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# **CHINA'S DISINFORMATION STRATEGY**

Its Dimensions and Future

Dexter Roberts



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Dexter Roberts is a nonresident senior fellow in the Atlantic Council's Asia Security Initiative, housed within Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security.

Peer reviewed by Iain Robertson and DFRLab team.

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Atlantic Council  
1030 15th Street NW, 12th Floor  
Washington, DC 20005

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# Executive Summary

**P**olitical slogans have grown wings” and “found their way to the young, the middle-aged, and the old . . . They have penetrated into their minds and are on their lips.” — Mao Zedong, 1927

“Party-owned media must hold the family name of the party. They must embody the party’s will, safeguard the party’s authority.” — Xi Jinping, 2016

In recent years, China has increasingly turned to state propaganda and the manipulation of social media to push its worldview onto the Chinese-speaking people of Hong Kong and Taiwan, and further abroad, amongst the Chinese diaspora community in North America. The effort to push a Chinese vision of the world, one firmly controlled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Beijing, has happened in tandem with the People’s Republic of China’s increasing global strength in economics, trade, diplomacy, and military. China is now the world’s second-largest economy and on track to surpass the United States to become number one in as early as a decade, according to many estimates; it has become the world’s largest trading nation and produces many of the prized products of top multinationals, including Apple’s iPhones and iPads, Samsung’s Galaxy smart phones, GM’s Buicks, and a multitude of products sold by the world’s largest retailer Walmart. It is playing a leading role in newly created global institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, in global bodies like the World Health Organization, and is one of only five countries with a veto-power seat on the United Nations Security Council, a power it increasingly uses. It has one of the most powerful militaries in the world and is testing the once-untouchable US forces in places like the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.

But even as it has become more powerful in these hard measures, it has not seen a commensurate rise in its soft power, or in its ability to push a “China story,” as exemplified by CCP General Secretary and Chinese President Xi Jinping’s “China Dream,” a vision for the future that sees a wealthy and developed China take a leading role in defining global norms with a state ideology that appeals to people around the world. Now it is trying to change that. China is using state media organs as well as domestic and global social media platforms, and increasingly pushing disinformation,

defined as “false information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by the planting of rumors) in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth.”<sup>1</sup> All this is an effort to strengthen China’s discourse power—or a country’s power to set the agenda in the international arena by influencing the political order and values globally.<sup>2</sup> This is not an easy task, of course. But that has not discouraged the powers in Beijing. Instead, they are focusing on a step-by-step approach to reaching this ultimate goal. And they are focusing their efforts on key areas that they view as essential to the future of the CCP and China as a modern, unified, and globally powerful nation.

Probably as important as anything else to its leaders is protecting the national sovereignty of China, which they view as encompassing not just restive ethnic regions like Xinjiang and Tibet, but critically, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Much of China’s use of propaganda and disinformation today focuses on reinforcing the notion of inviolate Chinese sovereignty over these places, even as Uighur and Tibetan minorities, and indeed, Hong Kong and Taiwanese youth, push back against this and are less and less prone to self-identify as Chinese. China’s history of being colonized and losing control of its own territory—as happened in the era of Treaty Ports run by European powers and the later fracturing of China during its warlord era and civil war—before ultimately its rise to a unified nation under the CCP, makes sovereignty or its opposite, the fear of division, a powerful motivating force for much of the policies and actions taken by its leaders today. It explains why the unification of the mainland and Taiwan has become a defining goal that Xi is determined to see achieved, through force or not, during his lifetime.

Equally important to China’s discourse power is promoting China’s image as a stable, strong, and leading country to the rest of the world. The present tragedy of the mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States and many European countries, plus the chaos surrounding the transition to a new US president, have been eagerly seized upon by Beijing to bolster China’s global standing. By contrasting its relative success controlling the coronavirus and restarting its now fast-growing economy with the spectacle of the outgoing US president fanning conspiracy

1 Merriam-Webster, s.v. “Disinformation,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disinformation>.

2 *Chinese Discourse Power: China’s Use of Information Manipulation in Regional and Global Competition*, Digital Forensic Research Lab, Atlantic Council, October 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Chinese-Discourse-Power.pdf>.

theories undermining the core democratic institution of open elections, Beijing has found fertile ground to more aggressively push its discourse power, which has long been defined in part by the belief that an excessive focus on individual rights—à la Western democracy—is often bad for the overall social good. Civil unrest in the United States following police violence against African Americans, too, has been used to counter criticism of police abuse against protesters in Hong Kong. China also hopes to encourage more of its overseas talent to return to the mainland, even as it embarks on a new challenging economic path of self-reliance, as shown in its so-called dual circulation strategy.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, Beijing is intent on using propaganda and the manipulation of social media at home to reinforce popular support for the CCP, particularly important at a time when its economy is facing significant headwinds as demography, debt, and unfinished reforms slow growth.

China's disinformation strategy is led by key government actors, including, critically, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the State Council and its Taiwan Affairs Office, the Cyberspace Administration of China, and the CCP's United Front Work Department (UFW)<sup>4</sup>, all of which have differing roles from seeding social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube with fake or sensationalist news critical of Hong Kong protesters, the present Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)-led Taiwanese government, and the US democratic system, to cultivating and encouraging—sometimes through threats—Chinese celebrities to use their own social media platforms to support the CCP, drumming up support for improved US-China relations (as well as dampening open criticism of the CCP and its mercantilist policies) from foreign businesspeople eager to benefit from the Chinese market and from local officials from Taipei to Los Angeles who want to boost their economies by tying them closer to China's growth.

There are clear shortcomings in China's strategy. While Chinese state actors have accumulated large numbers of followers on social media sites, including Facebook and Twitter—in many cases by purchasing them—they have struggled to build up much follower engagement, whether

measured by likes or retweets. In contrast with sophisticated Russian disinformation efforts, China so far has been unable to have real influence swaying the outcome of elections, as seen in the 2020 Taiwanese presidential election, which gave a resounding win to the DPP's Tsai Ing-wen despite disinformation efforts to damage the standing of the candidate most reviled by Beijing.<sup>5</sup>

Instead, Beijing has focused to date on pushing its simpler message of the strength of the CCP, its economy, and its military, and contrasting that with weaknesses abroad. Its recent efforts to provide aid to countries like Italy during the pandemic through its “mask diplomacy” are an example of that.<sup>6</sup> Some efforts, such as Beijing's attempts to win “hearts and minds” in Hong Kong and Taiwan, have backfired; instead, heavy-handed Chinese messaging attacking student protesters and promoting reunification has young people in both places increasingly unwilling to identify as Chinese and more and more feeling alienated and frightened by the prospect of being under the thumb of the CCP.<sup>7,8</sup>

At the same time, there are signs that China's disinformation efforts are becoming more sophisticated. China's military has spoken openly about the use of artificial intelligence to better tailor its messages to influence social media consumers in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the United States.<sup>9</sup> China has also proven increasingly adept at using its ever-larger market to coerce everyone from pop stars to multinational senior executives to accept the party's line on the status of Taiwan as an inviolable part of China—or to punish economically those who do not. Whether China's leaders will make the next leap to create a disinformation ecosystem truly capable of convincing not just ethnic Chinese but also other people around the globe to more and more accept its vision of China and the CCP's leading role in the world, as well as increasingly follow its dictates, is still uncertain. This report examines that prospect and suggests policies that should be taken to make that possible future less likely.

3 Jude Blanchette and Andrew Polk, “Dual Circulation and China's New Hedged Integration Strategy,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 24, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/dual-circulation-and-chinas-new-hedged-integration-strategy>.

4 DFRLab, *Chinese Discourse Power*.

5 Flemming Rose, “The Taiwan Election: Dealing with Disinformation while Protecting Speech,” *Cato at Liberty*, February 7, 2020, <https://www.cato.org/blog/taiwan-election-dealing-disinformation-while-protecting-speech>; *Chinese Messaging Across the Strait: China-friendly Narratives and the 2020 Taiwan Presidential Election*, Digital Forensic Research Lab, Atlantic Council, December 17, 2020, [https://78251c6f-ea33-4b6e-85f0-8ffd60cb35f5.filesusr.com/ugd/9d177c\\_aa623695074c4f7aa8576ada0155aad8.pdf](https://78251c6f-ea33-4b6e-85f0-8ffd60cb35f5.filesusr.com/ugd/9d177c_aa623695074c4f7aa8576ada0155aad8.pdf)

6 DFRLab, *Chinese Discourse Power*.

7 *Economist*, “Almost Nobody in Hong Kong under 30 identifies as ‘Chinese,’” August 26, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2019/08/26/almost-nobody-in-hong-kong-under-30-identifies-as-chinese>.

8 Kat Devlin and Christine Huang, *In Taiwan, Views of Mainland China Mostly Negative*, Pew Research Center (May 2020), 12-13, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/05/12/in-taiwan-views-of-mainland-china-mostly-negative/>.

9 Kyodo, “China's military aims to use AI to dominate in cyber and outer space, Japanese think tank warns,” *South China Morning Post*, November 13, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3109803/chinas-military-aims-use-ai-dominate-cyber-and-outer-space>.

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# The Backdrop to Today's Disinformation Push

The environment for China's assertive push to expand its disinformation capability is a complicated one. Under Xi, the country has seen a dramatic shift in how it approaches the world. Today, Xi holds an unprecedented concentration of power and has shown clearly his ambition to use it. But before he took power some eight years ago, the country had followed a dictum set by former paramount leader Deng Xiaoping of "keeping one's head low and biding one's time." This was a recognition of the fact that China, then a much smaller developing country, very much needed the cooperation and goodwill of the world to grow stronger. In order to ensure it would continue to have access to the capital and know-how of other countries around the world and especially the United States, China's leaders, particularly Deng, knew that it was not the right time—nor did they have the ability—to much more assertively push their geopolitical interests beyond their borders. That recognition was behind China's decision to agree to slash tariffs and open its economy to the world with entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001, even if those market-liberalizing promises in many cases ultimately were never met.

That reality defined China's approach under the succeeding leaderships of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. A separate Deng-instituted norm was rule by a new collective leadership of the top leaders, or the nine to eleven members of China's elite Politburo Standing Committee, that dominated the decision-making process under Deng's successors. This "one among equals" system was put in place to ensure that China would never again make the horrendous policy mistakes that occurred with one supreme, uncontested leader, as happened under "Great Helmsman" Mao Zedong, with the famine-inducing Great Leap Forward from 1958 to 1960 and the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. This system of joint rule arguably also bred caution in foreign policymaking, with any one member of the top echelon able to put a brake on policies being pursued by advocates of more assertive actions overseas, that might then hinder the country's overriding emphasis on economic development.

## Lifting living standards

Above all, Chinese policymaking during earlier years was focused on growing GDP and lifting living standards. A

target was set to double GDP and double disposable per capita income between 2010 and 2020, as well as end absolute poverty by 2021, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the CCP. Today, the party is set to accomplish all three. As over the years China has succeeded—even beyond its expectations—in its mandate of growing the economy and improving people's livelihoods, its leaders' ambitions have naturally extended to having a geopolitical profile to match their country's financial strength.

This is hardly a surprise: every Chinese youth is taught how China, once a great country, suffered through what is called "the century of national humiliation," those decades after foreign nations carved up its territory following the First Opium War's conclusion in 1842. Also part of the education curriculum: the idea that eventually China will return to its rightful place as one of the world's most powerful countries, with a military and economy to back it up. And over the last decade-plus, as China has grown in strength and even preceding Xi's rise to power, the leadership increasingly has been no longer content to have China play the role of little brother, adopting Western global norms with little adjustment or thought. Instead, they have begun to define what they view is a Chinese path to development, and its growing role not just domestically, but also beyond its borders.

Two key moments in recent history that saw this shift accelerate were the 2008 Beijing Olympics, considered by many Chinese as a coming out party announcing their country's new confidence to the world, and, crucially, the 2008-2009 Global Financial Crisis. The latter was the first time that government officials, central and local, as well as countless Chinese businesspeople, began to seriously question the pro-market-opening, regulation-reducing US approach to finance and economics; they watched the collapse of Lehman Brothers and the economic pain that followed globally, and began to consider there might be an alternate approach, a China model, to economic development. Even earlier in 2004, in an influential essay, a US consultant coined the phrase "Beijing Consensus" as an alternate model to challenge the free market-oriented "Washington Consensus."

## The ascension of Xi Jinping and a more assertive China

Xi's ascension to China's top leadership positions set a new, far more assertive era into motion, one in which the country has begun to promote in earnest China as a model for the world. Shortly after becoming CCP general secretary in the fall of 2012, and even before he became president the following spring, Xi announced his country would now pursue the "China Dream" or *zhongguo meng*, and it soon became mandatory study for government and party officials, was written into school textbooks, and began to appear on propaganda billboards across the country. "Everyone is talking about a China Dream," said Xi on November 29, 2012, while touring an exhibit with other top leaders at the National Museum of China in Beijing. "I believe the revival of the Chinese nation is the greatest dream of the nation since modern times."

At the same time, Xi launched an unprecedented and sweeping crackdown on corruption, taking down "tigers and flies," or some of the most powerful leaders in China as well as lowly administrators, which helped him solidify his position by removing rivals for power. Meanwhile, a leaked document in the spring of 2013 revealed how China's leaders feared Western political systems and values as a threat to their continued existence. The document referred to the ideological situation facing China "as a complicated, intense struggle" and warned party members to guard against seven "false ideological trends," including "Western constitutional democracy," the Western idea of journalism, and Western styles of governance.

By the 19th National Congress of the CCP in the fall of 2017, five years into his term, Xi was direct in describing how China should now provide a model to countries around the world, in opposition to the Western model, and in particular as an alternative to that promoted by the United States. "The path, the theory, the system, and the culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics have kept developing, blazing a new trail for other developing countries to achieve modernization. It offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence; and it offers Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing mankind."

Now in his second term, Xi has amassed unparalleled power. During the 19th Party Congress he was successful in the unprecedented move to get his own ideology, officially

called "Xi Jinping Thought for a New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," put into the preamble of the Chinese Constitution—in the past, leaders had had to wait until retiring before their ideological theories were incorporated into the document. Xi also oversaw the end of the Deng-era-instituted term limits for the presidency, which allows him to stay in power for many years more.

Xi has increasingly focused his attention on building up the stature of China beyond its borders. Key efforts include his Belt and Road Initiative, a massive infrastructure and investment push through the developing world, as well as the creation of China-centered international financial institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Less pacifically, he has begun to aggressively assert the country's control over the shoals and reefs of the strategic South China Sea with the buildup of naval bases. Simultaneously, China has exerted new pressures on global multinationals to bend to Beijing's ideological orders whether it is ensuring Hollywood does not portray China in a negative light or that airlines do not give Taiwan too much prominence on their websites.

## Sovereignty as a Core Concern

Other than perhaps ensuring the Chinese people enjoy rising living standards and do not become a destabilizing force that pushes back against CCP rule, no other issue keeps Chinese leaders awake at night as contemplating possible challenges to their country's territorial integrity, now a core concern of their disinformation strategy. That explains in part the tragic mistreatment of Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang, whom Beijing perceives as aiming for independence from China. It also explains why China has cracked down so brutally on culture and religion in Tibet, threatened as it is by belief systems that contest the power of the party. And it is why Xi opted to institute a harsh new national security law in early 2020 in Hong Kong in the face of massive protests by its citizens against encroaching "mainlandization" of the territory. It also explains why China's leaders have responded to increasing resistance to unification by Taiwanese by becoming ever more threatening toward the island, including by regularly sending PLA flights across the unofficial midline in the Taiwan Strait.

## The China Model

Another core defining concern is, of course, the Chinese leadership's now obvious desire to build up China as a model for the world, one that provides a credible alternative to the West and particularly the United States. China's

10 Joshua Cooper Ramo, *The Beijing Consensus* (London, United Kingdom: Foreign Policy Centre, 2004), <https://web.archive.org/web/20130824150344/http://fpc.org.uk/fsblob/244.pdf>.

11 Dexter Roberts, "Will Xi Jinping Be the Reformer China Needs?" *Bloomberg Businessweek*, March 1, 2013, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-02-28/will-xi-jinping-be-the-reformer-china-needs>.

12 ChinaFile, "Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation: How Much Is a Hardline Party Directive Shaping China's Current Political Climate?," November 8, 2013, <https://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>.

13 William A. Joseph, *Politics in China: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2019).

14 Chris Buckley, "Xi Jinping Thought Explained: A New Ideology for a New Era," *New York Times*, February 26, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/26/world/asia/xi-jinping-thought-explained-a-new-ideology-for-a-new-era.html>.

leaders, however, have struggled to date to define what exactly constitutes the China model, and why other nations should be interested in following it. Instead, much of their focus has been on trying to point out the flaws in China's most obvious ideological rival, the United States—a task made much easier recently with the country's mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic response and the recent chaos that followed the presidential election. China's admirable success in controlling the virus and restarting its economy, which grew by 4.9 percent in the third quarter and is expected to be the only major economy to grow in 2020, also has boosted its ability to present the country as just as worthy of emulation as the United States has been.<sup>15</sup>

### Economic Challenges

But while China's economy may look strong today, particularly when contrasted with the lackluster performance of much of the rest of the world, Beijing's leaders know that it faces substantial challenges, including an aging population, a shrinking workforce with falling productivity, growing debt which already amounts to more than 300 percent of GDP, and stilted progress in carrying out reforms essential to helping it transition to a much more domestic-market-driven economy. In particular, failure to make real progress reforming its household registration system and its dual land system have ensured that rural Chinese and migrant workers, close to half of China's population, remain in effect second-class citizens with limited access to higher quality healthcare or good education for their children. That makes it difficult for them to become part of the middle class, as most urban Chinese have already, and is why China has struggled to lift the proportion of domestic spending in its GDP above 40 percent, a level far below that which is common in most other major economies.

### The disinformation imperative

Beijing's awareness that it will struggle to lift the living standards of its own people at the fast pace of previous years explains why it now is eager to fan nationalism at home; encouraging its people to take pride in China's growing strength while viewing the United States as an opponent that wishes to hold back its rise can be used as a means to divert attention from growing challenges at home. These core priorities then—hitting back against any perceived threat to territorial integrity, building up the China model by undermining the appeal of the free market and democratic system of the United States, and luring overseas Chinese, who have studied in the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, and continental Europe, to return to

China—have all emerged as the overriding foci of the new effort to spread propaganda and disinformation. And these priorities make the people of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Chinese diaspora community of North America essential targets of China's information and discourse strategy. At the same time, China's own people are an equally important audience for Beijing's propaganda and disinformation.

A wide range of government and military actors have played key roles in China's disinformation strategy. Perhaps not surprisingly given the emphasis on sovereignty as a key goal, the PLA, including its Nanjing Political Institute, based in the capital of Jiangsu province, has been at the forefront of efforts and has been particularly active in pushing propaganda and false news in Taiwan.<sup>16</sup> Arms of the CCP, including its propaganda or, as it is now called, publicity department, as well as the party's shadowy but powerful UFWD, play a critical role. Also important are bodies of the government's State Council, China's cabinet, including its Taiwan Affairs Office, the State Council Information Office (SCIO), and the Cyberspace Administration of China.

China's state-run media, including the Communist Party mouthpiece *People's Daily*, national broadcaster CCTV, and the nationalistic broadsheet *Global Times*, have all played key roles drumming up nationalism at home by attacking Hong Kong protesters as excessively violent and manipulated by “hostile foreign forces” or “black hands” and Taiwan's DDP government as separatist-seeking officials bent on splitting from the mainland. Also playing a critical role are some of China's top social media companies, including Sina Weibo and WeChat. Within China, they have developed a vast internal censorship apparatus that keeps a constant eye on sensitive news, whether it be labor protests, calls for party officials to disclose their assets, or criticisms of top leaders like Xi, and move quickly to scrub them off posts and out of chat groups. At the same time, they have worked to promote news with “positive energy” or *zheng neng liang*—often defined as promoting the overall role of the party in some way—on their sites. One key reform of Weibo in 2018, for example, changed its search engine so that a state-crafted article with positive messaging always appears first in results.<sup>18</sup> Overseas, Chinese social media companies have played a critical role in spreading news denigrating the US electoral system while directing bipartisan criticism at US President Donald J. Trump on the one hand and US President-elect Joseph R. Biden, Jr., and US Vice President-elect Kamala Harris on the other. CCTV showed footage of Trump supporters besieging a polling station in Detroit, with the caption on the screen reading “multiple spots in the US have fallen into chaos,” as reported by the *South*

15 Evelyn Cheng, “China says its economy grew 4.9% in the third quarter,” CNBC, October 18, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/10/19/china-economy-q3-gdp-2020.html>.

16 Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Michael S. Chase, “Borrowing a Boat Out to Sea: The Chinese Military's Use of Social Media for Influence Operations,” John Hopkins School of Advanced Studies Foreign Policy Institute, 2019, [https://ac594fe2-a8ef-4a25-a40c-8acd006ea1a4.filesusr.com/ugd/b976eb\\_ad85a42f248a48c7b0cb2906f6398e71.pdf](https://ac594fe2-a8ef-4a25-a40c-8acd006ea1a4.filesusr.com/ugd/b976eb_ad85a42f248a48c7b0cb2906f6398e71.pdf).

17 Ivana Karásková, *One China under media heaven: How Beijing hones its skills in information operations*, European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, June 2020, [https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/20200625\\_Strategic-Analysis\\_23\\_China\\_Web.pdf](https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/20200625_Strategic-Analysis_23_China_Web.pdf).

18 DFRLab, *Chinese Discourse Power*.

*China Morning Post*.<sup>19</sup>

Just as important in China's disinformation efforts, however, have been the world's biggest social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Over the past several years, Chinese government officials, ranging from public security to overseas diplomats, at the encouragement of Beijing have opened accounts on these foreign platforms and used them to often forcefully promote China's rise. This has created the phenomenon of "wolf warrior" diplomats who tweet in often confrontational ways and increasingly spread fake news or even doctored images. Responding to disturbing revelations about war crimes committed by the Australian military, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian tweeted a falsified image of an Australian soldier holding a bloody knife to a child's throat, further damaging already troubled relations between the two countries. "The US [is] in degradation," tweeted Hu Xijin, the fiery editor of the *Global Times*, in the chaotic aftermath of the presidential election.<sup>20</sup>

### Disinformation in Hong Kong

In an effort to make their patriotic message more appealing to young people and in the hope of going "viral," state-run media, government agencies, and the CCP have increasingly created memes and music videos. CCTV, for example, created the hashtag #WanwanComeHome using the island's nickname to call for Taiwan to return to the mainland. The hashtag was one of the most popular searches on Weibo and Douyin, China's domestic version of the short video app TikTok, in November 2019.<sup>21,22</sup> CCTV also put out a rap song calling out "American hypocrisy" claiming the United States had a role in the protests in Hong Kong, while China's top public security body also released a rap, one focused on showing support for the Hong Kong police, with the lyrics "We are the Chinese police, and the Hong Kong police are part of our family."<sup>23</sup>

Less obvious efforts by government agencies using foreign social media platforms include the widespread use of fake accounts or "sockpuppets." Although often hard to prove definitively given their efforts to disguise their role, typically a government actor sets up an account using a false identity, for example, claiming to be an ordinary Hong Kong or Taiwanese citizen. Utilizing news produced by "content farms," or websites creating large volumes of questionable content or clickbait, these accounts have been used to

attack Hong Kong protesters as violent and manipulated by foreign groups, praise the Hong Kong police,<sup>24</sup> and undermine the government in Taiwan by attacking it as ineffective and unable to defend itself from invasion. In 2019, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter announced they had uncovered and shut down a group of accounts, pages, and channels masquerading as run by Hong Kong locals that were in fact linked to the Chinese government.

China has also increasingly used nonstate actors to push propaganda and disinformation in Hong Kong and beyond. Along with its well-known reliance on the so-called 50 Cent Army, those who have traditionally been paid small amounts to post content or intervene in conversations, to support the CCP and its goals, now authorities are more and more turning to those who already have a presence on social media and piggybacking on their platforms. That includes encouraging overseas Chinese students to post more patriotic sentiments, often by defending the crackdown on protesters in Hong Kong, attacking the DPP, or praising the Chinese armed forces.<sup>25</sup> It also includes tapping those who have a substantial viral reach online, whether it be pop stars who are increasingly expected to support the government in disputes it has overseas, or so-called fangirls—usually young women who organize online to support their favorite actors or singers—and Diba, a nationalist online community notorious for flooding the Facebook page of Tsai, Taiwan's president, with messages supporting the CCP in 2016.<sup>26</sup> "From fangirls to diba to Chinese students studying abroad, everyone who loves Hong Kong and China has recently united to support and safeguard the city," an anchor for CCTV crowed on the nightly news during protests in Taiwan in 2019.<sup>27</sup>

### Disinformation in Taiwan

Under Xi, Taiwan has a clear role to play in the "China Dream," which has as part of its mission "[realizing] the unification of the motherland," points out mainland political commentator Chang Ping. Taiwan has become so important an arena for Beijing's propaganda and disinformation efforts that some analysts have said it also has an additional purpose: being used as a testing ground for new tactics to interfere in the island's elections, which, if successful, could later be targeted at elections in the United States and elsewhere.<sup>28</sup>

Taiwan is also a key operating environment for China's

19 Jun Mai and Guo Rui, "China may be quiet on US election but state media is drawing attention to pockets of chaos in America," *South China Morning Post*, November 6, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3108663/china-may-be-quiet-us-election-state-media-drawing-attention>.

20 Reuters staff, "In China, bemusement and scorn over unresolved U.S. election," *Reuters*, November 4, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-china-reaction/in-china-bemusement-and-scorn-over-unresolved-u-s-election-idUSKBN27K1EF>.

21 DFRLab, *Chinese Messaging Across the Strait*.

22 Ibid.

23 Sue-Lin Wong, Christian Shephard, and Qianer Liu, "China's outsourcing its propaganda war against Hong Kong to online soldiers," *Ozy*, September 11, 2019, <https://www.ozy.com/the-new-and-the-next/chinas-outsourcing-its-propaganda-war-against-hong-kong-to-online-soldiers/96605/>.

24 *Targeting the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement: China's Hong Kong Messaging Proliferates on Social Media*, Digital Forensic Research Lab, Atlantic Council, December 17, 2020, [https://78251c6f-ea33-4b6e-85f0-8ffd60cb35f5.filesusr.com/ugd/9d177c\\_a64391bde9ce4d46926f0577e33a91de.pdf](https://78251c6f-ea33-4b6e-85f0-8ffd60cb35f5.filesusr.com/ugd/9d177c_a64391bde9ce4d46926f0577e33a91de.pdf)

25 Wong, Shephard, and Liu, "China's outsourcing."

26 DFRLab, *Chinese Discourse Power*.

27 Wong, Shephard, and Liu, "China's outsourcing."

UFWD, the concept for which was born in 1938 when the Communists and Nationalists decided to combine forces to fight the Japanese invasion of China. Today, it is a key part of the party apparatus whose mandate is to try to influence nonparty groups and individuals to alter their behavior to suit the CCP's interests. Its major focus has been on ethnic minority Tibetans and Muslim Uighurs; overseas Chinese populations, including in the United States; and Chinese from Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. In Taiwan, it has organized and paid for trips by local politicians, journalists, and businessmen to visit China in an effort to make them more supportive of unification with the mainland. By one estimate, it has spent at least \$337.8 million per year in recruiting efforts in Taiwan.<sup>29</sup>

Another Chinese tactic in Taiwan has been to flood local social media platforms with disinformation, in particular the online bulletin boards PTT and Dcard, both popular with young people and college students who want to discuss anime, gossip, and politics.<sup>30</sup> While local social media companies, including PTT and Dcard, have implemented tighter user registration regulations over the last couple of years, clearing off much of the mainland-created misinformation, a separate and growing concern today is China's influence over Taiwan's media conglomerates.<sup>31</sup> One of the most obvious examples is Want Want China, owned by pro-unification Taiwanese billionaire Tsai Eng-meng, who has significant financial interests in China, including a successful rice cracker and beverage business headquartered in Shanghai. Amidst growing concern about its pro-China stance and open attacks on the Taiwanese president, Taiwan's National Communications Commission announced in November 2020 that it will not renew the broadcast license of Chung T'ien News, Want Want China's cable news station, due to failure to fact check its news and the involvement of its owner in editorial decisions. "The key issue is its largest shareholder Tsai Eng-meng is directly and indirectly involved in the production of news programs," said the regulator's chairman Chen Yaw-shyang.<sup>32</sup>

## Disinformation and the Diaspora

Even without efforts to block them, as by the Taiwanese government, China's disinformation tactics face serious shortcomings. In marked contrast to sophisticated Russian efforts, China has been largely unable to exploit existing divisions within societies, failing to undermine its targeted enemies. And other Chinese actors, in particular exiled-in-

the-US billionaire businessman Guo Wengui (also known as Miles Kwok), have been far more successful than China's government in pushing their far-right, anti-CCP, and pro-Trump messages among the Chinese diaspora community in the United States. Guo has worked closely with former White House strategist Steve Bannon, as well as Falun Gong-owned media like the newspaper *Epoch Times* and New Tang Dynasty Television, which are known for trafficking in disinformation.<sup>33</sup>

Instead, China's disinformation approach has been similar to the usually heavy-handed approach of its state propaganda organs; even when it has covertly pushed out fake news, it has used the stilted language of the CCP, railing, for example, against "hostile foreign forces" interfering in Taiwan and encouraging "splittism." For the Taiwanese or Hong Kong residents it is targeting, this language is not only hard to relate to but is also often easily identifiable as originating from a Chinese government source. Another issue may simply be the officials' relative lack of fluency in, or understanding of, the dynamics of elections and opposition parties, putting them at a disadvantage when trying to create believable and effective fake news. "China has no idea how to run a Twitter network and does not do a good job amplifying its message with insincere state-run accounts," writes Jordan Schneider, who has researched China's use of the US social media platform. "The content it puts out is too hidebound by prescribed talking points and suffers from a general lack of understanding about how to operate in foreign cultural environments."<sup>34</sup>

This could change. China is relatively new to using disinformation on a global scale, but there are signs that it is learning quickly. Chinese authorities have also shown they are ready to put significant energy and money behind these efforts, which will only become a more important priority as China's economic, diplomatic, and military power increase. In a measure of how forward-thinking those involved in Chinese disinformation are when it comes to improving their tactics, artificial intelligence is being raised as a tool to better suit content to audiences around the world. The PLA publication the *Military Correspondent* recently laid out this strategy: the military must "fully exploit AI technology to accurately recommend military information to broad media platforms, and for different audiences. . .[and] make even more international audiences see our PLA reporting and think they themselves chose the content."<sup>35</sup>

28 Chang Ping, "How big is Xi Jinping's Taiwan ambition?," *Apple Daily*, December 1, 2020, [https://hk.appledaily.com/opinion/20201201/EMSK2IDV5BEUNF4EW5MHAFIA7M/?utm\\_campaign=hkad\\_social\\_AppleDailyENG&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=twitter](https://hk.appledaily.com/opinion/20201201/EMSK2IDV5BEUNF4EW5MHAFIA7M/?utm_campaign=hkad_social_AppleDailyENG&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter).

29 DFRLab, *Chinese Discourse Power*; Li-hua Chung and Sherry Hsiao, "China Targets 10 Groups for 'United Front,'" *Taipei Times*, January 14, 2018, <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2018/01/15/2003685789>.

30 DFRLab, Atlantic Council, *Chinese Messaging Across the Strait*.

31 DFRLab, *Chinese Messaging Across the Strait*.

32 Cindy Wang and Samson Ellis, "Taiwan Shuts Pro-China TV Channel in Battle Over Press Freedom," *Bloomberg*, November 18, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/amp/news/articles/2020-11-18/taiwan-shuts-pro-china-tv-channel-in-battle-over-press-freedom>.

33 Amy Qin, Vivian Wang, and Danny Hakim, "How Steve Bannon and a Chinese Billionaire Created a Right-Wing Coronavirus Media Sensation," *New York Times*, November 20, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/20/business/media/steve-bannon-china.html> *Epoch Times* and New Tang Dynasty were the subject of a significant removal of Facebook accounts and pages in August 2020; for more on this event, see: *Truth Media, Fake Profiles*, Graphika, August 2020, [https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/graphika\\_report\\_truth\\_media\\_fake\\_profiles.pdf](https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/graphika_report_truth_media_fake_profiles.pdf).

34 Jordan Schneider, "China's Hopeless Twitter Influence Operations," *ChinaTalk*, October 29, 2020, <https://chinatealk.substack.com/p/chinas-hopeless-twitter-influence>.

35 Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Chase, "Borrowing a Boat Out to Sea."

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## Policy Recommendations

In order to counter China's growing malign influence in cyberspace, the incoming administration of US President-elect Biden should consider the following options:

- The US government should expand its Chinese media reach, including through a depoliticized and better-funded *Radio Free Asia*. The station must first be restored to its former position as a strong, fair Mandarin-language voice.
- Given the critical role Taiwan plays as a democratic nation under threat from mainland China—through economic coercion, military threats, and as a major target of a disinformation strategy—the United States should consider helping fund and set up a joint Taiwan-US initiative housed at a think tank or university that aims to study and counter Chinese disinformation.
- The United States could also play a role in encouraging the creation of an independent public broadcaster in Taiwan, including an associated and active internet presence. This could help counter the increasing polarization of Taiwanese media and the infiltration of mainland money into Taiwanese media companies.
- The United States must work closely with other allies in Asia, traditional ones like Japan and South Korea and nontraditional ones like Vietnam, to help them understand and face China-led disinformation tactics as they likely expand to affect them. One option would be to help fund and set up disinformation studies programs at local universities and in local think tanks.
- The US government should create and find funding for an educational initiative in US middle schools and high schools teaching youth how to manage social media use and understand how overseas censorship, disinformation, and propaganda can affect them.
- US education authorities should increase resources to support more robust Mandarin-language programs and the study of China's cultural, political, and economic systems in middle schools through universities.
- The US government should reinstate and expand people-to-people exchanges between the United States and China, including the recently discontinued Peace Corps program and Fulbright scholarships in mainland China and Hong Kong. More exchanges would help create mutual understanding as well as restore historic feelings of goodwill between the peoples of the two countries. By having robust people-to-people exchanges, the United States will be better prepared to counter growing Chinese state-media propaganda and disinformation efforts that aim to paint the United States and its people as enemies of China.
- While being mindful of the real threat of technology theft, the United States should end the new restrictive visa policies that have affected tens of thousands of Chinese students who have legitimately come to study in the United States, attracted by its exemplary university education system.
- It is crucial that top social media companies, including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, do a better job of identifying and labeling disinformation on their platforms and change their algorithms to prevent fake news from spreading. The US government could establish an agency that monitors and works with these business giants to ensure they improve.
- The US government should work with business associations like the American Chamber of Commerce and others to support US companies facing pressure to bow to Chinese censorship. If all US airlines together

agreed to not change their websites to downgrade Taiwan's status when faced with Beijing's demands, for example, it would be much harder for Chinese authorities to carry through and punish them economically.

- An institute could be set up to monitor how US companies respond to pressure to self-censor when faced by Chinese demands and could regularly publicize those that do self-censor. This could provide political cover for companies that opt not to bow to Chinese authorities' demands—they could tell Beijing the cost of complying with censorship demands in China would hurt their business at home.
- Rather than engage in tit-for-tat expulsions of Chinese journalists in the United States and foreign correspondents in China, the United States should take the high road and refrain from limiting visa numbers and duration for Chinese journalists, as it has done with recent designations of Chinese media as state agents. Even as conditions worsen for US reporters in China, a far more effective tactic would be to limit visas of senior executives at China's state media, including Xinhua, the *People's Daily*, and CCTV, most of whom wear dual hats as media managers and party members.
- The US government should establish an initiative that researches both the role of the PLA and UFWD in disinformation, including by developing relationships with companies, business associations, and academic institutes in the United States and Taiwan.

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## Conclusion

While China to date has had limited success with its disinformation efforts, that is likely to change quickly. As its economy continues to grow and eventually surpasses that of the United States, as its diplomatic ambitions rise, and as it continues to build one of the world's most formidable militaries, it is clear that it will put ever more effort and finance into building a soft-power arsenal to match its formidable strength. Its present propaganda push to try to convince the world that the pandemic originated outside of its borders, despite all evidence otherwise, is one example of how ambitious China is in trying to control and shape the “China story,” even when it means altering facts on the ground. Under Beijing's implausible version, the pandemic started somewhere else and was brought to China, and there was never a cover-up in Wuhan to hide COVID-19 from China's own people and the world. Other countries instead are to focus on the genuinely admirable successes that followed, when China fought the virus largely to a standstill, despite its massive population, and restarted its economy.

But China's goal to dominate global discourse goes far beyond the pandemic. Much more important longer term is its ability to utilize propaganda, disinformation, and coercion to ensure its rapid rise faces few obstacles, and that other regions and countries, if not welcoming, at the very least accept and do not challenge it. In Hong Kong, the use of propaganda and disinformation—plus a heavy-handed crackdown on its opposition parties, its education system, and its youth under the draconian strictures of the national security law—aims to end completely the semi-independent status that underpinned the once successful model of “one country, two systems.”

Equally, if not more, alarming are Beijing's plans to take control of Taiwan, long a bastion of democracy and free society in Asia. Even as Taiwanese become less and less willing to contemplate unification with the mainland, China under Xi seems increasingly determined to ensure the island is brought into its fold sooner rather than later. Disinformation will continue to be key to the goal of trying to sway “hearts and minds” in Taiwan, despite its patent failure to date. But more frightening is the reality that disinformation is also seen by Beijing as an accompanying

tactic to possible military action, the eventual prospect of which looks increasingly likely. Already, Chinese authorities and, notably, the PLA are focusing disinformation not just on trying to undermine Taiwan's political system and build up support for China, but also to create a narrative that says that Taiwan has no choice but to bend to China's will: disinformation as a form of psychological warfare that aims to convince Taiwan and its armed forces that they would lose in any clash with the superior mainland military, that the United States might well not come to their aid, and, therefore, that resistance is futile.

Beyond Hong Kong and Taiwan, the Chinese diaspora and indeed all people in the United States and other countries are ultimately targets of China's disinformation ambitions. As described in the pages of our report, Beijing is already working hard to improve its capabilities amongst its diaspora communities. Through the workings of the party, government, and military, and the use of Chinese and global social media, it is exerting pressure on global businesses to not challenge in even a remote way what it sees as its leaders' absolute right to determine the future of Hong Kong and Taiwan; that was apparent after the National Basketball Association (NBA) found itself pulled from Chinese television and losing lucrative marketing opportunities after what seemed an offhand tweet in support of Hong Kong from the manager of one team, the Houston Rockets, in October 2019. And Beijing is using disinformation to try to get the world to ignore the human rights tragedies unfolding amongst Muslim communities in Xinjiang, Tibetans, and ethnic Mongolians in Inner Mongolia.

Even as China's disinformation efforts still lag and are inferior to those used by Russia, now is the time for the United States and other countries to work together and prioritize understanding and learning how to combat Beijing's developing disinformation tactics. Only by taking action now will it be possible to slow China from adding a far more sophisticated disinformation strategy to its growing arsenal of traditional power and use them together to realize its vision of a reascendant China expending its hard and soft power into countries far beyond its borders.

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36 *Descendants of the Dragon: China Targets Its Citizens and Descendants Beyond the Mainland*, Digital Forensic Research Lab, Atlantic Council, December 17, 2020, [https://78251c6f-ea33-4b6e-85f0-8ffd60cb35f5.filesusr.com/ugd/9d177c\\_d7848elf5c7a494ca00c7f434b9af036.pdf](https://78251c6f-ea33-4b6e-85f0-8ffd60cb35f5.filesusr.com/ugd/9d177c_d7848elf5c7a494ca00c7f434b9af036.pdf)



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