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China's Information Control Practices

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1. Abstract

The concept of foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) has been key to understanding and identifying information control operations. We argue that this concept overlooks two central aspects: the attribution to state actors and, relatedly, understanding the role of non-state actors. This working paper therefore analyses how and to what extent Chinese actors facilitate information control practices inside the country, but with a larger focus outside of China, especially inside the European Union (EU). We show that information control takes place across four dimensions: information production, information dissemination, information salience and within the Chinese diaspora.

2. Introduction

Inside the EU the concept of foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) has been key to understanding and identifying information control operations.[1] FIMI usually describes deliberate acts by authoritarian states, however we argue that this concept overlooks two central aspects: the attribution to state actors and, relatedly, understanding the role of non-state actors. Widening the scope of FIMI to the influence of non-state actors and non-deliberate actions may improve our understanding of how authoritarian states, such as China interfere in European societies.

To understand FIMI in a wider context, we use the concept of information control, which includes four main aspects: Controlling information production, information dissemination, information salience and perceptions of information control amongst the Chinese diaspora. Some describe these aspects of information control as information suppression. In contrast, we argue that the term information suppression is biased. Information suppression assumes that the authoritarian state has full control over other actors involved, such as private technology companies. In this working paper we show that the relationships between the state and actors involved in controlling information are more complex than a top-down relationship.

[1] *3rd EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats: Exposing the Architecture of FIMI Operations* (European Union External Action Service, 2025).

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To provide a more objective perspective in the context of China, we continue using the term information control. We therefore answer the following research questions:

- What actors are involved in China's information control practices?
- What are the implications of information control?
- How far is information control happening within the EU?

We answer these questions by structuring the paper along the four types of information control.

First, we dive into controlling the information production of knowledge, where we describe how academics, journalists and experts working on China within the EU and some other regions, such as the US, are pressured to self-censor or even deviate from producing information about China.

Second, we shift the focus to show how the dissemination of information is controlled. Here we set the scene by explaining how China has developed an institutional structure that involves several state and non-state actors to control the dissemination within China. We then take a closer look at two main sets of actors that operate outside of China and within the EU: Chinese international media outlets and Chinese technology companies.

Third, we explore information salience to dig deeper into the characteristics of information control. We show how narratives aligned with the Chinese government and its policies gain salience in the EU information space through a combination of state-associated and socially mediated processes.

Finally, we end our analysis by shifting the focus to the perceptions of the Chinese diaspora in the EU on China's information control practices.

We conclude the paper with providing a summary of China's information control and policy recommendations.

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3. Controlling Information Production of Knowledge

Research constitutes an important knowledge source for understanding foreign countries. Much of this knowledge is learned indirectly via education and media, while direct interaction, for example via travel, is comparatively less important.[2] Yet knowledge production often faces challenges that constrain academic freedom. Academic freedom is "the right, without constriction by prescribed doctrine, to freedom of teaching and discussion, freedom in carrying out research and disseminating and publishing the results thereof, freedom to express freely their opinion about the institution or system in which they work, freedom from institutional censorship and freedom to participate in professional or representative academic bodies" (1997 UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel).[3]

Researchers on China often face challenges for conducting research, especially on sensitive topics. As laid out below, many topics related to China have become more sensitive over time, not only inside China, but also abroad. Academic and non-academic experts on Chinese politics have faced significantly more constraints over time, especially in the United States, but also in Europe. This trend has resulted in a worrisome drop in the number of experts and publications. When societies lack empirical evidence produced and shared by researchers at academic institutions, but also journalists, non-governmental organisations, think tanks, or government bodies, policy-makers and citizens cannot easily fill this knowledge gap as travel is not always an option. This leaves room for forming views and decisions related to China based on rumours, misinformation, emotions, and stereotypes rather than founded empirical evidence.

The proliferation of low-quality information about China abroad has profound consequences for both, politics and society. Policy-makers and civil servants may inadvertently base

[2] Daniela Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).
[3] UNESCO, "Adoption of a Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel," 29c/12, UNESCO, 1997, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000109075.

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decisions on false assumptions, misguided risk calculations, or just not be able to see the full range of policy options. People of Asian descent who may or may not identify as Chinese can face harassment and violence. Constraints on knowledge production about China is neither in the interest of China or any other country.

Why are both, Chinese and non-Chinese state and non-state actors nevertheless engaging in restricting knowledge production? Below we formulate a preliminary answer based on Google Scholar data and an online survey conducted among academic and non-academic researchers in the United States, European Union, United Kingdom, Asia, Latin America, and Africa. We find that researchers affiliated with institutions in the United States face the greatest challenges to academic freedom, followed by the EU+ (including Norway, Switzerland) compared to other regions. While researchers used to face these constraints predominantly inside China, they now increasingly face challenges in the countries they work in.[4] While in the past actors identified as Chinese were most common, now actors identified as non-Chinese often take actions that increase pressure on researchers of Chinese politics. We provide a differentiated view of these actors along two dimensions: affiliation to the state (Chinese state or state of working institution) and their origin (China or other country). The United States stands out as a country where researchers experience pressure from state actors identified to be affiliated with the US government, while non-state actors dominate inside the EU and other regions. Both, China and other societies should take action to reduce these pressures to increase the quality of knowledge about Chinese politics.

3.1 Methodology

Being experts on Chinese politics, we are providing an insider view of constraints faced in the field of Chinese politics based on systematically collected evidence. To avoid potential bias we took precautions that guide data collection and analysis.[5]

[4] Sheena Chestnut Greitens and Rory Truex, "Repressive Experiences among China Scholars: New Evidence from Survey Data," *The China Quarterly* 242 (June 2020): 349–75, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741019000365.

[5] We created guidelines for the entire research team to identify potential areas for conflict of interest. For example, the research team did not fill in the survey and we follow standards for social science

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To identify experts of Chinese politics we rely on a unique sample based on a self-defined network of researchers of Chinese politics connected globally.[6] In contrast to earlier work, we thus compare the situation of researchers based at institutions in the United States with those at institutions in Europe, East Asia, and the Pacific region (Australia and New Zealand). We do not include researchers whose primary institution is based in Mainland China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan, since their situation differs significantly. Since most members of the network are in the United States and to compare to an earlier expert survey conducted primarily on US experts we report statistics for the United States in comparison to Europe as well as the overall average, including all regions (see Figure 1).[7]

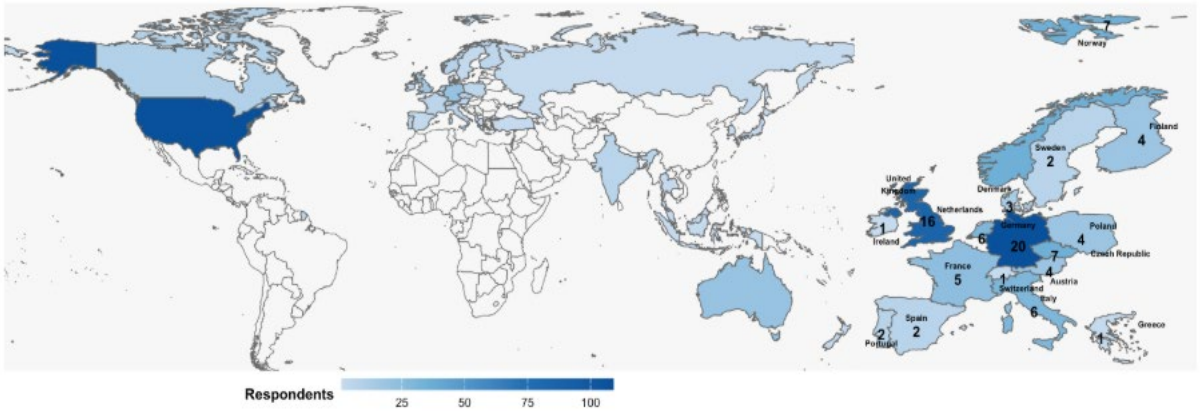

Figure 1. Respondents by country of workplace. Source: China Expert Survey 2025.

On the sample of self-identified researchers of Chinese politics we collected all publicly available publications on Google Scholar and examine their development over time.[8] In addition, we conducted an online expert survey where we contacted 1470 researchers

research when analyzing results with an attitude conscientiously separating our own experiences from the data.

[6] The expert network was constructed using a peer-nomination approach. Initial respondents were asked to recommend other scholars working on contemporary Chinese politics, and individuals were included in the sample if they were named by at least one peer. To protect respondent confidentiality, the identities of nominators are not disclosed. On research design and sampling see: Franziska B. Keller et al., "China Watchers," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 59, no. 1 (2026): 165–75, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096525101200.

[7] Greitens and Truex, "Repressive Experiences among China Scholars."

[8] The dataset on publicly available academic publications by this network covers 1,194 authors and 125,241 publications, spanning nearly 5,000 research topics as categorized by OpenAlex: OpenAlex, "About OpenAlex," OpenAlex, 2026, https://openalex.org/about.

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between October-December 2025, resulting in an response rate of above 21%, which is high for expert surveys.[9] Among 341 respondents 271 respondents worked in academic institutions and 70 worked in non-academic settings in 2025. 97 were affiliated with a University or College in the US, 57 in the EU+ (including scholars from Norway and Switzerland), 19 in New Zealand or Australia, 15 in the UK, 9 in South-East Asia (see Figure 1).[10] We complement statistical analysis of the survey with qualitative analysis of the many open-ended questions in which we asked respondents to describe their experiences.

3.2 Decline in Publications

Publicly available Google Scholar publications by the network of researchers of Chinese politics has significantly declined over time after a steep increase until 2020 (Figure 2). China's opening up after the Cultural Revolution provided new opportunities for scholars to conduct research on Chinese social science research and along with further opening up and increasing attention towards China scholarly publications increased. However, more active rejection of "Western" social science research began with the leadership change from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping in 2013.[11] Despite these pressures publications increased until declining sharply in 2021, around the time of the pandemic.

[9] The number of researchers contacted for the survey is higher than for Google Scholar because we could not find a Google Scholar profile for every researcher.
[10] 8% spread across other regions. 20% did not report the country of the institutions they work at.
[11] Chloé Froissart, "Power and Knowledge in 21st Century China: Producing Social Sciences," *China Perspectives* 2018, no. 4 (2018), https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.8330.

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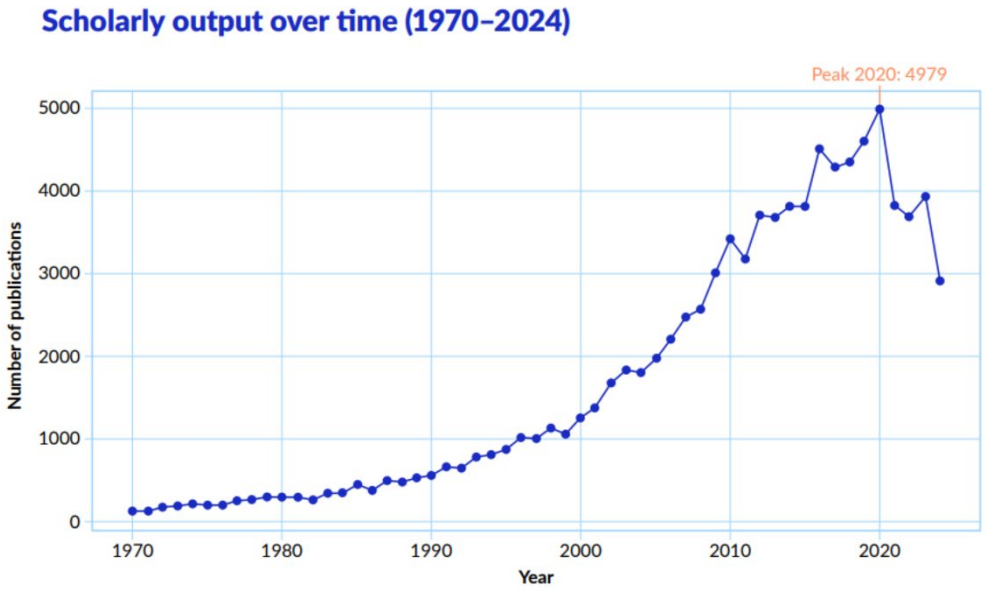

Figure 2. Publications on Google Scholar 1970-2024. Source: OpenAlex.

The reduction in knowledge production is most visible among authors, which dropped from a high of 865 contributors to research on Chinese politics in 2017 to only 667 in 2024 (Figure 3). Starting around 2017 politics became increasingly sensitive resulting in less data production and even historical research became highly politicized.[12] We thus see an overall decrease in the number of publications in social science research and history (see Figure 4). While people in 25 countries increasingly see China as the world's top economic power, empirically based research on China is decreasing in parallel, thus providing less empirically conducted scientific knowledge on China.[13] As pointed out earlier, this decreases quality of information with profound political and societal consequences.

[12] A. Trinkle et al., *How to Successfully Carry out China Research in Challenging Times – A Perspective from Junior Scholars*, no. 14, SCRIPTS Think Piece (Cluster of Excellence 2055 "Contestations of the Liberal Script (SCRIPTS), 2022); Daniela Stockmann and Ting Luo, *Governing Digital China*, Communication, Society and Politics (Cambridge University Press, 2025).

[13] Pew Research Center, "China's Economic Power and Economic Relations," Pew Research Center, July 15, 2025, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2025/07/15/chinas-economic-power-and-economic-relations/.

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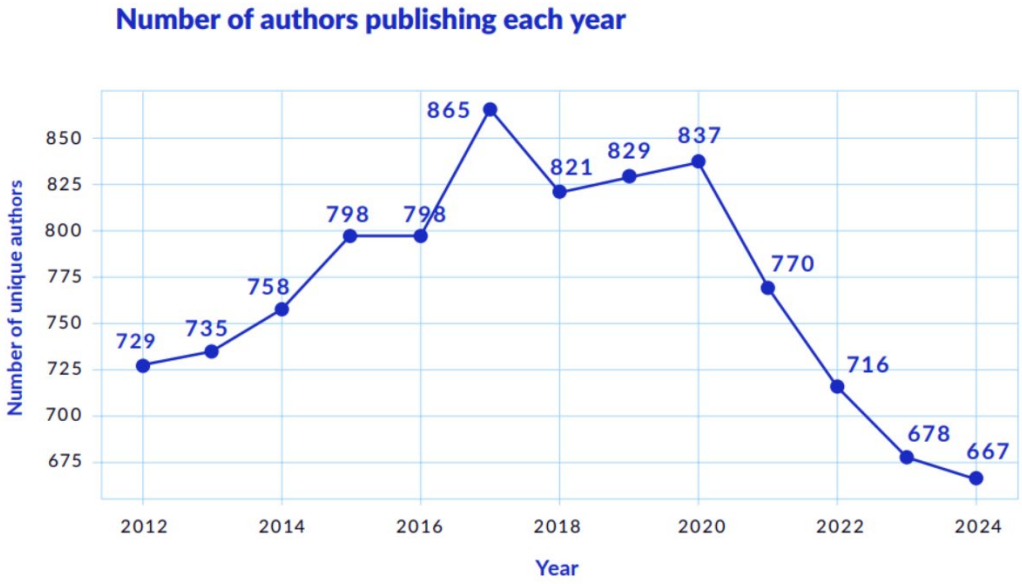

Figure 3. Number of Authors Publishing on Google Scholar, 2012-2024. Source: OpenAlex.

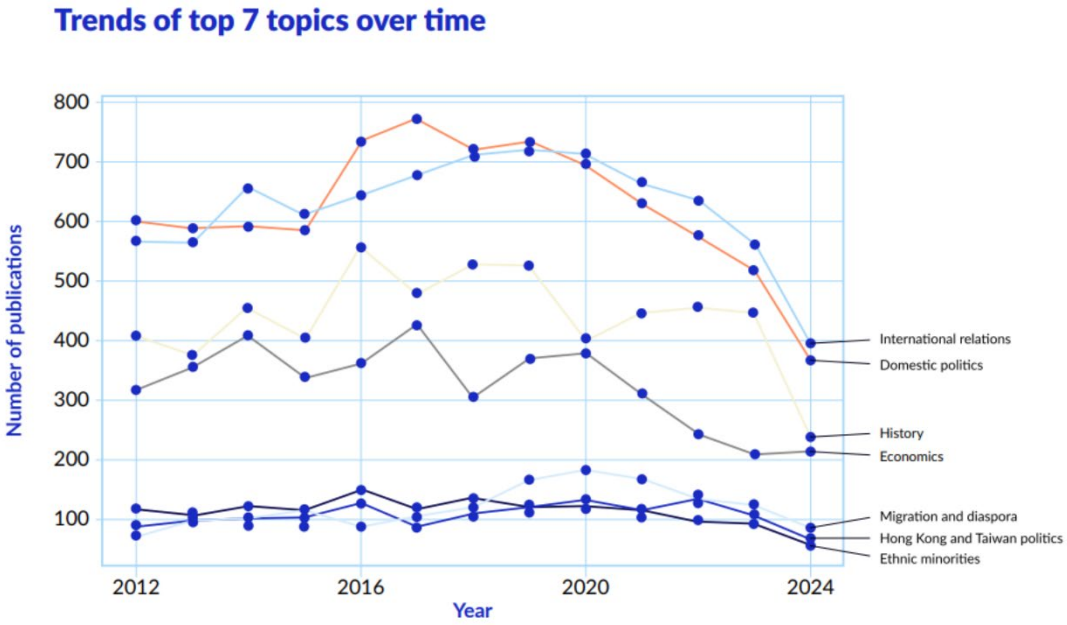

Figure 4, Trends of Key Topics Related to China, 2012-2024. Source: OpenAlex.

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3.3 Increasing Challenges to Knowledge Production

In our international survey, researchers working in the United States were more likely to report challenges to academic freedom compared to an earlier survey conducted predominantly among researchers working in the US.[14] Over time, researchers have reported more challenges, both inside China, but also in the country where their work was located. This was the case for both, academics working for University or College and non-academic researchers think tanks, non-governmental organisations, consultancies, government agencies, and news media organizations compared to scholars. Because the sample of non-academic researchers was comparatively small (n=70), we concentrate on academics below, pointing out differences to non-academic researchers when those are most significant.[15]

3.3.1 Challenges Inside China

Compared to an earlier survey conducted among China experts mostly in the United States, the situation had significantly worsened by 2025.[16] 49% of academic and 39% of non-academic researchers report experiencing, on average, at least one of the things listed in Figure 5 in the last ten years regarding their work on China (academics: 53% US, 37% EU; non-academics: 50% US, 33% EU). As shown in Figure 5, the most commonly reported challenge is having Chinese friends or acquaintances contacted by authorities and having interview subjects withdrawn from an interview at the last minute without clear explanation. Across regions, researchers from the United States were more likely to face challenges, followed by those located in the EU with some exceptions: US scholars were more likely to be denied a visa compared to those working at an EU University or College; 17% of non-academic researchers working for an organisation inside the EU were asked to cooperate with authorities compared to 8% of US non-academic researchers. [17]

[14] Greitens and Truex, “Repressive Experiences among China Scholars.”
[15] 12 out of 70 respondents were based in US while 18 were based in the EU.
[16] Greitens and Truex, “Repressive Experiences among China Scholars.”
[17] Had notes/research materials confiscated: academics 2% (3% from US, no case reported from EU), non-academics 1% (8% from US, no case reported from EU);
Been physically intimidated or detained: academics 2% (2% from US, no case reported from EU), non-academics 7% (25% from US, no case reported from EU);

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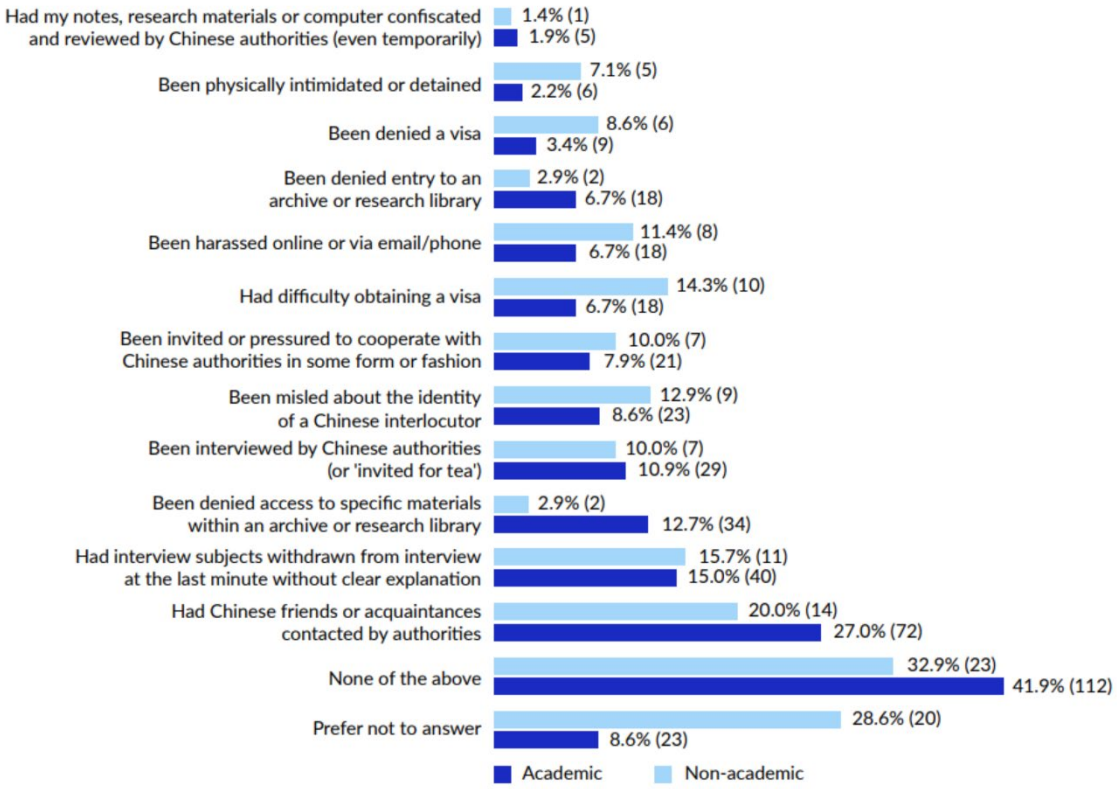

Figure 5. *Challenges Inside China. Source: China Expert Survey 2025.*

Been denied a visa: academics 3% (3% from US, 4% from EU), non-academics 9% (17% from US, 6% from EU);
Been denied entry to an archive or research library: academics 7% (9% from US; 2% from EU), non-academics 3% (no case reported from US or EU);
Been harassed online or via email/phone: academics 7% (8% from US, 5% from EU), non-academics 11% (25% from US, 6% from EU);
Had difficulty obtaining a visa: academics 7% (10% from US, 2% from EU), non-academics 14% (17% from US, 17% from EU);
Been invited or pressured to cooperate with Chinese authorities in some form or fashion: academics 8% (12% from US, 4% from EU), non-academics 10% (8% from US, 17% from EU);
Been misled about the identity of a Chinese interlocutor: academics 9% (11% from US, 4% from EU), non-academics 13% (25% from US, 11% from EU);
Been interviewed by Chinese authorities (or 'invited for tea'): academics 11% (12% from US, 5% from EU), non-academics 10% (17% from US, 17% from EU);
Been denied access to specific materials within an archive or research library: academics 13% (14% from US, 11% from EU), non-academics 3% (8% from US, no case reported from EU);
Had interview subjects withdrawn from interview at the last minute without clear explanation: academics 15% (19% from US, 14% from EU), non-academics 16% (25% from US, 6% from EU);
Had Chinese friends or acquaintances contacted by authorities: academics 27% (29% from US, 25% from EU), non-academics 20% (33% from US, 11% from EU);

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3.3.2 Disruption when Sharing Knowledge

Apart from these hurdles for data collection, scholars also experienced disruption in sharing of academic knowledge. Over 42% of scholars report having experienced attempts to influence content when publishing or giving a talk in China (53% for US-based academics, 28% for EU-based academics;). Specifically, 29% received guidance on or had to get approval for the content of a talk, lecture, or other presentation (35% for US, 18% for EU), 23% had their publication censored (35% for US, 9% for EU), and 11% had a talk/presentation cancelled (17% for US, 7% for EU.) Non-academic researchers also faced disruption, but to a lesser degree than scholars.[18]

3.3.3 Strategies to Cope with Challenges

More than half of academics (54%) and 33% of non-academic researchers (55% for US-academics, 47% for EU-academics; 17% for US-non-academics, 50% for EU-non-academics) have resorted to at least one of the following strategies: For scholars, the most common practice is to use a different language to describe a research project when in China (41%), which is followed by adapting a project's focus/approach to something less sensitive (20%), and decided not to pursue or publish a project because it was too sensitive (15%). Very few respondents reported that they published a project anonymously or under a pseudonym (2%). Non-academic researchers report less reactions in response to challenges.[19]

3.3.4 Travel to China

In light of less opportunities for data collection mentioned earlier, patterns of research travel changed following the Covid-19 Pandemic. Before Covid, 220 respondents reported traveling for research, with an average of 5.7 trips per person. During Covid, research travel declined

[18] 24% report having experienced attempts to influence content (33% for US, 17% for EU). Specifically, 11% received guidance on or had to get approval for the content of a talk, lecture, or other presentation (8% for US, 17% for EU), 16% had their publication censored (25% for US, 6% for EU), and 8% had a talk/presentation cancelled (8% for US, 6% for EU).

[19] 17% reported to use a different language to describe a project when in China, but this is more common among EU respondents compared to US ones (8% for US, 28% for EU). Similarly, less US researchers reported adapting a project's focus/approach to something less sensitive (11% average, no case for US, 17% for EU) and decided not to pursue or publish a project because it was too sensitive (11% average, 8% for US, 17% for EU). No one working for an institution in the US or the EU reported that they published a project anonymously or under a pseudonym (3% for other regions).

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sharply with only 17 researchers traveling with an average of 2.47 trips. After Covid, research travel partially resumed but at lower levels than before. 142 respondents reported traveling with an average of 3.05 trips per person. Similarly, before Covid, 42 non-academic researchers reported an average of 5.48 trips, compared to only 6 respondents reporting 1.17 trips during Covid, and 22 respondents reporting 3.36 trips after Covid.

3.3.5 Actors Inside China

Actors exerting pressure greatly outnumber researchers. In the survey, many researchers provided more detailed open-ended explanations of the incidents. On average since 2015, scholars reported 6 incidents and non-academic researchers 11. During this time academics had, on average, contact with 2 or 3 different actors (2.6), while non-academic researchers had contact with 4 to 5 (4.4) actors, whereby the differences were driven by the greater likelihood by non-academic researchers to have an incident (Table 1).

	STATE	NON-STATE	N
Academic researchers (103)	191	74	265 (630)
Non-academic researchers (21)	78	15	93 (239)
N	269	89	358

Table 1. Mentions of Actors for Challenges Inside China (see Figure 5). Source: China Expert Survey 2025.[20]

[20] Number of respondents giving valid responses to open-ended question in parentheses (left column). Number of incidents reported in parentheses (right column).

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In addition to specific actors, researchers also frequently mention the atmosphere in China leading to researchers feeling constrained. Researchers reported that the restriction of access to resources "very often happen not because there is a clear directive to do so, but to avoid any potential harm. As such, I also understand this practice, since the safety of local research contacts (incl. staff at libraries etc) should be the most important ethical guideline for anyone conducing fieldwork, no matter where." Similar constraints were reported relating to contact with host institutions and last-minute withdrawal of interview subjects due to "a general sense of nervousness [that] made potential interview participants get `cold feet`."

3.4.1. Challenges in the Country of the Researcher's Workplace

Challenges outside of China have become a major constraint for knowledge production.[21] 30% of scholars and 31% of non-academic researchers reported to have experienced at least one of the challenges to academic freedom listed in the country where they work (Figure 6). For non-academic researchers the situation is worse compared to academics. This especially applies to individual personal insults (17% from non-academics, 25% from US, 22% from EU) while 13% experienced reputational attacks (17% from both US and EU). 7% reported other types of pressure (0% from US, 11% from EU), and 6% experienced direct threats or intimidation (8% from US, 6% from EU). 6% reported experiences of dogpiling (8% from US, 0% from EU). Online and offline stalking and doxxing were not reported among non-academic researchers in the United States or Europe (4% reported online/offline stalking in other regions, but no one doxxing). This points towards stalking and doxxing being specifically targeted at academics. Among academics, the situation has become more challenging in the United States except for dogpiling, stalking, and doxxing, which is more likely in the EU.[22]

[21] Based on background conversations with scholars prior to the survey. Greitens and Treux (2020) did not include questions about the situation in the country of workplace because it was not considered a main challenge at the time.

[22] 16% of academic researchers have experienced individual personal insults, derogatory remarks, and ad hominem attacks on their character, appearance, background, qualifications, or motivations because of their research on China (21% for US-based respondents, 12 % for EU-based). 10% have experienced other types of pressure (9% for both US and EU) such as. 8 % report experiencing reputational attacks to damage your professional reputation through false accusations, character assassination, or the spread of misleading or defamatory information about your work or personal life (9% for US, 7% for EU). 4% experience dogpiling, i.e. tactics by multiple individuals that include flooding your social media accounts with abusive messages, sending hate mail, visiting at your home or office, or spreading false

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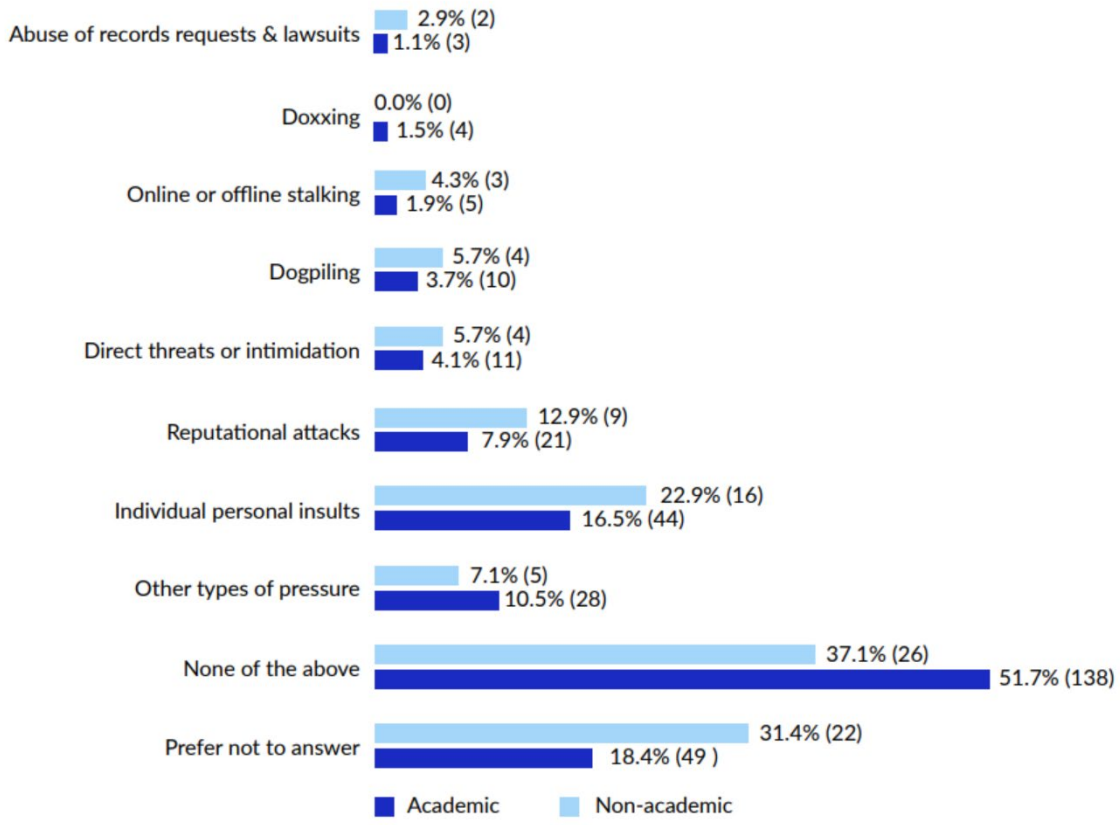

Figure 6. Online and Offline Pressures in Country of Workplace. Source: China Expert Survey 2025.

information about your character and the nature of your work. (2% US, 4% EU) and 4% report direct threats and intimidation (4% among both US- and EU-based respondents). Only 2% report experiencing online or offline stalking (none from US, 2% for EU), 2% for doxxing, i.e. the public disclosure of your personal information by third actors (none from US, 2% for EU). 1% experience abuse of records request & lawsuits (1% for US, none for EU).

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3.3.6 Challenges at Universities, Colleges, Think Tanks, Non-governmental organisations, Consultancies, Government agencies, and News media organisations

27% of scholars note additional administrative burden or approval requirements that increase time and resources spent (33% for US, 20% for EU). 14% report being discouraged or questioned by colleagues to work on China (14% for both US and EU). Other issues, such as restricted access to state funding for travel (10% for US, 2% for EU) and institutional ethics review problems (3% for US, no reported cases from EU-based respondent) were reported by smaller shares of respondents.

Not surprisingly, researchers working at other organisations than Universities and Colleges also face less administrative burden or approval requirements. Among non-academic researchers, 14% experienced additional administrative burden or approval requirements (33% for US, 19% for EU), followed by 9% being discouraged or questioned by colleagues to work on China (no reported cases from US, 14% for EU). 7% of respondents have not been able to state funding for research travel to China (no reported cases from US, 2% for EU). Thus, additional burdens are comparatively lower when working for non-academic institutions.

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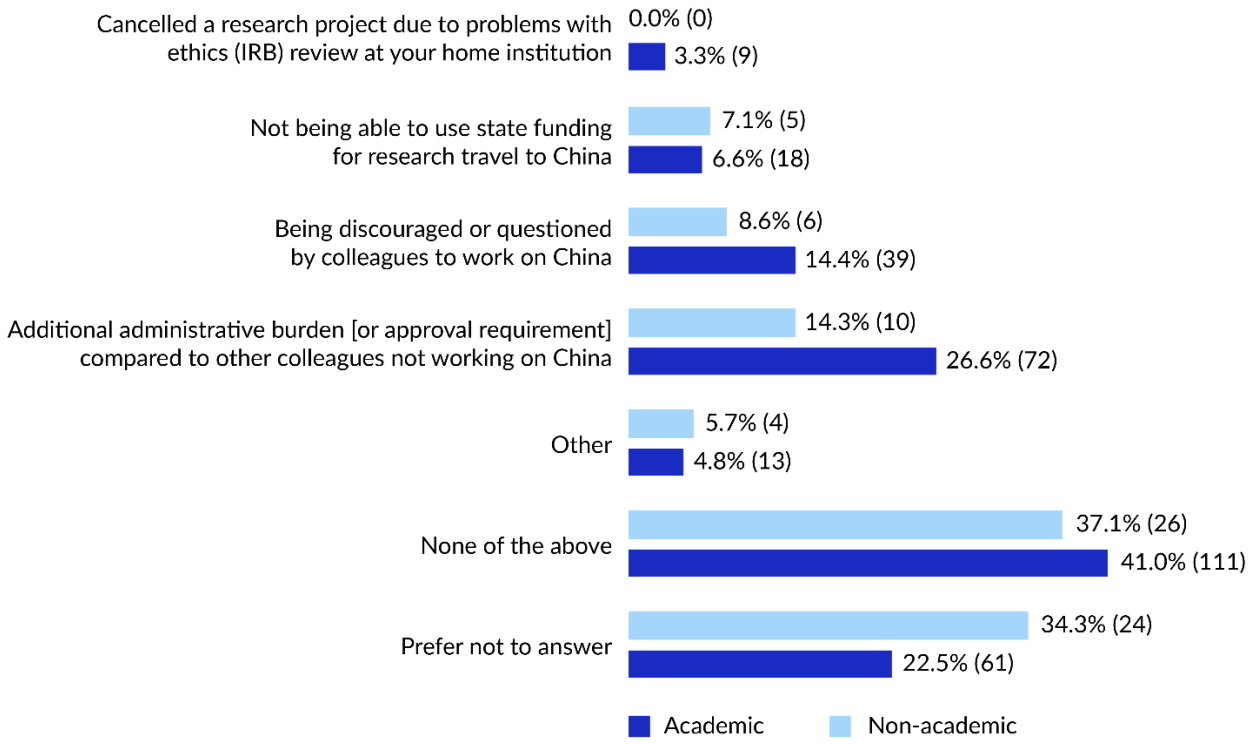

Figure 7. Adverse Work Environment Experiences. Source: China Expert Survey 2025.

3.3.7 Actors Outside China

At the workplace

Figure 7 above indicates that policies by research funding institutions, Universities, and colleagues play an important role. Thus, we see a similarity in the kinds of societal actors that are involved inside China with the important caveat that Universities, libraries, archives were often mentioned being involved in cooperation with state actors, while outside of China, especially in liberal democracies these actors tend to act more independently.

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Outside of the workplace

Similar to China outside of the workplace researchers are also outnumbered by types of actors placing constraints on knowledge production. On average, scholars reported 7 and non-academic researchers 9 incidents since 2015. During this period, they identified, on average, 2 different actors. Researchers were especially likely to be targeted in their country of workplace by non-state actors identified as non-Chinese. Chinese actors are significantly less likely to be involved compared to actors identified as non-Chinese.

	CHINESE STATE	CHINESE NON-STATE	OTHER STATE	OTHER NON-STATE	N
Academic researchers (60)	18	21	13	74	126 (411)
Non-academic researchers (18)	10	6	4	22	42 (154)
N	30	25	17	96	

Table 2. Mentions of Actors for Challenges Outside China (see Figure 6). Source: China Expert Survey 2025.[23]

In addition to specific actors, researchers also frequently mention the atmosphere, especially in the United States. US researchers mentioned public universities being “subject to state laws which are now increasingly stringent concerning receiving funds from Chinese entities, including Chinese Universities.” Another reported a "political climate in the US, where right-wing students and organizations exert pressure on faculty teaching sensitive topics.” Although more comments mentioned pressure from the right, one also stated: "Certain administrators

[23] Number of respondents giving valid responses to open-ended question in parentheses (left column). Number of incidents reported in parentheses (right column).

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and colleagues obsessed with Diversity Equity and Inclusion and social justice who don't appreciate the kind of work I do."

3.3.8 TTPs[24]

TACTICS	TECHNIQUES
Manage, guide, and control information production about China inside China	Denial of access to China Reduction of data collection Coercion exerted by state and non-state actors directly and indirectly via second-degree contacts Signalling sensitivity via creating an atmosphere
Manage, guide, and control information production about China outside China	Selective coercive pressure exerted directly via state and non-state actors identified as Chinese

4. Controlling Information Dissemination

China's investment strategies via the Digital Silkroad have sparked a debate about potential effects of Chinese technology investment and operations of Chinese tech companies outside of China. The US has repeatedly expressed concerns about data insecurity and direct information control by the Chinese state.[25] Debates in Europe surrounding protecting democracy and stability pose limits on potential influence of the Chinese state via home-grown

[24] While the conventional cyber security approach to the exploration of information manipulation and interference include identifying Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs), we are not including Procedures in our analyses. This is in line with common practice in the information defence community using the DISARM frameworks, which avoids describing procedures - as these could easily be picked up by adversaries as explicit guidebooks for conducting such operations.

[25] "Managing the Risks of China's Access to U.S. Data and Control of Software and Connected Technology," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 30, 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/01/managing-the-risks-of-chinas-access-to-us-data-and-control-of-software-and-connected-technology.

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technology companies.[26] In this section we provide a new perspective on the debate about the role of Chinese tech companies in dissemination of information by drawing attention towards the role of technology companies in China's propaganda strategies. In contrast to the European Union, where platforms and search engines are governed under the Digital Services Act/Digital Markets Act Package as digital services run by private companies, in China the digital services are considered applications "having news, public opinion or social mobilisation functions."[27] As such, the digital services themselves, even though run by private companies, are governed under formal and informal rules for public opinion guidance, separated into internal (内宣传) and external propaganda (officially translated as publicity) (外宣传). We thus dive into China's domestic information control practices to explain similarities and differences with international control of information dissemination with a focus on implications for the European Union.

4.1 Inside China

Like many authoritarian regimes, the Chinese state restricts press freedom and imposes barriers on access to information.[28] China's approach towards dissemination of information has become well-known for its Great Chinese Firewall, which separates the People's Republic of China from the Global Internet. In practice, according to estimates only roughly 12 percent use VPNs and other tools to jump the wall in order to obtain information.[29] While such barriers which increase costs for obtaining certain kinds of information constitute an important measure for information control, especially one-party regimes like China tend to build institutions that

[26] Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi), "Seven Lessons From the German 5G Debate," accessed January 23, 2026, https://gppi.net/2021/12/30/seven-lessons-from-the-german-5g-debate.
[27] "Internet News Information Service Management Rules," *China Copyright and Media*, January 13, 2016, https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2016/01/13/internet-news-information-service-management-rules/.
[28] Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cosmopolitan Communications: Cultural Diversity in a Globalized World*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2009), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511804557.
[29] Daniela Stockmann and Ting Luo, *Governing Digital China*, Communication, Society and Politics (Cambridge University Press, 2025), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009360692.

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allow them to also deal with the challenge of managing information flows within their territorial boundaries.[30]

China is constantly building up its capacity to control information, mostly through institutional infrastructures, such as the Propaganda Department and the Cyberspace Administration. Although these institutions aim for a roughly uniform flow of political information, they are not unitary actors, but instead characterised by fragmentation. In contrast to the EU's process-based approach towards aiming for transparency and accountability of media outlets while also preserving their autonomy, Chinese institutions include public administrative bodies that give directives to media regarding the boundaries of information. However, even under Xi Jinping tensions between ministries and bureaus remain.[31] Recentralization strengthened enforcement of propaganda and public opinion work, but did not overcome fragmentation inherent in the Chinese political system.[32] While China has built up substantial capacity to control information flows through these institutions that aim for a unitary information flow, in practice, multiple state and non-state actors are engaged in information control, relying on a variety of techniques.

China is, of course, most well-known for censorship imposed via directives issued to media by the state. Yet information may not only be overtly censored but also buried, thus increasing the costs of retrieving it. For example, filters may divert attention of individuals towards other issues, a technique Roberts refers to as friction.[33] Another technique is to flood cyberspace with distracting or biased information, for example by astroturfers (paid bloggers or 50-cent

[30] Daniela Stockmann, "Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China," Cambridge Core, Cambridge University Press, December 2012, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139087742.
[31] Rogier Creemers, "Cyber China: Upgrading Propaganda, Public Opinion Work and Social Management for the Twenty-First Century," *Journal of Contemporary China* 26, no. 103 (2017): 85–100, https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2016.1206281.
[32] Daniela Stockmann and Ting Luo, "Xi Jinping's Partnership with Technology Companies and Social Media Platforms," in *Chinese Politics*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2024).
[33] Margaret E. Roberts, *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall* (Princeton University Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc77b21.

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party army) or fake accounts.[34][35][36] *Friction* and *flooding* are more subtle techniques to manipulate online information, and users may not even be aware of such manipulation. Actors may also engage in *Doxing* involving the gathering and publishing of information about these individuals and inviting others to do the same and circulate discrediting information about the target.[37] Doxing is generally not directly associated with state actors, but openly encouraged by the state or strategically used to stifle dissenting voices.[38] Overall, information control contains four main strategies that range from overt to more subtle techniques that are not always directly linked to the state as censorship. Flooding, Friction, and Doxing are often initiated by volunteers who have their own goals and are not necessarily part of a deliberate information control strategy of the Chinese state. Thus, rather than fully controlling information flows, information control inside China is not homogenous, but instead varies over time, regionally, by topic and communication channel.[39]

In terms of time, information control in China undergoes periods of tightening and loosening. Each year, China undergoes a cycle of tightening and loosening of its media policy/reporting at around the time of the Spring Festival, followed by the meetings of the National People's Congress and the National People's Political Consultative Conference in Beijing, called the "two meetings" (*liang hui* 两会). During this time (usually between late January and March), reporting is more tightly controlled than toward the end of the year, when there is more room for criticism. In the wake of leadership change, economic slowdown, or crisis, such as, for example the Covid pandemic, information control is particularly important.

[34] Rongbin Han, "Defending the Authoritarian Regime Online: China's 'Voluntary Fifty-Cent Army,'" *The China Quarterly* 224 (December 2015): 1006–25, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741015001216.
[35] Gary King et al., "How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, Not Engaged Argument," *American Political Science Review* 111, no. 3 (2017): 484–501, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055417000144.
[36] Philip N. Howard, *Lie Machines: How to Save Democracy from Troll Armies, Deceitful Robots, Junk News Operations, and Political Operatives* (Yale University Press, 2020), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv10sm8wg.
[37] Daniel Trottier, "Denunciation and Doxing: Towards a Conceptual Model of Digital Vigilantism," *Global Crime* 21, nos. 3–4 (2020): 196–212, https://doi.org/10.1080/17440572.2019.1591952.
[38] Min Jiang and Ashley Esarey, "(Un)Civil Society in Digital China| Uncivil Society in Digital China: Incivility, Fragmentation, and Political Stability — Introduction," *International Journal of Communication* 12 (May 2018): 17–17.
[39] For variation on topics and issues, please see separate policy brief on salience.

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Regionally, the information environment varies in terms of access to media that vary with respect to their independence from the Chinese state. It used to be the case that people living in more developed coastal cities and provinces tend to be surrounded by more commercialised media outlets and have better access to the Internet than those in the less developed inland or rural areas, but in recent years Western China has significantly caught up in terms of digitalisation. In 2018 there remained zero correlation between level of provincial economic development and share of internet users. Many provinces with lower GDP like Ningxia and Qinghai in Western China have similar levels of Internet penetration to Guangdong and Jiangsu. However, the urban-rural digital divide remains.[40]

Within this context, communication channels differ in terms of their autonomy from the state. Like most authoritarian regimes China has moved away from funding media predominantly via state subsidies, leading to varying degrees of autonomy from the state. Numerous observers have noted that television is the most tightly controlled medium, followed by radio broadcasting, newspapers, magazines, online news websites, and the Internet. Despite common perceptions, television still remained the most widely consumed media in mainland China, according to the China Internet Survey 2018.[41] Yet even within newspapers or the Internet there remain considerable differences. For example, political institutions at all administrative levels have increased their internet websites where about 5% of Internet users engage with. To increase their reach, WeChat has become an important channel for political institutions to engage with Internet users as 99% of them are on WeChat. Among this group 73% lurk into and produce political information. Besides WeChat, news websites (43%) and QQ (25%) remain important alternative channels. While popularity is important in terms of reaching broad segments of the Chinese population, some platforms are also able to reach certain segments of society that are considered potentially destabilising. In this regard Sina Weibo remains vital, where about 10% of Internet users engage with political information.[42]

[40] Daniela Stockmann and Ting Luo, "Surveying Internet Users in China: Comparing Representative Survey Data with Official Statistics," *The China Quarterly* 262 (June 2025): 531–47, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741025000177.
[41] "China Internet Survey," China Internet Survey, accessed January 23, 2026, https://chinainternetsurvey.net/.
[42] Stockmann and Luo, *Governing Digital China* (Cambridge University Press, 2025).

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These platforms are managed by companies that are profit-oriented relying on the same data-driven business models as technology companies outside of China. In terms of dissemination of political information, Tencent holds a monopoly with its platforms WeChat and QQ. Founded in 1998 and headquartered in Shenzhen Tencent and listed on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange. As of July 2025 Tencent's estimated market capitalisation reached $573.36 billion, ranking it 17th in the world's most valuable company list. Sina was founded in 1999 and is known for its Chinese language-infotainment web portal Sina.com, serving populations around the world and the above mentioned Sina Weibo. Sina has been listed on the New York Stock Exchange as a standalone social media company since 2014 and on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange since 2021. As of 2025 Sina remains the largest shareholder of Sina Weibo, holding 35,9 percent, followed by Alibaba with a share of 27,7 percent.

Although many observers suspect that these companies are in practice dominated by the Chinese state, empirical evidence reveals a *partnership*, whereby the Chinese state can employ coercion and financial incentives to shape the behaviour of these firms. However, political elites lack the expertise to independently craft and drive digital innovation that appeals to a wide range of citizens. The state is interested in growing the digital economy while also keeping the political system stable. Gradually, China has developed a solution to this challenge by partnering with technology companies to promote digital development. The partnership is characterised not only by symbiosis and collusion, but also by contention. On the one hand, the partnership serves mutual interests – technology companies seek to maximise profits without pushing for political liberalisation. On the other hand, the interests of the government do not always align with the bottom line of their targeted internet users. Technology companies leverage their insider and consultancy status with government bodies to negotiate greater space for political discourse and resist demands of the state to share user data.[43] Overt attempts relying on coercive instruments, such as penalties issued during the anti-trust campaign, are often used to reassert the state's role in the driver's seat. The state flexing its muscles was a sign that Alibaba and other technology firms had become too influential in the state-business relationship. Not surprisingly, the central government started to crack down on Alibaba after Jack Ma's speech in 2020 in which he placed himself and the company above Xi Jinping and the state. Alibaba was most affected, followed by Tencent and Sina. Although the

[43] Stockmann and Luo, *Governing Digital China* (Cambridge University Press, 2025).

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anti-trust campaign reduced insider status, state dependency on technology firms continues to exist.

4.2 Outside China

While information control inside China focuses on topics relevant to political stability, external propaganda concentrates on the image of China among audiences abroad (see policy brief on salience). We identify two sets of actors that control the dissemination of information related to China abroad. The first set are Chinese international media outlets that are under direct control of the Chinese state. The second set of actors are private tech companies that are headquartered in China, but also register abroad to provide social media platforms, search engines, or artificial intelligence to citizens outside of China.

4.2.1 China's International Media Outlets

China's international media outlets play an important role in China' external propaganda strategy and thus dissemination of information outside of China. China Daily, Xinhua, CCTV and CRI are registered directly under a state unit and often receive a certain degree of financially state subsidies or other favourable financial treatments.[44] These outlets are considered mouthpieces to establish "initiatives and operation planning, show motivation and demonstrate a correct understanding of the policy instructions issues by the state".[45] In practice this means, that these outlets hire local European staff in order to stay on top of up to date reporting, but as soon as stories are related to China's image or China's solid interests in EU countries they are likely to apply a state-directed perspective.

The most significant international media outlet in this context is the Xinhua News Agency. Despite changing its status in 2003 from a "state news agency" to a Company Limited, Xinhua is well placed in the Chinese government apparatus (see also Figure 8).[46] By offering large news coverage in several languages and across several news outlets Xinhua has the objective

[44] Daniela Stockmann, "Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China," December 2012.
[45] Shubo Li, *Mediatized China-Africa Relations: How Media Discourses Negotiate the Shifted Global Order* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
[46] M. Ohlberg, "Creating a Favorable International Public Opinion Environment: External Propaganda (Duiwai Xuanchuan) as a Global Concept with Chinese Characteristics" (University of Heidelberg, 2014), https://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/17289/.

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to “present China to the world” and to provide China’s state perspective on international affairs.[47]

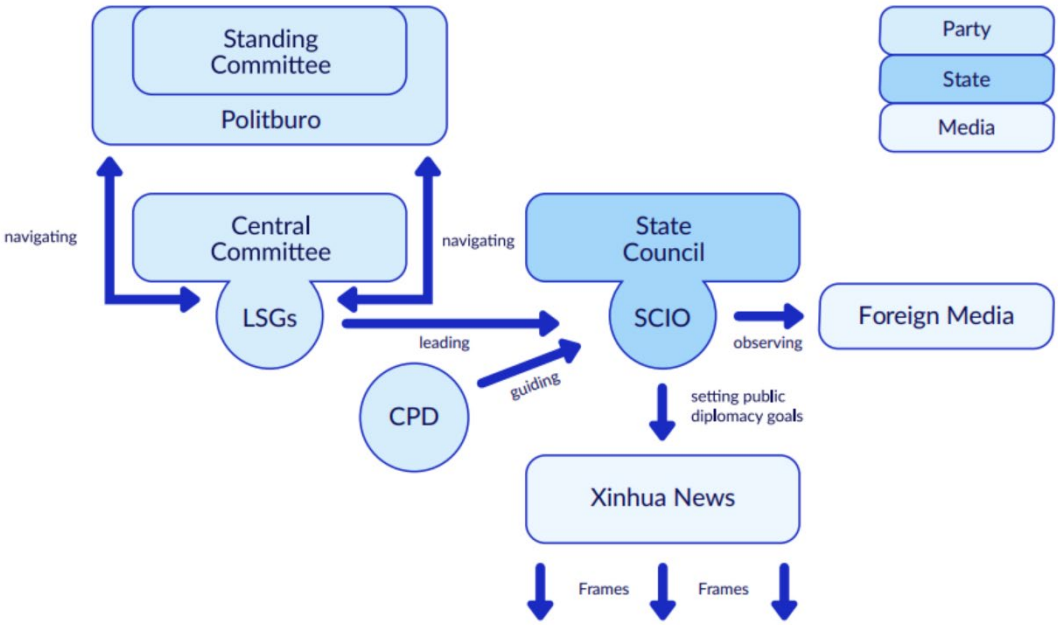

Figure 8. “China’s control over Xinhua News Agency”, Own illustration.[48]

Xinhua is registered under the state council with China’s external propaganda handled by the State Council Information Office (SCIO) (Ohlberg, 2014: 521). [49] Key responsibilities of this

[47] S. Custer et al., *Ties That Bind: Managing China’s Public Diplomacy and Its “Good Neighbour” Effect* (VA. AidData at William & Mary, 2018); Dani Madrid-Morales, “Chapter 6: Why Are Chinese Media in Africa? Evidence from Three Decades of Xinhua’s News Coverage of Africa,” in *China’s Media and Soft Power in Africa: Promotion and Perceptions*, ed. Xiaoling Zhang et al. (PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2016), https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19480881.2017.1379247.

[48] Illustration is based on: Ingrid d’Hooghe, “Chapter 4: China’s Public Diplomacy System,” in *China’s Public Diplomacy*, by Ingrid d’Hooghe (Brill, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004283954_006; Li, *Mediatized China-Africa Relations: How Media Discourses Negotiate the Shifted Global Order*; Ohlberg, “Creating a Favorable International Public Opinion Environment: External Propaganda (Duiwai Xuanchuan) as a Global Concept with Chinese Characteristics”; K. Zhao, “The Motivation Behind China’s Public Diplomacy,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 8, no. 2 (2015): 167–96, https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pov005.

[49] Ohlberg, “Creating a Favorable International Public Opinion Environment: External Propaganda (Duiwai Xuanchuan) as a Global Concept with Chinese Characteristics.”

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institution are setting information control guidelines and instruments; observing foreign media; and taking part in guidance of domestic media, including the internet.[50]

To address fragmentation in the Chinese political system, small leadership groups are formed led by high-level leaders. These bodies bring together major Politburo members and heads of commissions, ministries, party departments, and government agencies responsible for the communication and information industry. The SCIO works closely with the Central Committee (CC) Publicity and Ideology Leading Small Group (LSG), the CC Foreign Affairs LSG and the Central Propaganda Department (CPD) as well as other units. It navigates the foreign policy and diplomatic strategies between the Standing Committee of the Politburo and the State Council as well as other relevant foreign affairs institutions. [51]

China's foreign propaganda strategy was revised before the Beijing Olympics in 2008 when China reacted to harsh criticism during the Olympic Games by using China's main state-led media outlets (Xinhua, China Daily, CCTV and CRI) to seek options of implementing a 'going out policy' (GOP). For this policy RMB 450 million was allocated, representing an investment of unprecedented scale.[52]

While operating abroad Xinhua is embedded internally into the Chinese political system and is subject to the same mechanisms that manage media outlined earlier. On the ground Xinhua might have some leeway, but the government structure in which it is placed clearly prevents it from acting independently abroad.

4.2.2 China's International Tech Companies

Although Chinese tech companies are not marionettes of the Chinese state (as explained in section 2.1), Chinese tech companies constitute an important channel for information dissemination. China's international digitalisation strategy, the Digital Silk Road (DSR), shows that Chinese digital platforms operating abroad are not only providing technology but also

[50] d'Hooghe, "Chapter 4: China's Public Diplomacy System."
[51] d'Hooghe, "Chapter 4: China's Public Diplomacy System"; Zhao, "The Motivation Behind China's Public Diplomacy."
[52] Li, *Mediatized China-Africa Relations: How Media Discourses Negotiate the Shifted Global Order*.

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exporting an authoritarian version of data governance that includes specific non-democratic values and practices.[53]

Extraterritorial Application of China's Cyberspace Laws and Regulation

The 2020 Hong Kong National Security Law applies to offences committed 'outside the Region by a person who is not a permanent resident of the Region,'[54] and the 2021 Data Security Law criminalises the processing of harmful for the national security data, even when committed outside China. It even allows China to take measures against any country that adopts 'discriminatory prohibitions, restrictions, or other similar measures against the PRC relevant to investment, trade, etc. in data, data development and use technology.' The Anti-Telecom and Online Fraud Law[55] foresees, under article 3 that the law applies 'to fighting the telecom and online fraud in China's territory, or telecom and online fraud overseas committed by Chinese citizens.'

Those laws provide for a wide extraterritorial reach, seemingly in contradiction to basic premises of international law such as sovereignty and territoriality.[56] The Anti-Telecom and Online Fraud Law has been used to bring cases against Chinese civilians, but also against foreigners, such as the ones brought against Canadian Falun Gong practitioners and people, allegedly guilty of espionage.[57][58] In terms of enforcement, one should take into account the presumed existence of overseas 'undercover' police stations and procuratorates operating on

[53] Daniela Stockmann, "Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China," December 2012.
[54] Freedom House. "Beijing's Extraterritorial Reach, Hong Kong National Security Law, More 'Subversion' Charges in China." July, 2020. https://freedomhouse.org/report/china-media-bulletin/2020/beijings-extraterritorial-reach-hong-kong-national-security-law.
[55] National People's Congress, Personal Information Protection Law of the People's Republic of China (Adopted on 20 August 2021, effective 1 November 2021). http://en.npc.gov.cn.cdurl.cn/2021-12/29/c_694559.htm.
[56] See also article 43 of the Personal Information Law and the Anti-Telecom and Online Fraud Law.
[57] National Post. "Canadian Citizen Sentenced to Eight Years by China Is Latest Victim of Huawei Feud, Beijing Lawyer Says". June 30, 2020. https://nationalpost.com/news/canadian-citizen-sentenced-to-eight-years-by-china-is-latest-victim-of-huawei-feud-beijing-lawyer-says.
[58] South China Morning Post. "China Moves Ahead with Prosecution of Canadians on Spying Charges." June 19, 2020. https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3089745/china-moves-prosecute-detained-canadians-kovrig-and-spavor.

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the territory of other states,[59] the abuse of Interpol Red Notices,[6061] and the tactics of involuntary returns, whereby Chinese citizens are "persuaded to return,"[6263] all resting on the assumption that the reach of Chinese law extends beyond its national borders.

Internal laws also leak into platform governance. Weixin, a well-known social media app operating in China, shows the network of laws that facilitate information control in its Terms of Service (TOS). The platform used to divide users based on language, IP, and citizenship and applies different and stricter content moderation limits to the so-called "PRC Users",[64] but over time Weixin's TOS cast the net of control continuously wider. The 2017 revisions allow broader data collection based on national security.[65]

Users are currently split between Weixin and the international version, WeChat, depending on whether users have a Chinese mobile number or 'have contracted with (Shenzhen Tencent Computer Systems Company Limited) Weixin.'[66] WeChat has separate TOS with lighter global compliance but Weixin's TOS has spillover effects due to the interoperability of the two apps. Not only are certain features in WeChat operated by Weixin and thus under its own TOS, but, as stated in the Wechat TOS:

[59] "China," Human Rights Tracker, accessed January 23, 2026, https://rightstracker.org/country/CHN.
[60] "Repeat Offender: China's Violations of INTERPOL Rules Continue in Benin and Thailand | Safeguard Defenders," October 24, 2024, https://safeguarddefenders.com/en/blog/repeat-offender-chinas-violations-interpol-rules-continue-benin-and-thailand.
[61] Michelle Estlund, "China: INTERPOL Red Notice Abuse in Cases of Wealthy Business Owners and Dissidents (Post 1 of 2)," *Red Notice Law Journal*, September 17, 2024, https://www.rednoticelawjournal.com/2024/09/china-interpol-red-notice-abuse-in-cases-of-wealthy-business-owners-and-dissidents-post-1-of-2/.
[62] "Overseas Police Stations Expand and Coerce," Sohu.Com, September 7, 2022, https://www.sohu.com/a/537850569_119038.
[63] "110 Overseas (v5).Pdf," n.d., accessed January 23, 2026, https://safeguarddefenders.com/sites/default/files/pdf/110%20Overseas%20%28v5%29.pdf.
[64] Daniela Stockmann et al., "Who Is a PRC User? Comparing Chinese Social Media User Agreements," *First Monday*, ahead of print, July 22, 2020, https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v25i8.10319.
[65] Emma Lee, "Updated: WeChat's Privacy Policy Update Draws Attention to Information Shared with the Government · TechNode," *TechNode*, September 19, 2017, https://technode.com/2017/09/19/now-its-official-wechat-is-watching-you-1/.
[66] "WeChat - Terms of Service," accessed January 23, 2026, https://www.wechat.com/en/service_terms.html#schedule_3_european_union_and_united_kingdom_specific_terms.

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> ‘when you interact with a Weixin user, or use or receive notifications from any feature operated by Weixin (…) we will share your information with Weixin to the extent necessary to facilitate your Interoperable Interaction and your information may be retained, shared and/or stored by Weixin in a different manner to what is described in these Terms or the WeChat Privacy Policy.’[67]

Another spillover effect happens when a user registers with a Chinese number but resides abroad. The same seems to be the case with censorship spillover between TikTok and the Chinese version Douyin.[68][69][70][71]

The extraterritorial application of laws and regulations makes the context within which channels operate important, especially whether a country is characterised by weak regulations and economic dependence from China.[72] Chinese companies benefit from low levels of regulation and few restrictions on FDI existing in the Global South.[73] In those contexts tech companies fill not only gaps in infrastructure but also in legislation, thus strengthening state capacity.[74][75] Geedge Networks, for example, has provided surveillance and censorship solutions to Pakistan, Myanmar, Ethiopia and Kazakhstan.[76] However, the mere exportation of Chinese

[67] “WeChat - Terms of Service.”
[68] Alex Hern and Alex Hern Technology editor, “Revealed: How TikTok Censors Videos That Do Not Please Beijing,” Technology, *The Guardian*, September 25, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/sep/25/revealed-how-tiktok-censors-videos-that-do-not-please-beijing.
[69] Markus Reuter and Chris Köver, “TikTok: Cheerfulness and censorship,” *netzpolitik.org*, November 23, 2019, https://netzpolitik.org/2019/cheerfulness-and-censorship/.
[70] Jia (Lianrui) and Ruan (Lotus), “Going Global: Comparing Chinese Mobile Applications’ Data and User Privacy Governance at Home and Abroad,” info:eu-repo/semantics/article, Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society gGmbH, September 16, 2020, https://doi.org/10.14763/2020.3.1502.
[71] “TikTok vs Douyin: A Security and Privacy Analysis,” *The Citizen Lab*, n.d., accessed January 23, 2026, https://citizenlab.ca/research/tiktok-vs-douyin-security-privacy-analysis/.
[72] Felix Garten, “Hierarchical Networks in Finance and Trade: How Do Digital Platforms Shape Foreign Markets?,” in *Dissertations Submitted to the Hertie School; 05/2025* (Hertie School, 2025), application/pdf, 2185 KB, vi, 124 pages, https://doi.org/10.48462/OPUS4-5806.
[73] M. S. Erie and T. Streinz, “The Beijing Effect: China’s ‘Digital Silk Road’ as Transnational Data Governance,” *New York University of International Law and Politics* 54, no. 1 (2021), https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:71efc786-4e5f-4006-8156-ea9cdfd3a433.
[74] Jia (Lianrui) and Ruan (Lotus), “Going Global.”
[75] Daniela Stockmann et al., “Who Is a PRC User? Comparing Chinese Social Media User Agreements,” *First Monday*, ahead of print, July 22, 2020, https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v25i8.10319.
[76] Zeyi Yang, “Massive Leak Shows How a Chinese Company Is Exporting the Great Firewall to the World,” Tags, *Wired*, September 8, 2025, https://www.wired.com/story/geedge-networks-mass-censorship-leak/.

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software solutions may increase information control by other authoritarian regimes, but it remains unclear to what extent these channels also disseminate information favourable to China. We turn to this question next, but in a context with higher levels of regulation: the European Union.

In contexts with higher levels of regulation, such as the EU, platforms run by Chinese technology companies are subject to a process-based approach that aims to regulate procedures to introduce greater emphasis on public interest on the side of the platforms, stressing a need for greater transparency, public responsibility, and accountability.[77] To do so, the European Union distributes power away from large tech companies to empower smaller firms, Internet users, platform workers, and other societal actors.[78] In this way, the European Union fundamentally departs from the Chinese model relying on content moderation embedded in authoritarian political structures and self-regulatory approaches that maximise autonomy of platforms and characterise the United States and most other countries.[79][80]

China's Technology Platforms as Channels of Information Control

To analyse China's channels for controlling information dissemination, we dive into five different cases of Chinese tech companies operating within the EU. In Table 4.1. we provide an overview and comparison of the different cases.

[77] Dr. Mathias Vermeulen, "Online Content: To Regulate or Not to Regulate – Is That the Question?," Association for Progressive Communications, November 1, 2019, https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/online-content-regulate-or-not-regulate-question.
[78] Anu Bradford, *Digital Empires: The Global Battle to Regulate Technology*, 1st ed. (Oxford University PressNew York, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197649268.001.0001.
[79] Judit Bayer et al., eds., *Perspectives on Platform Regulation: Concepts and Models of Social Media Governance | Across the Globe* (Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG, 2021), https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748929789.
[80] Daniela Stockmann, "Tech Companies and the Public Interest: The Role of the State in Governing Social Media Platforms," *Information, Communication & Society* 26, no. 1 (2023): 1–15, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2022.2032796.

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Company	Platform	Chinese Counterpart	Same Platform Operating inside Firewall	Regulation Status (EU)	Legal Representation[81]	Platform Headquarter(s)[82]	Company Headquarter
Alibaba Group	AliExpress	Taobao	No	VLOP	Singapore	China	China
ByteDance	TikTok	Douyin	No	VLOP	Ireland	USA and Singapore	China
Tencent	WeChat	Weixin	No	OP	Netherlands	China	China
Xingyin Information Technology	RedNote[83][84]	Xiaohongshu	No	OP	Singapore	China	China
Hangzhou DeepSeek Artificial Intelligence	DeepSeek	-	Yes	-	China	China	China

Table 4. Overview of China's Communication Channels Inside the EU

[81] Legal representation refers to the place where the company has registered for any legal disputes related to operations in the EU according to the Terms of Services.
[82] Headquarters mentioned on platform website.
[83] According to Terms of Services RedNote operates since December 8th, 2025.
[84] "Rednote Terms of Service," accessed January 23, 2026, https://agree.xiaohongshu.com/h5/terms/ZXXY20251205003/-1.

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Case 1: AliExpress

We take advantage of AliExpress providing public access under Article 40.12 of the DSA to compare content on politically sensitive products available for purchase on AliExpress with Taobao. AliExpress and Taobao are e-commerce platforms operated by Alibaba Group. Taobao primarily operates inside Mainland China under China's domestic content and platform governance regime. AliExpress operates outside China, including the EU, and is designated as a Very Large Online Platform (VLOP) under the EU Digital Services Act (DSA), placing it under enhanced obligations related to systemic risk assessment, mitigation, and transparency.

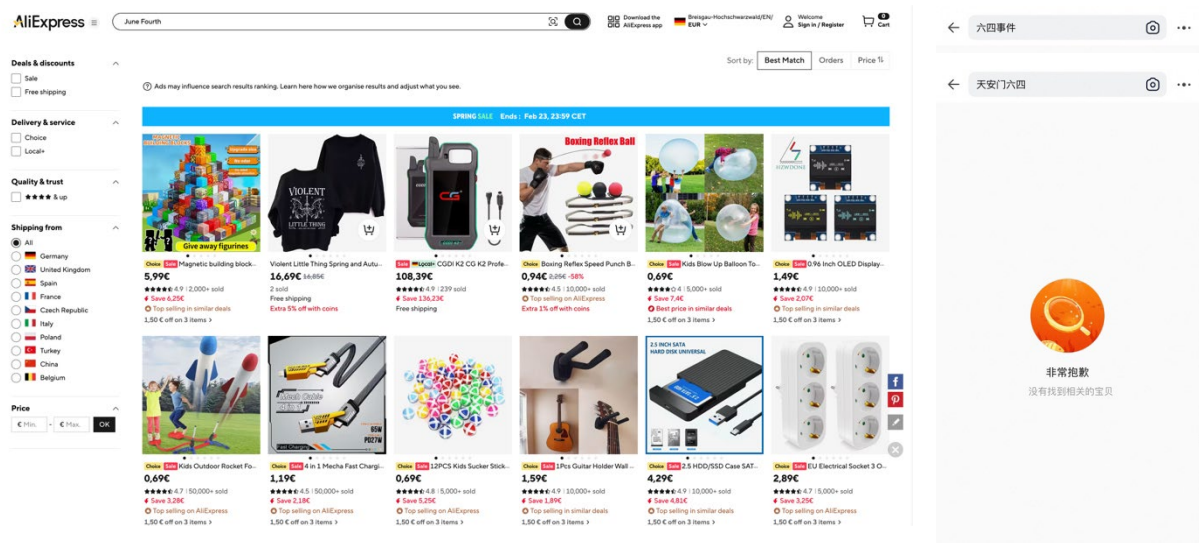

Figure 9. Comparison of search results for "June Fourth" on AliExpress (IP Germany) compared to Taobao (IP PRC), 2026.

To explore whether AliExpress inherits elements of Taobao's political sensitivity logic while adapting to overseas markets, we queried a set of politically salient keywords to compare search results for products on both platforms. For PRC-sensitive historical and political narratives, such as Tiananmen and June Fourth, we detected limited products on both platforms, suggesting that certain core political sensitivities may remain constrained even on an overseas-facing platform (see Figure 9). We also examined Rainbow flags associated with LGBTQ+ content as an example of a product with political relevance that would be considered sensitive in China, but not inside the EU. AliExpress displayed search results, but without images, while no such LGBTQ+/Pride merchandise was available on Taobao. This indicates

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selective relaxation of controls rather than a uniform export of domestic censorship (see Figure 10). Finally, we also engaged with keywords associated with extremist symbolism with particular salience in Europe, that are not sensitive in China. While “Hitler” led to no search results on AliExpress, Taobao featured numerous products (see Figure 11).

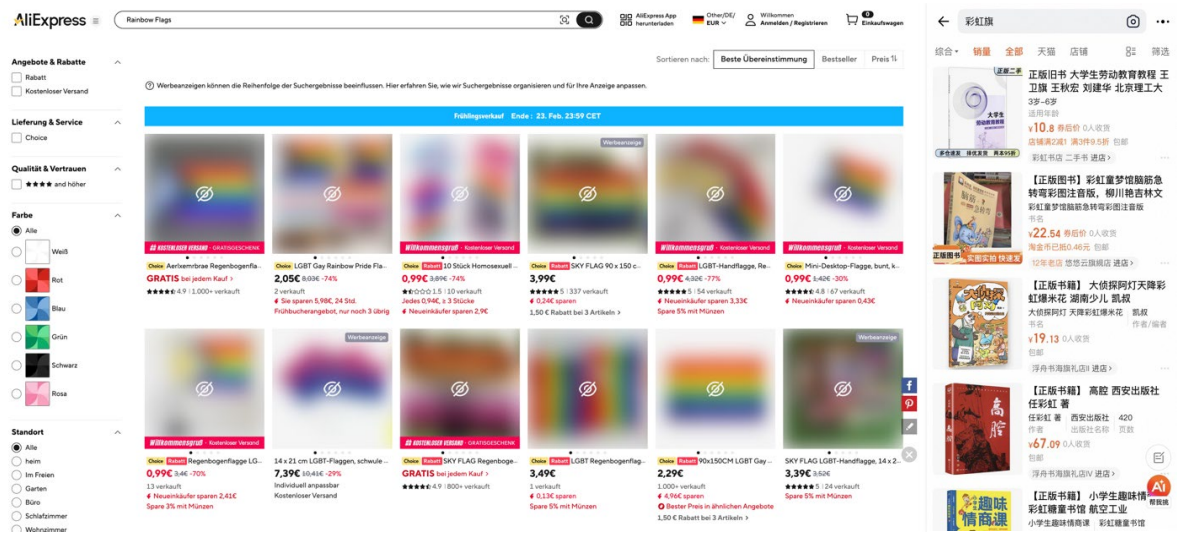

Figure 10. Comparison of search results for rainbow flags on AliExpress (IP Germany) compared to Taobao (IP PRC), 2026.

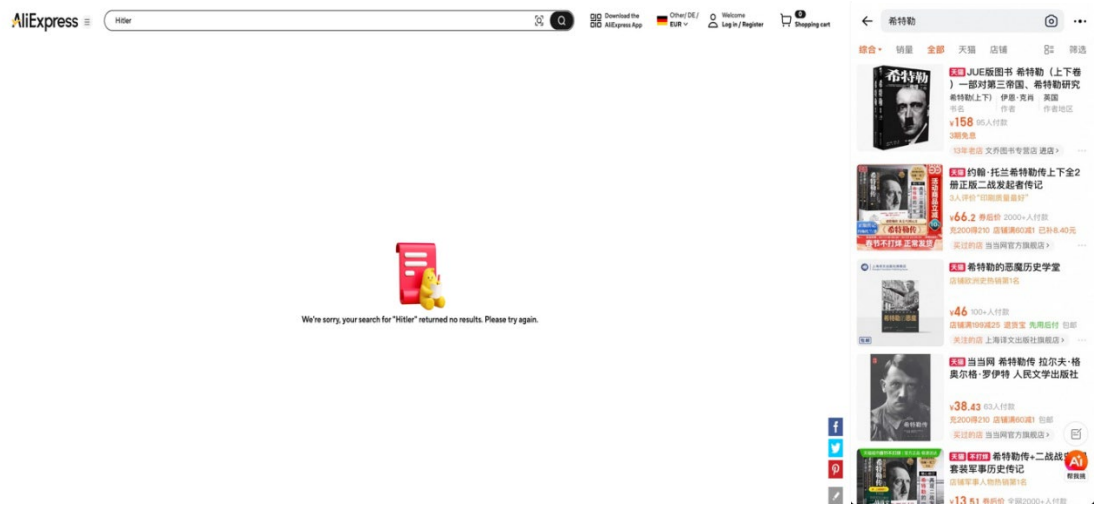

Figure 11. Comparison of search results for “Hitler” on AliExpress (IP Germany) compared to Taobao (IP PRC), 2026.

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AliExpress is an e-commerce platform, offering opportunities for Chinese businesses to sell products to consumers inside the EU. The selective visibility of products may not necessarily be a function of its search, ranking, and recommendation systems, but could also be shaped by supply and demand. Our preliminary evidence suggests that a combination of both factors may be at work. At the same time, AliExpress clearly does not consistently follow logic originating in China, but does consider local context, thus following different information dissemination logics.

Case 2: TikTok

ByteDance's TikTok, as the first Chinese social media platform to achieve popularity on a global scale, has sparked a debate about the extent to which the platform is used as channel for dissemination of information from China. All social media platforms engage in content moderation to reduce spam on their platform and to promote community standards for healthy conversations on their platforms. In order to maintain this "entertainment-first" stance, TikTok actively engages in a variety of forms of content moderation ranging from the enforcement of community guidelines to membership in industry initiatives against online violence, extremism, and so on.[85] The platform not only claims to be entertainment-oriented, but also forbids political advertisement by disabling monetisation features for ads on accounts belonging to governments, politicians and political parties, even though they "welcome political and electoral user-generated content" if it aligns with Community Guidelines.[86] This distinction is important, as while political entities can advertise on TikTok in only limited cases and after directly interfacing with a sales representative to undergo a certification process, users can share political content organically unless it falls within the categories of content moderation (such as misinformation, deception, hate speech, and so on).[87]

[85] "Partnering to Prevent Violent Extremism," Newsroom | TikTok, accessed January 23, 2026, https://newsroom.tiktok.com/partnering-to-prevent-violent-extremism?lang=en.
[86] "How We're Protecting Election Integrity on TikTok | TikTok For Business Blog," TikTok For Business, accessed January 23, 2026, https://ads.tiktok.com/business/en-GB/blog/protecting-election-integrity-on-tiktok.
[87] "Politics, Governments, and Elections | TikTok Advertising Policies," accessed January 23, 2026, https://ads.tiktok.com/help/article/tiktok-ads-policy-politics-government-and-elections.

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While TikTok tries to limit political engagement on its platform, research also points to information control practices. Within the EU, a German investigation found TikTok to have censored or limited the visibility of posts by users it identified as belonging to vulnerable groups (such as disabled, fat, or LGBTQ+ people) as a measure to protect them from bullying.[88] Transgender TikTok users from the UK also reported their content being controlled for unclear reasons.[89] In Germany, TikTok has been documented shadow-banning content containing terms related to LGBTQ+, internment camps, and the Chinese tennis player Peng Shuai.[90] Similarly, Italian creators and journalists have reported about TikTok censoring content related to the opioid epidemic, the Palestinian occupation, or even QR codes. A June 2025 briefing by the European Parliament has recognised the important role that TikTok plays for the dissemination of illegal or manipulative content,[91] and in December 2025 the platform has committed to address all the concerns raised by the European Commission, although none of these were directly related to the extensive cases of content moderation documented on the platform.[92]

More research is necessary to fully understand if these practices are specific to TikTok or if this is a phenomenon that we can also observe on non-Chinese platforms.

Case 3: WeChat

Technical research by the University of Toronto Citizen Lab shows that WeChat conducts content surveillance on material shared among non-China-registered accounts even when all

[88] Alex Hern, "TikTok Owns up to Censoring Some Users' Videos to Stop Bullying," Technology, *The Guardian*, December 3, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/dec/03/tiktok-owns-up-to-censoring-some-users-videos-to-stop-bullying.
[89] *Transgender Users Accuse TikTok of Censorship*, February 12, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-51474114.
[90] Alistair Walsh, "TikTok Censoring LGBTQ, Nazi Terms in Germany: Report," Dw.Com, 2022, https://www.dw.com/en/tiktok-censoring-lgbtq-nazi-terms-in-germany-report/a-61237610.
[91] *TikTok and EU Regulation: Legal Challenges and Cross-Jurisdictional Insights*, n.d.
[92] "Commission Accepts TikTok's Commitments on Advertising Transparency under the Digital Services Act," Text, European Commission - European Commission, accessed January 23, 2026, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_2940.

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participants are located outside China.[93] Using controlled messaging experiment and document/image hash analysis the researchers show that politically sensitive content exchanged between overseas accounts is monitored and used to train and reinforce WeChat's censorship mechanism applied to China-registered users. This surveillance occurs without user notification and with limited transparency, making it difficult for diaspora users to know when or how their content is assessed.[94] Other research on WeChat public accounts further documents systematic removals and filtering of politically sensitive content, including historical events and state criticism.[95] In a background conversation with a Chinese Blogger in Europe, the blogger explained that even during live streams, WeChat signals to the producers when content is considered as sensitive.[96] These findings suggest that WeChat's governance reaches beyond territorial borders, drawing diaspora users in a broader censorship ecosystem irrespective of local legal context.

Case 4: Xiaohongshu (RedNote)

Xiaohongshu (also known as RedNote) is a Chinese social media platform, often described as a hybrid of Instagram and Pinterest, and has been growing in China and internationally used for information sharing and socialisation.[97] Analyses from China Digital Times, based on leaked internal content moderation documentation, indicate that sensitive political terms and related expressions of political content are consistently filtered or suppressed on Xiaohongshu, aligned with content control practices in Chinese apps.[98] The platform has started in December

[93] "We Chat, They Watch: How International Users Unwittingly Build up WeChat's Chinese Censorship Apparatus," *The Citizen Lab*, n.d., accessed January 23, 2026, https://citizenlab.ca/research/we-chat-they-watch/.
[94] "Tracking Censorship on WeChat's Public Accounts Platform," *The Citizen Lab*, n.d., accessed January 23, 2026, https://citizenlab.ca/research/tracking-censorship-on-wechat-public-accounts-platform/.
[95] "Censored Contagion: How Information on the Coronavirus Is Managed on Chinese Social Media," *The Citizen Lab*, n.d., accessed January 23, 2026, https://citizenlab.ca/research/censored-contagion-how-information-on-the-coronavirus-is-managed-on-chinese-social-media/.
[96] Background conversation with video blogger (Interview 04, 18 September, 2025)
[97] Guizhou Minzu University and Jinglin Tan, "A Critical Research on Xiaohongshu for Information Sharing for Chinese Teenagers," *Profesional de La Información* 33, no. 1 (2024), https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2024.0017.
[98] "Xiaohongshu Censorship Encyclopedia - China Digital Space," accessed January 23, 2026, https://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/%E5%B0%8F%E7%BA%A2%E4%B9%A6%E5%AE%A1%E6%9F%A5%E7%99%BE%E7%A7%91.

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2025 to separate users registered in Mainland China from users registered outside, which is similar to the PRC User case of WeChat described above.[99][100][101]

Case 5: DeepSeek

The release of DeepSeek in 2025 was followed by fears that the homegrown Chinese Large Language Models (LLMs) could be used to power misinformation campaigns and reinforce authoritarian narratives.[102] While these concerns apply to deep learning models in general, we argue that the DeepSeek case exemplifies two additional layers of information control on the international level. The first layer is bias embedded in the model itself: DeepSeek models are trained and finetuned on data that amplifies perspectives and reproduces stances that result in information control.[103] This applies to any use of the model, even if hosted within the EU. The second layer describes additional moderation controls applied on top of online versions of DeepSeek (via web interface, app or API), which are available to EU-based users. When the model would output controversial content generated during its "reasoning" process, the final answer is censored by key-word based filters.[104] Examples show that if the model is asked about sensitive topics it does not provide an answer.[105] The combination of these two layers means that, in addition to their use for generating misleading content, these models could impact the dissemination of information within the EU.

[99] All users who have registered on Xiaohongshu before December 8th, 2025 remain users of Xiaohongshu, despite having an international phone number.
[100] "Rednote Terms of Service."
[101] "Xiaohongshu Terms of Service," accessed January 23, 2026, https://agree.xiaohongshu.com/h5/terms/ZXXY20250119002/-1.
[102] Robert Booth and Dan Milmo, "Experts Urge Caution over Use of Chinese AI DeepSeek," Technology, *The Guardian*, January 28, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/jan/28/experts-urge-caution-over-use-of-chinese-ai-deepseek.
[103] "The Party's AI: How China's New AI Systems Are Reshaping Human Rights - ASPI," accessed January 23, 2026, https://www.aspi.org.au/report/the-partys-ai-how-chinas-new-ai-systems-are-reshaping-human-rights/.
[104] Peiran Qiu et al., "Information Suppression in Large Language Models: Auditing, Quantifying, and Characterizing Censorship in DeepSeek," version 1, preprint, arXiv, 2025, https://doi.org/10.48550/ARXIV.2506.12349.
[105] Donna Lu, "We Tried out DeepSeek. It Worked Well, until We Asked It about Tiananmen Square and Taiwan," Technology, *The Guardian*, January 28, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/jan/28/we-tried-out-deepseek-it-works-well-until-we-asked-it-about-tiananmen-square-and-taiwan.

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More research is necessary to fully understand if these practices are specific to TikTok or if this is a phenomenon that we can also observe on non-Chinese platforms.

4.3 TTPs[106]

	TACTICS	TECHNIQUES
Controlling Information Dissemination (Inside China)	Restricting press freedom and imposing barriers on access to information	Separating the People's Republic of China from the Global Internet via the Great Chinese Firewall Building institutions that manage information flows within territorial boundaries via Propaganda Department and the Cyberspace Administration Involvement of multiple state and non-state actors in information control practices
	Burying information to increase costs of retrieving it	Manipulating the information space via Friction, Flooding and Doxing.
	Controlling the information space during important national events	Increase of information control practices during national events, such as the Spring Festival, National People's Congress, economic slowdown, Covid pandemic etc.
	Partnership with technology companies	Chinese state can employ coercion and financial incentives to shape the behaviour of technology companies
Controlling Information Dissemination (Outside China)	International Chinese media outlets need to control information related to China's	Local staff of the respective countries are hired to provide daily reporting, but they need to use Chinese state perspectives when relevant

[106] While the conventional cyber security approach to the exploration of information manipulation and interference include identifying Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs), we are not including Procedures in our analyses. This is in line with common practice in the information defence community using the DISARM frameworks, which avoids describing procedures - as these could easily be picked up by adversaries as explicit guidebooks for conducting such operations.

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	image or China's solid interests	Control of Chinese media outlets via China's government structure
	Controlling cyber spaces abroad	Expanding data and privacy laws beyond China's national jurisdiction to Chinese nationals. Potentially exporting censorship criteria via Chinese technology platforms (e.g. AliExpress and TikTok) Exporting censorship criteria via AI platforms (e.g. DeepSeek)
	Manage, guide, and control diaspora information spaces	Platform-mediated monitoring and content moderation (e.g. WeChat and Xiaohongshu)

5. Controlling Information Salience

Political influence in digital environments is increasingly competing for citizens' attention, as the visibility and accessibility of political views and narratives play a central role in shaping political communication. In the EU information space, narratives aligned with the Chinese government and its policies gain salience in the EU information space through a combination of state-associated and socially mediated processes. Public diplomacy and media activities across multiple channels contribute to the amplification of official narratives and the relative marginalisation of critical voices, while social processes such as self-censorship and nationalism shape patterns of expression by discouraging critical engagement and encouraging the circulation of pro-government perspectives. These dynamics reflect both direct state involvement and the transnational diffusion of domestic social processes that structure political discussion beyond China's borders.

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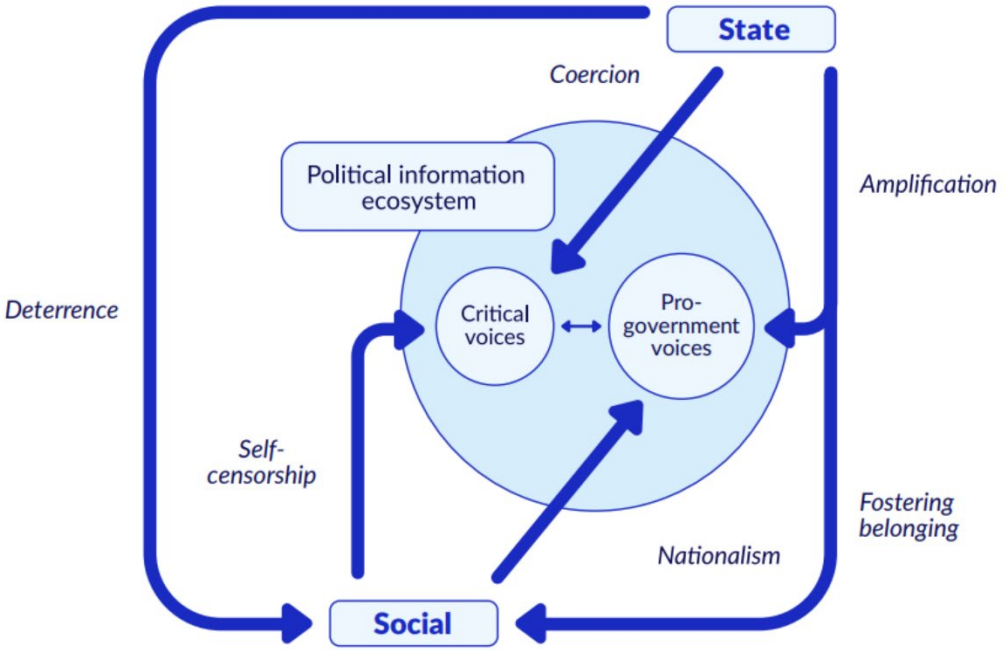

Figure 12. China's State and Social Influences on the Salience of Critical versus Pro-Government Voices in the EU's Information Space.

5.1 State-Associated Practices

The Chinese government has expanded its efforts to shape information and narratives beyond its national borders. Such efforts involve traditional public diplomacy activities, but also more illicit practices aiming to influence flows of political information and their salience.

While the Chinese state cannot filter online content abroad as it does domestically, an alternative approach relies on the increased *production* of certain pro-government perspectives. Systematically increasing the production – and thus salience – of content aligning with the government's perspective promotes such a perspective and increases the cost of accessing other information, by means of burying it below layers of alternative content. This is especially the case as content increasingly competes for user attention online. In the

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domestic context, government-coordinated content production has been found to divert and distract attention away from critical voices – a strategy usually referred to as "flooding".[107]

The so-called Going Global campaign, introduced in the 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-2020), outlines Beijing's plans to increase its presence in the global communication space. It aims to do so by “expanding overseas communication networks”, “establishing flagship media”, and “leveraging information network infrastructures”.[108] Accordingly, observers have noted a steady increase of state-affiliated social media accounts on global digital platforms.[109] Between June 2020 and March 2021, Chinese diplomats and state media staffed a total of 176 accounts on Twitter and Facebook, posting 700,000 times in total while receiving 355 million likes and 27 million comments.[110]

The overarching aim of such increased public diplomacy efforts is to "tell China's story well", that is, to bolster a positive image of both China and the Chinese government abroad.[111]

5.1.1 Amplification

Apart from usual public diplomacy activities, some social media accounts affiliated with Chinese state actors have been found to involve "inauthentic" activities aimed at increasing the visibility of official government channels online. Researchers in the UK, for example, identified networks of automated user activity artificially amplifying messages of Chinese government representatives. Although the effectiveness of automated content production

[107] Margaret E. Roberts, *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China`s Great Firewall* (Princeton University Press, 2018).
[108] Yingjie Fan et al., “Strategies of Chinese State Media on Twitter,” *Political Communication* 41, no. 1 (2024): 4–25.
[109] See also Zhao Alexandre Huang and Rui Wang, “Building a Network to ``Tell China Stories Well'': Chinese Diplomatic Communication Strategies on Twitter,” *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019): 2984–3007.
[110] M. Schliebs et al., *China’s Public Diplomacy Operations: Understanding Engagement and Inauthentic Amplification of PRC Diplomats on Facebook and Twitter* (Programme on Democracy and Technology, Oxford University, 2021), https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:427320a1-c677-40d4-b4a5-1759e563e7ed.
[111] Hannah Bailey, *Discursive Statecraft: China’s Information Operations*, no. GPP03 (Council on Geostrategy, 2023); Katja Drinhausen et al., *Image Control: How China Struggles for Discourse Power* (MERICS, 2023).

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through bots is currently still insignificant, the scale and sophistication of inauthentic content production on social media is expected to increase rapidly with the rise of generative AI.[112]

5.1.2 State Media Partnerships

Chinese state media organisations have signed partnerships with several influential news outlets in Europe. Such partnerships can indirectly influence media content about China featuring in the news. Xinhua, one of the largest state news agencies, has longstanding agreements with Reuters and has signed new agreements with AP and PA Media Group.[113] Chinese state media have also signed bilateral agreements with national-level news outlets in Italy, Czechia, and Hungary.[114] A Dutch think tank report highlights how, through such agreements, official Chinese media content has "invisibly" found its way into national news broadcasts in The Netherlands.[115]

5.1.3 Fake News Websites

There are also indications that the Chinese government runs fake news websites abroad to spread pro-Beijing content. One investigation shows a total of at least 123 websites covertly operating from within China but acting as local news outlets in various places around the globe, among others in various EU countries.[116] Targeted EU countries include Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden. So far, the reach and exposure of these websites is thought to be relatively insignificant, but again, it is expected to

[112] William Marcellino et al., *The Rise of Generative AI and the Coming Era of Social Media Manipulation 3.0: Next-Generation Chinese Astroturfing and Coping with Ubiquitous AI* (2023), https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA2679-1.html; Brett J. Goldstein and Brett V. Benson, "The Era of A.I. Propaganda Has Arrived, and America Must Act," Opinion, *The New York Times*, August 5, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/05/opinion/china-ai-propaganda.html.
[113] David Bandurski, "The Politics of Pure Business," *China Media Project*, July 3, 2024, https://chinamediaproject.org/2024/07/03/the-politics-of-the-media-deal/.
[114] Raksha Kumar, "How China Uses the News Media as a Weapon in Its Propaganda War against the West," *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*, December 9, 2024, https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/how-china-uses-news-media-weapon-its-propaganda-war-against-west.
[115] Ardi Bouwers and Susanne Kamerling, *Chinese influence and interference in the Dutch media landscape* (China Knowledge Network, 2024), 33.
[116] See Alberto Fittarelli, *PAPERWALL: Chinese Websites Posing as Local News Outlets Target Global Audiences with Pro-Beijing Content* (Citizen Lab, University of Toronto, 2024), https://citizenlab.ca/2024/02/paperwall-chinese-websites-posing-as-local-news-outlets-with-pro-beijing-content/.

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increase as techniques for creating and disseminating this type of content become more advanced.

In both the creation of social media and news content, the important role of private firms is worth noting as well here. Often, commercial PR companies based in China are the direct implementors of online content creation, obscuring the identity of potential stakeholders behind such actions.[117]

5.2 Self-Censorship and the Social Production of Silence

Apart from direct government interventions, social norms and influences are highly consequential in shaping the flow of political information by shaping public expression online. In China's domestic context, citizens are found to play an important role in shaping which political perspectives become salient online, and which remain in the margins.[118] As the Chinese diaspora has become increasingly prominent in geopolitical debates abroad, similar social mechanisms influence online political discourse in the EU. Most important here are self-censorship and nationalism.

5.2.1 Self-Censorship

Among China experts, it is common knowledge that the scale and impact of self-censorship (i.e. individuals choosing not to speak about a certain topic) is considerably higher than actual censorship by the state itself.[119] Self-censorship is both the result of fear for potential sanctions

[117] See, for instance, Goldstein and Benson, "The Era of A.I. Propaganda Has Arrived, and America Must Act."
[118] See Min Jiang, "Authoritarian Deliberation on Chinese Internet," *Electronic Journal of Communication* 20, nos. 3 & 4 (2010); Rongbin Han, *Contesting Cyberspace in China: Online Expression and Authoritarian Resilience* (Columbia University Press, 2018); Maria Repnikova and Kecheng Fang, "Authoritarian Participatory Persuasion 2.0: Netizens as Thought Work Collaborators in China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no. 113 (2018): 113, https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1458063; Zhifan Luo and Muyang Li, "Participatory Censorship: How Online Fandom Community Facilitates Authoritarian Rule," *New Media & Society*, August 19, 2022, 14614448221113923, https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221113923.
[119] Conversations with China experts. See also Rachel E. Stern and Jonathan Hassid, "Amplifying Silence: Uncertainty and Control Parables in Contemporary China," *Comparative Political Studies* 45, no. 10 (2012): 1230–54, https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414011434295; Perry Link, "China: The Anaconda in the Chandelier," The NYRB China Archive, *New York Review of Books*, November 4, 2002, https://www.chinafile.com/library/nyrb-china-archive/china-anaconda-chandelier.

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by the state and of indirect social processes such as the formation of norms that result in "collective silence".[120] By adhering to perceived constraints on what is socially and politically permissible, self-censorship plays a critical role in reducing the salience of perspectives critical toward the Chinese government and its policies.

One cause of self-censorship is fear of potential retribution by the Chinese state. Within China, although even less than 1% of journalists are directly sanctioned for critical attitudes toward the state, the remaining 99% is affected by this through fear of similar sanction.[121] Among European journalists, similar dynamics play a role. Journalists working on China frequently report "social and psychological pressure" due to fear of potential sanctions by the Chinese state. Fears include direct harassment by the Chinese state but also indirect sanctions such as travel restrictions, which can have both personal and professional consequences.[122] The psychological pressures due to the uncertainty about the sensitivity of one's actions puts additional pressure on reporters and thus increases their difficulty to perform their work. It is often thought that uncertainty, and the constant political calculation it requires, has an overall "exhausting" effect (also known as "chilling effect") on journalists reporting on China, and especially among those taking a critical stance. Currently, editorial teams are often unequipped to support reporters under such circumstances.

Indirectly, self-censorship is also driven through the spread of social norms and pressures.[123] After becoming customary as a norm, not talking about certain sensitive topics (i.e. those that are deemed undesirable to the government), self-censorship becomes self-reinforcing, as discussing such topics creates uneasiness within social situations. Such collective silence around sensitive topics has been described as creating an air of "public secrecy".[124] Self-censorship can thus lead to spiralling effects, further raising barriers for critical debates to form.[125] It also complicates work by critical journalists and academics aiming to study sensitive

[120] Margaret Hillenbrand, *Negative Exposures: Knowing What Not to Know in Contemporary China* (Duke University Press, 2020).
[121] Stern and Hassid, “Amplifying Silence.”
[122] Bouwers and Kamerling, *Chinese influence and interference in the Dutch media landscape*.
[123] Daniel Bar-Tal, “Self-Censorship as a Socio-Political-Psychological Phenomenon: Conception and Research,” *Political Psychology* 38, no. S1 (2017): 37–65, https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12391.
[124] Hillenbrand, *Negative Exposures*.
[125] Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, “The Spiral of Silence a Theory of Public Opinion,” *Journal of Communication* 24, no. 2 (1974): 43–51, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1974.tb00367.x.

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political topics.[126] Chinese diaspora members, some of which work as knowledge professionals on China, are clearly reluctant to talk about topics that are highly sensitive in the Chinese context, such as human rights violations in Xinjiang and the status of Taiwan in the international system.[127] The implications are that their perspectives are neither voiced nor heard in public debates, leaving room for other actors to fill that space with alternative, potentially pro-government political perspectives.

5.2.2 Nationalism

As a form of identification with China and its rise as a geopolitical power, nationalism is a powerful motivator for individuals to spread positive views about China and, by extension, the Chinese government. Nationalism can be triggered among Chinese diaspora in geopolitical debates especially, as such debates can be perceived as threatening to one's identity.[128] It can cause some diaspora members to actively defend China against its critics as they are perceived as "enemies" that aim to undermine China and its rightful position as a global power. Nationalism, it should be noted, is both a bottom-up social phenomenon and actively shaped by the government, for instance through patriotic education.[129]

Within China, nationalism plays a prominent role in online political discussion through, among others, motivating regime-defensive tendencies.[130] On social media, this is apparent when citizens with strong nationalist sentiments promote the regime, or counter regime-critical voices online. Such online fanatics are sometimes referred to as “Little Pinks” (*xiaofenhong*) and regarded as a political force in its own right, as self-mobilised nationalists acting in defence of

[126] Conversation with China scholar working with Tibetan and Uyghur communities in the EU. The conversation highlighted the extreme difficulty to engage conversation about certain topics due to the overall "paranoia" within such communities.
[127] This is also apparent in our own interviews with Chinese diaspora members in Europe.
[128] Henry Chiu Hail, “Patriotism Abroad: Overseas Chinese Students’ Encounters With Criticisms of China,” *Journal of Studies in International Education* 19, no. 4 (2015): 311–26, https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315314567175.
[129] Peter Hays Gries, *China’s New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy*, Philip E. Lilienthal Books (Paperback) (University of California Press, 2004), https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520931947; Suisheng Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism* (Stanford University Press, 2004), http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip0416/2004006013.html.
[130] Han, *Contesting Cyberspace in China*; Florian Schneider, *China’s Digital Nationalism*, Oxford Studies in Digital Politics (Oxford University Press, 2018).

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the Chinese government.[131] In extreme cases, such regime-defensive behaviour can turn into a form of digital vigilantism, where regime defenders go as far as to intimidate and harass opposition views.[132] The political prominence of nationalism in China contributes to an atmosphere where individuals feel the pressure to align their publicly expressed views to nationalist and pro-government perspectives.[133]

In the EU context, nationalism contributes to similar dynamics, where China-critical voices face backlash from nationalist individuals, whereas China-positive content does not such resistance. Media figures who are critical of the Chinese state and its domestic governance often experience harsh criticism and even online harassment. A German-based journalist, for instance, who publishes critically about human-rights abuses in China, became a target of continuous online harassment, including threatening messages from anonymous senders as well as a smear campaign to damage her reputation.[134] Online backlash extends to various media domains – such as live streams or expert interview broadcasts – where individuals receive threatening or disturbing messages in response to being critical of China or the Chinese government, usually from online media users with Chinese roots.[135]

Whether such online harassment is executed by nationalist individuals acting on their own accord, or whether it is part of an official operation often remains unclear. We suspect that both are true; while nationalism fosters genuine user-driven actions online, the government actively

[131] Kecheng Fang and Maria Repnikova, "Demystifying 'Little Pink': The Creation and Evolution of a Gendered Label for Nationalistic Activists in China," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 6 (2018): 2162–85, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817731923; Hailong Liu, ed., *From Cyber-Nationalism to Fandom Nationalism: The Case of Diba Expedition In China*, Chinese Perspectives on Journalism and Communication (Routledge, 2019).
[132] Daniel Trottier, "Denunciation and Doxing: Towards a Conceptual Model of Digital Vigilantism," *Global Crime* 21, nos. 3–4 (2020): 196–212, https://doi.org/10.1080/17440572.2019.1591952.
[133] Multiple of our interviewees for instance indicate that they tend to downplay their positive experiences of living abroad when among friends and family in China, who might interpret it as an indirect criticism of China and China's political system.
[134] Amelia Loi and Mary Zhao, "For Female Journalists, Covering China Comes at a Cost – Radio Free Asia," *Radio Free Asia*, March 20, 2023, https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/harassment-03202023133743.html.
[135] Conversations with an EU-based WeChat influencer and publicly China scholar. See also Wendy Weile Zhou, "Global China's Pride and Anxiety: Nationalistic Attacks on 'Anti-China Media,'" paper presented at 2025 AAS Annual Conference, March 14, 2025, https://asianstudies.confex.com/asianstudies/2025/meetingapp.cgi/Paper/14873.

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plays into nationalist sentiments to mobilise Chinese citizens and diaspora to "defend" their country against critics.

Nationalism also indirectly contributes to the salience of *pro-government* perspectives online. It makes online spaces more conducive to pro-China narratives, as users holding such views feel encouraged to share them publicly. This is also the case within liberal democracies, and particularly on WeChat and Chinese-language channels.[136]

Many of the online actions motivated by nationalism are not per se against the law, except for the extremer cases of harassment and intimidation, but rather "transgressive" of liberal democratic norms.[137]

[136] Systematic empirical evidence directly linking diaspora nationalism to patterns of online content circulation remains limited, however, and mostly case-study-based. See, for instance, Luwei Luqiu and Yi Kang, "Loyalty to WeChat beyond National Borders: A Perspective of Media System Dependency Theory on Techno-Nationalism," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 14 (May 2021): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2021.1921820; Wanning Sun, "Chinese Diaspora and Social Media: Negotiating Transnational Space," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication* (2021), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.1146; Henry Hail, "Patriotism Abroad: Overseas Chinese Students' Encounters With Criticisms of China," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 19 (January 2015), https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315314567175.

[137] See Ralph Weber, "The Party-State's Global Transgressive Political Activities and Influence Work," in *Routledge Handbook on Global China*, First edition, ed. Maximilian Mayer (Routledge, 2025).

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5.3 TTPs[138]

TACTICS	TECHNIQUES
Reducing visibility of criticism	Flooding; Deterrence via harassment and intimidation; Inducing self-censorship through uncertainty and social pressure
Amplifying pro-government narratives	Coordinated amplification on social media; Use of inauthentic or automated accounts
Normalising official narratives within mainstream information flows	Media partnerships and content syndication; Disguised or covert news outlet; Use of PR intermediaries and commercial firms

6. Perceptions of Information Control among Chinese Diaspora

Chinese-language diaspora has migrated to Europe in several waves mostly from Guangdong, Zhejiang, and Fujian. First-generation migrants who were born in the PRC predominantly live in Italy, the UK, Spain, the Netherlands, Germany, and Sweden (see perceptions policy brief). Thus the Chinese diaspora consists of multiple and diverse communities.

[138] While the conventional cyber security approach to the exploration of information manipulation and interference include identifying Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs), we are not including Procedures in our analyses. This is in line with common practice in the information defence community using the DISARM frameworks, which avoids describing procedures - as these could easily be picked up by adversaries as explicit guidebooks for conducting such operations.

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Members of these communities vary greatly in terms of how they experience, interpret, and adapt to perceived constraints on expression in everyday social, digital, and institutional settings. In contrast to assumptions of FIMI (see above), these constraints do *not* take the form of large, state-led campaigns or operations. Instead, information control is experienced as a daily, socially embedded routine across digital platforms, within community networks, and across transnational ties.

Information control is often experienced in form of small, repeated cues that shape what feels "safe" to say, share, or organise around. A person's assessment of sensitivity is socialised over time and is aimed at reducing uncertainty about potential consequences of one's behaviour.[139]

6.1 Diaspora Use of WeChat and Xiaohongshu

WeChat and Xiaohongshu outlined earlier plays a crucial role in diaspora information environments. These communication channels function for many overseas Chinese as a space to maintain cultural ties, exchange practical information (e.g. migration, housing, work), observe peer experiences, and share news across borders. As such, they tie diaspora communities to other Chinese-language friends, family, and acquaintances predominantly situated in the PRC. Outside the PRC, WeChat has large user bases in countries with Chinese-speaking populations, including Malaysia, the United States, Japan, South Korea, and Indonesia[140], while Xiaohongshu is widely used among overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, Taiwan, and the United States,[141] with a temporary increase in US-based users during the early-2025 "TikTok refugee" episode.[142][143]

[139] Daniela Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2012), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139087742.
[140] Shubham Singh, "WeChat Statistics 2026 (Monthly Active Users & Revenue)," DemandSage, December 26, 2025, https://www.demandsage.com/wechat-statistics/.
[141] Terrence Ngu, "Xiaohongshu User Statistics: Global & Southeast Asian Market Analysis," Hashmeta, July 8, 2025, https://hashmeta.com/blog/xiaohongshu-user-statistics-global-southeast-asian-market-analysis/.
[142] "TikTok refugees" refers to US-based users who temporarily migrated to alternative platforms, including Xiaohongshu, in response to anticipated restrictions on TikTok.
[143] AP News, "TikTok Refugees Are Pouring to Xiaohongshu. Here's What You Need to Know about the RedNote App," AP News, January 17, 2025, https://apnews.com/article/tiktok-refugee-xiaohongshu-rednote-855692624aa52825b30afc5474af881d.

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To reduce visibility to automated moderation systems Chinese WeChat and Xiaohongshu users develop coping strategies, such as, for example, coded language, homophones, memes, screenshots of texts[144][145], and strategic hashtagging.[146][147] Research on diaspora communications further shows that encrypted messaging apps (EMAs) such as WhatsApp and Telegram are often adopted as alternative spaces when users seek greater privacy and autonomy from platform-level moderation or perceived surveillance on dominant platforms like WeChat.[148] During the late-2022 zero-COVID protests, protestors used encrypted apps such as Telegram to organise group chats, share protest locations, and coordinate while attempting to evade surveillance, while authorities simultaneously replied on mobile data and social-media monitoring to identify participants.[149] However, WeChat and Xiaohongshu constitute highly important community spaces for diaspora to overcome uncertainty.

6.2 Importance of Community Spaces

Users sometimes express concerns that messages sent on WeChat and Xiaohongshu may carry consequences. These concerns include possible repercussions for family members in China, future access to visa or travel, professional ties, or the ability to return for personal or business reasons. Such concerns are often shaped less by direct coercion by specific actors, but instead by sharing stories about past cases that is circulated by word-of-mouth within diaspora networks. As one Chinese student in the Netherlands states: *"Via WeChat, I receive messages such as: 'You are disloyal to your leader,' 'Your studies in the Netherlands don't*

[144] Studies of social media users in restrictive contexts reveal adaptive practices like sharing images up-side down instead of texts to avoid censorship.
[145] Echo Huang, "Researchers Have Figured out Ways to Dodge Censorship on WeChat," August 15, 2018, https://qz.com/1356503/how-to-dodge-wechats-image-censorship-according-to-citizen-lab.
[146] Xiaohongshu users navigate the platform's recommendation algorithm by strategically re-appropriate hastags.
[147] Ruyuan Wan et al., "Hashtag Re-Appropriation for Audience Control on Recommendation-Driven Social Media Xiaohongshu (Rednote)," *Proceedings of the 2025 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, April 26, 2025, 1–25, https://doi.org/10.1145/3706598.3713379.
[148] Inga K Trauthig and Samuel C Woolley, "'On WhatsApp I Say What I Want': Messaging Apps, Diaspora Communities, and Networked Counterpublics in the United States," *New Media & Society* 27, no. 4 (2025): 2050–67, https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231203695.
[149] Rachel Liang, *China's Covid Protesters Become Targets of Beijing's Surveillance State*, November 29, 2022, https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-covid-protesters-become-targets-of-beijings-surveillance-state-11669718994.

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amount to anything,' 'I'm going to pay your family a visit,' and 'I will report your activities.' And someone even sent me the other day: 'I can reach you in Amsterdam within four hours." Others described how her father's travel visas were repeatedly blocked after she engaged in activism abroad.[150] This case of Doxing illustrates that information control practices from inside the Firewall leaks into these spaces. The perceived plausibility of monitoring may thus encourage self-censorship. Even limited or uneven instances of transnational repression can generate chilling effects, encouraging risk-averse behaviour such as avoiding public political expression, disengaging from sensitive discussions, or confining communication to small, trusted networks.[151]

6.2.1 Case: Prato's Green Dragon Club

In February 2025, the Green Dragon Club in Prato, Italy, a local Chinese community centre, was appointed as both 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".[152]

6.2.2 Case: Overseas Police Stations

China has established "overseas service stations" outside its territorial borders since 2014.[153] In these emigration hubs PRC citizens may file certain paperwork with the PRC public security

[150] Toon Meijerink, "Chinese Students Threatened by Chinese Government: 'They Regularly Ring My Doorbell," May 1, 2024, https://www.folia.nl/nl/international/161772/chinese-students-threatened-by-chinese-government-they-regularly-ring-my-doorbell.
[151] Nate Schenkkan and Isabel Linzer, "Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach: The Global Scale and Scope of Transnational Repression," preprint, Unpublished, 2021, https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.20958.97600; Margaret E. Roberts, *Censored: Distraction and Diversion inside China's Great Firewall* (Princeton university press, 2018).
[152] Lingua Sinica, "Media Liaison Office for Wenzhou Opens in Prato," Lungua Sinica, 2026, https://lingua-sinica.org/dispatch/media-liaison-office-for-wenzhou-opens-in-prato/.
[153] Matt Schrader, "Chinese Assistance Centers' Grow United Front Work Department Global Presence," Jamestown, January 5, 2019, https://jamestown.org/chinese-assistance-centers-grow-united-front-work-department-global-presence/.

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offices. In the PRC these are also in charge of administration unrelated to policing or law enforcement, such as, for example, issuing driver's licenses. According to empirical research, these hubs play some, but minimal role in harassment and intimidation, contrary to the initial report that initiated investigations by public authorities in the United States and the EU, among others.[154] The European parliament reported that such hubs existed in 13 member states as of 2022, including the Netherlands, Spain, France, and Germany.[155]

Apart from online community spaces, cultural centres, diaspora organisations, and hometown associations also function as sites for social support and information exchange, such as the Prato's Green Dragon Club. Diaspora may also consult with emigration hubs that have sparked a debate about "overseas police stations" by the PRC. Yet as in case of the Green Dragon Club, their affiliation with the PRC public security offices blurs the boundary between community support and oversight, thus creating an atmosphere of caution and potentially self-censorship in these spaces.

6.3 Responses Across Different Diaspora Groups

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 may be pragmatic rather than ideological, shaped by the need to preserve economic stability, secure visas, or

[154] Kuo Kasier, "Transnational Repression and China's 'Overseas Police Stations," The China Porject, July 20, 2023, http://thechinaproject.com/2023/07/20/transnational-repression-and-chinas-overseas-police-stations/.
[155] European Parliament, "Parliamentary Question E-003564/2022: "Illegal and Unlawful Chinese Overseas Police 'Service Stations' in the EU," November 3, 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2022-003564_EN.html#def2.

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avoid wanted scrutiny. Business organisations may also advocate economic benefits of deeper bilateral ties as in case of a new "mega embassy" in London in 2026.[156]

Study finds that many Chinese small business operators in the Pacific engage with China's diplomacy in pragmatic and conditional ways, shaped by business stability concerns, local insecurity, and expectations of consular protection. In such cases, compliance is often strategic rather than conviction-based.[157]

2. Indifference or Apolitical Distance

Research on Chinese migrant communities in Europe suggests that political disengagement is common among more recent migrants, undocumented individuals, and working-class groups, particularly with economic precarity and insecure legal status. These individuals may avoid homeland political topics altogether, choosing instead to focus on economic survival or social integration in their host countries.

In France, Chinese migrants have long been characterised as politically "invisible", with limited participation in both host-country and homeland politics. [158] In particular, first-generation migrants may prioritise livelihood, family obligations, and business survival, and avoid political expression to reduce exposure to risk.[159]

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

[156] Reuters, "Protests in London over China's Plan for Mega Embassy," January 17, 2026, https://www.reuters.com/video/watch/idRW754817012026RP1/.
[157] Denghua Zhang, "China's Diplomacy and Diaspora Perceptions: Evidence from the Pacific Region," *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies* 10, nos. 1–3 (2023): 46–62, https://doi.org/10.1002/app5.379.
[158] Rémi Korman and William Liew, "Politics of Invisibility: The Political Underrepresentation of Chinese Communities in France," January 2009, https://humanityinaction.org/knowledge_detail/politics-of-invisibility-the-political-underrepresentation-of-chinese-communities-in-france/.
[159] Global Dialogue, "From Silence to Action: The Chinese in France," February 21, 2021, https://globaldialogue.isa-sociology.org/articles/from-silence-to-action-the-chinese-in-france.

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through protests, alternative media platforms, or public dissent. During protests participants may experience refugee espionage.[160] For example, in Switzerland Official Chinese representations have used the issuing of visas for travel to Tibet as a highly effective means of pressure for Tibetans.[161] Chinese students at Universities in Europe and North America have also been reported to wear masks, hats and sunglasses to conceal their identity from individuals perceived to be agents of the PRC government monitoring, photographing, and filming attendees. Ten reported that, within hours of attending protests abroad, PRC security officials harassed and intimidated family in mainland China.[162] During protests different diaspora groups may also clash. For example, in 2019 students from Hong Kong at the University of Sheffield in the UK demonstrated in solidarity with pro-democracy protests back home. They were met by a defiant crowd of students from mainland China.[163]

6.3.1 Case: Welcoming Rallies Meet Counter-Demonstrations

During Xi Jinping's state visit to Hungary in 2024, pro-China activists wearing red baseball caps were ripped a large "Free Tibet" banner and used Chinese national flags to physically block Tibetan flags from the view of the presidential motorcade. Hungarian police did not intervene.[164]

[160] 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.
[161] Ralph Weber et al., "The Situation of the Tibetan and Uyghur Communities in Switzerland: Actual and Perceived Exertions of Pressure," Institute for European Global Studies, 2024, https://europa.unibas.ch/fileadmin/user_upload/europa/News__Events/PDFs_News__Events/Weber-Kapoor-Morell-vonRuette_Research_Report_engl_version.pdf.
[162] Amnesty International, "ON MY CAMPUS, I AM AFRAID" CHINA'S TARGETING of OVERSEAS STUDENTS STIFLES RIGHTS," 2024, https://www.amnesty.nl/content/uploads/2024/05/FINAL-REPORT-NO-EMBARGO.pdf?x35814.
[163] Sheffield Tribune, "Rednote, Rankings, and Rumoured Riches: The Real Lives of Sheffield's Chinese Students," April 4, 2025, https://www.sheffieldtribune.co.uk/rednote-rankings-and-rumoured-riches-the-real-lives-of-sheffields-chinese-students/.
[164] Radio Free Asia, "Pro-China Activists Harass Tibetan Protesters in Hungary during Xi's Visit," May 9, 2024, https://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/pro-china-activists-harass-tibetan-protesters-hungary-xi-jinping-visit-05092024161319.html.

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6.3.2 Case: China Deviants

The UK-based group China Deviants, formed in 2022, organises online and offline activism including Tiananmen commemorations. 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.[165]

6.4 Actors and Their Potential Influence

Actors differ in terms of their proximity to the state. At one end of the spectrum are formal state and state-linked institutions, including the Chinese Communist Party, the United Front Working Department (UFWD), Chinese embassies and consulates, and state-affiliated media outlets such as Xinhua and China Daily. At the other end are non-state actors embedded within diaspora life, including Tencent and Rednote that run WeChat and Xiaohongshu, diaspora media outlets such as Nouvelles D'Europe and Ouhua Daily, hometown associations, and business networks. A broad grey zone lies between these poles, encompassing organisations formally independent but socially, economically, or symbolically linked to state priorities, such as consulate-connected associations or platform governance systems that reproduce PRC-sensitive content restrictions abroad.

This spectrum is central to how information control is perceived and internalised by diaspora members, as uncertainty over actor affiliation often encourages anticipatory compliance and self-censorship. For example, research on the United Front emphasises that formal affiliation is neither necessary nor sufficient to produce state-aligned behaviour; instead, regular contact, symbolic recognition, and access dependencies shape expectations and self-censorship.[166] Thus, actor's influence on diaspora is often exercised through relational embeddedness and structural dependence, rather than direct control.

[165] UK-China Transparency, "'China Deviants': A Story of the CCP's Harassment of Chinese Students in Europe," 2023, https://ukctransparency.org/projects-2/ccp-on-campus/china-deviants/.
[166] Gerry Groot, *Managing Transitions*, 0 ed. (Routledge, 2004), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203502945; Anne-Marie Brady, "Magic Weapons: China's Political Influence Activities under Xi Jinping | Wilson Center," paper presented at The corrosion of democracy under China's global influence, September 16, 2017, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/magic-weapons-chinas-political-influence-activities-under-xi-jinping; Marlies Glasius, "Extraterritorial Authoritarian Practices: A Framework," *Globalizations* 15, no. 2 (2018): 179–97, https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2017.1403781.

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6.5 How to Access Proximity to the State

An actor's proximity to the Chinese state is based on whether their activities involve sustained, routine interaction with PRC state institutions that can plausibly generate expectations of alignment or compliance, regardless of formal ownership or direct instruction.

In practice, this includes observable indicators such as:

- Regular coordination with Chinese embassies, consulates, or United Front-linked bodies;
- Formal recognition, designation, or endorsement by PRC state or state-affiliated institutions; or
- Structural dependence on access to China including visas, markets, advertising revenue, or regulatory approach which research shows can incentivise anticipatory compliance in the absence of coercion

Actors exhibiting one or more of these indicators tend to be closer to the state on the proximity spectrum, while those without such interactions tend to be more distant, without presuming intent or control.

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6.6 TTPs[167]

TACTICS	TECHNIQUES
Manage, guide, and control diaspora information spaces	Social signalling and reputational pressure within community networks
	Selective coercive pressure such as targeted intimidation or surveillance of outspoken individuals
Mobilise diaspora actors as informal representatives of soft power	Incentivised participation in state-aligned initiatives or events
	Establishment or endorsement of liaison roles between diaspora groups and state-linked bodies

5. Conclusion

This paper shows that the FIMI concept overlooks two central aspects: the attribution to state actors and, relatedly, understanding the role of non-state actors. By widening the scope of this concept we give a more comprehensive understanding of how the influence of non-state actors and non-deliberate actions highlight the interference of authoritarian states, such as China in European societies.

To understand FIMI in a wider context, we use the concept of information control across information production, information dissemination, information salience and perceptions of information control. Across these dimensions we find that actors differ in terms of their proximity to the state. At one end of the spectrum are formal state and state-linked institutions, including the Chinese Communist Party, the United Front Working Department (UFWD),

[167] While the conventional cyber security approach to the exploration of information manipulation and interference include identifying Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs), we are not including Procedures in our analyses. This is in line with common practice in the information defence community using the DISARM frameworks, which avoids describing procedures - as these could easily be picked up by adversaries as explicit guidebooks for conducting such operations.

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Chinese embassies and consulates, and state-affiliated media outlets such as Xinhua and China Daily. At the other end are non-state actors embedded within diaspora life and beyond, including WeChat and Xiaohongshu, but also to some extent AliExpress, TikTok and DeepSeek.

Between these poles lies a broad grey zone that characterises many actors involved in China's information control practices. In both information production and engagement with the Chinese diaspora this ambiguity encourages anticipatory compliance and self-censorship. In the context of information dissemination this is reflected to some extent in China's international media outlets and to a larger extent in Chinese technology companies. We find that Chinese media outlets do not always control the dissemination of information, instead doing so only when it is related to core political interests of the central government. By comparison, Chinese technology companies seem to vary how they control information and whether it is related to information control practices of the Chinese government.

Given the grey zone between state and non-state actors in China's information control practices, we recommend the following for future policies:

- Consider state and non-state actors in China's information control practices
- Think more about the relationship of the Chinese state and the channels of information control presented here
- Create more incentives for comparative research on Chinese and US-American technology companies
- Safeguard open and critical discussion that allow researchers to not take political stances: separate normative discussions from empirical discussions more explicitly, both when presenting research to broader audiences, but also within research settings

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