



Media
Forensics Hub

Oh, the Places You'll Go!



The Tactics and Impact of a Chinese Multilingual Narrative
Flooding Campaign through Political Cartoons

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INTRODUCTION

This report describes an influence operation targeting narratives around Chinese scientist Li-Meng Yan, dealing mostly with her relationships with exiled Chinese investor Guo Wengui and American political operative Steve Bannon. This operation is ongoing, has lasted over a year and consists, at its core, of over 250 political cartoons in at least three languages that have been spread on social media, web forums, and political blogs.¹

This campaign pushes several related narratives, all of which are derogatory to Yan. The most prominent portrays Yan as a puppet of Guo and Bannon who produces false research about China's responsibility for originating the COVID-19 pandemic.

The campaign is structured to target a large variety of online platforms around the world. We found the images on 465 unique domains. Major international platforms like Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Medium, Pinterest, Reddit, Quora, Tumblr, and Youtube are included, but so are many smaller message boards and blogs, especially those operating primarily in Chinese: 6Park, Duowei News, HK Golden, Nanyang Money, Philippine Dragon, Southeast Asia Chinese Network (dnyhr.com), ublog, Vocus, Western Canada Forum, and York

Forum. But the international focus is not exclusively on Chinese. We also see significant posting on a variety of other international forums and blogs, including Ameba (Japan), LiveDoor (Japan), and Kaskus (Indonesia). The posts are often in the local language, even though the text on the cartoons is in English or Chinese.

Overwhelmingly, these posts are created by persona that are extremely flat and generic. They create posts for this campaign and related campaigns, non-sequitur filler, and not much else. To the extent they include text with the images, that text is standardized and, at least in English, seems stilted and likely to be auto-translated.

Unlike the minimal investment in the posting accounts, there appeared to be specialized investment in the creation of the cartoons themselves. Although the

level of effort clearly varied across cartoons, nearly all of the images were created specifically for use in this campaign. The heterogeneity of the style and metadata suggest that dozens of artists contributed to their creation, ranging in the number of cartoons created by each. The variety of tools used to create the art suggests that they were not created in a centralized production facility using a common set of tools and instead were likely created by independently contracted artists.

The impact of this sort of campaign is difficult to measure. There is limited evidence of organic spread or virality. The cartoons did not uncritically appear in mainstream media. But, on many of these platforms, it became nearly impossible to discover information about any of the major targets of this campaign without stumbling upon these cartoons. Any search of the name "Yan Limeng" or the hashtag #yanlimeng on Twitter, Reddit, Tumblr, or Pinterest will surface these images, and, often, nothing else. The same pattern holds for the name "Guo Wengui" or the hashtag #GuoWengui. During the week of Steve Bannon's arrest, when the organic content was quite high, the hashtag #Bannon was trending on Twitter, but these images still appeared in among the top search results for it. This sort of narrative flooding is an impact that does not require organic spread, just sufficient effort from the influence operators.

We can attribute this campaign, with high confidence, as originating from China. Our confidence comes from a variety of mutually consistent and overlapping markers. First,

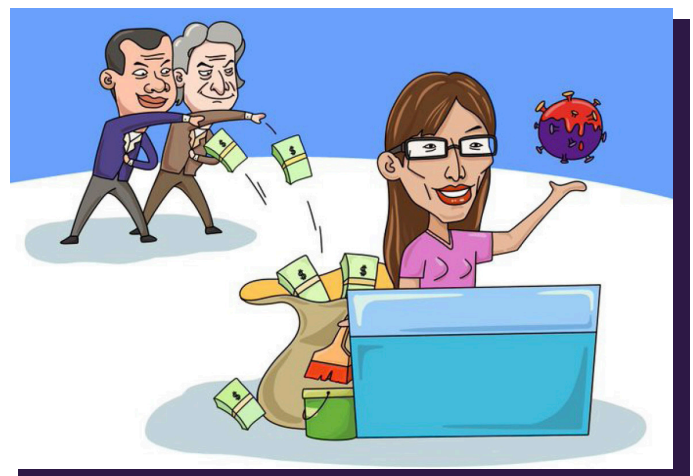


Figure 1, a typical comic featuring Yan, Bannon, and Guo

¹ An archive of the exemplars of the images is available at: <https://clemons.box.com/s/2fi2oaf4u592kohjnt30iiozvamwk5kj>.

many of the Twitter accounts that posted these cartoons also posted content and video from the #XinjiangCotton campaign, and Twitter has attributed several of the accounts contributing to that campaign to China.² Second, the technical metadata on some of the images is geotagged to a specific location in northern China. Third, some of the accounts that originate these images push narratives that are clearly part of other, related, campaigns, and several of these campaigns concern issues of very limited interest to people outside of China. See, for example, the “Accelerationism” campaign, in the “Related Campaigns” section of this report. Fourth, the geographic and linguistic targeting of websites suggests that the Chinese diaspora are a primary target for this campaign.

BACKGROUND

Guo Wengui, Li-Meng Yan, and Steve Bannon

The three targets of this influence operation are Guo Wengui, Steve Bannon, and most predominantly Limeng Yan. These three people are prominent critics of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and have ties to the Himalaya movement, a worldwide anti-CCP organization founded and funded by Guo Wengui. Guo Wengui is a Chinese billionaire who was one of the richest men in China before he was accused of corruption and fled to the United States. Since then he has been closely allied collaborator with Steve Bannon. They are the founders and leaders of GTV Media Group which hosts many sources spreading misinformation and heavily focuses on China.

The other person of interest is Li-Meng Yan. A Chinese virologist, she rose to prominence in late 2020 through the notoriety of her report which pushed the conspiracy theory that the SARS-CoV-2 virus was manufactured in a lab in Wuhan. Her report found a natural foothold in the social media network of the Himalaya movement

beginning with the Rule of Law Society, a right wing organization tied to the movement, promoting a preprint of her report. It is important to know that beginning before this in January 2020 Wang Dinggang reported on information given to him from the “world’s foremost coronavirus expert”- later revealed to be Li-Meng Yan- that the CCP was not being truthful about the coronavirus outbreak.

Yan’s trajectory within the movement rose from there as she then appeared on Steve Bannon’s podcast. Guo and Bannon managed her public persona and financially provided for her to travel and stay in the US.³

This group suffered various setbacks, including Bannon’s arrest, infighting between Guo and Yan, and Guo’s filing for bankruptcy. Since then, Guo and Bannon been heavily involved in promoting H-coin, a cryptocurrency tied to the Himalaya movement which has been heavily targeted by the SEC. Yan has continued to promote her reports of the coronavirus being leaked from a lab and has been the subject to coverage surrounding rumors of her being hired as a staff member at UPenn’s Perelman School of Medicine.



Figure 2, a typical comic

2 Linvill, et al (2021) “Xinjiang Nylon”, Clemson Media Forensics Hub. Available at: <https://www.clemson.edu/centers-institutes/watt/hub/documents/ci-xinjiang-influence-operation-2021.html>

3 “How Steve Bannon and a Chinese Billionaire Created a Right-Wing Coronavirus Media Sensation” The New York Times 11/20/2020.

PRIOR ANALYSIS OF THE CAMPAIGN

There has been substantial reporting on individuals targeted by this misinformation campaign. However, the coverage of the campaign itself has been limited. Madiant noted elements of the campaign had appearing on several dozen platforms in multiple languages.⁴ Two reports, one from an Australian defense think tank: the Australian Strategic Policy Initiative (ASPI) and one from the Center for Information Resilience (CIR), dug into a subset of the campaign that appeared on Twitter in greater detail.⁵

These report describes the nature and development of the campaign on Twitter, beginning with the co option of #StopAsianHate. Started in March 2020 to end racially motivated violence against Asian Americans in response to COVID, the hashtag was soon compromised and drew false equivalencies between Limeng Yan and COVID origin skepticism and anti-Asian racism.

The ASPI report details how quickly this movement took hold and discusses how there are two aspects of this campaign. There are authentic accounts that are boosting this hashtag and sharing the content, but there is strong evidence that most of this is being perpetrated by actors in China. They go on to detail how a bulk of the output linked to this campaign on twitter follows Beijing's working hours and week schedule, noting no activity over weekends or the Chinese Labor Day.

They point out how similar these characteristics are to a 2020 Chinese takedown operation, and that there are several developments in this campaign that point to advancements and coordination as they are making use of several

platforms, multiple languages.

The CIR report concentrates on the network structure and inauthenticity of the Twitter accounts and how the amplified each other a official CCP officials. But the analysis of this campaign was just one element of a much larger investigation of the general approach taken on Twitter.

In contrast to both these reports, which concentrated on platform accounts/posting strategies, mostly on Twitter, we are focusing our attention on the breadth and depth of the campaign-- how much investment was made, all the places it spread, and how significant was the investment/impact in those places. As we will show, this broader perspective reveals some very important insights into how this campaign operates and the impacts it has.

OUR APPROACH

Our approach to analyzing this operation is to build a snowball sample of cartoons that appear to be part of the campaign. We then define an exemplar for each cartoon, and collect all variants of that exemplar that appear in google "related image" searches. We then investigate this collection to determine the thematic and technical characteristics of the images, the breadth and depth of their spread, and features of how they were presented.

COLLECTION OF SNOWBALL SAMPLE

We began our collection with a convenience sample of images featuring Limeng Yan, Guo Wengui, and Steve Bannon uncovered during a previous investigation (See link, fn 7). Specifically, we began with Images 82 and 83 (See archive, fn 1). Image searches of these initial images revealed accounts across a variety of platforms that share many other cartoons with similar themes, featuring Yan, Guo, and Bannon. We collected these cartoons and repeated this "snowball" process until no additional cartoons surfaced. We terminated formal collection April 1, 2022, but the campaign continued beyond that date.

4 Serabian, R. and Foster, L. (2021) "Pro-PRC Influence Campaign Expands to Dozens of Social Media Platforms, Websites, and Forums in at Least Seven Languages, Attempted to Physically Mobilize Protesters in the U.S." Threat Research Madiant

5 Strick, Ben (2021) "Analysis of the Pro-China Propaganda Network Targeting International Narratives" Center for Information Resilience Report Zhang, Albert (2021) "#StopAsianHate: Chinese diaspora targeted by CCP disinformation campaign" The Strategist. Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

EXEMPLAR DEFINITION

In collecting the snowball sample, we saved the earliest instance we could discover of each image. The “blog” section of one specific site, Duowei News (dwnews.com), stood out as a prominent and persistent target for hosting early examples of many cartoons. For each cartoon, we selected the earliest example of that cartoon appearing on Duowei News as our definitional exemplar of that cartoon. When a version was not available on dwnews.com, we instead chose the earliest example we could find on any other site that had dated posting (often on blogspot.com).

THEMATIC LABELING

The images were coded with a grounded theory approach to note what objects were prominent in each image. Because the comics are presented in several languages containing the same images, the coding was meant to identify the images themselves and not the words present in the comic. Translation was used sparingly in coding and was often a tool for identifying labels, which were gratuitously deployed by the artists. In the tradition of political cartoons, images are heavily labeled so readers understand exactly what is being presented with almost no room for error. This technique was combined with the typical political cartoon’s use of exaggeration and symbolism. The content of these comics is meant to be understandable by the most common and transient viewers, often without any need to understand the language.

EXPANSION USING GOOGLE PHOTO AND APIS

Using reverse Google image search, we were able to identify where each image appeared across the web. For each exemplar, we conducted a reverse image search, using the “similar images” option and collected the results. To conduct these searches at scale, we used Parsehub to expedite the collection. Parsehub uses machine learning to extend manual web collection tasks to automated

engines. From these results, we logged the domains and the full URLs of each image. For the subset of those URLs on Twitter and Instagram, we further expanded the information we had on each post, including the date of posting, using the API or RSS feed features available on the platforms.

TIMING

To track the spread of this campaign we have to measure when the images are posted, along both the extensive margin (when new cartoons

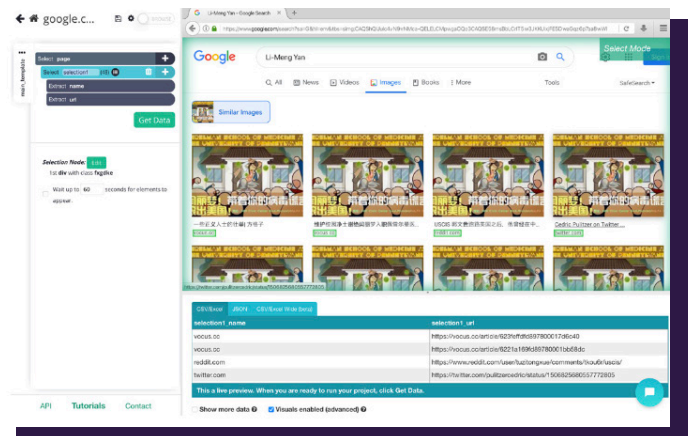


Figure 3, sample of expansion method

are posted) and the intensive margin (including when old cartoons are reposted). Ideally we would do this analysis across all domains, but the large variety of domains used makes it hard to reliably automatically gather all post dates. Instead, we use a slightly different strategy for each margin, and make inferences about the general patterns from those two examples.

Extensive Margin: To measure the date of appearance for new cartoons, we focus our attention on our exemplars, as defined above. For each exemplar— usually the first appearance on dwnews.com—we note the date and time at which the image appeared. Although some social media sites, like Twitter or Pinterest had more cartoons posted, the earliest remaining examples were often on blogs, especially Chinese-language blogs, perhaps due to the moderation practices on social media sites.

Intensive Margin: To measure the intensive margin, the overall posting volumes over time, we limited our attention to posts on Twitter and Pinterest. Concentrating on posts on these platforms has two advantages. First, they were, by far, the most common domains on which to find these cartoons. Second, by using the Twitter API and the RSS feature of Pinterest, it was possible to collect a very complete set of information about each of these posts automatically.

META DATA

For each exemplar and every image posted to Pinterest, we collected all the metadata available from the image using the “Exif Tags” module from the “PILLOW” fork of the Python Image Library. These included data about the software used to create and edit the images, the dates the cartoons were edited, the names of some of the originating files, and even hardware information and geotags. But not all images have all the metadata elements.

IMPACT AND EVALUATION

For impact, we searched for evidence of organic sharing and engagement, by evaluating the accounts sharing the images or engaging with the campaign posts for evidence that they are not part of the campaign. In addition, we evaluated the prominence of the central themes in the search functions of the major targeted domains.

RESULTS

THE IMAGES

Almost immediately, common vignettes containing the actions of Yan, Wengui, and Bannon emerged. Yan is often pictured with the virus. Bannon is often in handcuffs or portrayed as a puppeteer. Wengui is portrayed with wine and money. The subjects are also shown together. Images of Bannon, Wengui and Yan plotting or scheming something were common. These also included images of money or other favors being offered to Yan to say something seemingly false about the virus. Another featured group is

Wengui, Yan, and Wang Dinggang fighting one another, suggesting a falling out between this group.

As the timeline of these comics progressed, the narratives would also shift. One of the greatest changes we observed are comics representing Yan as a fraud, and her presence causing anti-Asian narratives by suggesting the virus originated in the PRC. Usually in these images she is being chased, chastised, or disavowed in some way. Overall, these cartoons are designed to be blunt, crude, and ultimately persuasive, which is no surprise for the genre.

Themes and Targets: Common codes that arose were “virus” (n = 62), “money” (n = 55), “USA” (n = 40), and “animals” (n = 30).

Grouping our codes together we were able to identify four different emergent themes. These were identified as “Dehumanization,” “News Manipulation” (labeled as “News” in graphs), “Outrage,” and “Decadence.”

1. “Dehumanization” occurred when the subjects of the comics were depicted as something other than human, usually a monstrous entity or an animal. These codes included puppets, rats, vampires, snakes, and other unsavory entities. The purpose of this tactic seems to distance the viewer from the humanity of the targets; it is easier to view them as evil if they are seen as vile or ugly. In short, it is an ad hominem attack.
2. The “News Manipulation” theme was associated with codes including news agencies, reporting, and objects representing presentations. The general purpose of comics with this theme is to create a narrative of control. These comics tended to include the targets being in control of the message around the virus, even manipulating the media directly in some cases. This could potentially cause an audience to distrust mainstream news outlets.
3. “Outrage” was closely associated to the

violence sometimes displayed and, more recently, the association of Limeng Yan with anti-Asian discrimination. Codes included angry mobs, violence, panic, and acts of cancelation. Themes of “Outrage” seemed much more closely tied to Yan than Bannon or Wengui, and she seems to have become a pariah representing the discrimination against Asians in the United States.

4. The fourth theme was “Decadence,” accompanied by images associated with wealth. These ranged from literal stacks of money to subtler signs, such as wine and food and specific depictions of poverty; the absence of wealth. Sometimes Decadence was represented as quid-pro-quo between Yan and Bannon or Wengui. According to the comics depicting Decadence, collaborating



Figure 5, “News” example

with western ideals and systems provides an embarrassment of riches. However, as sometimes depicted, these riches could be taken away at a moment’s notice leaving the collaborated destitute, or worse, imprisoned.

The bar graph, Figure 6, presents the number of images that present each theme and each target. News and Decadence are the most common themes, represented in about over a quarter of the images, followed by Dehumanization and Outrage. All three targets were extremely common, with portrayals of Limeng Yan being the most common of all.



Figure 4, “Dehumanization” example

Image Counts by Theme and Target

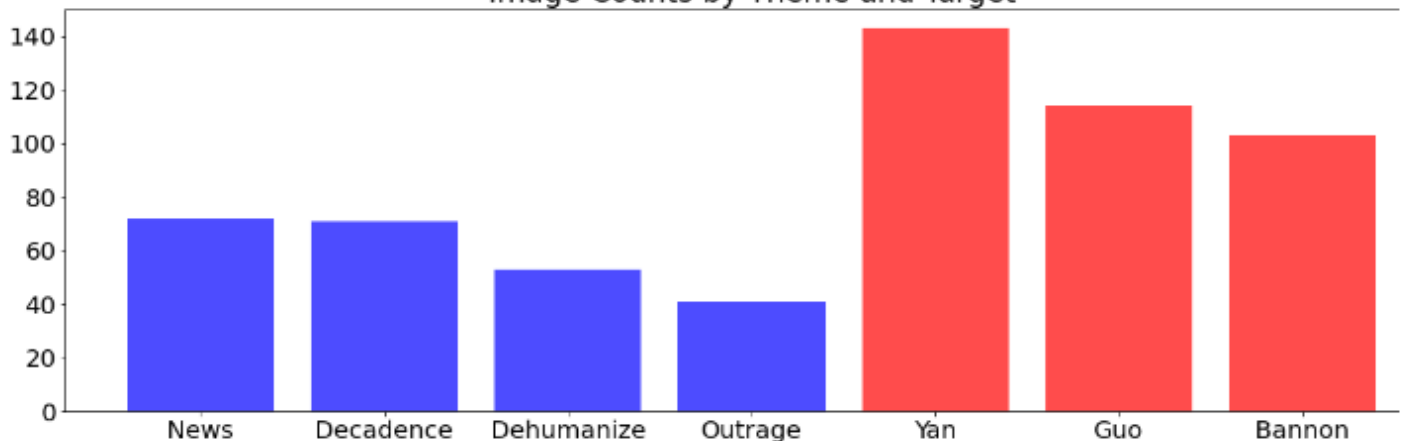


Figure 6

These themes and targets suggest a concerted agenda against the subjects and content matter of the comics. The themes were also not mutually exclusive. For example, it was possible for a target to be portrayed as both inhuman and very wealthy. All three targets were extremely common, with portrayals of Limeng Yan being the most common of all.

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Figure 7, "Decadence" example

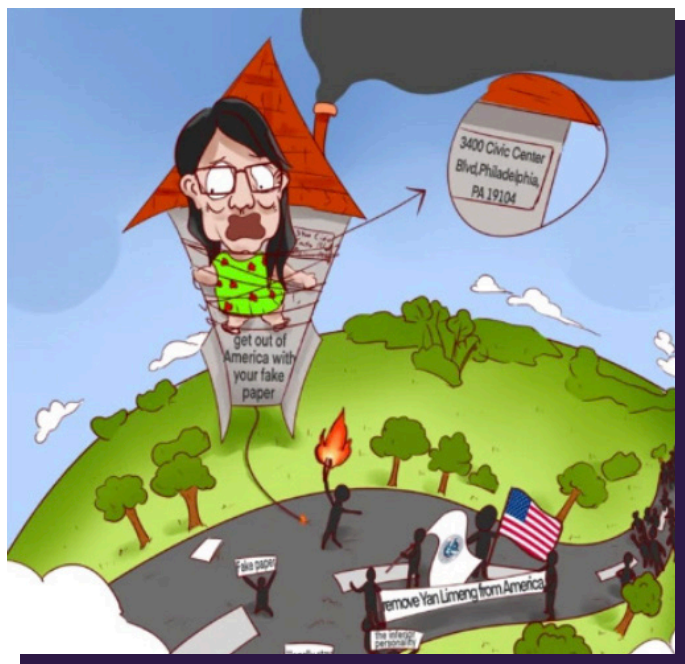


Figure 8, "Outrage" example

Combined, we see these themes create an attack bombarding the targets from multiple angles. "Dehumanization" is a tactic closely linked with propaganda to make the subjects seem worthy of criticism or disdain. The close relation of the campaign to "News Manipulation" could possibly be connected to creating a distrust of mainstream media outlets that seem to surround the pariahs of the comics. "Outrage" may be an emergent theme in order to suggest that people other than the reader are upset by the people and events featured in the comics, leading to a potential ad populem argument. The surprising theme to arise is "Decadence," suggesting that this campaign originates from the PRC, decrying western ideas of capitalism and wealth accrual as inherently negative.

Style: The cartoons in general could be considered low quality or low effort. Some authors have even taken words and images from other sources and placed them on top of the comics in a slapdash manner. This minimal level of effort in a large number of the comics may suggest a

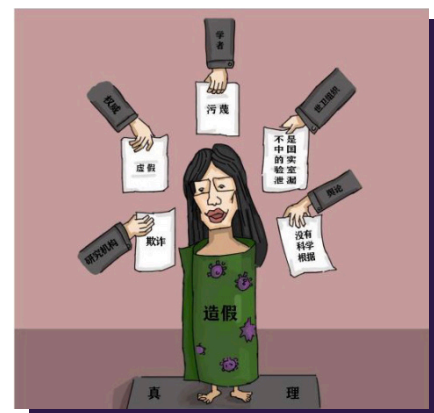
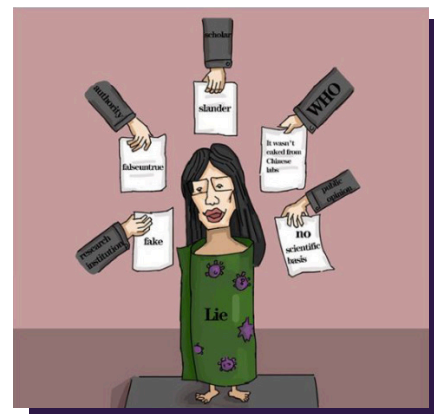


Figure 9, a comic posted in different languages

quantity over quality approach, which would align with the goals of the images flooding specific hashtags and headlines with a curated narrative intended for quick and mass consumption. In a digital landscape in which attention spans are at a premium, quick and quippy are valued. Even though the quality of the cartoons seems amateurish, there are several cartoons that can be easily identified by artistic style. In particular, the multi-panel images [represented by images 32 - 41, see archive, fn 1] were the first of many sets in which we noticed artistic consistency. Though we attempted to locate a commercial artist that may have been contracted for this very specific defamation project, our results were inconclusive.

Of our entire sample set, only two of the images contained an artist signature. This could either suggest a distancing of artists from their works or the attitude of simply producing more content rather than quality content worthy of personal accolades. The identification of an artist could provide far more insight into the goal of the project.

Language: In nearly every case, the campaign images include text, either as labels or as speech bubbles. In 49 cases, multiple language variants of the same image were discovered (see Figure 9). These almost always included English and Chinese variants, except, in a handful of cases (all from the same artist) French and English.

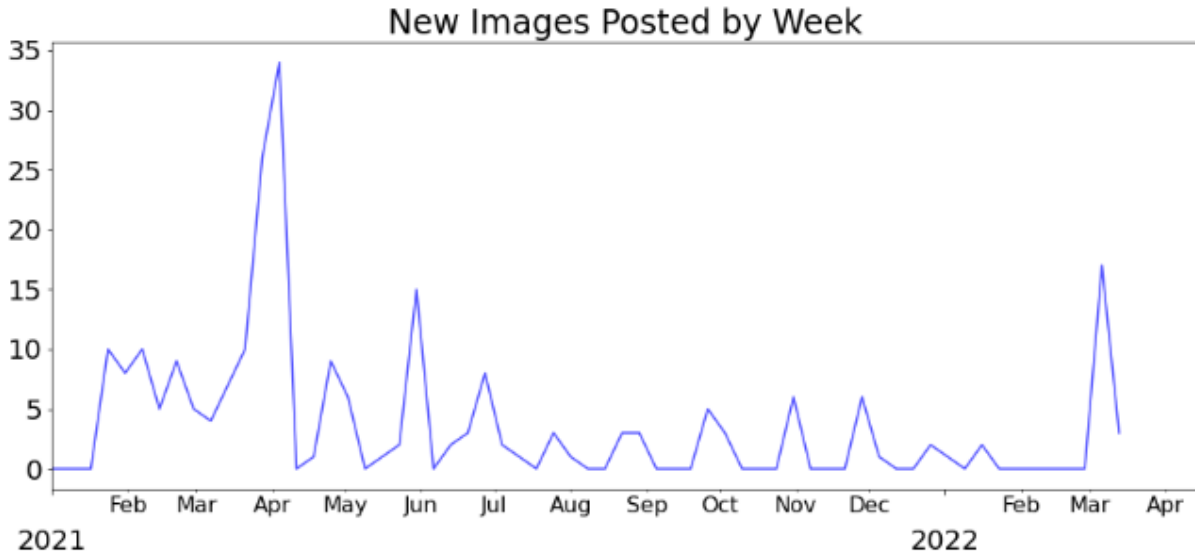


Figure 10

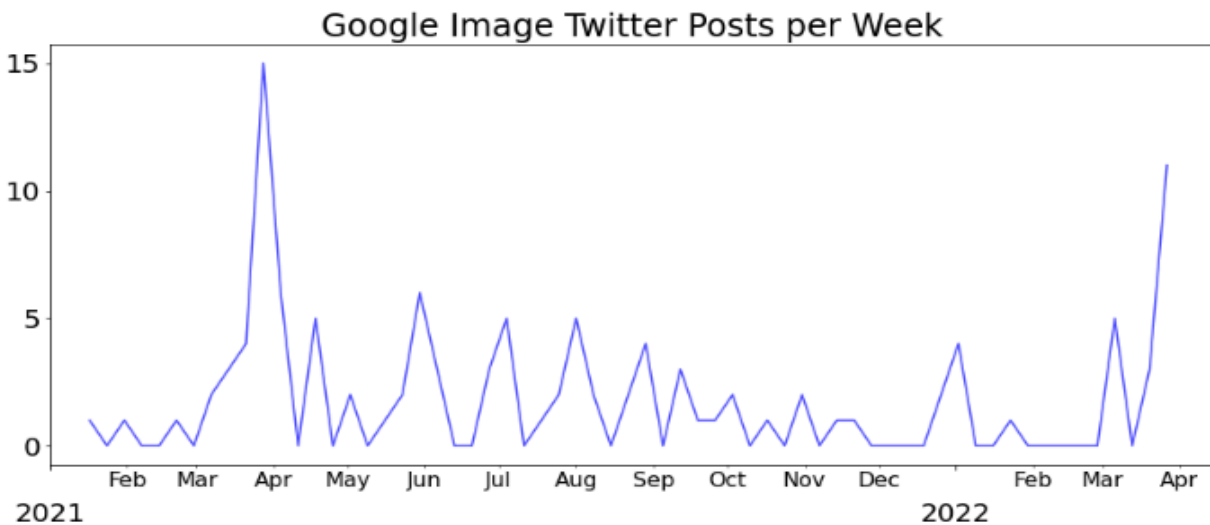


Figure 11

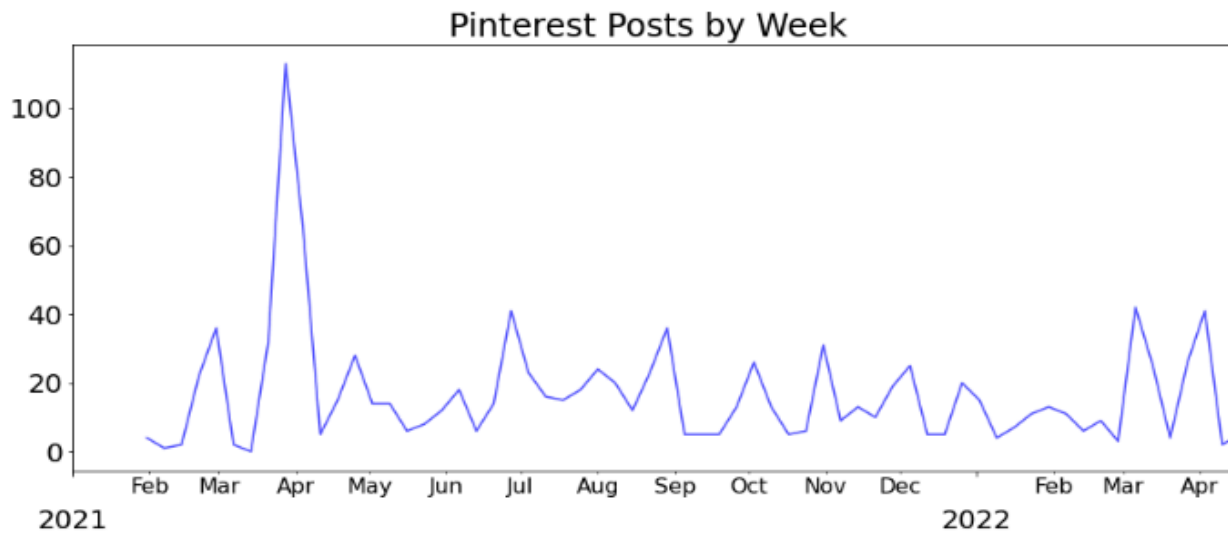


Figure 12

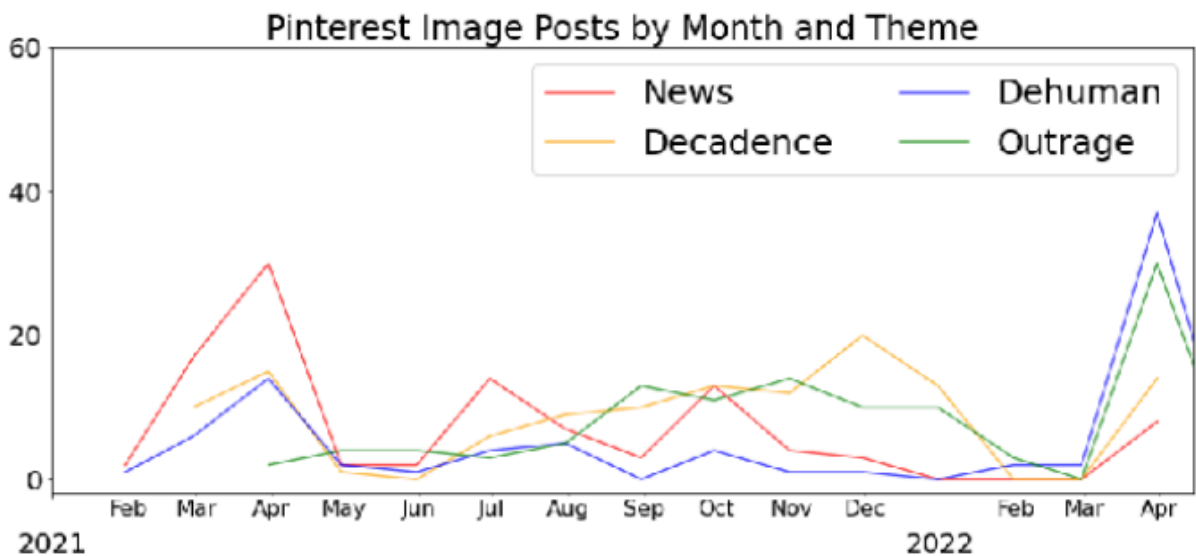


Figure 13

THE CAMPAIGN OVER TIME

First Posts of New Images: The timeline below presents the number of new campaign images, by enumerating the number of exemplars in each week. March 30th, 2021 was, by far, the day with the most new images, with 26 new images posted. The campaign was most active in producing new images in early 2021, but new images arose throughout 2021 and 2022, with the second biggest occurring on March 4, 2022, when 10 new images were posted.

Twitter and Pinterest Counts: The two timelines below present alternative ways of measuring the activity level of the campaign. The first timeline in Figure 11 shows the number of Twitter posts

per week appearing in Google Image Search results for the campaign images. It is limited to posts made by accounts that were not yet suspended by Twitter as of April 2022. These two limitations (indexed by Google Image Search and not suspended) means that we certainly have undercount, and that undercount probably offsets across the timeline, as newer posts are less likely to show up in Google Image Search but older posts are more likely to be suspended. The second timeline (Figure 12) shows the number of Pinterest posts per week from accounts that shared a substantial number of the images. These posts counts are not limited to posts that included one (or, often, more) of the campaign images, but the vast majority did. And even the

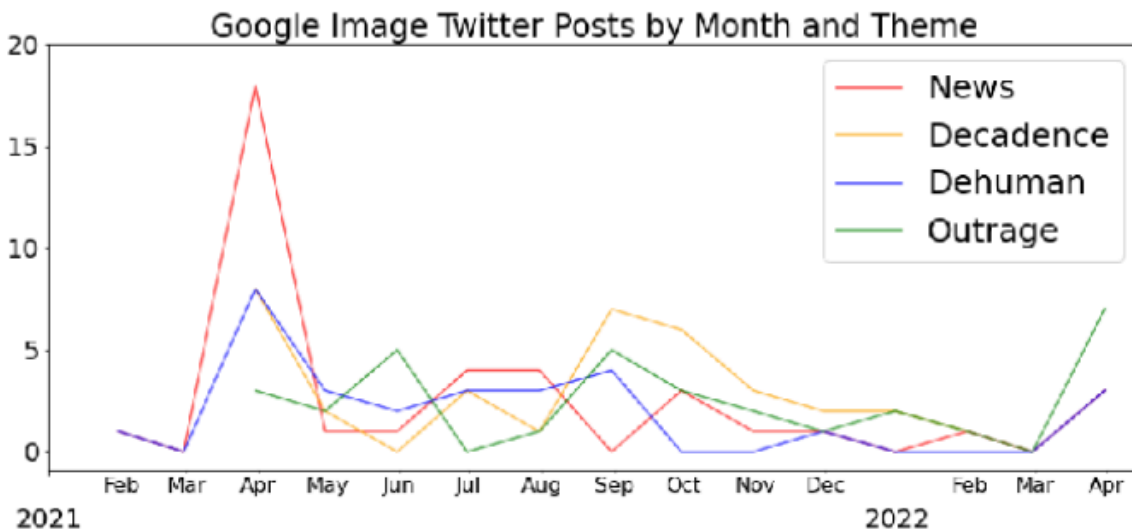


Figure 14

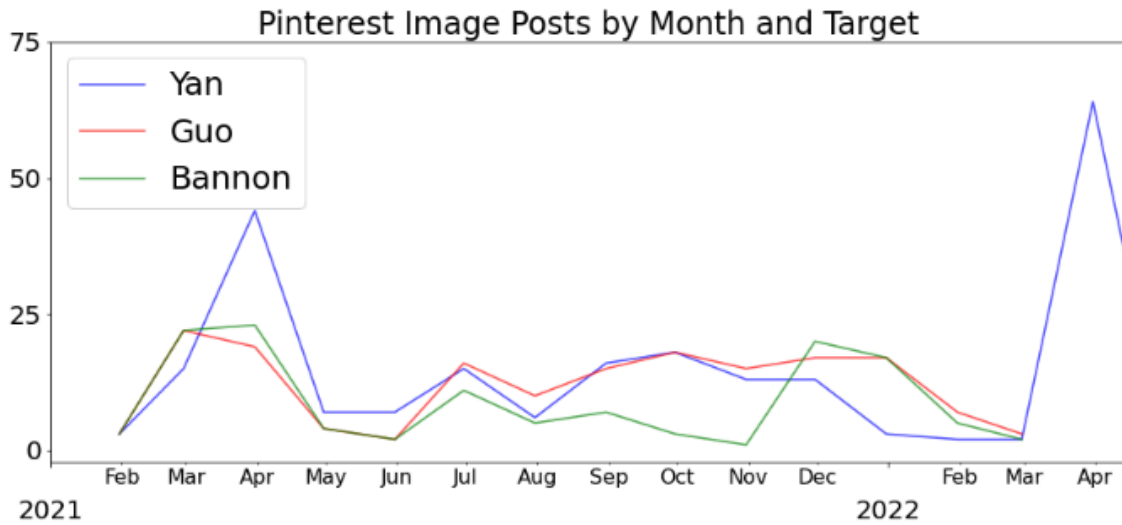


Figure 15

posts that did not include one of the images were still overwhelmingly related to the major themes outlined above. Both these posting timelines show the same pattern, with a large spike at the end of March, 2021, and a low and fairly consistent level of posting throughout 2021, with some evidence of a new spike in March, 2022.

Posting Rates by Theme and Target: We can further analyze the patterns of posting in this campaign by breaking out the prominence of themes and targets over time, on the two platforms for which we can observe behavior over time-- Twitter and Pinterest, where the patterns are, essentially, the same. In the first spike of activity, the "News" theme is by far the most prominent, probably in direct response to the media campaign organized by Bannon, Guo, and Yan, with Yan being the

central figure but all three targets appearing. Media spikes again in July, 2021, with all three Targets being portrayed nearly equally. But in late 2021/early 2022, Outrage and Decadence rise to be the primary themes. At first, this focused on Guo and Yan, but as Bannon is arrested on and Guo's yacht and Guo's money/legal troubles worsen, Bannon reappears and the portrayals of Yan reached its lowest level

Finally, in late Spring, of 2022, Yan reemerges as the primary target, with News (of her potential appointment at UPenn Medical school) reemerging as the dominant theme.

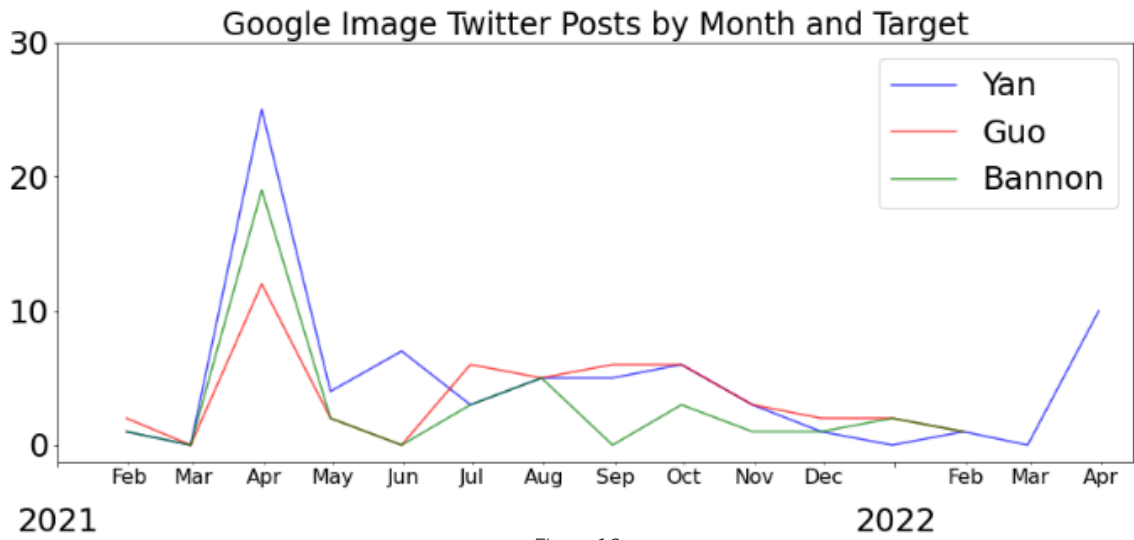


Figure 16



Figure 17

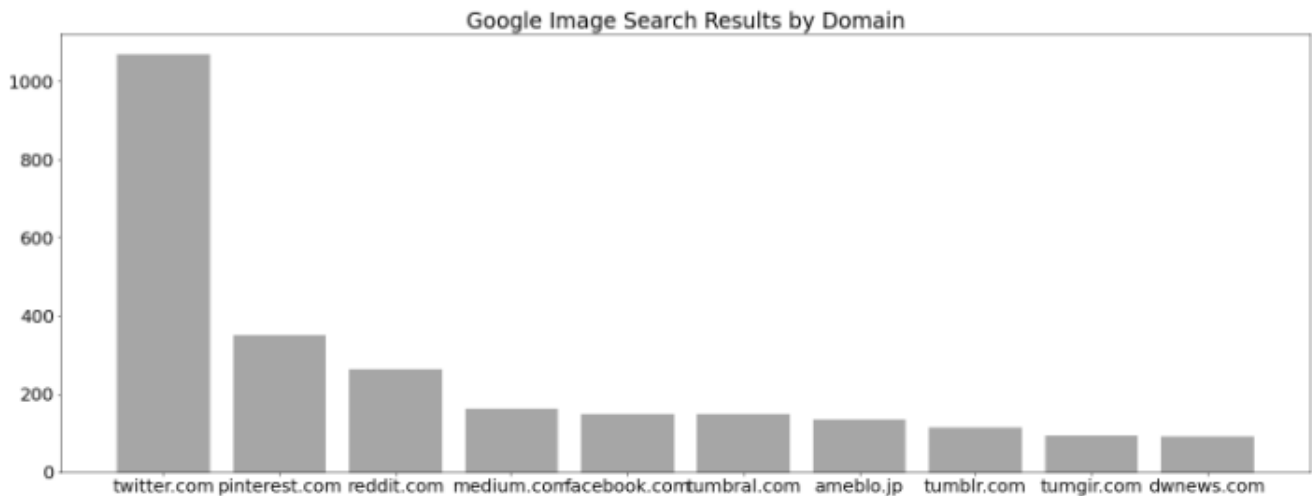


Figure 18

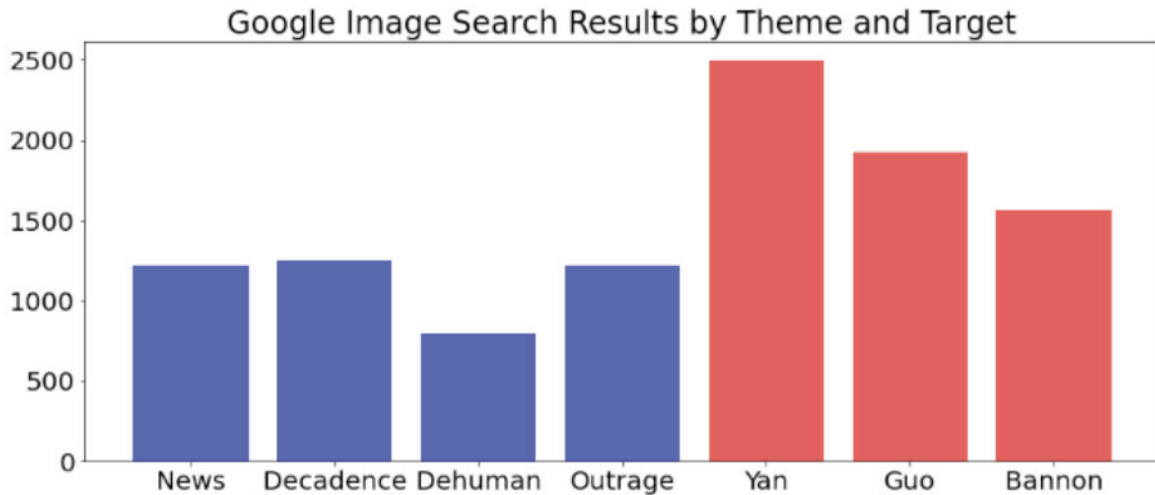


Figure 19

POSTING AROUND THE WEB

Google Photo Counts: Overall, our Google Image Search process uncovered 4,136 instances of images from the campaign being posted. Some of these are duplicate URLs, as some posts included multiple images. Some of these postings can also be double counted as the same post could appear, for example, both in a Twitter profile and in a twitter search results page, and both might be independently indexed by Google Image Search. There was significant heterogeneity in the number of search results across images. The most prominent images had nearly 100 indexed results, while over 100 images did not appear in any Google Image Search results. The bar graph in Figure 17 shows the number of results for all the images with any results. Several images with the same number search results included language variants, where the only difference was the language in the labels and speech bubbles. Google Image often returned identical results for each variant.

Overall, images were documented appearing on 236 unique root domains. These included nearly every major social media site, many large blog hosts, and many web forums. These domains operated in multiple languages, across the globe. The top 8 root domains are presented in the bar graph in Figure 18.

The bar graph in Figure 19 presents the number

of Google Image Search results for images with elements of each major theme or containing portrayals of each major subject. The theme of “Outrage” appeared disproportionately often in the Google Image Search results, relative to its share in the images, overall. The ordering of the major subjects were similar to the set of images, but the gap between Yan and the other two subjects was larger in the search results.

IMPACT

We searched on all the major domains which hosted the campaign images for significant evidence of impact. Across all domains, evidence of organic sharing was extremely limited. Few accounts that appeared organic shared any of the images, and most of the posting received very low levels of organic engagement.

Rather, the most significant impact of this campaign appears to be by influencing the prominence of the themes they pushed in the results of searches for the names of their primary subjects. At the writing of this report, images from this campaign dominate any search for “Limeng Yan” on every one of the top-10 domains targeted. In most cases, every post on the first search page includes one of the campaign images. The results for “Guo Wengui” also contain many campaign images. And while searches for “Steve Bannon” are mostly clear of the images on the major international English-language sites, they still

dominate the search results for many non-English sites that were targeted by the campaign, like dwnews.com and ameblo.jp.

But, as the timelines above make clear, over the past several months images featuring Guo and Bannon have been a much smaller share of the output of this campaign. When they were more central, campaign images were much more prominent in their search results. Even today, despite many suspensions of accounts that were active in this campaign, a Twitter search of “Bannon” limited to the time frame when he was a prominent target of the campaign turns up many images from it.

The goal of this campaign appears to be to caricature its targets and make those caricatures prominent for readers searching for information about them. From that perspective, it might be judged a success, despite its limited organic adoption or engagement.

CREATORS AND ORGANIZATION OF CREATION

Characterizing the identity of the creators of these cartoons and how their production is organized is difficult. Little direct evidence about their identities is available. Only two of the images are signed (Figures 20, 21), and we have been unable to find examples of art signed by that same artist outside the campaign. But we can, nevertheless, provide



Figure 21, Artist signature in bottom left

some indirect evidence for who the creators are and how their creation is structured. First, it is obvious from the variety of styles that there were many artists who contributed to the campaign and most artists, like the signed artist below, contributed multiple images. Similarity of art style indicates that a single artist may have created over a dozen unique images (with almost double that if you double-count language variants). With the exception of a handful of images that were clearly created by altering pre-existing artistic images from outside the campaign, we found very few cases of unique art styles appearing in only one campaign image. Given that we probably do not have a full corpus of the campaign images, we conclude that each artist created a small set of images, on a theme. Second, the evidence suggests that the art for this campaign was not produced in a centralized manner but rather outsourced. This is in contrast with the Russian Internet Research Agency, for example, which has been shown to have



Figure 20, artist signature in bottom right

employed a centralized art department to create content for their campaigns.⁶ The best evidence for this decentralization is the large variety of software that was used to create the art. In many cases, the posted images still contained metadata indicating the digital-art software used to create the images. Combining the metadata from the exemplars and from the versions of the images posted in Pinterest, there were nearly 20 different image-editing softwares used in the creation of the cartoons, including many versions of Photoshop for Windows and Mac, Meitu, Snapseed, Comagine, and PicsArt. If these images were all created in the same workshop, we would expect much less heterogeneity in the editing tools and implied systems.

Third, the technical evidence suggests that at least some of the art for this campaign was produced in China. We have three sorts of technical evidence for this claim. First, some of the tools that were used to create the images, like meitu.com, are almost unknown in the West and overwhelmingly used by mainland Chinese users. Second, several of the hardware traces left in the metadata show that the images were edited on phones that are overwhelmingly used in China, such as the “vivo Nex A” and the “Huawei COL-AL10.” Finally, and most convincingly, several of the images had intact geocoding data that indicated they were last edited in a specific location in northern China.

Taken together, we infer that this campaign used a variety of artists to produce their images in a decentralized way. Whether these artist were contractors, employees of a marketing firm, or employees of the government is unclear. The Chinese Government has been documented using its bureaucrats to engage in influence

campaigns as side projects.⁷ But they have also been documented contracting out, including using government affiliated marketing firms and more complete contracting with fully outside marketing firms.⁸ Which structure the art element of this campaign took is unclear.

Connection to Other Campaigns

This report concentrates only on posts that include one of the identified images. But there are indications that this campaign is connected to several related campaigns, suggesting that they may be conducted by the same organization or closely related organizations.

Xinjiang Cotton: We first encountered this campaign while investigating another Chinese influence campaign. The “Xinjiang Cotton” campaign was a complex and multifaceted operation that furthered narrative slants about Xinjiang that were in the interest of the CCP. This campaign attempted to distract from the CCP’s treatment of the Uyghurs in the Xinjiang region of China by flooding the Twitter timeline of anything related to Xinjiang with content about their cotton production, agriculture, and clothes production. By October of 2021 it became apparent that a bulk of the tweets linked to the hashtags #Xinjiang and #XinjiangCotton were from accounts that were inauthentic, and most are now suspended.⁹

Several of the accounts that contributed to the Xinjiang Cotton campaign were also sharing these Guo, Bannon, and Limeng cartoons. The number of accounts that shared these cartoons

6 Gibney, A. and Botero, J. (Director). (2020). Agents of Chaos [Film]. HBO Documentary Films.

7 See, for instance, King, Pan, and Roberts (2017) “How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, Not Engaged Argument” American Political Science Review, 111, 3, pp. 484 - 501.

8 “Bots and Fake Accounts Push China’s Vision of Winter Olympic Wonderland” New York Times, 2/18/2022.
“Buying Influence: How China Manipulates Facebook and Twitter” New York Times, 12/20/21.

9 Intricacies of the accounts that were involved in the campaign can be found in Linvill, et al (2021) “Xinjiang Nylon”, Clemson Media Forensics Hub. Available at: <https://www.clem-son.edu/centers-institutes/watt/hub/documents/ci-xinjiang-influence-operation-2021.html>

weren't numerous as to shift the focus of the report; however, it was enough to prompt further investigation.

When collecting Twitter accounts that were sharing images from this campaign, we some images that share some characteristics of both campaigns, with Xinjiang Cotton political cartoons that include multilingual labels/word clouds and, interestingly, portrayals of ASPI, who have also reported on this campaign.

Australia Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI): We discussed a report ASPI report on the Twitter parts of this operation, but there is another connection between this campaign and that organization. Upon the publication of the ASPI report, and other reporting by them on Xinjiang, cartoons began appearing that referenced the report and depicted the ASPI as a bungling or deceptive character (See Figure 22). The content of the cartoons targeting the ASPI attempted to cast aspersions on their truthfulness and make them appear self-serving and as portraying facts as not what they appear.

Accelerationism: Several campaign accounts



Figure 22, Comic linking ASPI to Xinjiang Cotton

shared an odd sort of content in addition to the campaign's cartoons. These accounts initially appeared to be sharing content related to the car racing video game Need for Speed, often accompanied with pictures of race cars and the hashtag #accelerationism.

The term "accelerationism" was, on its face, being applied to a method of driving or speeding in the video game; but when looking at a larger sample of accounts the link to the political philosophy of accelerationism became apparent. Accelerationism is the political strategy by which small conflicts are fanned into something much larger as a means to bring about their goals.

The term "Accelerator-in-Chief" is a derogatory nickname for Xi Jinping, the President of the Peoples Republic of China. The term refers to the belief that Xi is accelerating China into conflict with the rival superpowers and insofar will accelerate bringing about the collapse of the CCP. This term makes fun of the title bestowed on Deng Xiaoping, "Architect in Chief". The targeting of this hashtag by the accounts related to this campaign is another example of "hashtag flooding." This technique is employed by influence actors who are not exclusively promoting a narrative but rather want to demote narratives that they do not want to be prominent in the conversation. They do this by making them hard to find in a flood of inauthentic content.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This report presents a comprehensive analysis of a coordinated inauthentic influence operation that is ongoing, robust, multilingual, cross-platform and effective. This campaign uses a novel approach to narrative flooding by creating a variety of low-cost cartoons and localizing them by changing the language of the speech bubbles, labels, and messages accompanying their posting. The photos could then be paired with messages and hashtags to overwhelm discussion of the three primary targets of the campaign: Limeng Yan, Wengui Guo, and Steve Bannon.

This campaign concentrated on quantity over quality, but with enough variety to avoid pure duplication. Here the use of variants across languages served double-purpose, by allowing for cheap near-duplicates and by broadening the set of search terms these cartoons would hit. As such, it did not benefit from much organic amplification from those outside the campaign, but for a goal of flooding the discourse around their targets with the narratives that the campaign promoted, that sort of amplification was not required. Instead, the campaign messaging alone sufficed to overwhelm any organic narratives, at least for the times where it was most active.

This structure and consequences of this campaign suggests the need to develop new measures of impact. Traditionally, in the study of information operations, we look for impact in terms of organic take-up of the narratives— things like retweets and followers. And it is common to see campaigns with lots of accounts with few followers and few organic retweets described as “ineffective” or “not getting much traction.” But the way this campaign was able to affect the search results on dozens of platforms suggests that lack of organic reach may not be sufficient to judge a campaign as ineffectual.

Furthermore, the structure of this campaign across literally hundreds of websites and platforms suggests the need to develop new methodologies for measuring the behavior of very broad campaigns. Our methodology of tracing the cartoons through reverse image searches seemed to work well for this campaign, and should work as well for other campaigns that share media very broadly. But if this campaign had worked more in video or audio and less in simple cartoons, we might have missed many of the links. Even text would have, actually, been harder to trace, as long as they did not reuse text word-for-word. An analysis of this campaign, or one like it, that limited itself to just Twitter, or even a handful of major English-dominated platforms, would have missed a big part of what this campaign was up to and the impact that it had.

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