Atlantic Council

DIGITAL FORENSIC
RESEARCH LAB

Atlantic Council

SCOWCROFT CENTER
FOR STRATEGY AND SECURITY

TARGETING THE ANTI-EXTRADITION BILL MOVEMENT

China's Hong Kong Messaging Proliferates on Social Media

Atlantic Council

December 2020

Atlantic Council

Targeting the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement

China's Hong Kong Messaging Proliferates on Social Media

Table of Contents

Introduction

I n early 2019, the government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) introduced a bill that could ostensibly legalize the extradition of Hong Kong residents to mainland China for trial. The draft legislation provoked fears that Hong Kong might lose the autonomy it has maintained since 1997, sparking widespread protests. Propagandists adjacent to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took advantage of this unrest, using viral disinformation and social media curation to isolate and denigrate the broader Hong Kong pro-democracy movement. In time, Chinese authorities would use this aggressive application of discourse power to move closer than ever toward their ultimate goal: the subordination of Hong Kong to the Chinese party-state.

Initially, it appeared that the Hong Kong protesters – subsequently dubbed the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement – were in the stronger position. Following brutal suppression of the demonstrations by Chinese and Hong Kong security services, the protesters returned in greater numbers.[1] Their cause also grew to encompass popular backlash against police violence.[2] The CCP, meanwhile, had to strike a balance in its messaging between mainland Chinese, the population of Hong Kong, and a large international audience who tracked the situation closely thanks to Hong Kong's longstanding position as an international hub for business, culture, and transit.

Yet the CCP sustained focus and gained traction in a dogged application of discourse power. Party-state propagandists and associated media began a prolonged campaign to discredit the demonstrations while legitimizing the behavior of police and decisions by both the CCP and SAR authorities. By juxtaposing positive messaging around Hong Kong police with sensationalized, decontextualized examples of protester violence – as well as disinformation that emphasized "collusion" with foreign forces – the Chinese government has begun to blunt the impact of the popular movement.

This report examines the narratives, both overt and covert, that the Chinese government has used to undermine the Hong Kong protests and broader pro-democracy movement. The result is a cautionary tale. Not only has the CCP used discourse power to encroach on the longstanding "One China, Two Systems" ("一国两制") policy and challenge Hong Kong's *de jure* autonomy; it is also harnessing these same techniques to seize *de facto* control over Hong Kong's political decisions and to erode its once relatively free speech.

---

1 Shibhani Mahtani, Timothy McLaughlin, Tiffany Liang, and Ryan Ho Kilpatrick, "In Hong Kong crackdown, police repeatedly broke their own rules – and faced no consequences," *The Washington Post*, December 24, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/world/hong-kong-protests-excessive-force/.
2 Yuen Yung Sherry Chan, "Hong Kong's Protests Aren't Just About the Extradition Bill Anymore," *The Diplomat*, July 25, 2019, https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/hong-kongs-protests-arent-just-about-the-extradition-bill-anymore/.

One China, Two Systems, and Different Visions for the Future

Besides China's developing skills in manipulating information flow in the digital space, another primary reason for China to attempt to dominate the online space is increasing anti-China and pro-independence sentiment in Hong Kong. The party-state worries about the potential for autonomy in Hong Kong, as well as the spillover effects in Taiwan, Tibet, and the country's Uighur communities.[3] When the sovereignty of Hong Kong was transferred from Britain to China in 1997, the identity of Hong Kongese was a hybrid of local and national identities.[4] While local Hong Kong people aligned with the traditional cultural values of China, they were skeptical of the political differences as well as balancing their identities "between the competing hegemonies of the British and Chinese empires."[5]

Nominally, the political system in Hong Kong follows the principle of "One Country, Two Systems," which was intended to be China's neoliberalism experiment to preserve the semi-autonomous, open market, and relatively democratic system in Hong Kong from the party-state's central control applied to the mainland, at least notionally. Since the outset of 2012, however, there has been increasing suspicion over China's increasing control in the political processes of Hong Kong's system. Then-Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying was suspected to have been appointed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government, as he had only received 689 votes out of 1,200 votes from the Election Committee, the lowest ever for any chief executive

of Hong Kong.[6]

In the years following 2012, clashes between the pan-democratic camp in Hong Kong and the mainland's CCP government have escalated. The 2014 "Occupy Central" Movement was kindled by pan-democratic camp's appeal for universal suffrage in the 2017 Chief Executive election.[7] Benny Tai Yiu-ting ("戴耀廷"), a law professor at University of Hong Kong, proposed an act of civil disobedience: occupying the roads in the Central, a district in Hong Kong. He was joined by Chan Kin-man ("陳健民") and Chu Yiu-ming ("朱耀明") as leaders of the movement. Later, student representatives, including Lester Shum ("岑敖暉") and Joshua Wong Chi fung ("黃之鋒"), also took active initiative in leading the movement and attracting more attention from the international community.[8] The response to the demonstration was divided, as shown by a survey of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. On October 22, 2014, 38 percent of the population supported the movement while 36 percent opposed the movement.[10] By November 16, however, 34 percent of the population supported the movement while 44 percent of the population opposed it, a decline reportedly caused by the general disruptions to businesses operating in the city and the increased congestion as traffic adjusted to move around the protests.[11]

In the "Occupy Central" Movement, social media platforms played a significant role in broadcasting previously suppressed criticisms of the CCP-aligned government.[12] Like

---

3 Stephan Ortmann, "The Umbrella Movement and Hong Kong's Protracted Democratization Process," *Asian Affairs* 46(2015):32-50, accessed on December 11, 2020, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2014.994957.

4 Anthony Fung, "Postcolonial Hong Kong identity: hybridising the local and the national," *Social Identities* 10 (2004): 399-414, accessed on December 11, 2020, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1350463042000230854

5 Eric K.W. Ma & Anthony Y.H. Fung, "Negotiating Local and National Identifications: Hong Kong Identity Surveys 1996–2006," *Asian Journal of Communication* 17 (2017) 172-185, accessed on December 11, 2020, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01292980701306555; Gordon Mathews, "Hèunggóngyàhn: On the past, present, and future of Hong Kong identity," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 29 (1997): 3-13, accessed on December 11, 2020, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14672715.1997.10413089.

6 郑汉良, "梁振英689票压倒性当选香港下届特首," ("Leung Chun-ying won a landslide election of the SAR Government Head with 689 votes"), Radio France Internationale, March 25, 2012, https://www.rfi.fr/cn/中国/20120325-梁振英689票压倒性当选香港下届特首.

7 林祖伟, "香港占中五周年：从雨伞运动的"和理非"到"反送中"的"勇武"," ("Occupy Central Fifth Anniversary: From 'Peaceful, Rational, Non-violent' to 'Valiantism' in 'anti-extradition' movement"), *BBC News*, September 27, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-49753070

8 On December 2, 2020, a Hong Kong court sentenced Wong to over a year in prison for incitement and taking part in an unauthorized protest. Two other activists were also sentenced, though to lesser terms. Shibani Mahtani and Theodora Yu, "Joshua Wong, Agnes Chow, Ivan Lam are sent to prison over Hong Kong democracy protests," *The Washington Post*, December 2, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/joshua-wong-hong-kong-agnes-chow-prison/2020/12/02/2b3e74ae-2d2c-11eb-9dd6-2d0179981719_story.html.

9 廖美香, "特稿：反思香港"占中" 理想与现实" ("Special: Reflecting on the Dream and Reality of the 'Occupy Central' Movement in Hong Kong"), *BBC News*, December 19, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/china/2014/12/141219_occupycentral_reality

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Andrew Lih, "In Hong Kong's protests, technology is a battlefield," *Quartz*, October 2, 2014, https://qz.com/274973/in-hong-kongs-protests-technology-is-a-battlefield/

the Arab Spring and other movements, protesters in Hong Kong actively used online spaces to organize activities and shape narratives around the cause.[13] Lee *et al.* defined the digital space in the 2014 demonstration as an "insurgent public sphere (IPS)," enabling a media apparatus that worked more favorable toward the protesters and looking more critically at the governing bodies, including both the Hong Kong SAR Government and the Chinese central government.[14]

Beyond the practical application of discourse power, Hong Kong remains a core interest to the China's party-state in controlling information domestically. The autonomy granted under the "One China, Two Systems" approach could provide for other challenges to the party-state's control in places like Tibet or communities like China's Uighur population as well as encourage other perceived challenges to China's sovereignty, like an independent Taiwan.

---

13 Ibid.

14 Paul S.N. Lee, Clement Y.K. So & Loius Leung, "Social media and Umbrella Movement: insurgent public sphere in formation," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 8 (2015):356-375, accessed on December 11, 2020, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17544750.2015.1088874

2019 Hong Kong Protests: Online and on the Ground

The catalyst for the most recent protests was a 2019 extradition bill in reaction to a murder case in which a Hong Kong citizen murdered his girlfriend in Taiwan.[16] With no means of extraditing him for prosecution, the Hong Kong SAR Government proposed an amendment to the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance with an extradition provision that, as written, would allow Hong Kong to extradite people to countries with which it has no such agreement, including mainland China.[17] According to the University of Hong Kong, about 66 percent of the population was against the amendment, mostly out of fear of Beijing's less transparent judicial system, and critics highlighted that the law was so broadly written that it could be used to transfer political prisoners from Hong Kong to mainland China, or elsewhere, for prosecution.[18] The CCP initially welcomed this development.

Unlike the well-defined leadership in the 2014 "Occupy Central" Movement, the "anti-extradition bill" movement in 2019 was more grassroots and less centrally organized.
On June 6, 2019, human rights organization "民間人權陣線" ("Civil Human Rights Front") organized the first demonstration against the bill.[19] Increasingly violent confrontations between the protesters and the Hong Kong police triggered severe mistrust of the security services. The shelf life of specific occurrences within the 2019 protests has been made much longer on social media, where depictions have been replayed, amplified, and debated in what could prove to be a decisive "battle of public opinion."[20]

While one should generally be cautious with analogies of war to describe influence operations or the competition for information, the comparison in Hong Kong's case is apt. The battle for public opinion – in Hong Kong, the Chinese mainland, and internationally – related to the current protests could prove decisive for Hong Kong's continued autonomy under the "One China, Two Systems" policy. The victor in this competition for information will gain control of the information environment itself. What is at stake is the relatively open information environment Hong Kong has enjoyed, to be replaced with the restrictive information environment of mainland China.

15 Stephan Ortmann, "The Umbrella Movement and Hong Kong's Protracted Democratization Process."
16 Mike Ives, "What Is Hong Kong's Extradition Bill?" New York Times, June 10, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/10/world/asia/hong-kong-extradition-bill.html; 林祖偉, "香港反送中100天：如何從遊行變成暴力衝突？" (100 Days into Anti-Extradition Movement: How does the demonstration become violent confrontation?), BBC News, September 16, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/extra/Fy2CQzQkHZ/hong-kong-protests-100-days-on
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 林祖偉, "100 Days into Anti-Extradition Movement: How does the demonstration become violent confrontation?"; 民間人權陣線, "反送中百萬人大遊行一周年聲明" ("Anti-Extradition Million-People Demonstration Anniversary Statement"), InMedia Hong Kong, June 9, 2020, https://www.inmediahk.net/node/1074324
20 Grace Shao, "Social media has become a battleground in Hong Kong's protests," CNBC News, August 16, 2019, https://www.cnbc.com/2019/08/16/social-media-has-become-a-battleground-in-hong-kongs-protests.html

Discourse Power: A Decisive Competition for Information

The recent history of protests in Hong Kong and the use of social media and online communications are intertwined. Both are essential in understanding the CCP's approach to discourse power on the immediate, core interests of the CCP.

With 6.79 million internet users, almost 91 percent of its population, as of January 2020, Hong Kong has a robust online population with access to social media platforms.[21] Due to the less restricted online space compared to the mainland, Hong Kong's residents use a myriad of social media platforms of both Western origin and Chinese origin.[22] As of the third quarter of 2019, the most popular social media platforms in Hong Kong were Facebook (82 percent penetration rate), YouTube (81 percent), WhatsApp (79 percent), Instagram (60 percent), WeChat (54 percent), Facebook Messenger (52 percent), Twitter (30 percent), and LinkedIn (22 percent).[23]

Protestors in Hong Kong utilized social media platforms that are more localized and more familiar to them, and the Chinese government gradually moved its efforts to non-mainland social media platforms, while at the same time maintaining tight control over the mainland social media platforms, to consolidate the CCP's narratives.

One essential distinction is the extent to which social media platforms were used as communications infrastructure for both coordinating and public messaging by the protesters. For example, Telegram gained prominence since the previous protests in Hong Kong in 2014. Because of its security and encryption, protesters used it to coordinate demonstrations, alert each other about police activity, and share resources with each other.[24] Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram have also remained more public forums for protesters to voice their opposition to the CCP government and in support of Hong Kong's autonomy or relative democracy.

However, the most recent, ongoing protests have also been marked by a more intentional disinformation campaign and narrative shaping by the CCP and aligned representatives in the SAR Government. Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter identified and disclosed networks of accounts, pages, and channels masquerading as Hong Kong locals and spreading disinformation about protesters, which the platforms linked – in varying degrees – to the Chinese government or entities connected to the Chinese government.[25] These accounts collectively delegitimized the demonstrations in the eyes of the local Hong Kongese as well as the foreign audience.

21 Simon Kemp, "Digital 2020: Hong Kong," *Data Reportal*, Feburary 13, 2020, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-hong-kong#:~:text=There%20were%206.79%20million%20internet,at%2091%25%20in%20January%202020.

22 As a consequence of the "One Country, Two Systems" policy, the Chinese government does not place the restrictions on internet accessibility in Hong Kong, unlike in the mainland, where access to Western websites including Google, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, is obstructed by the Great Fire Wall.

23 "Penetration rate of leading social networks in Hong Kong as of 3rd quarter 2019," *Statista*, January 2020, https://www.statista.com/statistics/412500/hk-social-network-penetration/. The percentage means penetration rate of the social media networks.

24 Joel Schectman, "Exclusive: Messaging app Telegram moves to protect identity of Hong Kong protesters," *Reuters*, August 30, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-telegram-exclusive/exclusive-messaging-app-telegram-moves-to-protect-identity-of-hong-kong-protesters-idUSKCN1VK2NI

25 Renée Diresta et al.,"Telling China's Story: The Chinese Communist Party's Campaign to Shape Global Narratives"; "Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior from China"; Twitter Safety, "Information operations directed at Hong Kong"; "Hong Kong protests: YouTube takes down 200 channels spreading disinformation."

Social Media Findings

China's influence operations, besides those imposed by the previously mentioned network of inauthentic accounts on YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, have three observed characteristics, including positive messaging about the police and the CCP government, negative messaging about the protesters, and coordination between domestic Chinese and foreign, particularly Western platforms. The following examples are meant to be illustrative, as opposed to a comprehensive analysis of narratives and counter-narratives throughout the 2019 protests.

Positive Messaging: Police Stories

The Hong Kong police are aligned with the SAR Government, which is seen as pro-CCP and directly pursuing a policy of extradition that would inhibit the longstanding principal of "One China, Two Systems." The escalation of protests, and the police's violent crackdown on them, are a primary front for the competition of narratives regarding Hong Kong's continued autonomy. While journalists in Hong Kong and around the world have attempted to demonstrate the disproportionate violence of Hong Kong police officers, the CCP government has instead shaped them as strong defenders of the country's dignity and sovereignty.

The narratives found in official media and covert information operations follow the logic of the "China story," which can be expressed in individualistic stories representing the public image of China as "世界和平的建设者, 全球发展的贡献者, 国际秩序的维护者" ("a builder of world peace, a contributor to global development, and a defender of international order").[26] These pro-China narratives, in the context of the Hong Kong protests, featured the stories of injured policemen, propagating their "personal stories" on all social media platforms.

One example is Lau Cha Kei ("劉澤基"), who was celebrated as a "police hero" by the state-controlled media in China after a picture of him aiming a gun at protesters went viral during violent confrontations between protesters and the police at the Kwai Chung Police Station on July 31, 2019.[27]

Pictures of "Bald Lau Sir" aiming a gun at the protestors during the demonstration at the Kwai Chung Police Station on July 31, 2019.[28]

With a nickname of "光头刘sir" ("Bald Lau Sir") in simplified Chinese, he was used by state-controlled media, including *People's Daily* and *Global Times*, as the figurehead for resisting violent protesters and defending Hong Kong. On July 31, *Global Times* reported that "Lau Sir" and another policeman were "surrounded and beaten by nearly a hundred people and that protesters were throwing unknown objects at the police," which made it necessary for "Lau Sir" to "raise his gun and aim at the protesters to warn them."[29] The article also posted a photo of "Lau Sir" that showed injuries to his eyes.[30]

26 "讲好中国故事 让世界更好了解中国" ("Tell the China Story Well to Let the World Understand China Better"), *Xinhua News*, September 2, 2018, www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-09/02/c_1123367300.htm

27 "國際關鍵字：#光頭劉Sir，槍指人民是英雄？香港「光頭警長」中國爆紅" ("International Key Word: #BaldLauSir, a hero pointing gun at the people? Hong Kong 'bald officer' went viral in mainland China"), *UDN Global*, October 2, 2019, https://global.udn.com/global_vision/story/8662/4081664.

28 "New protests erupt after Hong Kong activists charged with rioting," *Reuters*, July 30, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/news/picture/new-protests-erupt-after-hong-kong-activ-idUSRTX71L2Y

29 范凌志, "外媒集火攻击昨晚香港警察举枪，那是因为你没看到这一幕！" ("Foreign media attacked the Hong Kong police last night, because you didn't see this scene!"), *Global Times*, July 31, 2019, https://china.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnKlTd6

30 Ibid.

The necessity of raising his shotgun was questionable. According to a leaked document obtained by *the Washington Post*, the Hong Kong Police Force's protocols have regulated that firearms can only be used when encountered with deadly assault.[31] In the video released by *Global Times* itself, only a few protesters were throwing non-deadly objects (such as water bottles or fruit) at the police, which would not pose a sufficient threat such that the officer would need to raise the shotgun, regardless of whether he fired.[32]

Nevertheless, the Chinese government propagated narratives that not only condemned the protesters for harming "Lau Sir" but also portrayed "Lau Sir" as a hero defending Hong Kong against "mobsters" ("暴徒"), a pejorative catch-all term the CCP government and its affiliated media uses to refer to the protesters. On Weibo, *People's Daily* pushed two hashtags, #香港光头警长的回信# ("#ReplyFromHongKongBaldLauSir#") and #阿sir我们挺你# ("#PoliceOfficerWeSupportYou#"), on August 7, 2019, shortly after the Kwai Chung protest. These two hashtags, with 85,000 and 306,000 discussions, have garnered over 580,000,000 and over 620,000,000 views, respectively.[33] Out of the 346 posts chosen – the host of the hashtag can choose – to be displayed under the hashtag #ReplyFromHongKongBaldLauSir# by *People's Daily*, 104 posts were from accounts for local governments and government-owned news outlets. Out of the ninety-seven posts posted August 8, 2019, between 9:36 a.m. to 10:22 a.m., forty-eight were from governmental institutions and state-controlled media, indicating a potential top-down campaign ordered by the central propaganda department.

Two People's Daily posts on August 7 created two hashtags, which received a significant number of reads and discussions (posts and comments). An Enlighent search also indicated that the hashtag #ReplyFromHongKongBaldLauSir# reached second place of most searched terms that day with 72,106 searches.[34]

31 Shibani Mahtani, Timothy McLaughlin, Tiffany Liang and Ryan Ho Kilpatrick, "In Hong Kong crackdown, police repeatedly broke their own rules — and faced no consequences," *The Washington Post*, December 24, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/world/hong-kong-protests-excessive-force/
32 范凌志, "Foreign media attacked the Hong Kong police last night, because you didn't see this scene!"
33 The " discussions " under the hashtag include all uses of the hashtag: posts with the hashtag that are either selected by the topic host to show on the hashtag result page, reposts with the hashtag, and comments under the posts.
34 People's Daily, "【香港光头警长的回信#：只恨他们亦是中国人，打不是，不打也不是】..." ("#ReplyFromHongKongBaldLauSir# Just hate that they are also Chinese, you cannot hit them, but you cannot resist hitting them..."), Weibo post, August 7, 2019, https://weibo.com/2803301701/I18ZPj1fs?-from=page_1002062803301701_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime, this page is archived on December 14, 2020, at https://archive.is/zbt8d; People's Daily , "【人民微评：请严正执法，#阿sir我们挺你#!]" ("People's Daily Comment: Please strictly enforce the law #PoliceOfficerWeSupportYou#"), Weibo post, August 7, 2020, https://weibo.com/2803301701/I1ai3jDlC?refer_flag=1001030103, this page is archived on December 14, 2020, at https://archive.is/5LbBS; DFRLab used the social media analytics tool Enlightent to collect historical Weibo data, performed on November 24, 2020. "#ReplyFromHongKongBaldLauSir#", Weibo hashtag, accessed on December 14, 2020, https://s.weibo.com/weibo/%2523%25E9%25A6%2599%25E6%25B8%25AF%25E5%2585%2589%25E9%25A0%25AD%25E8%25AD%25A6%25E9%2595%25B7%25E7%259A%2584%25E5%259B%259E%25E4%25BF%25A1%2523?topnav=1&wvr=6&b=1, archived on December 14, 2020, at https://archive.is/mrLMY; "PoliceOfficerWeSupportYou," Weibo hashtag, accessed on December 14, 2020, https://s.weibo.com/weibo?q=%23%E9%98%BFsir%E6%88%91%E4%BB%AC%E6%8C%BA%E4%BD%A0%23&wvr=6&b=1&Refer=SWeibo_box, archived on December 14, 2020, at https://archive.is/J8fYz.

At right, a capture of a CCTV interview with "Bald Lau Sir"on the Chinese National Day, which received low engagement on YouTube despite a high number of overall views. At left, screencaps of two DouYin videos that received high engagement on the platform, shot during "Lau Sir"'s trip to Beijing, China, on the Chinese National Day.[35]

Moreover, in October 2019, shortly after the National Day in China, China Daily did an in-person interview with "Lau Sir," the headline for which was "Not as a last resort, I will not point the gun at them."[36] The video interview posted on YouTube received 2,483 likes and 106,453 views as of November 13, 2020, indicating its likely insignificant impact on the Hong Kong population. Moreover, on the same trip to Beijing, there were also other clips on iXigua and DouYin (China's domestic version of TikTok), both owned by Byte Dance, that featured his acknowledgement that Hong Kong belongs to China, which each received over 460,000 engagements, suggesting that the nationalist representation of Hong Kong police officers is popular amongst the mainland audience. The captions of the videos included "Hong Kong bald officer waves the national flag. We are all witnessing this at the moment. Hong Kong and Macau will have a brighter future!" and "#CCTVInterviewsBaldLauSir: Seeing a powerful China is the feeling of being back home." They both convey the strong sentiment that police officers in Hong Kong recognize themselves as proud Chinese citizens, reassuring that Hong Kong is a part of China's sovereignty and within China's jurisdiction.

Another example of the positive narrative building is "小虎 sir" ("Tiger Sir"), a nickname given to a police officer whose real identity is as yet unknown. Tiger Sir went viral on social media after a confrontation at Tuen Mun metro station between the police and protesters on October 1, 2019, the National

This is a picture of the three Facebook pages that produced the same narratives with the same image. This post is translated as "Attacked by corrosive liquid Tiger Sir Waking up by the cry of pain from the wound."[37]

Day of China, after he was splashed with sulfuric acid by a protester. Two Facebook pages, with the exact same picture and headline used by the state-controlled media that posted a few days later, seized on the opportunity to push an image of the police as tough defenders against the evil "men in black" or "mobsters," both defamatory terms for protesters. Two Facebook pages, "獅子吼" ("Lion Roar") and "時間香港" ("Time Hong Kong"), regularly produced narratives that later appeared on the Facebook page for *People's Daily Online-HK*. Some of the related article titles were "Attacked by corrosive liquid, Tiger Sir, woke up by a cry of pain from the wound" and "Tiger Sir thanks Police Head for his repeated visits: Challenges make us better, and the police colleagues are all strong and tough!" The posts

35 CCTV中国中央电视台, "[面对面] 专访香港"光头警长刘Sir"刘泽基：不到万不得已 我不会把枪指向他们 | CCTV" (""[Face-to-Face] Interview with Bald Lau Sir: Not as a last resort, I will not point the gun at them"), YouTube video, October 13, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tnfVWJpAFzg, archived on December 14, 2020, at https://archive.is/aIWZk.

36 Ibid.

37 獅子吼, "【被腐蝕性液體襲擊小虎SIR：被傷口疼痛的叫聲吵醒】" ("Attacked by corrosive liquid Tiger Sir: Waked up by the cry of pain from the wound"), Facebook post, April 19, 2020, accessed on November 13, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/voiceofhongkong2019/posts/259938432074072. Archived link can be found at https://archive.is/phJUf. 時間香港, "【被腐蝕性液體襲擊小虎SIR：被傷口疼痛的叫聲吵醒】" ("Attacked by corrosive liquid Tiger Sir: Waked up by the cry of pain from the wound"), Facebook post, April 22, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/HongKongGoodNews/posts/3815833895157185. Archived link can be found at https://archive.is/FFA0Z. 時聞香港, "【被腐蝕性液體襲擊小虎SIR：被傷口疼痛的叫聲吵醒】" ("Attacked by corrosive liquid Tiger Sir: Waked up by the cry of pain from the wound"), Facebook post, April 21, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/rmwhk/posts/3851159151593063. Archived link can be found at https://archive.is/Ib7Um.

獅子吼, "小虎Sir感謝一哥多番探望…" (Tiger Sir thanked the police leader for frequent visits…), Facebook post, April 9, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/voiceofhongkong2019/posts/250731006328148, archived link can be found at https://archive.is/rlisx. 時間香港, "小虎Sir感謝一哥多番探望…" (Tiger Sir thanked the police leader for frequent visits…), Facebook post, April 10, 2020, https://www.facebook.co m/HongKongGoodNews/posts/3775130892560819, archived link can be found at https://archive.is/WVRRH. 人民網(香港), "小虎Sir感謝一哥多番探望…" (Tiger Sir thanked the police leader for frequent visits…), Facebook post, April 10, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/rmwhk/posts/3812429545466024, archived link can be found at https://archive.is/7mtYD.

from these pages often received higher engagement than the same posts than *People's Daily Online-HK*. Time Hong Kong and People's Daily Online-HK had 609,861 followers and 1,514,495 followers, respectively, while Lion Roar had a low 6,572 followers, as of November 13, 2020. This is potentially because the page Lion Roar was established in September 23, 2019, while Time Hong Kong and *People's Daily Online-HK* were both older, having been created on July 9, 2013, and April 24, 2013, respectively.

This post translated as "Tiger Sir thanks Police Head for his repeated visits: Challenges make us better, and the police colleagues are all strong and tough!" People's Daily Online-HK picked the narratives and pictures from these two pages.[38]

Positive Messaging: Hong Kong Police vs. the World

China also took advantage of other protests going on around the world as an opportunity to compare the actions of the police in Hong Kong with those elsewhere in the world, especially those from democratic countries. This comparison messaging allowed the party-state to distort narratives to legitimize the Hong Kong police force's behavior and to discredit the democratic system that the Hong Kong protesters desired.

While the pandemic has discouraged many protesters from taking to the streets out of safety concerns, there have been sporadic protests since May 2020 as the city has gained greater control over the pandemic. Moreover, after the Hong Kong national security law was passed on June 30, 2020, a new wave of protests started, kindling more opposition within Hong Kong society against the Chinese government.

One narrative that is actively deployed by China's state-controlled media includes comparing the Hong Kong protests and the Hong Kong police's allegedly restrained response with police violence in Western democracies and, in particular, the United States. These narratives, however, deliberately ignore evidence that the police have used disproportionate force in Hong Kong.[39] For instance, across many platforms, one such misleading narrative about the relative gentleness of the Hong Kong police gained some traction in 2019 after several state-controlled media Facebook pages disseminated it. On September 8, 2019, "通傳媒" ("Tong Media"), an outlet operated by Hong Kong China News Agency, posted a video titled "開眼界：看西方警察是如何用"暴力"執法的!" ("Eye-opener: see how Western police use 'violent' law enforcement!"). On October 24, 2019, China's Xinhua News and People's Daily, Overseas posted on their Facebook pages a picture contrasting police activities around protests in the United Kingdom, Spain, France, and Hong Kong, emphasizing that Hong Kong police were "under restraint, tolerant, and professional."[40] These posts did not appear to attract much attention, as they received little engagement.

---

38 獅子吼, "小虎Sir感謝一哥多番探望..." (Tiger Sir thanked the police leader for frequent visits...), Facebook post, April 9, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/voiceofhongkong2019/posts/250731006328148, archived link can be found at https://archive.is/rlisx. 時間香港, "小虎Sir感謝一哥多番探望..." (Tiger Sir thanked the police leader for frequent visits...), Facebook post, April 10, 2020, https://www.facebook.co m/HongKongGoodNews/posts/3775130892560819, archived link can be found at https://archive.is/WVRRH. 人民網(香港), "小虎Sir感謝一哥多番探望..." (Tiger Sir thanked the police leader for frequent visits...), Facebook post, April 10, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/rmwhk/posts/3812429545466024, archived link can be found at https://archive.is/7mtYD.

39 For a better comparison between the police forces in the United States and in Hong Kong, see Sahil Singhvi, "Disturbing Parallels in Crackdowns on Protesters in the US and Hong Kong," *Brennan Center for Justice*, October 29, 2020, https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/disturbing-parallels-crackdowns-protesters-us-and-hong-kong.

40 China XinHua News, "西方警察vs香港警察," ("Western Police vs. Hong Kong Police"), Facebook post, October 24, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/369959106408139/posts/2998236380247052, archived on December 14, 2020, at https://archive.vn/2h0WD; People's Daily Overseas, "西方警察vs香港警察," ("Western Police vs. Hong Kong Police"), Facebook post, October 24 https://www.facebook.com/1472956969657611/posts/2537371366549494, archived on December 14, 2020, at https://archive.vn/Pz34u.

The picture by Xinhua and China's Daily contrasting police activities between protests in the United Kingdom, Spain, France, and Hong Kong.[41]

engagement (in comparison to other videos tagged with the keyword "anti-extadition"): as of November 13, 2020, the post had more than 20,300 engagements.[43]

Following the start of the George Floyd protests in the United States in May 2020, similar narratives were propagated on social media platforms, serving the goal of discrediting Western democracy in general while delegitimizing the cause of the protesters. For example, one popular narrative following the George Floyd protests aimed to discredit democracies by arguing that democratic countries like the United States have "double standards" in dealing with protesters, as well as emphasizing the supposed violence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protesters.[44]

On June 2, 2020, People's Daily China posted an article on its Facebook page with the title "Supporting Hong Kong thugs but suppressing domestic protests, what about American human rights?", which garnered 3,261 engagements.[45] The post mocked US politicians for their hypocrisy in indicting the Chinese response to the Hong Kong protests while repressing the protests happening at home. Similarly, on June 1, 2020, Tong Media, a state-controlled media based in Hong Kong, posted on its Facebook page "When the United States messed up, all the Hong Kong extremists blindly supporting the United States are silenced," attracting a relatively low 1,440 engagements.[46] Such narratives comparing the "chaos" in the United States with Hong Kong started shortly after the renewed BLM protests following the killing of George Floyd, as demonstrated by the search query result below. The narrative was used in only 178 posts, but it garnered a total of 103,858 interactions.

Besides state-controlled media, several pages on Facebook with close connection to the CCP also disseminated similar narratives. For example, "幫港出聲 Silent Majority," ("Help Spread the Hong Kong Voice Silent Majority"), a local Hong Kongese media outlet founded by pro-China scholars, businessmen, and media workers, posted a video contrasting the French and Hong Kong police, mocking the protesters' use of "international standard" to restrain Hong Kong police and implying that Hong Kong police are a lot more gentle than French police.[42] The video garnered relatively high

Search query for "美國暴亂"+"香港" ("US Riots + Hong Kong") on CrowdTangle. This graph shows that shortly after the BLM movement started, tthere occurred narratives on the Internet comparing the US chaos to Hong Kong. While there weren't many posts, the engagements with such posts are high.

41 Ibid.
42 For Silent Majority's relationship with the CCP, see "張德江晤周融等人　肯定「幫港出聲」工作　籲堅持與港獨進行鬥爭" ("Zhang Dejiang met with Zhou Rong and others to affirm the work of "Silent Majority" and call for persistence in fighting against Hong Kong independence,") *Stand News*, November 29, 2016, https://www.thestandnews.com/politics/張德江晤周融等人-肯定-幫港出聲-工作-籲堅持與港獨進行鬥爭/.
43　幫港出聲 Silent Majority, "【精選推介】香港嘅黃絲成日話效法法國「黃背心運動」(Yellow Vest Movement) " ("[Selected News] Protesters in Hong Kong are copycats of the Yellow Vest Movement"), Facebook post, August 19, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/498565150232596/posts/2451022661653492, archived on December 14, 2020, at https://archive.is/q6N54.
44 While many right-wing media outlets and politicians in the United States claim BLM protesters to be violent or associated with a cabal of violent antifa activists, the vast majority of BLM protests are peaceful in nature. See Grace Hauck, Trevor Hughes, Omar Abdel-Baqui, Ricardo Torres, and Hayes Gardner, "'A fanciful reality': Trump claims Black Lives Matter protests are violent, but the majority are peaceful," *USA Today*, October 25, 2020, https://www.usato-day.com/in-depth/news/nation/2020/10/24/trump-claims-blm-protests-violent-but-majority-peaceful/3640564001/.
45 People's Daily, "【撐腰香港暴徒卻鎮壓國內抗議，說好的美國人權呢？】" ("Supporting Hong Kong mobsters yet oppress domestic protests, where is human rights in the US?"), Facebook post, June. 2, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/1418921401682874/posts/2633393486902320 archived on December 14, 2020, at https://archive.is/AsZJd.
46 通傳媒, "【美國一亂，舔美的亂港分子就全部龜縮起來了】" ("[When the US is in chaos, the Hong Kong flatters of the US are stranded.]"), Facebook post, June 1, 2020,　https://www.facebook.com/1741899676139973/posts/2522469024749697, archived on December 16, 2020, at https://archive.is/87jsz.

Many previously identified pro-China and pro-CCP pages also reproduced similar narratives. For example, several pages related to Di Ba, the Chinese nationalist bulletin board system (more commonly known as BBS) community, famous for flooding pro-independence President Tsai Ing-Wen's Facebook page in Taiwan after the 2016 Taiwanese president election, posted several times comparing the George Floyd protests to the Hong Kong protests, asserting that protesters in both the United States and Hong Kong are violent and stupid, aiming to discredit the legitimacy of democratic protests.[47]

On May 30, 2020, "帝吧中央集团军(小组)" ("Di Ba Central Army (Small Group)") posted a video of US protesters writing "Fuck Trump" on the outside of a building with a caption "Youth of peaceful demonstrations in the United States are suspected of copycat behaviors by Hong Kong mobsters and the young no-hopers." The post received 1,077 engagements as of November 13, 2020.[48] Similarly, on May 29, 2020, "婷婷看世界" ("Tingting look at the World"), a Facebook page that frequently reposted TikTok videos of Chinese state-controlled media and reproduced pro-China and pro-CCP narratives, posted a sarcastic post depicting a photo of US policemen holding weapons to prepare for the protest in Minnesota. The accompanying caption read "The US police force... These servants who suppress democracy and freedom will be nailed to the pillar of shame in history. (Saying what the young no-hopers would say)."[49] The post garnered 3,352 engagements as of November 13, 2020.

In sum, both Chinese state-controlled media and pro-China social media accounts have used messaging to encourage positive public sentiment toward the Hong Kong police by featuring stories of "police heroes" who defended against allegedly violent protestors and of how "gentle, adamant, and benevolent" the Hong Kong police are in comparison to the more aggressive police forces in Western democracies. The effect has been to make Hong Kong police a symbol – and extension – of Chinese nationalism.

Negative Messaging: Protestors Are Unstable Violent Looters

Besides the cheerleading messages that sought to portray the police as the positive public face of the CCP government, the CCP also utilized negative messaging intending to stigmatize the protesters as violent looters destabilizing society. These narratives attempt to not only distract public opinion from concerns about the police use of excessive force but also portray the protesters as criminals to invalidate the movement in general.

The first example of negative messaging in the 2019 Hong Kong protest portrayed the protesters as violent looters. The messaging built on the wider cultural and political narratives of the need for security and stability. By casting protesters as violent extremists, the party-state and its advocates attempt to diminish public support for the protest movement. Moreover, such narratives also reinforce the notion that the police, the SAR Government, and the CCP government are the positive and correct solution. State media and pro-China sources refer to the protesters using defamatory terms, including 暴徒 ("mobsters"), 甲由 ("Cockroaches"), and 廢青 ("the young no-hopers"), not only generalizing a negative image of all protesters but also portraying them as extremists who are undermining the rule of law in Hong Kong.

One example is the Prince Station incident, which happened on August 31, 2019, when - ignited by a verbal dispute in the metro station - violent clashes broke out between demonstrators and pro-police citizens with fire extinguisher and umbrellas. The subsequent reaction by the police – including using pepper spray to attack nearby protesters who had already stopped resisting, excessive violence, and the arbitrary and indiscriminatory arrests of people in the metro station – was severely disproportionate compared to the protesters' relatively minor clashes.[50]

Following the incident, several China Daily and CCTV videos on YouTube used "mobsters" to describe protesters in their headlines, such as "Hong Kong mobsters' five 'outstandingly stupid' moments | CCTV"[51] and "The truth! They actually have two faces! Hong Kong mobsters at Prince Station with costume drama."[52] These videos focused on the protesters' violent clashes with normal citizens as a means of indirectly legitimizing the police officers' aggressive responses. Because the videos lack context for the police behavior by focusing only on the protesters' actions, viewers are more likely to accept the idea that the protesters are violent looters that bring instability to society.

47 For more information on the incident, please see 郑仲岚, "台湾选后：中国网民"翻墙洗版"引两岸论战" ("After the Taiwan Eletion: Chinese internet users 'climb the Great Firewall' and 'flood pages on Facebook,' leading to cross-strait discussion."), *BBC News*, January 21, 2016,https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/china/2016/01/160121_china_china_netizens_vpn_fb_sticker_war; 李红梅, "如何理解中国的民族主义？:帝吧出征事件分析" ("How to understand China's nationalism? An analysis on Di Ba's March"), 国际新闻界 11(2016): 91-113, accessed on November 13, 2020, http://cjjc.ruc.edu.cn/CN/article/downloadArticleFile.do?attachType=PDF&id=608.

48 帝吧中央集团军(小组), "美国和平示威青年涉嫌抄袭，香港暴徒废青提出严正交涉" ("Youth of peaceful demonstrations in the United States are suspected of copycat behaviors by Hong Kong mobsters and the young no-hopers"), Facebook post, May 30, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/832140356914881/posts/2822637637865133, archived on December 14, 2020, at https://archive.vn/WpIOg.

49 Ibid.

50 "Hong Kong Storm Prince Edward Station and Attack Civilians 20190831 11pm," Wikipedia, accessed on November 13, 2020, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/98/HK_police_storm_Prince_Edward_station_and_attack_civilians_20190831_11pm.webm, archived on December 14, 2020, at https://archive.is/hfby2.

51 CCTV中国中央电视台, "香港暴徒五大"智熄"瞬间 | CCTV" ("5 stupid moments of Hong Kong mobsters"), YouTube video, September 24, 2019, accessed on November 13, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZUBkdALdrc, archived on December 14, 2020, at https://archive.is/C84NB

52 China Daily, "真相！竟然有两副面孔！太子站香港暴徒上演变装大戏," ("Truth! They have two faces! Mobsters changed their clothes at Prince Edward Station"), YouTube video, September 1, 2019, accessed on November 13, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFRTK9qj3ss, archived on December 14, 2020, at https://archive.is/Xvzdi.

Channel Name	Translation	Subscriberes	Views	Creation Date
美国时事	American Societa; Affairs	64.3k	33,272,450	Jan 5, 2007
新闻联播247	News Broadcast 247	N/A	5,373,219	Jul 23, 2007
AC世界新聞頻道	AC World News Channel	N/A	3,567,261	Dec 5, 2014
今日中国NEWS【热点时事,深度解读】	China Today NEWS【Hot social affairs, in-depth interpretation】	11.1k	1,418,125	Mar 24, 2015
百态中国	All Facets of China	N/A	8,802,657	Mar 8, 2016
台湾新闻 Today	Taiwan News Today	N/A	819,892	Jul 28, 2016
政治概况	Political Overview	59.9k	8,359,892	Nov 15, 2016
热点新闻 [更新中国美国情况]	Hot News [Update China and the United States]	48.4k	22,122,533	Nov 22, 2016
大国演义	Great Kingdoms	N/A	30,020,559	Apr 4, 2017
中国梦时代【深度时事 每日更新 欢迎订阅】	China Dream [Daily Updates on Social Affairs; Welcome to Subscribe]	121k	1,179,008	Jun 11, 2017
厉害了我的国	Awesome My Country	182k	85,834,588	June 26, 2017
江湖百晓生	Society Man-Knows-Everything	112k	90,544,010	Dec 25, 2017
朝闻天下	Morning News on the Globe	N/A	44,485,968	Aug 14, 2018
有猫腻来啦	There is something hidden	N/A	44,710,137	Sep 5, 2018
点亮历史【真相解密 最新史料 欢迎订阅】	Light up the history [the truth is deciphered; the latest historical materials; welcome to subscribe]	278k	169,584,155	Sep 28, 2018
兴仔说中国	Xingzai Talks About China	N/A	38,864,542	Oct 12, 2018
時政焦點	Contemporary political focus	60.9k	23,989,416	Oct 28, 2018
中国新观察	China New Watch	130k	18,288,593	Nov 16, 2018
環球諜報	Global Spy News	N/A	46,139,525	January 2, 2019
时政快报	Social Affairs Express	56.2k	11,334,785	Feb 23, 2019
洞察天下	Insight into the world	N/A	2,371,929	Mar 1, 2019
新聞凌凌柒	News 007	N/A	11,092,152	Mar 5, 2019
今日资讯	Today's Information	N/A	5,098,822	Mar 13, 2019
环球观察	Global observation	142k	50,150,538	Apr 4, 2019
龙之声	Voice of the Dragon	N/A	24,551,084	Apr 19, 2019
中华振兴	China Revitalization	144k	14,111,582	May 31, 2019
龙腾大中国	Dragon Great China	94k	35,876,360	Aug 6, 2019
深度军事	Deep into military	50.3k	12,921,628	Aug 15, 2019
东方资讯 - 【天下热闻 一手掌握】	Oriental News-【World Hot News Within Reach】	N/A	22,739,626	Sep 8, 2019
了不起我的中国	Great my china	163k	69,832,183	Sep 28, 2019
热点时局 Hot News【官方频道 每日更新 欢迎订阅】	Hot News [Official Channel Daily Updates Welcome to Subscribe]	150k	83,319,017	Oct 17, 2019
利刃观察	Sharp observation	N/A	21,429,357	Oct 17, 2019
尖端军事Focus on Military【官方频道 每日更新 欢迎订阅】	Focus on Military [official channel daily update welcome to subscribe]	N/A	27,147,519	Oct 17, 2019
环球瞭望	Global Lookout	N/A	15,418,095	Dec 8, 2019
未将点兵	Commander Talks About the World	N/A	22,299,346	Dec 8, 2019
龙腾瞭望号	Dragon Lookout	N/A	2,001,412	Mar 12, 2020
新潮民	New Trendy people	187k	32,340,865	Mar 28, 2020

A list of YouTube channels that pushed anti-Hong Kong protester narratives with a similar cover page layout and narration style.[55]

---

55 This list partially relied upon the YouTube board list named "大外宣." "大外宣", YouTube, http://youtube.board.tw/rank.php?tagid=15. The detailed analysis of the cover page layout and narration style of these YouTube channels was covered in a previous DFRLab report on China's disinformation efforts on Taiwan." Chinese Messaging Across the Strait: China-friendly narratives on the 2020 Taiwan presidential election," DFRLab, December 2020, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/dfrlab-china-reports/.

A previously studied YouTube network, as covered in the DFRLab's report *Chinese Messaging Across the Strait: China-friendly Narratives and the 2020 Taiwan Presidential Election*, has also disseminated similar negative narratives using similar dismissive terms. For example, as of November 14, 2020, the YouTube channel "点亮历史 [真相解密 最新史料 欢迎订阅]" ("Light up the history [the truth is deciphered and the latest historical materials welcome to subscribe]") used "mobsters" seventy-one times to refer to protesters in Hong Kong and "young no-hopers" seventeen times.[53] "江湖百晓生" ("He Who Knows Everything in the society") used "mobsters" twenty-one times, "young no-hopers" fifty-four times, and "cockroaches" two times.[54]

Another incident that Chinese state-controlled media focused on is Fu Guohao's confrontation with the protesters on August 13, 2019. An employee of Global Times, Fu is not a licensed reporter. According to an eyewitness, however, his behavior of taking close-up photos of demonstrators and disguising his identity caused suspicion among the protesters that he was a plain clothes police officer.[56] Because of this, he was tied to a luggage cart by the demonstrators and hit by the protesters and his eyes were targeted with laser pointers.[57] During the attack, he said the "I support Hong Kong police, now you can beat me,"[58] a phrase that was later used by state-controlled media as the headline for articles celebrating his resistance to the "violent" protesters. The hashtag #IAlsoSupportHongKongPolice#, hosted on Weibo by *People's Daily*, received 134.79 million discussions (which includes posts and comments) and 8.32 billion reads as of November 14, 2020. At least ninety-nine celebrities also posted under the hashtag, directing attention to their fan groups in China. The general sentiment on Weibo was condemnation for the "violence" of the protesters.

State media featured this story across different platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, Weibo, WeChat, and DouYin, yet with unverified information about Fu's identity and intentionally downplaying another victim, Xu Jinyang, who was reported to be a police officer from Shenzhen, a city close to Hong Kong in mainland China. This is partially because a confirmation of his identity might lead to more widespread suspicion over plainclothes officers from mainland China infiltrating the protests. Although the chief editor of *Global Times* posted several times, both on Twitter and Weibo, that Fu works for *Global Times* but that his license had not yet been processed, there remained questions as to why Fu did not reveal his true identity when interviewing the protesters and instead insisted that he was a "tourist" while also taking close-up portraits photos of the protesters without their consent.[57] In October, Fu claimed that he worked at the *Global Times* mainly as an editor and explained for why he didn't obtain a journalist certificate.[60] On the other hand, Xu Jinyang, who was also tied to the luggage cart and beaten on the same day, was not mentioned widely on Chinese social media Weibo nor in state-controlled media, as he was suspected to be a police officer from Shenzhen in Guang Dong province.[61] According to a 2018 list released by Offcn Education (中公教育), a private education institution that provides support for national examinations for the civil service, under which police officer examinations fall, there is a person named "Xu Jinyang" who is a member of the Fu Tian police station in Shenzhen, Guang Dong.[62] Moreover, by searching on the official Guang Dong government WeChat official account, there is only one person named Xu Jinyang in Guang Dong, which makes it highly likely that this person is a plain clothes police officer. However, his name was intentionally underreported by the official mouthpiece of the party.

53 The DFRLab searched for the phrase of "暴徒 港" ("Mobsters, Kong (as in Hong Kong)") on the YouTube channel of 点亮历史【真相解密 最新史料 欢迎订阅】, accessed on November 14, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvYes_0afVM6GeTTFzELW4Q/search?query=%E6%9A%B4%E5%BE%92%20%E6%B8%AF, archived on December 14. 2020, at https://archive.is/WsUcB.

54The DFRLab searched for the phrase "甲由" ("cockraoches") on the YouTube channel 江湖百晓生, accessed on November 14, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/c/%E6%B1%9F%E6%B9%96%E7%99%BE%E6%99%93%E7%94%9F/search?query=%E6%9B%B1%E7%94%B1, archived on December 14, 2020, at https://archive.is/5piS0.

56 梁祖饒, 陳芷昕 and 麥凱茵, "【機場集會】《環時》記者被示威者索帶綁手 救護員到場後送院" ("[Airport Assembly] Global Times journalist's hands were tied by pro-testers, and rescue sent him to the hospital."), *Hong Kong 01*, August 14, 2019, https://www.hk01.com/社會新聞/363491/機場集會-環時-記者被示威者索帶綁手-救護員到場後送院.

57 Elizabeth Cheung, "Global Times journalist beaten by Hong Kong protesters given hero's welcome after being discharged from hospital," *South China Morning Post*, August 14, 2019, https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3022782/global-times-journalist-beaten-hong-kong-protesters-given; BBC News 中文, "機場集會衝突:示威者「公審」大陸男子的來龍去脈— BBC News 中文" ("Airport Rally Conflict: the story behind the 'public trial' of the man from mainland by the demonstrators"), YouTube video, August 14, 2019,https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-CeRpiBttw8

58 CCTV中国中央电视台, "面对暴徒的拳头 他喊出:我支持香港警察,你们可以打我了!| CCTV" ("Facing the fists from the mobsters, he shouted: I support Hong Kong police, you can beat me now!"), YouTube video, August 14, 2019, accessed on November 14, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSapLDvcLkI.

59 See the response from Hu Xijin and Global Times, "这些质疑付国豪的弱智问题,我们一并回答。" ("Those stupid questions questioning the identity of Guohao Fu, we are answering now together!"), *Global Times*, August 15, 2020, https://china.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnKmegF.

60 "8.13 機場被襲　付國豪認在《環球網》不涉記者工作　沒有考取內地記者證," ("813 Airport attak, Fu Guohao admitted that he did not work as a journalist in Global Times and he did not have mainland journalist certificate"), *Stand News,* October 21, 2020, https://www.thestandnews.com/court/8-13-%E6%A9%9F%E5%A0%B4%E8%A2%AB%E8%A5%B2-%E4%BB%98%E5%9C%8B%E8%B1%AA%E8%AA%8D%E5%9C%A8-%E7%92%B0%E7%90%83%E7%B6%B2-%E4%B8%8D%E6%B6%89%E8%A8%98%E8%80%85%E5%B7%A5%E4%BD%9C-%E6%B2%92%E6%9C%89%E8%80%83%E5%8F%96%E5%85%A7%E5%9C%B0%E8%A8%98%E8%80%85%E8%AD%89/

61 "付国豪遭殴打新闻热爆微博 内媒对徐锦炀身分只字不提," ("the news that Fu Guohao was assaulted hit Weibo, mainland media did not mention Xu Jinyang's identity"), *Bastille Australia*, August 15, 2020, https://www.bastillepost.com/australia/article/1063513-%e4%bb%98%e5%9c%8b%e8%b1%aa%e9%81%ad%e6%af%86%e6%89%93%e6%96%b0%e8%81%9e%e7%86%b1%e7%88%86%e5%be%ae%e5%8d%9a-%e5%85%a7%e5%aa%92%e5%b0%8d%e5%be%90%e9%8c%a6%e7%85%ac%e8%ba%ab%e5%88%86%e9%9a%bb%e5%ad%97?variant=zh-cn

62 "深圳市公安局第二批辅警招聘政审合格人员名册(第一批)" ("Shenzhen Municipal Public Security Bureau's second batch of auxiliary police recruiting political review qualified personnel (first batch)"), *Offcn*, 2018, http://gd.offcn.com/dl/2018/0925/20180925030428312.xls
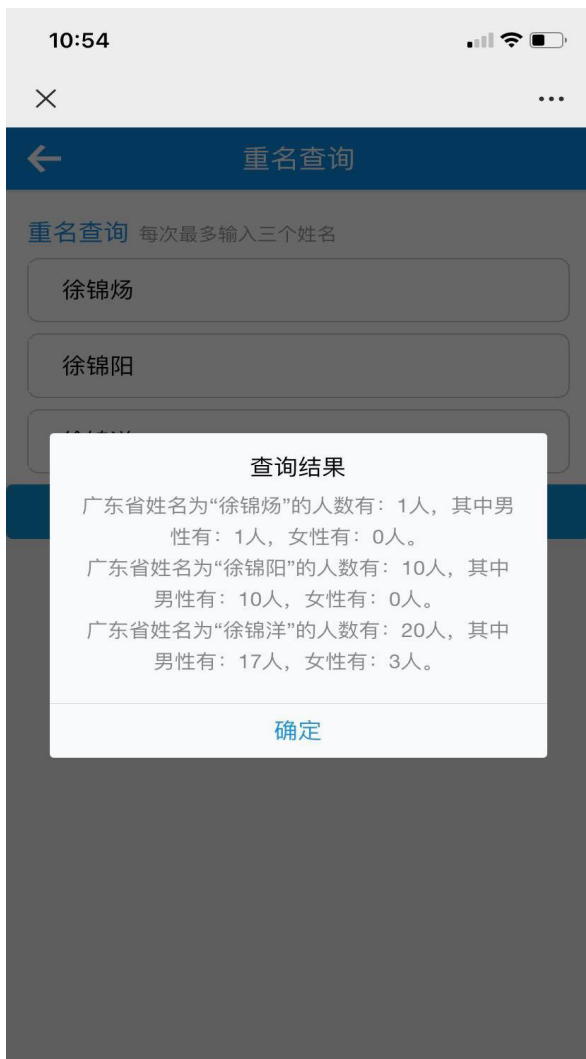
On Weibo, not only did a search of #徐锦炀# or #徐錦煬# ("Xu Jinyang" in simplified and traditional Chinese, respectively) yield a restricted access page, the only information available was the number of views and posts under #徐錦煬#, which comprises only sixty-three discussions and 106,000 views.[64] Compared to the 354,000 discussions and 1.33 billion views under #付国豪# ("#FuGuohao#"), where the top narratives were contributed by Global Times, 中国共青团网 ("Chinese Communist Youth League"), and Today's Headline (a news agency by ByteDance), it is clear that the government institutions and propaganda apparatus downplayed the online discussion regarding Xu Jinyang's identity, which, if publicly verified, as a mainland police officer, would

exacerbate the already widespread suspicion over the involvement of mainland police in the Hong Kong protests, and further deteriorate an already poor perception of the government's actions.[65]

Negative Messaging: Claims of Foreign Influence

A second example of negative messaging accused the protesters of colluding with foreign countries that either condemned the CCP's behavior or agreed to grant political asylum to the protesters, including the United Kingdom (Hong Kong's former colonial occupier), the United States, or Canada. According Global Figure, a subsection of Global Times, the party-state accused the United States of fomenting a "color revolution" in Hong Kong, sourced with statements by Hua Chunying, spokesperson of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Zhang Guoqing, an expert on American issues at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.[66] The evidence cited in these narratives included an array of disinformation: false similarities of Hong Kong's protests to the previous color revolutions and unverified claims about foreigners organizing protests, leading the resistance against the police, and funding protesters. The

---

63 DFRLab performed a search of Xu Jinyang's name on Guang Dong government's WeChat Official Account on November 15, 2020.
64 DFRLab performed a search of #徐锦炀# (#XuJinYang# in simplified Chinese) on Weibo November 15, 2020, the archived link can be found here at ; https://archive.is/p0DjH; https://archive.is/OWVSyhttps://archive.is/sZ8x9; DFRLab performed a search of #徐錦煬# (#XuJinYang# in traditional Chinese) on Weibo November 15, 2020, the archived link can be found here at https://archive.is/p0DjH.
65 DFRLab performed a search of #付国豪# (#Fu Guohao#) on December 16, 2020, the archived link can be found here at https://archive.is/FVqLd.
66 白宇,曾伟, "美国乱港真相：斥巨资搞培训，当"颜色革命"走到第六步，流血事件还远远吗？" ("The truth of US meddling in Hong Kong: the US spent a huge amount of money to train the protesteres, and when the color revolution is at its stage six, is bloodshed far away?"), *People's Daily*, August 15, 2019, world.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0815/c1002-31298345.html

disinformation incorporated tangential evidence not proving but rather creating the specter of foreign interference. For instance, Chinese outlets cited a meeting between Joshua Wong Chi-fung, the student leader, and Julie Eadeh, a US diplomat in Hong Kong, as proof of sinister meddling from abroad.[67]

A network of ten Facebook pages based in Malaysia previously identified by the DFRLab to be reproducing anti-Trump and anti-US sentiment also actively coordinated around narratives of foreign collusion in the Hong Kong protests.

Nine out of the ten pages reposted content produced by a page named "贺芳蔼" ("He Fangai"), which categorizes itself as "Shopping & Retail" but in actuality only posts original videos about politics that adhere to Chinese narratives and that have subtitles both in Chinese and in English. The page originally seemed to be for a fake persona page as at the time of creation in March 2020, as it used a profile photo of a man of South-Asian descent. In April, it changed its profile

image to that of a young girl, in accordance with the gender and nationality implications of its name. The engagement on its posts were relatively low. The pages in the networks posted content accusing "overseas forces" of interfering in Hong Kong and supporting the pro-democracy camp. For example, some posts argued that the pro-independence "mobsters" in Hong Kong were supported by the British government.

Page Name	Translation	Created	Engagements	Post Views	Total Views	Message
中国永远是华人的娘家	China is always the home for diaspora	2020-08-24 07:09:10 EDT	24	518	3718	保国卫港，肃清"港独"遗毒，任重道远！
以民为主 For The People	For the People	2020-08-24 07:10:14 EDT	10	400	3723	保国卫港，肃清"港独"遗毒，任重道远！
我们的征途是星辰大海	Our journey is to the galaxy and the sea	2020-08-24 07:08:37 EDT	9	71	3718	保国卫港，肃清"港独"遗毒，任重道远！
中华民族 伟大复兴	The Chinese Ethnicity; The Great Rejuven	2020-08-24 07:08:51 EDT	7	77	3718	保国卫港，肃清"港独"遗毒，任重道远！
寰宇劲报	Global Power News	2020-08-24 07:11:49 EDT	1	63	3718	保国卫港，肃清"港独"遗毒，任重道远！
民联专页大联盟	Pakatan Rakyat Page Alliance	2020-08-24 07:11:35 EDT	1	95	3722	保国卫港，肃清"港独"遗毒，任重道远！
睿智方阵	Wisdom Matrix	2020-08-24 07:10:50 EDT	1	47	3723	保国卫港，肃清"港独"遗毒，任重道远！
我为人人 人人为我 One For All All For One	One for All; All for One	2020-08-24 07:11:19 EDT	0	48	3718	保国卫港，肃清"港独"遗毒，任重道远！
吃瓜看天下 Watermelon Gang	Watermelon Gang	2020-08-24 07:10:32 EDT	0	51	3723	保国卫港，肃清"港独"遗毒，任重道远！
百万人民支持安华 Millions of people support ANWAR	Millions of people support ANWAR	2020-08-24 07:10:01 EDT	0	60	3718	保国卫港，肃清"港独"遗毒，任重道远！

A network of Facebook pages identified in the former DFRLab lab report on information influence on Chinese diaspora is also responsible for propagating narratives that discredit Hong Kong pro-independence protestors.[68]
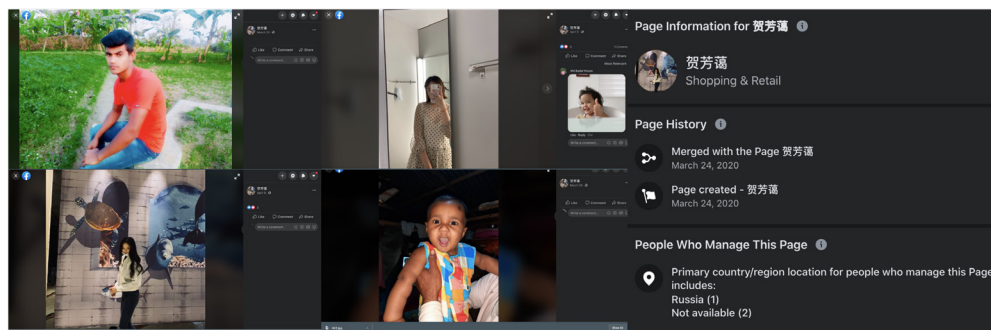
Collage of screenshots shows the change of the page's profile picture and background picture from that of a male of South Asian descent to a female of East Asian descent while the name stayed the same from the day of the registration. The page has one admin in Russia and two admins with unavailable location information.[69]

67 ""港独"组织头目黄之锋承认与美国驻港领事密商，竟密谋"制裁"香港" ('Hong Kong pro-independence leader Josorganizationhua Wong admitted that he had a secret appointment with the US consul in Hong Kong, and they secretly agreed upon sanctioning Hong Kong), *Guancha Syndicate,* August 8, 2019, https://www.guancha.cn/politics/2019_08_08_512741.shtml ; 周辰, "这个美国女人跑到哪哪出事，最近她在香港很忙" ("Wherever this US woman goes, there will trouble: she is now busy in Hong Kong"), *Wenhui News,* August 8, 2019, wenhui.whb.cn/zhuzhan/rd/20190808/281948.html.
68 DFRLab used social media analytics tool CrowdTangle.
69 贺芳蔼 He Fangai, Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/%E8%B4%BA%E8%8A%B3%E8%94%BC-101773021476825, archived link can be found here https://archive.is/ZwdLt; Profile picture of 贺芳蔼 He Fangai, Facebook, March 24, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/%E8%B4%BA%E8%8A%B3%E8%94%BC-101773021476825/photos/a.101773051476822/101773064810154, Profile picture of 贺芳蔼 He Fangai, Facebook, April 9 2020, https://www.facebook.com/%E8%B4%BA%E8%8A%B3%E8%94%BC-101773021476825/photos/a.101773051476822/117718206548973; Background picture of 贺芳蔼 He Fangai, Facebook, March 24 2020, https://www.facebook.com/%E8%B4%BA%E8%8A%B3%E8%94%BC-101773021476825/photos/a.101773118143482/101773068143487, Background picture of 贺芳蔼 He Fangai, Facebook, April 4 2020, https://www.facebook.com/%E8%B4%BA%E8%8A%B3%E8%94%BC-101773021476825/photos/a.101773118143482/117718389882288.

A collage of examples of Facebook posts published by the network that propagated pro-China and anti-Hong Kong protester content. These posts discuss how protest leaders seek asylum abroad and how that is indicative of foreign collusion.[70]

Another example was a video titled "12名港毒潛逃台灣　幕後真相大曝光" ("12 Hong Kong protestors fled to Taiwan, the truth behind the scenes is exposed."), which accused "foreign forces" of supporting the pro-democracy activists in fleeing to Taiwan. The evidence cited by the video included support from a Taiwanese priest and a GoFundMe page that raised approximately 30 million HKD (around $3.9 million USD) for 我要攬炒 ("I want to burn with the enemy"), a pro-democracy organization.[71] Similarly, the evidence provided in the video did not substantiate China's arguments of conspiracy theories of foreign powers meddling with its internal politics.

Both Chinese official media and pro-China networks have followed the negative messaging strategy, which employs denigrating terms for protestors, exaggerates the extent of violence of the protestors, and propagates unfounded claims accusing protesters of colluding with overseas forces. By discrediting the protesters and the integrity of the cause, these narratives seek to shape and entrench the conspiracies around the movement and pro-democracy camp. This content is predominantly posted in simplified or traditional Chinese, similar to the networks uncovered in the DFRLab report *Descendants of the Dragon: China Targets Its Citizens and Descendants Beyond the Mainland*, indicating that it is likely targeting the Chinese diaspora community and Chinese citizens in both mainland and Hong Kong as a means of winning the hearts and minds of those people who are emotionally invested in such political issues.

The evidence given by the post included the fact that these activists had sought asylum in the United Kingdom and the fact that the British government has turned down the Chinese government's request to arrest those who reside in the United Kingdom. This argument has no bearing on whether the British government has financially and intentionally sponsored the movement, indicating an intention to manipulate facts to prove an unrelated point.

70 以民为主 For the People, "保国卫港，肃清"港独"遗毒，任重道远！"("Protecting the country and defend Hong Kong; Get rid of the Hong Kong pro-independence posion; there is still a long way to go."), Facebook post, https://www.facebook.com/ForThePeople168/posts/1230801993933295, archived link can be found at https://archive.is/YmQqf; 中国永远是华人的娘家 China is always the home to the diaspora, "保国卫港，肃清"港独"遗毒，任重道远！"("Protecting the country and defend Hong Kong; Get rid of the Hong Kong pro-independence posion; there is still a long way to go."), Facebook post, https://www.facebook.com/ChinaMotherland/posts/2496049094018874, archived link can be found here https://archive.is/cX6zX; 我们的征途是星辰大海 (Our Trip is to the Galaxy and the Sea), "保国卫港，肃清"港独"遗毒，任重道远！"("Protecting the country and defend Hong Kong; Get rid of the Hong Kong pro-independence posion; there is still a long way to go."), Facebook post, https://www.facebook.com/traveltoSkyandSea/posts/991506151309600, archived link can be found here https://archive.is/Bf2Ug; 贺芳蔼 He Fangai, "保国卫港，肃清"港独"遗毒，任重道远！"("Protecting the country and defend Hong Kong; Get rid of the Hong Kong pro-independence posion; there is still a long way to go."), Facebook post, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=168406148146845&id=101773021476825, archived link can be found here https://archive.is/uHILK.
71 趙平復, ""英美港盟，主權在民"和「我要攬炒」的英語是什麼？" ("What is English translation for the UK, US and HK in alliance and I want mutual destruction?"), August 10 2019, *International Online*, https://international-online.org/2019/08/10/iad-english/
72 While the DFRLab did not find any clear connection in its research, as mentioned prior, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter did remove assets from their platforms that they did attribute to the party-state.

Conclusion

Over the last decade, amid the intensifying ideological clash between the people of Hong Kong and the CCP, the party-state propaganda apparatus updated its strategies of information operations, pushing more aggressive narratives in the overt channels of state-controlled media and Chinese domestic social media platforms while covertly engaging audiences in Hong Kong with similar narratives. The use of disinformation and misinformation intended to convey both positive messaging about the police and negative messaging about the demonstrators and the causes of the protest have received wide coverage. These narratives not only polarize the local Hong Kongese but also reinforce pro-authority messaging with the mainland Chinese audience.

While Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter remain influential in Hong Kong, social media platforms of Chinese origin, including Weibo and WeChat, have gained impact with a surge of mainland immigrants to Hong Kong. The DFRLab observed cross-platform indications of the success of Chinese influence operations, as "China story" narratives have penetrated the local media environment in Hong Kong.

The "China story" focuses on the positive messaging of the government and the representatives of the government, including the police and the journalists from the state-controlled media. By intentionally emphasizing helpful context while omitting that which is notionally harmful, police officers and state media journalists are portrayed as innocent victims of protester violence and the legitimate cause of the protest is reduced to one of violent looting. In this context, the narratives the DFRLab observed from state-controlled media and other online actors also emphasized violent behavior from an extreme subset of the protesters, lack of recognition for the majority of protesters who were peaceful, and accusations of foreign interference in the protests. These narratives were conveyed by both government-controlled media outlets as well as coordinated social media assets, including fake persona pages on Facebook and "news" channels on YouTube, all of which were intended to convince viewers of the corrupt nature of the protests.

Although similar to the network found by Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube in 2019, the impact and the magnitude of China's information operations in Hong Kong on Western social media platforms appear to be less significant than those on Chinese social media platforms. This would indicate that information operations targeting mainland Chinese have been prioritized as the CCP ensures the spread of anti-protest, pro-police narratives.

While the DFRLab found no clear links to the Chinese party-state in the social media messages it identified as a part of this research,70 the narratives it found on social media platforms – both domestic and foreign – nevertheless correlated directly with narratives deployed by the CCP to assert discourse power. Among these efforts are the promotion of positive perceptions of the "national law enforcement machine" (i.e., the police at all levels); the integrity of Chinese values in a warped interpretation of Western democratic values; and the exaggeration of negative perceptions of the movement, including the excessive violence and the conspiratorial collusion with foreign powers. It is relatively difficult to evaluate how successful these narratives are in Hong Kong as data availability on Facebook pages are not indicative of geographical distribution of engagement, it is safe to conclude that influence campaigns such as these are relatively successful in mainland China, in part because the CCP maintains rigid control of the information environment.

China aims to tighten its control over the Hong Kong territory and discourage popular support for Hong Kong citizens' rights of democracy under "One Country, Two Systems" policy by, among other tactics, instilling pro-China sentiment. At the time of publication, the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong are facing an escalating crackdown and the continued arrests of protest leaders. The fate of the demonstrations remains uncertain, as does Hong Kong's continued general autonomy. What is more certain, however, is the role that disinformation and social media manipulation have played in tandem with an escalation of assertive, and in some cases coercive, discourse power from the Chinese party-state.

Contributors

Iain Robertson served as lead editor and contributing writer. DFRLab staff conducted principal research and writing. Romain Warnault created the cover, and Eric Baker designed the layout.

Last updated August 17, 2020