conversation in Taipei and elsewhere has focused on the outputs of PRC disinformation (purported examples of PRC disinformation and local reporting on the consequences), instead of exploring the inputs of PRC thinking, conceptual framing, and planning and technical preparation for executing social media manipulation campaigns. While this emphasis on outputs stems in part from well-documented difficulties in attribution of inputs, it is nonetheless dangerous to overlook these PRC primary sources, because a lack of understanding of the most likely perpetrator's thinking is a disservice to broader efforts to combat disinformation.

Too Much Focus on Outputs, Not Enough Searching for the Inputs

Unfortunately, the Taiwanese government has so far been vague about Chinese planning and thinking for interference in either the 2018 or 2020 elections. Certainly, there has been no retrospective declassified report released to the public similar to the U.S. intelligence community assessment and later Senate reports on Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.[1] President Tsai Ing-wen warned of the spread of fake news ahead of the 2018 election, but remained vague on its potential origins ([Facebook](#), November 14, 2018). After the elections, her administration and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) were careful not to draw direct links between disinformation and the election outcomes, focusing instead on the party's shortcomings during the campaign period—likely out of consideration for Taiwan's hyper-partisan political environment ([Taipei Times](#), November 27, 2018).

Other Taiwanese government officials, including those from its National Security Bureau, were more forthcoming, citing the PLASSF as the main organization responsible for social media disinformation against Taiwan during its 2018 election cycle and suggesting that its personnel numbered around 300,000 ([Liberty Times](#), November 2, 2018; [Taipei Times](#), November 5, 2018). The Legislative Yuan's Foreign Affairs and National Defense Committee released a report in May 2019 that touched briefly on Chinese approaches to disinformation during the 2018 election but focused predominantly on government countermeasures.[2] Little public discussion exists about the PLASSF's actual thinking on and approach to social media manipulation.

While Western researchers have made substantial contributions to existing debates on Chinese disinformation against Taiwan, they consistently overlook and underutilize official Chinese sources when discussing Chinese social media interference.[3] Taiwanese researchers similarly do not explore actual Chinese thinking on social media manipulation, and instead only track their outputs.[4] Taiwanese researchers also continue to misstate and misunderstand “cognitive domain operations” (CDO, 认知域作战, *renzhi yu zuozhan*), the actual PLA operational concept motivating these operations.[5]

Again, the near-impossibility in definitively attributing disinformation to a concrete origin—as well as methodological and privacy considerations, among others—is a partially understandable explanation for the emphasis on outputs as opposed to inputs ([Graphika](#), August 25, 2020). However, this approach overlooks primary and open-source assessments from Taiwan's sole adversary—and the entities with the mission sets, technological prowess, and resources to pursue large-scale, coordinated disinformation campaigns. In a preliminary effort to address these deficiencies, this article takes a close look at the primary Chinese military unit targeting Taiwan for psychological warfare, Base 311 (also known as Unit 61716).

Evolving PLASSF Base 311 Interest in Taiwanese Social Media

Base 311 is at “the forefront of applied psychological operations and propaganda directed against Taiwan,” and “functions as an operational PLA political warfare command,” according to a 2013 study.[6] As part of the

PLA's massive reorganization under Xi Jinping since 2015, Base 311 was transferred from the now-disbanded General Political Department (GPD) to the newly created Strategic Support Force (SSF). A 2018 report foresaw that the SSF's fusion of cyber and psychological warfare capabilities could "build new synergies between disparate capabilities that enable specific types of strategic information operations (IO) missions expected to be decisive in future wars." [7] Based on these studies, this article focuses on writings produced by the Huayi Broadcasting Company (中国华艺广播公司, *zhongguo huayi guangbo gongsi*), which Mark Stokes has described as likely one of the regimental-grade units subordinate to Base 311 and its "commercial" persona operating a range of public organizations with semi-transparent PLA ties. [8]

Early Awareness in 2011

A September 2011 article by an online editor for Huayi Broadcasting already recognized the growing importance of social media in Taiwanese society, including for political mobilization. [9] Framed under the idea of "cross-strait news exchange" (两岸新闻交流, *liangan xinwen jiaoliu*), the article provided a detailed overview of Taiwan's social media landscape at the time and identified how social media was increasingly influential for shaping Taiwanese public opinion. [10] It made four recommendations for propaganda toward Taiwan. First, embrace social media as a new medium for cross-strait propaganda, including to leverage existing PRC platforms already in the Taiwanese market (Sina Weibo) and encourage other platforms to open in Taiwan. Second, "establish and guide microblog topics to serve the development of cross-strait relations," including "immediately transmitting positive information [propaganda]" and to "create public opinion situations of strength." Third, leverage "opinion leaders" to "change the direction of public opinion" as necessary, including by inviting pro-China experts to open accounts. Fourth, embrace all types of new media (such as blogs, forums, etc.) to make up for shortcomings via social media. [11]

Many of these recommendations would be embraced in China's broader social media propaganda strategy for Taiwan, though it is impossible to know how much direct impact this early article had. For example, PRC propaganda organs use PRC social media platforms (Weibo and WeChat) to target their messaging toward the intended Taiwanese audience, including through content in Southern Min (the closest mainland dialect to Taiwanese Hokkien). [12] The PRC has also specifically targeted young Taiwanese social media celebrities as conduits for Chinese propaganda (CNA, February 21). Moreover, the reports referenced above consistently find that China is attempting to shape Taiwanese public opinion through agenda setting via a variety of means.



Image: A “Cross-Strait Youth Internet Celebrity Anchor Competition” held in Xiamen in September 2020 and broadcast on Strait TV. Taiwan’s National Security Agency has noted that China has expanded the organization of training activities for internet celebrities and e-commerce live broadcasters as part of its efforts to actively use new media for propaganda purposes (Image source: [CNA](#)).

2014 Taiwanese Political Events Drive Growing Attention

A November 2014 article by personnel from Huayi Broadcasting and Voice of the Strait (Base 311’s main radio channel) took this interest a step further, but still framed new media (Internet-based media) as supporting radio propaganda, likely reflecting institutional preference.^[13] Nevertheless, the article argued that new media, including Facebook and Twitter, have “completely changed the traditional propaganda style and massively influenced [...] public opinion guidance.” The authors suggested that Chinese propagandists “should research and understand” the new Taiwanese generation, and “use their familiar style, vocabulary, context, coordinate ‘down to earth’ content to make [propaganda] effectively land in Taiwan.” The article suggested using Facebook and Twitter to spread “content we create and content created in cooperation [...] to increase the influence and penetration” of its propaganda. However, much of the article still centered on how social media could support radio propaganda. The article’s bullish embrace of social media but grounding in legacy propaganda probably reflected debates during this time within Base 311 and perhaps more broadly across PRC propaganda organs on how best to optimize work across a breadth of evolving media.

By 2015, Base 311 personnel realized that recent events in Taiwan had proved without a doubt that social media’s growing influence over Taiwanese politics was ripe for exploitation. An August 2015 article analyzing the November 2014 Taipei mayoral election hailed Ko Wen-je’s (柯文哲) successful use of social media as a

key ingredient for his victory, especially amongst the critical youth voting bloc, and provided detailed coverage of his campaign's social media usage.[14] The article argued that social media, and the Internet more broadly, had “brought a massive transformation to political communications,” and that netizens were now leading their own political mobilization by creating like-minded groups on social media. It added that social media was breaking local political parties' and businesses' traditional domination of Taiwanese media as well as weakening Taiwan's traditional two-party system. However, the authors cautioned that the DPP's successful embrace of new media further spread their “independence” agenda, and noted that the Sunflower Movement represented a slippery slope of social media transforming Taiwanese from being specifically against the unratified 2013 Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement to being generally anti-China.

The article added that “new media is a double-edged sword for the development of cross-strait relations,” because it brought people on both sides closer even as adversarial views persisted, so that the risk of misunderstandings grew. Overall, the article reflected a bleak view of Taiwanese democracy and its prospects for China, arguing that the chaos of the Sunflower Movement “will certainly on one level weaken the influence of Taiwan's ‘beacon of democracy’ for mainland Westernization, and offset the outcome of the human rights-centric turn of the Kuomintang (KMT) and DPP's China policy.”

The authors argued that “new media provides the ideal resource on popular will and information for political communications,” noting that Ko Wen-je was the first in Taiwan to apply big data analytics to tweak his campaign messaging on social media. In retrospect, conclusions from the 2015 article appear to have been turned into actions based on reports of PRC-run Facebook groups supporting Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜), the surprise KMT winner of the Kaohsiung mayoral race in 2018 ([Foreign Policy](#), June 26, 2019). The August 2015 article also explains one potential PRC motivation for social media manipulation and political interference against Taiwan: social media was damaging the prospects for unification.

A related September 2015 article described the Internet as the “fuse” for the Sunflower Movement and a “propaganda amplifier,” echoing the online trend of self-creating information bubbles.[15] It recommended, “for Taiwan propaganda, we should not only create our own platforms and join hands [cooperate] with Taiwanese websites, [we] should also proactively establish sites on Taiwanese social networks, share meaningful content, [produce] personalize information, and build social media followings with distinguished meaning.” This would be reflected in China's broader long-term strategy of cooperating with local Taiwanese media, and an emphasis on distributing content through independent small-scale new media in Taiwan, because they are trusted and can have an outsize impact at “special times.”[16]

Embrace of Social Media Manipulation After Tsai's 2016 Victory

A May 2016 article by Huayi Broadcasting personnel represented a change of tone in Base 311's approach to Taiwan propaganda. It argued that the DPP's victory in the January 2016 election made Taiwanese media “more green” and “more pro-independence,” creating a “harmful Taiwanese media environment” and turning

Taiwanese public opinion against China.[17] The authors wrote about the rise of pro-DPP “green” media and their belief that the DPP victory could force pro-KMT “blue” media to follow DPP views on cross-strait policy, turning the Taiwanese public against China. Echoing earlier articles’ emphasis on the growing importance of social media for shaping Taiwanese public opinion, the authors recommended “strengthening the effectiveness of propaganda against Taiwan” and suggested that propaganda should “use diagrams, icons, cartoons, and audio-visual media” in order to “weaken the propaganda color” of the information. More ambitiously, the article argued that China should “strengthen awareness of online public opinion intervention” (强化网络舆论干预意识, *qianghua wangluo yulun ganyu yishi*). This specifically entailed “expanding the cultivation and use of online opinion leaders,” including having mainland scholars join Taiwanese online media to “actively confront Taiwanese netizens and play the role of public opinion leaders” to “guide Taiwanese online public opinion toward a direction favorable to us.”[18]

PLASSF Base 311 Operationalizes Manipulation of Taiwanese Social Media

If there was any doubt that China was focused on the artificial manipulation of Taiwanese social media, an October 2018 article written by Base 311 and National University of Defense Technology (NUDT) researchers and computer engineers, made this clear. The article addressed the equipment requirements to conduct “cognitive domain operations” (CDO), summarized in a 2019 *China Brief* article as the “next-generation evolution of psychological warfare [that] seeks to use information to influence an adversary’s cognitive functions, spanning from peacetime public opinion to wartime decision-making” (*China Brief*, September 6, 2019). The October 2018 article argued for the importance of applying CDO to social media, but highlighted several shortcomings, including “little research on the technology and equipment for cognitive domain operations on mainstream social networking platforms,” and elsewhere explicitly listed Facebook, Twitter, and LINE as platforms that needed to be further explored. It argued:

“Speed up the research for network propaganda technology targeted toward the real-time release on social platforms, voice information synthesis technology using deep learning and other technology, online netizen sentiment trend analysis using big data analytics...strengthen the research and development of new media technology, improve the psychological warfare operations capability in the whole media environment.”

The article also advocated embracing military-local cooperation for CDO on social media, including “leveraging the advantages of local traditional and new media advantages” and to “jointly use or lease [...] existing platforms and channels” as well as “purchasing or absorbing mature local” capabilities while “ensuring secrecy.” While military-local cooperation could suggest Base 311 personnel were advocating for partnering with PRC domestic actors (perhaps Taiwan-focused propaganda organs based in Fujian Province), given the broad PRC penetration and manipulation of the Taiwanese media environment, it is also possible the authors were advocating leveraging willing or ignorant Taiwanese actors and social media manipulation capabilities.[19] In summary, the article—written in the lead-up to Taiwan’s 2018

elections—appeared to suggest that the PLA should create inauthentic content (disinformation) on social media across peacetime and conflict, including deep fakes (“using deep learning”) and fake content (using natural language processing) tailored for specific audiences (“using big data analytics”). More recent Base 311 technical writings suggest an interest in using artificial intelligence to control how this content is then injected into online platforms.[20]

Broader PLA Interest in Taiwanese Social Media

In addition to Base 311’s clear focus on Taiwanese social media as a vector for public opinion guidance (manipulation), other parts of the PLA also appear to have supported this effort. To give one example, a graduate student at the PLA’s Nanjing Political Institute provided a practical guide to blend in on Taiwanese social media in 2017.[21] The author observed that “in online communities where Southern Min and Mandarin is fully intermingled, if one sentence appears that clearly carries a Northern [mainland] communication style, it would be very easy to stick out and attract other netizens’ attention, creating an invisible wall in the online communities.” Tailored propaganda targeted at Taiwan on social media should use “Taiwanese flavor,” including “actively using diction that is close to the language of Taiwanese social network communities.” Coming in 2017, this article suggests that the goal of manipulating Taiwanese social media was so pervasive across the PLA by 2017 that a graduate student could support the effort.[22]

Conclusion

In retrospect, it is clear the PLA, and especially PLASSF Base 311, prepared for and may have executed a campaign to covertly manipulate Taiwanese social media and interfere in Taiwan’s 2018 elections. This article shed light on how long the PLA—as the CCP’s “barrel of the gun”—has been interested in Taiwanese social media and focused on exploiting it for political interference against Taiwan. Social media is simply the latest and greatest way for the PLA to artificially manipulate Taiwanese public opinion.

There needs to be greater emphasis—in Taiwan specifically, but also more generally—on the stated intentions and tactical considerations of entities within the PLA and the Chinese government charged with carrying out social media interference. The hope is that this article has provided an example of the range and depth of publicly available, primary source material on official Chinese thinking on social media manipulation against Taiwan and encouraged further exploration of these materials.

A shift from an overreliance on outputs to a more balanced view that incorporates inputs can promote more substantial debates and establish a firmer foundation to inform policy discussions. Such an approach would place less weight on outcomes, which inherently assume that one party has benefited and are contentious against the backdrop of elections, instead placing more emphasis on better understanding the actual threats and how to best combat them.

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Notes

[1] “Countermeasures to Chinese Psychological Warfare Through Disinformation” [“中國假訊息心戰之因應對策”], Foreign Affairs and National Defense Committee of the Legislative Yuan of the Republic of China [立法院外交及國防委員會], May 2, 2019, <https://lis.ly.gov.tw/lydbmeetr/uploadn/108/1080502/01.pdf> and <https://hackmd.io/@billy3321/rkxYFmuiN/%2Fs%2Fr1ukomuo4?type=book>.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] For examples, see: Renée Diresta, Carly Miller, Vanessa Molter, John Pomfret, And Glenn Tiffert, *Telling China's Story: The Chinese Communist Party's Campaign to Shape Global Narratives* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Internet Observatory, 2020), https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/sio-china_story_white_paper-final.pdf; Ketty W. Chen and J. Michael Cole, “CCP and proxy disinformation: Means, practices, and impact on democracies,” *Sinopsis*, July 26, 2019, <https://sinopsis.cz/en/ccp-and-proxy-disinformation-means-practices-and-impact-on-democracies/>; Insikt Group, *Chinese Influence Operations Evolve in Campaigns Targeting Taiwanese Elections, Hong Kong Protests* (Recorded Future, April 29, 2020), <https://www.recordedfuture.com/chinese-influence-operations/>; Nick Monaco, Melanie Smith, Amy Studdart, *Detecting Digital Fingerprints: Tracing Chinese Disinformation in Taiwan* (Institute for the Future's Digital Intelligence Lab, August 2020), https://www.iff.org/fileadmin/user_upload/downloads/ourwork/Detecting_Digital_Fingerprints_-_Tracing_Chinese_Disinformation_in_Taiwan.pdf. The IFTF et al report cited one PRC article in passing that was provided by one of the authors of this article.

[4] For examples, see: Puma Shen [沈伯洋], “A Preliminary Study of China's Cognitive Field Operation Model: Taking the 2020 Taiwan Election as an Example” [“中國認知領域作戰模型初探：以 2020 臺灣選舉為例”], Prospect Foundation, January 2021, <https://www.pf.org.tw/files/6931/CF88D276-7F56-42D0-8E51-ABF84D29FEAD>; Su Ziyun [蘇紫雲], Jiang Xinbiao [江忻杓], “Annual Assessment of Trends of Defense Technology” [“2020國防科技趨勢評估報告”] (Taipei, Institute for National Defense and Security Research, December 2020), <https://inders.org.tw/Download/2020%E7%A7%91%E6%8A%80%E5%B9%B4%E5%A0%B1%E4%B8%8A%E7%B6%B2%E7%89%88.pdf>. INDSR has no PLA sources in their annual report write-up on the topic and instead draws predominately from Western sources.

[5] For example, Puma Shen refers to 认知领域作战 (*renzhi lingyu zuozhan*), while INDSR refers to it as 认知作战 (*renzhi zuozhan*). The most authoritative PLA writings available instead use 认知域作战 (*renzhi yu zuozhan*), demonstrating these Taiwanese researchers are not looking at the right PLA sources.

[6] Mark Stokes and Russell Hsiao, “The People’s Liberation Army General Political Department: Political Warfare with Chinese Characteristics,” Project 2049 Institute, October 14, 2013, https://www.project2049.net/documents/PLA_General_Political_Department_Liaison_Stokes_Hsiao.pdf. For more recent analysis, see: Elsa Kania, “The Role of PLA Base 311 in Political Warfare against Taiwan: Part 3,” *Global Taiwan Brief*, February 2017, <https://globaltaiwan.org/2017/02/15-gtb-2-7/#ElsaKania021517>.

[7] Joe McReynolds and John Costello, *China’s Strategic Support Force: A Force for a New Era* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 2018), p. 5.

[8] The authors thank Mark Stokes for this insight. See also: https://project2049.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/P2049_Stokes_Hsiao_PLA_General_Political_Department_Liaison_101413.pdf.

[9] Ai Ran [艾然], “The development characteristics of Taiwan’s microblog and its Insights for cross-strait news exchanges” [“台湾微博的发展特点及对两岸新闻交流的启示”], *Southeast Communication* [东南传播], September 2011, pp. 42-44. This may be a pseudonym for the director of Huayi Broadcasting, Ai Songru [艾松如], who has reportedly used Ai Ke [艾克]. See: Elsa Kania, “The Role of PLA Base 311 in Political Warfare against Taiwan: Part 3,” *Global Taiwan Brief*, February 2017, <https://globaltaiwan.org/2017/02/15-gtb-2-7/>.

[10] The article also specifically notes that Twitter is the most open social media platform and can be used through its API. For one example of Western scholarship on early Taiwanese social media (after the PLA article was written), see: Luc Chia-Shin Lin and Naren Chitty, “Plurk politics—Micro-blogging is changing political communication in Taiwan,” *Journalism and Mass Communication* 2:4, 2012, pp. 565-579.

[11] For other writings in 2011 by Huayi Broadcasting personnel on online propaganda and the importance of opinion leaders, including the importance of tailoring messaging to each group of opinion leaders, see: Kou Xiaoyu [寇晓蕤], “Complex network theory and its enlightenment on improving the effect of network communication” [“复杂网络理论及其对提升网络传播效果的启示”], *Southeast Communication* [东南传播], November 2011, pp. 61-63.

[12] For one PLA example, see: Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Michael S. Chase, *Borrowing a Boat Out to Sea: The Chinese Military’s Use of Social Media for Influence Operations* (Washington, DC: John Hopkins SAIS Foreign Policy Institute, 2019), <https://www.fpi.sais-jhu.edu/borrowing-a-boat-out-to-sea-pdf>.

[13] Zhong Zhigang [钟志刚] and Jiang Hongxing [姜红星], "A Preliminary Study on Using New Media to Expand the Guiding Space of Broadcasting Public Opinion" ["运用新媒体扩展对台广播舆论引导空间初探"], *China Broadcasting* [中国广播], November 2014, pp. 87-89. Note that the 2011 article also showed signs of legacy media-bias, arguing that "targeted use of microblogs" can make up for the insufficiency of traditional media exchanges (propaganda) against Taiwan. See: Ai Ran [艾然], "The development characteristics of Taiwan's microblog and its Insights for cross-strait news exchanges" ["台湾微博的发展特点及对两岸新闻交流的启示"], *Southeast Communication* [东南传播], September 2011, pp. 42-44.

[14] He Zipeng [何子鹏], Yue Hong [岳虹], and Li Yunmeng [李运猛], "On the Application of New Media to the Political Communication in Taiwan: A Case Study of the 2014 Taipei Mayor Election" ["试析网络新媒体在台湾政治传播中的运用: 以2014年台北市长选举为例"], *Taiwan Research Journal* [台湾研究集刊], August 2015, pp. 19-27. The article specifically mentions Facebook, Plurk, Twitter, PTT, YouTube, Line and WeChat as influential platforms. For earlier Huayi Broadcasting in the role of Taiwanese media in Taiwanese politics, see: Zheng Yong [郑永] and Zuo Yi [左伊], "Research on Video Campaign Advertisements for Taiwan's "General Election" in 2012" ["2012年台“大选”视频竞选广告研究"], *Modern Taiwan Studies* [现代台湾研究], June 2012, pp. 35-39. For an earlier PLA Foreign Language Institute, now under the SSF Information Engineering University, article on Taiwanese political mobilization, see: Li Hongbo [李洪波] and Wen Liangqian [温良谦], "An Analysis of the Adjustment of the Political Mobilization Mode of the Democratic Progressive Party since 2008" ["试析2008年以来民进党政治动员模式的调整"], *Modern Taiwan Studies* [现代台湾研究], February 2015, pp. 55-61.

[15] Yi Shaojie [易绍杰] and Yao Chunling [姚春玲], "Thoughts on Information Dissemination Strategies for Taiwan in the New Media Era: Taking the use of new media in Taiwan's "anti-service trade" movement in 2014 as an example" ["新媒体时代对台信息传播策略思考: 以2014年台湾“反服贸”运动的新媒体运用为例"],

[16] For examples, see: Kathrin Hille, "Taiwan primaries highlight fears over China's political influence," *Financial Times*, July 16, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/036b609a-a768-11e9-984c-fac8325aaa04>; Brian Hioe, "Fighting Fake News And Disinformation In Taiwan: An Interview With Puma Shen," *New Bloom*, January 6, 2020, <https://newbloommag.net/2020/01/06/puma-shen-interview/>; Yimou Lee and I-hwa Cheng, "Paid 'news': China using Taiwan media to win hearts and minds on island," Reuters, August 9, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-taiwan-china-media-insight/paid-news-china-using-taiwan-media-to-win-hearts-and-minds-on-island-sources-idUSKCN1UZ0I4>. For more details on Base 311 cooperation with Taiwanese traditional media, see: Zhong Zhigang [钟志刚] and Jiang Hongxing [姜红星], "A Preliminary Study on Using New Media to Expand the Guiding Space of Broadcasting Public Opinion" ["运用新媒体扩展对台广播舆论引导空间初探"], *China Broadcasting* [中国广播], November 2014, pp. 87-89.

[17] Wang Fangzhou [汪芳洲], "Current Taiwan media public opinion Ecology and countermeasures" ["当前台湾媒体舆论生态及应对策略"], *Modern Taiwan Studies* [现代台湾研究], October 2016, pp. 63-66.

The article does make some ironic claims, such as “political party control of the media and interference into the public’s right to free speech is a severe infringement of everyone’s right to know and right to speak, and means the media has no way to supervise the government’s behavior.”

[18] By praising the Diba Expedition (帝吧出征, *Diba chuzheng*) phenomenon, the article appeared to still assume human involvement in the manipulation of Taiwanese public opinion, instead of the bots that have been observed since 2019. For more on this, see: Nick Monaco, “Computational Propaganda in Taiwan: Where Digital Democracy Meets Automated Autocracy,” Computational Propaganda Research Project, working paper, June 2017.

[19] The authors thank Peter Wood for the meaning on military-local cooperation. For cross-strait media cooperation, see for example: Kathrin Hille, “Taiwan primaries highlight fears over China’s political influence,” *Financial Times*, July 16, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/036b609a-a768-11e9-984c-fac8325aaa04>; Yimou Lee and I-hwa Cheng, “Paid ‘news’: China using Taiwan media to win hearts and minds on island,” Reuters, August 9, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-taiwan-china-media-insight/paid-news-china-using-taiwan-media-to-win-hearts-and-minds-on-island-sources-idUSKCN1UZ0I4>.

[20] Li Bicheng [李弼程], Hu Huaping [胡华平], and Xiong Ya [熊尧], “Intelligent agent model for network public opinion guidance” [“网络舆情引导智能代理模型”], *Defense Technology Review* [国防科技], June 2019.

[21] Lai Dongwei [赖东威], “An Analysis of the Minnan Language Sentence Patterns and Vocabulary Used on Taiwanese Social Media” [“台湾社交媒体的闽南语句式 and 词汇使用现象探析”], *News Research* [新闻研究], November 2017. The author is from Fujian area and likely speaks Southern Min. He appears to have attended 福建省南安第一中学 high school, then Xiamen University, and appears to have gone to work for PLA public facing media, perhaps for CCTV’s military channel or PLA media afterwards.

[22] For other non-Base 311 PLA articles on Taiwanese social media, see for example: Lou Sijia [娄思佳], “On the Strategies of Leveraging Non-local Social Media for Military Broadcasting in Taiwan” [“试论对台军事广播借力非本土社交媒体的策略”], *China Broadcasts*. August 2017, pp. 29-32. This deep interest by Nanjing Political Institute students has continued, as evident in this detailed overview of Taiwanese usage of Facebook: Liu Weichao [刘伟超] and Zhou Jun [周军], “The Analysis of Facebook Users’ Information Behavior in Taiwan: Through the Two Angles of the User and the Media” [“台湾地区脸书(Facebook)用户信息行为研究: 基于用户和媒介的双重视角”], *Taiwan Studies* [台湾研究], June 2019, pp. 71-83.

**Xinhua Infiltrates Western Electronic Media, Part One:
Online “Advertorial” Content**

By John Dotson

Introduction

For many years, the People’s Republic of China (PRC)’s state propaganda apparatus has sought to expand its influence among foreign audiences as part of a broader effort to achieve greater “discourse power” (话语权, *huayuquan*) for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) internationally ([CACR](#), December 15, 2020). One component of this effort has been the practice of “borrowing foreign newspapers” (借用海外报刊, *jiyong haiwai baokan*) to promote Beijing’s preferred messages—a practice pursued both through the cultivation of foreign reporters and media figures, as well as through the direct purchase of “advertorial” inserts in influential international newspapers and magazines.^[1] More recently, this practice has also moved into the realm of online media, with the PRC’s state-run Xinhua News Agency sponsoring propaganda content for publication in the websites of foreign newspapers and magazines. The long-standing practice of hardcopy “advertorial” publishing has moved into the electronic realm.

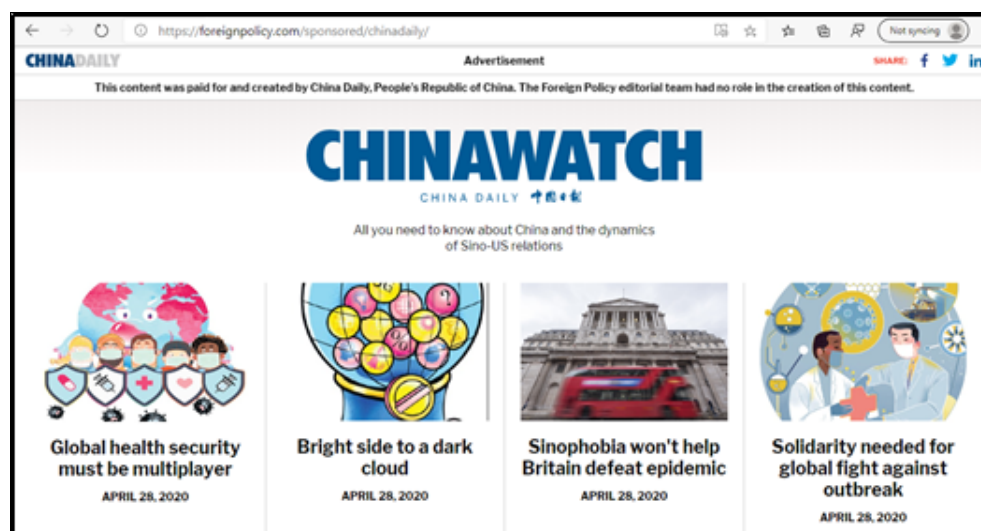


Image: A screenshot of the China Watch advertorial webpage hosted by Foreign Policy magazine (April 29, 2020) (Source: [Foreign Policy](#)).

Xinhua “Advertorial” Inserts in Print Media

A long history exists of PRC state media outlets paying for “advertorial” inserts into major U.S. newspapers such as the *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times*—often under the banners of “China Watch” or “China Focus,” which are both headings used by Xinhua for its English-language content (see *accompanying images*) ([Freedom House](#), 2020). The articles in these inserts are intended to look like news

and editorial material presented by the host newspaper (albeit accompanied by disclaimers, often in small print), but represent propaganda content prepared by the CCP’s foreign media apparatus.

Significant outlays are involved in the purchase of these advertorial inserts. For example, inquiries in 2011 by Congressional staff indicated that the cost of a *China Watch* insert in the *Washington Post* was \$300,000 dollars at that time, excluding additional fees for web-based content, and reporting from 2016 indicated that the U.K.-based *Daily Telegraph* collected £750,000 annually (over \$1 million dollars) to publish similar inserts.^[2] Widespread criticism has led some publications to reconsider the practice: for example, in 2020 *Daily Telegraph* and a handful of Australian newspapers (including the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*) announced that they would no longer carry such inserts (The Guardian, [April 14, 2020](#) and [December 8, 2020](#)).



Image: (Left) The front page of a four-page “advertorial” insert in the Des Moines Register in September 2018 ([Des Moines Register](#), Sep. 24, 2018). (Right) A full-page “advertorial” advertisement in the March 21, 2020 print edition of *The Economist*, titled “A Shot of Confidence—President Xi Leads the Battle Against COVID-19 Outbreak,” which praised the Chinese government for “the most ambitious, agile, and aggressive disease containment effort in history,” and held China’s response up as a model to the world. (Source: Author’s photo)

Xinhua Advertorial Content Goes Digital

While Xinhua’s hardcopy newspaper inserts have been the subject of attention for many years, far less attention has been given to the migration of this material to electronic media—where it has the potential to reach even wider audiences, and in some instances to be more specifically tailored towards particular target

audiences. The *China Watch* title, a repackaging of material from the Xinhua English-language outlet *China Daily*, is now hosted—or has recently been hosted—in online form by a host of Western news and foreign affairs publications on their websites (see *accompanying images*).

Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) disclosure documents filed by China Daily Distribution Corporation (CDDC), which is a Xinhua affiliate based in New York City that serves as the executive agent for promoting this “advertorial” content in North America, give a sense of the scale of resources dedicated to this propaganda program. Documents covering the twelve-month period from November 2019 through October 2020 indicate that CDDC received a total of \$9,191,926.16 from its parent company to support printing and advertising costs (both hardcopy and online) for Xinhua materials.[3]

Between November 2019 and April 2020, CDDC maintained business ties to an array of North American newspapers, including the *Los Angeles Times*, *Seattle Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Houston Chronicle*, and *Boston Globe*. In the first six months of this period (November 2019 – April 2020), CDDC paid out \$759,179.59 in advertising expenses to media outlets, with the *Wall Street Journal* and *Foreign Policy* listed as specific recipients. For the latter six months (May – October 2020), newspapers receiving CDDC advertising revenue included the *Los Angeles Times* (\$340,000), the *Financial Times* (\$223,710), and the *Canadian Globe and Mail* (\$152,046.41).

Case Study: The Wall Street Journal

For several years and continuing throughout much of 2020, the *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) has hosted sponsored Xinhua material on a WSJ-associated *China Watch* webpage. According to the previously mentioned FARA documents, from the period of November 2019 to April 2020 WSJ was the recipient of an undisclosed amount of CDDC advertising funds; in May-June 2020 the WSJ received \$85,296.69, but payments for 2020 apparently ceased at that point. During this period, WSJ appears to have cancelled, or at least paused, its business relationship with CDDC: although the WSJ-hosted webpage for *China Daily* content remains online as of March 31, 2021, it no longer provides active links to any articles ([Wall Street Journal](#), accessed March 31).

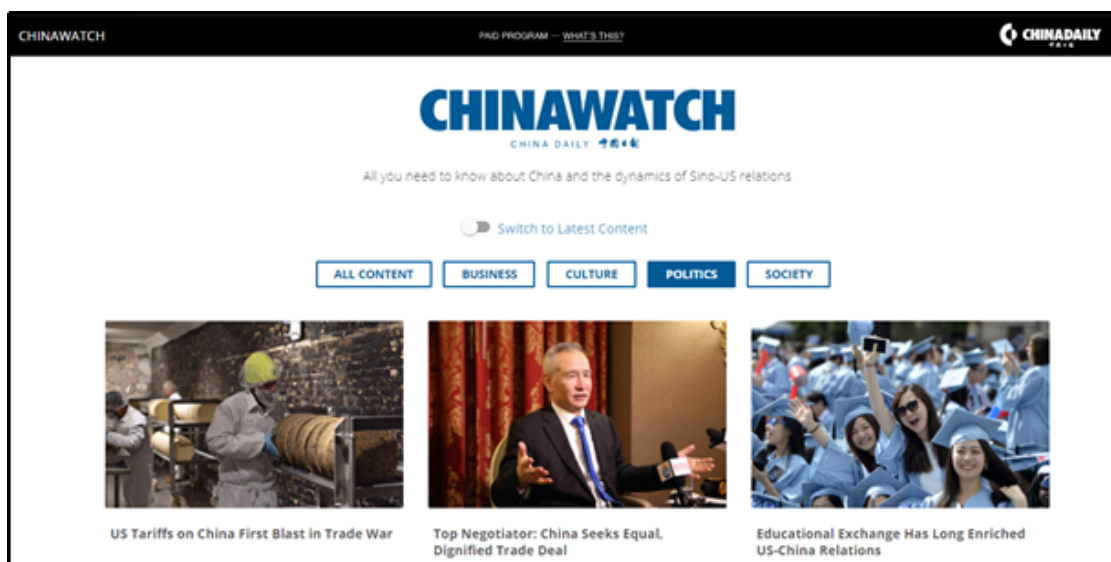


Image: A screenshot of the China Watch advertorial webpage hosted by the Wall Street Journal (April 29, 2020) (Source: [Wall Street Journal](#)).

Throughout 2020, a major propaganda theme stressed in this material was that of praise for China’s highly effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic—accompanied by calls for global solidarity and insistence that China not be held responsible in any way for the outbreak. Such content often directly cited or more generally attributed statements to prominent international figures such as World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and Apple Inc. CEO Tim Cook. In addition to praise for PRC policies, these articles also criticized policies contrary to PRC interests—such as the travel bans issued by many countries against travelers from China in the early stages of the pandemic. Such content argued that bans on travel to and from China were ineffective and reflective of “Sinophobia,” and should be opposed. This message continued even after the PRC instituted travel restrictions of its own in March 2020 ([PRC Foreign Ministry](#), March 26), and began a propaganda campaign to promote the narrative that the virus originated outside of China ([Xinhua](#), May 10, 2020).

Another significant theme was the assertion that the United States bore responsibility for starting the U.S.-China “trade war”—but that despite this, China had staked out a reasonable position and was seeking an “equal, dignified trade deal” to resolve the disputes (*see accompanying images*). This description of bilateral tensions has been framed by the highest levels of China’s foreign policy leadership, including State Councilor Wang Yi and Director of the CCP Central Committee Foreign Affairs Commission Yang Jiechi ([PRC Foreign Ministry](#), February 22; [Xinhua](#), February 2).



Image: China Watch advertorial content hosted on the website of the Wall Street Journal (March 31, 2020) reinforcing a propaganda theme promoted consistently by PRC state media during the early months of the global COVID-19 crisis: that bans on travel to and from China were ineffective and racist in nature, and should be opposed. (Image source: [Wall Street Journal](#), March 31, 2020)

Case Study: Foreign Policy Magazine

An example of Xinhua seeking to branch out beyond traditional newspapers in an effort to engage with a more specialist audience in the field of international relations was observable in the advertorial campaign launched through *Foreign Policy* magazine in 2020. Between November 2019 and April 2020, *Foreign Policy* was paid an undisclosed amount by CDDC for advertising services; from May – October 2020 the magazine was paid \$100,000 for the same. These services took the form of hosting *China Watch* articles on a *Foreign Policy*-hosted webpage, as well as an e-mail advertising campaign to promote this content (see accompanying images).

Another noteworthy propaganda theme promoted in the *Foreign Policy* advertorial material was that of China's positive role in investing capital and building infrastructure overseas, and its similarly beneficent role in promoting its development model. One such example (see below) was disseminated in February 2020 under the title "Sharing the Fruits of Common Development"—a translation of the phrase *fenxiang fazhan chengguo* (共享发展成果), which is a CCP propaganda slogan that has been frequently invoked in PRC domestic discourse under the leadership of CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping ([Xuexi Shibao](#), August 4, 2016). Although such messages may find traction among a certain subset of credulous readers, this example serves to demonstrate one of the weaknesses of the CCP's advertorial propaganda efforts: to wit, that the material is often so closely tied to the CCP's domestic propaganda that it reads as stilted and clumsy to foreign audiences.

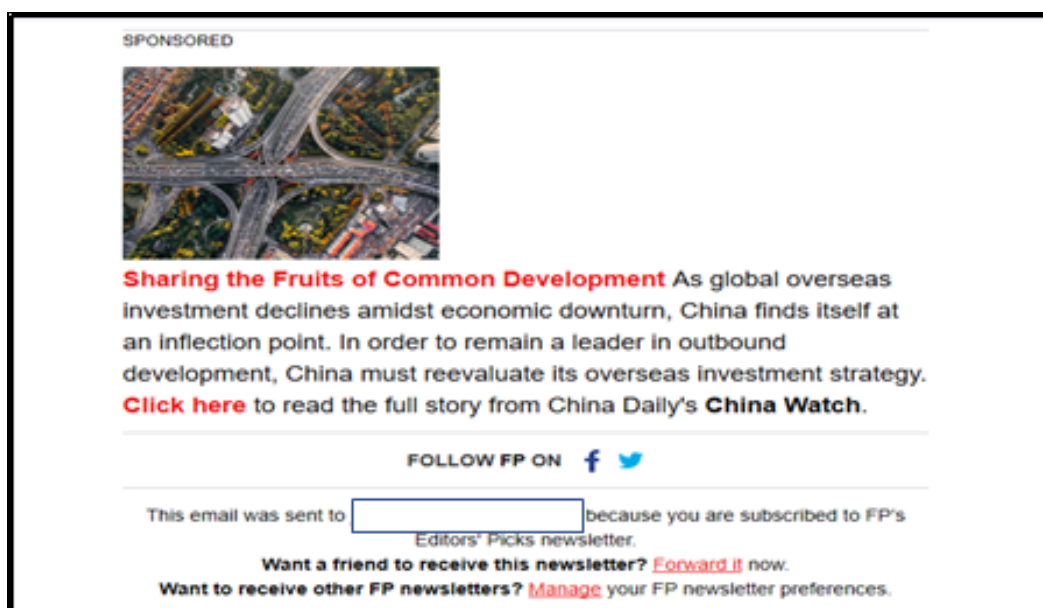


Image: An electronic advertisement and link for China Watch “advertorial” content produced by the PRC English-language state media outlet China Daily. This material was included in e-mail advertising promoted by the journal Foreign Policy (Feb. 10, 2020) (Source: Author’s personal e-mail).

Conclusion

After many years of paying for hardcopy advertorial inserts in major foreign newspapers and magazines, it is a natural progression for the PRC’s foreign media apparatus to promote such material in the online editions of these publications. Such advertorial content—intended to leverage the credibility of prominent English-language periodicals, and perhaps to deceive credulous readers who fail to take note of disclaimers and textual differences—provides another example of the intent of the PRC propaganda system to “tell China’s story well” (讲好中国故事, *jiang hao Zhongguo gushi*).

The hosting of propaganda material from an authoritarian regime arguably presents ethical challenges for international news and foreign affairs publications and raises legitimate questions as to whether the journalistic coverage and editorial positions of these publications might be influenced—even if only indirectly—by the need to maintain this stream of advertising revenue. Recognizing the potential conflicts of interest and ethical concerns raised by their relationships with Xinhua, some English-language news outlets have decided to relinquish these revenue streams—but many others maintain these ties and have expanded them into the electronic realm.

In terms of the PRC’s foreign propaganda, another new phenomenon—related to, but separate from advertorial material—is the practice of Xinhua forging business partnerships with Western media companies and sponsoring repackaged content for distribution through American online news aggregation and

distributions services. These practices—more subtle, and potentially more effective than “advertorializing”—will be addressed in a second forthcoming article.

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Notes

[1] Dr. Anne-Marie Brady, testimony presented at *China’s Propaganda and Influence Operations, Its Intelligence Activities That Target the United States, and the Resulting Impacts on U.S. National Security*, (hearing conducted by the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, April 30, 2009), p. 34. <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/transcripts/4.30.09HearingTranscript.pdf>.

[2] See: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2011 Report to Congress* (pp. 323-324), <https://www.uscc.gov/annual-report/2011-annual-report-congress>; and Jack Hazlewood, “China Spends Big on Propaganda in Britain... But Returns Are Low,” *Hong Kong Free Press*, April 3, 2016, <https://hongkongfp.com/2016/04/03/china-spends-big-on-propaganda-in-britain-but-returns-are-low/>.

[3] FARA disclosure document (“Supplemental Statement for Six-Month Period Ending 04/30/2020”) dated May 21, 2020, <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/3457-Supplemental-Statement-20200521-32.pdf>; and FARA disclosure document (“Supplemental Statement for Six-Month Period Ending 10/31/2020”) dated Nov. 18, 2020, <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/3457-Supplemental-Statement-20201118-33.pdf>.
