

Navigating influence: Understanding information control and the Chinese diaspora in Europe

Summary

Since 2015, the Chinese Communist Party has increasingly framed overseas students as a new focus for soft power agents. Through cultural programs and digital media campaigns, it aims to promote ideological alignment and shape how diaspora communities engage with public discourse. These efforts unfold across a continuum, from voluntary engagement to ambient pressure and coercion, and are experienced differently across subgroups. Not all interactions are state-driven, and overgeneralisation risks stigmatising diverse communities.

For EU democracies, this raises key challenges: protecting open civic space without securitising migration, supporting inclusion without overlooking strategic influence, and building institutional resilience in the face of new geopolitical realities.

The European context

Since 2023, the European Union External Action Service (EEAS) has expanded its capacity to identify and understand foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI). However, the existing framework remains focused on state-led, large-scale campaigns and tends to overlook the role of non-state actors, localised networks and cross-border diaspora-linked channels. While Chinese-linked influence operations do occur, experts note that robust evidence of systematic, large-scale FIMI activity within the EU remains limited. Relying too heavily on the FIMI model risks misunderstanding China's more informal influence approach targeting Chinese diaspora communities.

The Chinese diaspora in Europe is estimated at over 2.5 million as of 2024. Diaspora populations are diverse and fragmented across linguistic, occupation, and generational lines, with structured diaspora engagement policies remaining rare. According to the EU Global Facility, only

Ireland has a national diaspora strategy, and only France offers parliamentary representation. Most Western European countries limit engagement to consular services or emergency communications.

The policy gap leaves diaspora communities vulnerable to external influence and marginalisation. It weakens governments' ability to detect, respond to, or proactively support communities exposed to foreign influence while also limiting opportunities to empower diaspora voices as democratic contributors. Without robust frameworks, states risk overlooking diaspora needs or failing to address the indirect consequences of foreign political pressure. By examining how different Chinese actors shape the information environment within diasporas in the EU, the brief supports efforts safeguard freedom of information and Sustainable Development Goal 16.10: public access to information and fundamental freedoms.

Key Messages

- Multiple actors with ties to China engage with EU-based diaspora communities.
- These actors operate along a continuum; not all of it state-directed.
- Diaspora responses vary by class, migration background, and exposure, and strategies must reflect this diversity.
- Information control can undermine trust and cohesion, thus affecting integration of migrants.
- Policy gaps across the EU leave diaspora communities vulnerable and unsupported.



Who is the Chinese diaspora in Europe

Recent scholarship emphasises a temporal and dynamic conceptualisation of diaspora. Migration waves, evolving state engagement, and changing host-country experiences continuously reshape diaspora identities. This means diaspora is not a fixed group but one that shifts over time depending on who migrates, under what conditions, and for how long.

Chinese communities in the EU illustrate this dynamism. State-sponsored students may reside abroad for only a few years, often with limited local engagement before returning to China. Their short-term presence raises important questions about self-identification, inclusion in diaspora networks, and exposure to transnational influence. Such variability complicates efforts to map communities or design responsive policies.

Different diaspora members respond differently to information control. Migrants running restaurants or small businesses may be affected differently to younger international students. Recognising this complexity helps policymakers avoid one-size-fits-all assumptions and design better-targeted interventions.

The Chinese diaspora in the EU and the UK has been shaped by distinct migration patterns²:

- **Pre-1950s:** Seafarers from Guangdong settled in port cities like Marseille and Liverpool
- **1980s-1990s:** Zhejiang migrants established garment manufacturing businesses in Italy and France
- **1990s-2000s:** Fujianese communities arrived, often via irregular migration routes
- **2000s-present:** Students and skilled workers in academia and technology sectors

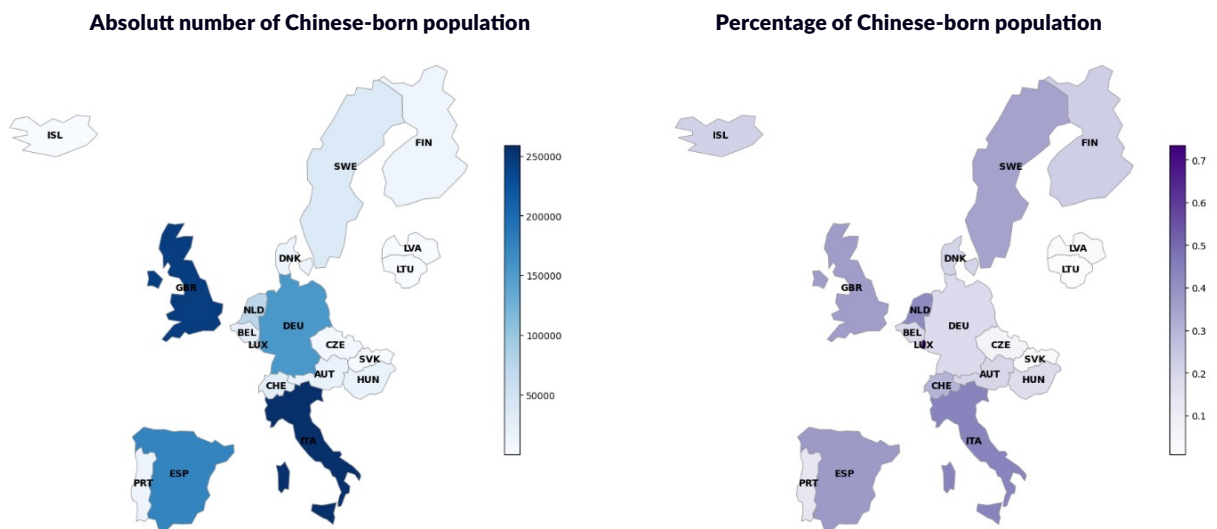


Figure 1. Distribution and share of Chinese-born populations across EU member states and the UK, 2021. Illustration by author.

¹ Chan, Shelly. *Diaspora's Homeland: Modern China in the Age of Global Migration*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.; Thuno, M. (2002), *Reaching Out and Incorporating Chinese Overseas*. In: *The China Quarterly*.

² Pieke, F. N. (2004). *Chinese Globalization in Europe*.; Ceccagno, A. (2017). *City Making and Global Labor Regimes*.; Nyiri, P. (2003). *Chinese Migration to Eastern Europe*.

A Continuum of influence: from engagement to pressure

In 2018 the Communist Party Central Committee called on all diaspora to help “realise the great rejuvenation of the Chinese” by “telling Chinese stories” and “promoting Chinese culture.”³ This signalled a broader shift in diaspora engagement that now extends beyond economic investment to include political, social, and discursive influence. Following a major United Front work conference in 2015 that elevated the political status of diaspora engagement, China has shifted from passively anticipating diaspora support to actively cultivating cultural, ideological, and political loyalty abroad.⁴

These strategies operate along a continuum rather than a simple divide between state-controlled and independent action. It is a spectrum of involvement, intent, and effect without clear lines between where one ends and the other begins.

- Lower end: activities driven by individual interest or cultural pride without explicit incentive or pressure, such as attending festivals or cultural events.
- Middle range: more ambient forms of influence that often seem uncoordinated but remain restrictive, such as avoiding discussing sensitive topics online.
- Upper end: coercive, top-down approaches that are often state-led or coordinated, including surveillance, threats, and visa pressure.

This spectrum has complicate distinctions between voluntary engagement and state-directed interference. Even indirect or self-imposed pressures can lead to distrust, self-censorship, or disengagement from civic life.

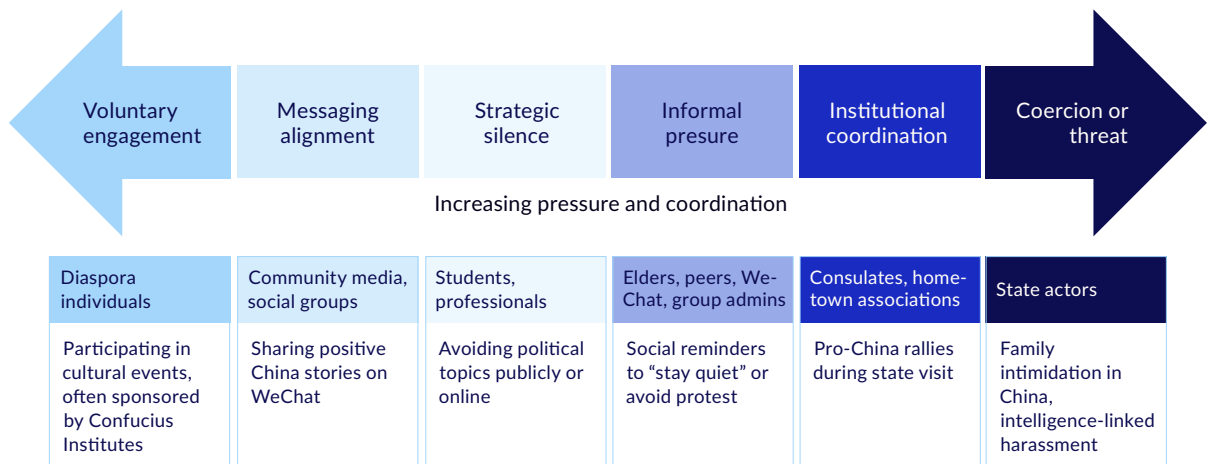


Figure 2. Continuum of influence within Chinese diaspora communities. *Illustration by author.*

Alignment of messaging on platforms such as WeChat does not always stem from coercion. It may reflect pragmatic adaptation, social pressure, or internalised norms. Yet even in the absence of explicit directives, ambient pressure can restrict free expression. Research shows

³ Xinhua, “Xi Jinping: Open Up a New Situation in United Front Work,” *People’s Daily*, July 31, 2015. <https://cpc.people.com.cn/xuexi/n/2015/0731/c385474-27391395.html>.

⁴ Marcel Angliviell de la Beaumelle, *The United Front Work Department: “Magic Weapon” at Home and Abroad*, Jamestown Foundation, September 9, 2019. Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/united-front-work-department-magic-weapon-home-abroad>.

⁵ Amnesty International (2024). *On My Campus, I Am Afraid: Chinese Students Abroad and Transnational Repression*.

that diaspora media often avoid sensitive topics due to fears of economic backlash (e.g. loss of China-based advertisers) or visa restrictions for staff.⁶ Information control can also manifest as subtle censorship, such as denying access to data or records, blocked publications, or content removal triggered by politically sensitive terms rather than direct state orders.⁷

The united front and the ambiguity of influence

The United Front Work Department (UFWD) is frequently cited in policy and academic literature as a key actor in China's overseas influence strategy. However, its real-world impact remains uneven and difficult to verify. A case study of Chinese networks in Switzerland reveals that many organisations with links to the UFWD operate in decentralised, non-coordinated ways.⁸ These networks may still reproduce state-aligned messaging, but not necessarily due to direct orders or control. United Front strategies often resemble campaign-style mobilisations rather than fixed institutional commands, with influence frequently enacted by individuals not formally tied to the Chinese state. This creates layers of plausible deniability and complicating attribution.⁹

Whether the decentralised structure is strategic or incidental, its effect is the same: uncertainty creates an atmosphere in which individuals internalise risk and act cautiously, even without formal directives. This ambient pressure can encourage self-censorship, particularly in academic spaces, where researchers and students face heightened vulnerability due to the political sensitivity of their work, dependence on access to China, or fear of retaliation.

It is therefore crucial not to conflate all community activity with state direction. Doing so risks stigmatising individuals and undermining trusts within diaspora communities, potentially alienating the very people who might otherwise contribute to open discourse and civic engagement.

The role of hometown associations and diaspora media

Hometown associations and diaspora media often act as informal channels of influence within Chinese communities in the EU. In countries like Germany and Italy, these associations frequently host cultural or business events and maintain close ties with Chinese consulates or local authorities. Organisations such as the Italy-China Friendship Association and regional hometown groups in Prato have reportedly helped promote narratives favourable to Beijing, often through localised WeChat networks or diaspora newspapers.

Case: Prato's Green Dragon Club

In February 2025, the Green Dragon Club in Prato, Italy – a local Chinese community centre – was appointed as an “overseas communication base” and “liaison office” of the Wenzhou International Communication Center (ICC). The ICC is one of over 70 centres established across China since 2018 to amplify the CCP's international messaging efforts. Operating in coordination with local propaganda offices, these centres aim to help the CCP “tell China's story well” and enhance the global “discourse power”.¹⁰

⁶ Cook, Sarah (2015). *The Long Shadow of Chinese Censorship: How the CCP's Media Restrictions Affect News Outlets Worldwide.*; Nyiri et al. (2023). *How do Chinese journalists perceive us?* University of Amsterdam.

⁷ Based on background conversation 1 with China experts.

⁸ Weber. (2020). *Unified message, rhizomatic delivery. A preliminary analysis of PRC/CCP influence and the united front in Switzerland.*

⁹ Based on background conversation 2 with China experts.

¹⁰ Media Liaison Office for Wenzhou Opens in Prato, Lingua Sinica Dispatch.

Not all associations operate with clear directions. Studies suggest while some efforts align with state objectives, they are not always centrally coordinated and often exist in a grey zone between engagement and interference.¹¹ This ambiguity underscores the need for empirical research, nuanced understanding, and community-informed strategies that strengthen resilience without eroding inclusion.

How diaspora communities are responding

Diaspora responses to information influence are not uniform. They vary widely depending on generational background, legal status, class position, and degree of social integration. These responses can be broadly categorised along a continuum from compliance to resistance:

1. Strategic compliance or alignment

Some diaspora members, especially older migrants or small business owners with economic or personal ties to China, may echo state-aligned narratives. This alignment is often pragmatic rather than ideological, shaped by the need to preserve economic stability, secure visas, or avoid wanted scrutiny.

One study finds that Chinese small business operators in the Pacific show more favourable views of Chinese diplomacy that are often tied to concerns over local instability and weak consular protection. In such cases, compliance is often strategic and context-driven rather than conviction-based.¹²

2. Indifference or apolitical distance

Newer migrants, undocumented individuals, and working-class communities often exhibit political disengagement. These individuals may avoid homeland political topics altogether, choosing instead to focus on economic survival or social integration in their host countries.

A study of Chinese migrants in France found widespread political disengagement, including from homeland affairs. Respondents cited limited access to uncensored Chinese-language media, precarious legal status, and general detachment from state-led political narratives, preferring instead to focus on livelihood and family needs.¹³

3. Resistance or activism:

More politically engaged actors, typically younger students, second-generation diaspora, or migrants from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Tibet, may actively resist CCP-aligned narratives through protests, alternative media platforms¹⁴, or public dissent.

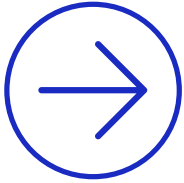
¹¹ CSBA (2023). *Uncovering China's Influence in Europe*.

¹² China's diplomacy and diaspora perceptions: Evidence from the Pacific region.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ In the case of China Deviants, alternative media includes Instagram and X where students run social accounts with meme and art. These platforms often serve as spaces to curate counter-narratives, disseminate sensitive content censored in Chinese media, and connect diaspora or dissidence networks internationally.

The UK-based group China Deviants, formed in 2022, organises online and offline activism including Tiananmen vigils. Members have faced threats to family members in China and surveillance linked to their activities, such as being followed or receiving coercive messages linked to their activism, highlighting the transnational risk activists may encounter.¹⁵



Policy recommendations

- **Establish a multilingual digital hub** offering legal guidance, secure reporting channels, and resources for diaspora students and researchers facing surveillance, threats, or coercive pressure.
- **Develop a code of practice for institutions** – especially universities and think tanks – on engaging with consular outreach, protecting academic freedom and student safety.
- **Fund diaspora-led civic and digital literacy programs**, tailored by age and occupation, to help communities navigate censorship, misinformation, and transnational influence safely.
- **Support independent diaspora-run media platforms** through micro-grants, digital infrastructure, and safety training to diversify narratives and reduce self-censorship incentives.
- **Build on the Council of Europe’s proposal** to promote safe intra-diaspora dialogues by supporting NGOs and municipalities in hosting forums that bridge generational, regional, and political divides.
- **Establish diaspora-dedicated institutions** to ensure diasporic perspectives meaningfully shape integration, civic participation, and information integrity strategies.
- **Co-develop an EU-level White paper** on diaspora engagement together with diaspora organisations, researchers, and civil society, building on the Parliamentary Assembly’s recommendation for coordinated policy learning and implementation.

¹⁵ UK-China Transparency. ‘China Deviants’: a story of the CCP’s harassment of Chinese students in Europe.

About the ARM Project

Coordinated by the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), the ARM project delves into authoritarian strategies for information control beyond borders. While foreign disinformation receives ample scrutiny, other forms of foreign information manipulation and intervention (FIMI) remain overlooked.

Analysing Russia, China, Ethiopia, and Rwanda, ARM conceptualises and addresses different forms of FIMI. The project will explore the extent that major global players like China and Russia, alongside Ethiopia and Rwanda, engage in transnational information suppression, particularly targeting European diaspora communities.

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