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The 5-year Spam: Tracking a Persistent Chinese Influence Operation

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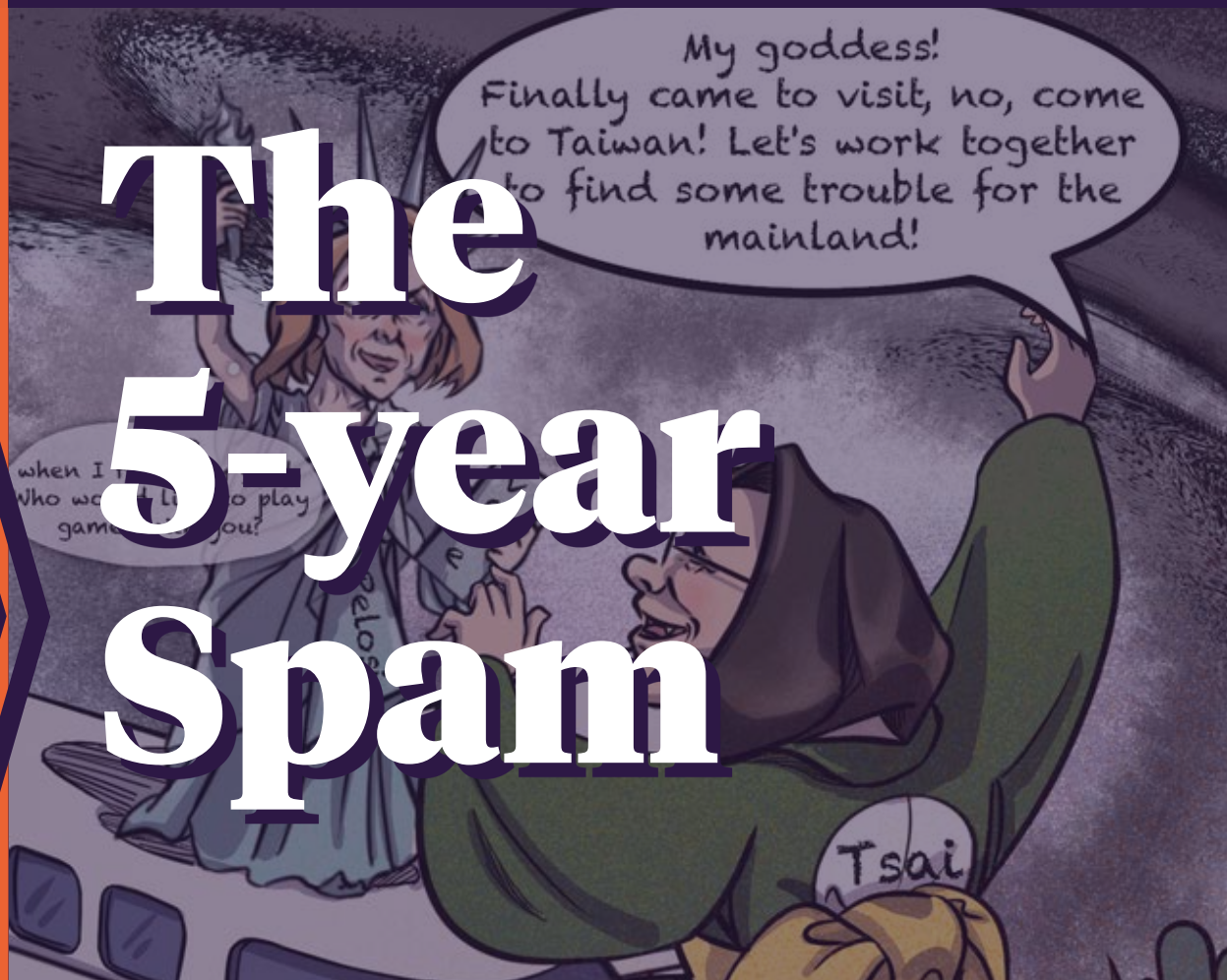
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Tracking a Persistent Chinese Influence Operation

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INTRO

China, like many autocratic nations, works to control the spread of information which may be viewed as detrimental to the goals of the state. China maintains a variety of tools employed in information operations with the goal of controlling how the state, and issues pertinent to the state, are perceived both in China and around the globe. These tools include overt levers, such as the multi-billion-dollar state media conglomerate but less obvious devices as well¹. China has organized, for instance, what is sometimes referred to as the 50 Cent Army, a collection of as many as two million social media users which make online comments at the direct behest of the state, largely for a domestic audience². To reach a more global, English speaking social media audience China has engaged in a variety of other, often subtle, tactics. These include engaging YouTube influencer to espouse a pro-China message and working with marketing companies to create pro-China astroturfing campaigns.³ This report will detail another tool China employs to control conversations around the globe: the suppressions of narratives and voices through spamming internet discourse, especially on social media.

This report analyzes the behavior of a single, coordinated inauthentic information operator working within China and in the interests of the Chinese government. This operator has been called by different names by different analysts, including “Spamouflage Dragon“ (by the network analysis firm Graphika) and “Dragonbridge” (by the Google owned cybersecurity firm Mandiant) and has been operating continuously since, at least, April 2017. In this report we will refer to this actor as Dragonbridge.

Section II of this report gives an update on several campaign this actor has engaged in recent

months. Section III presents a synthetic overview of some of Dragonbridge’s past and ongoing tactics and targets. Section IV draws some more general lessons about how this actor operates.

RECENT ACTIVITY

This section lays out three recent topics targeted by Dragonbridge. Content produced by Dragonbridge on these topics can be found across a wide range of social media platforms, forums, and websites. As is typical, however, organic engagement with the content is extremely low. In each case, Dragonbridge’s goal may not be to seed narratives or spread false claims, but rather to overwhelm natural discourse on the topics and ensure that real users cannot fully engage as they may otherwise choose.

PROBLEMATIC EXPATRIATES AND CRITICS

Starting in October 2022, a series of cartoons was observed appearing across the web focusing on a Chinese expatriates and critics, specifically Amy Qin, Qiu Jiajun, and Yan Zhihua. Qin is a New York Times journalist who has published numerous articles about east Asia over the past 10 years.⁴ Qiu Jiajun has created content related to China, covering a variety of topics, all painting the CCP in a critical light. He has been posting on YouTube since 2018 but only recently appeared as a target.⁵ Content targeting these individuals and believed to originate with Dragonbridge works to discredit them by portraying them as traitorous Western puppets. Such content has appeared in an array of online platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, among many other small forums. Attacks on Jiajun also include homophobic cartoons questioning his sexuality (Figure 1). Yan Zhihua is retired history teacher and the author of a book that claims that official accounts significantly understate deaths in Sichuan during the Great Famine.⁶ To market the book, he participated in an interview with New

1 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/12/05/chinese-state-media-beijing-xi-influence-tools-disinformation/>

2 <https://www.voanews.com/a/who-is-that-chinese-troll/3540663.html>

3 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/18/technology/china-olympics-propaganda.html>

4 <https://www.nytimes.com/by/amy-qin>

5 <https://twitter.com/john17churchill>
<https://www.youtube.com/@user-gx6dd1pz3c>



Figure 1. Collection of Dragonbridge cartoons attacking Qiu Jiajun

Tang Dynasty TV, an outlet operated by the Falun Gong.⁷ Attacks questioned his loyalty and claimed that he wrote critically to collect money from the West (Figure 2).

Attacks on Qin Jiajun also include spoofing his social media accounts—creating fake account that looked nearly identical to his own true account—on both Twitter and YouTube in a clear attempt to make it difficult to recognize his true account (Figure 3).

This behavior continues a long chain of similar attacks. Dragonbridge has targeted Chinese expatriates and individuals of Chinese decent living abroad since the beginning, including very early attacks against Guo Wengui and leaders of the resistance in Hong Kong. Section III analyzes the history of this behavior in greater detail.

TAIWAN

6 <https://www.bannedbook.org/bnews/lifebaike/20221229/1829415.html>

7 <https://www.ntdtv.com/b5/2019/09/07/a102659748.html>



Figure 2. Collection of Dragonbridge Posts and Cartoons Attacking Yan Zhihua

Current political tensions make Taiwan an obvious target for Chinese disinformation campaigns. In August 2022, Dragonbridge linked accounts on social media began to use the hashtag #敦促蔡英文及其軍政首腦投降書, which translates to: “urge Tsai Ing-Wen and her military and political leaders to surrender” (#urge). This tag appeared first when popularized by Chinese pundit Sima Nan but was quickly picked up by Dragonbridge. The #urge hashtag was found employed by likely

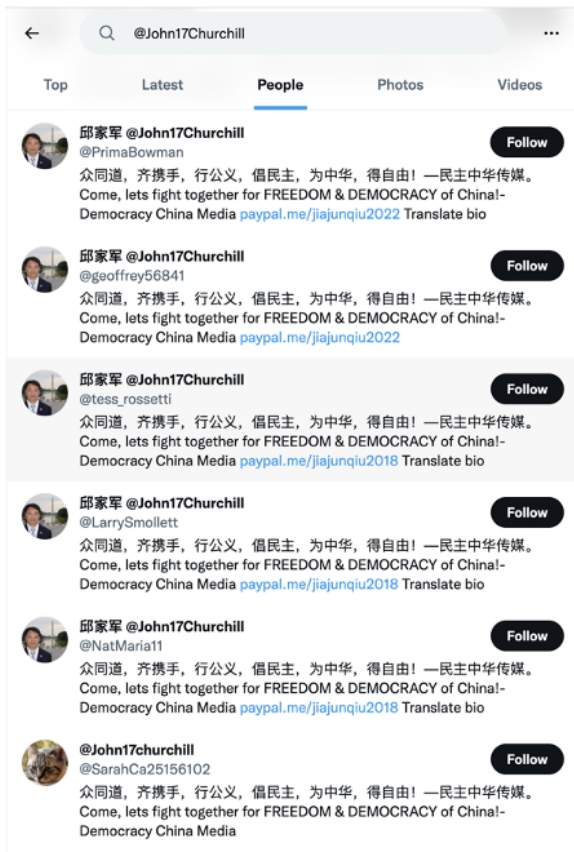


Figure 3. Screen Capture of Accounts Spoofing Qiu Jiajun Twitter Account

Dragonbridge accounts on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest and Tik Tok. Using this hashtag, Dragonbridge shared a selection of highly militaristic, fairly high production value videos. Between the 18th and 31st of August 2022, this hashtag was used at least 69,803 times on Twitter, overwhelmingly and perhaps exclusively, by accounts affiliated with Dragonbridge.

Linked videos showed messages consistent with the hashtag itself, “urging Taiwan to surrender.” Many of the videos showed Tsai Ing-Wen with



Figure 4. Images from Dragonbridge Video Shared Using #敦促蔡英文及其軍政首腦投降



Figure 5. Dragonbridge Cartoons Critical of Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-Wen

Nancy Pelosi, other political figures, Chinese naval forces, aircraft, maps illustrating invasion plans, and examples of Chinese nationalism (Figure 4). They also showcased many events from the United States, for example the storming of the US capitol on January 6th, 2020 and riots from the Black Lives Matter protests.

The overall theme of the videos matched the hashtag: Taiwan needs to fall in line with Chinese rule or face the consequences, and Taiwan's allies are unreliable. In addition to the videos, a substantial number of cartoons were found shared using this hashtag. These cartoons depict Tsai Ing-Wen as pleading for help from the United States, even being pictured as a dog (Figure 5).

As is evident from the cartoons in Figure 5, Nancy Pelosi has been a prominent target of Dragonbridge. At the beginning of August 2022, Pelosi visited Taiwan – the first prominent U.S. politician to do so in over twenty years. The People's Republic of China (PRC) viewed this visit as a violation of the United States' One-China Policy,

Paul Pelosi, Nancy's husband, was also a Dragonbridge target. Scandals, including his driving under the influence conviction and rumors of insider trading, were used to discredit the Pelosi visit to Taiwan. Content about Paul Pelosi likewise includes political cartoons and links to negative articles (Figure 6).

Many of the accounts on Twitter that were found using the #urge hashtag were created at around the same time, August or September of 2022. These accounts would generally post the same content repeatedly. Other accounts posting the videos and propaganda were hacked accounts of genuine users.

While fewer accounts sharing the #urge hashtag and content appeared on Facebook, these accounts engaged in more legitimizing techniques. We found many accounts utilizing backstopping (posting content to support the fact that the "person" is real). Examples include pictures of attractive people, beautiful landscapes and general stock images. Once the hacked accounts were established under the control of the new, illegitimate owner, posting about Tsai Ing-Wen and surrendering would begin.

Interestingly, while Pinterest is not normally thought of as a platform on which disinformation, or political content more generally, is shared, Dragonbridge content appears on the platform frequently. This included content related to the #urge hashtag (Figure 7).

TRANSITIONAL POLICING SCANDAL

Another recent Dragonbridge narrative that has emerged involves Chinese defense against the accusations that they have deployed police outside their borders. On September 12, 2022, the Human Rights NGO Safeguard Defenders published a report suggesting China was operating unofficial police stations overseas.⁸ This report seems to have resulted in an attempt by Dragonbridge to delegitimize and drown out the story and Safeguard Defenders more broadly.



Figure 6. Dragonbridge Cartoon attacking Nancy and Paul Pelosi

This campaign employs two potential narrative pathways. The first is a ‘whataboutism’ based narrative that implicates the West as already conducting transnational policing. The other narrative in this campaign involves discrediting allegations against the China more directly.

The whataboutism based campaign centers on portraying the US and other Western powers as

exercising power illegally outside their borders. One such example shows an NSA jacketed Uncle Sam listening through a technological device aimed at the globe with the caption “An unexpected invasion.” There is also a bubble extending from Uncle Sam that says “Huawei...”

This lambasts the United States opposition to Huawei and its claims that the telecommunications provider is a means of Chinese espionage (Figure 8). Dragonbridge’s tactics around transnational policing and Safeguard Defenders were similar to past efforts. On Twitter and other platforms fake social media accounts spread cartoons attacking the NGO, claiming it was a puppet of a hypocritical United States government. Meanwhile, new accounts were created to discuss the issue at a high rate and with verbatim content, seemingly in an effort to drown out genuine conversations that may occur (Figure 9). As with other elements of the wider Dragonbridge campaign, YouTube was central to efforts around transnational policing (Figure 10). The videos were all nearly identical, in terms both content

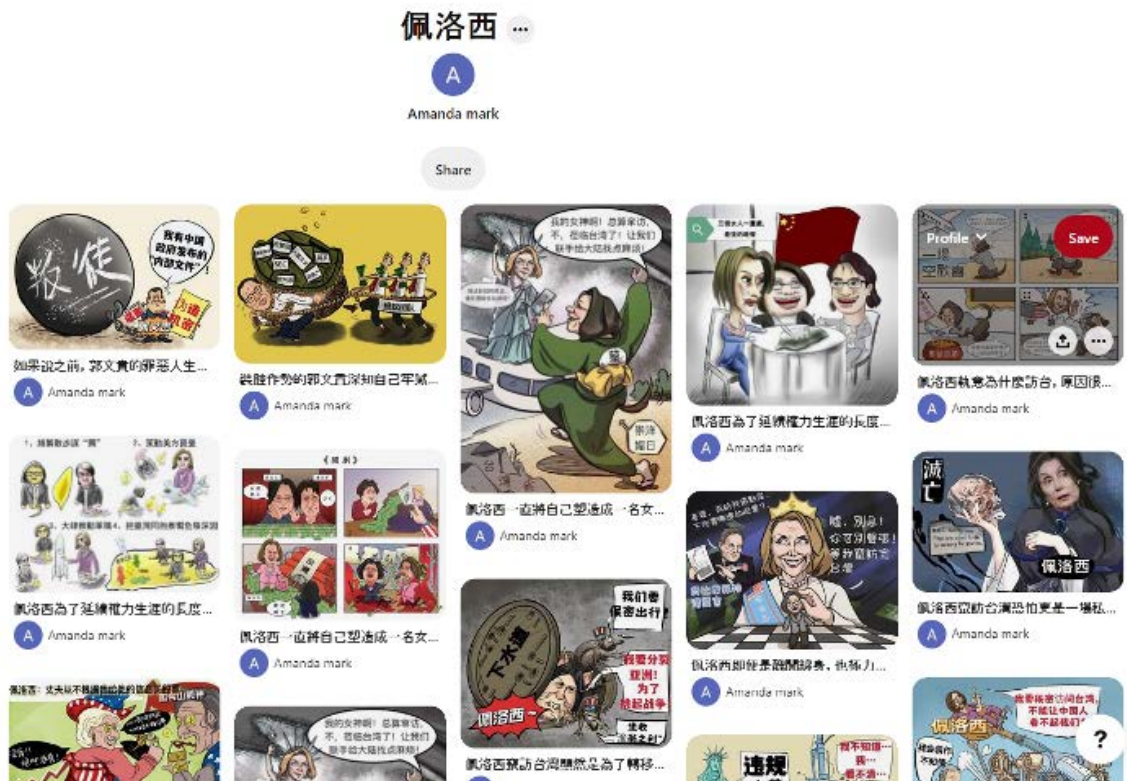


Figure 7. Example Pinterest Account Sharing Dragonbridge Content

and formatting, and the comments section on the more-viewed videos were full of other accounts that post Dragonbridge content.

SYNTHETIC ANALYSIS OF DRAGONBRIDGE'S HISTORY

Dragonbridge has been the subject of over a dozen reports over the past 3 years. These reports have documented elements of its activity dating back to, at least, June 2017. Here, we pull together the topics and tactics documented in those reports to present a more complete picture of how this actor behaves and how that behavior has varied over time. At the time of their publication, not all of the reports detailed below attributed the activity described to Dragonbridge, but subsequent evidence suggests that these reports all point to activity from the same actor.

PAST REPORTS ON DRAGONBRIDGE'S BEHAVIOR

Our synthesis is derived from 14 reports from 4 institutions who have investigated the behavior of this actor over the past three years, in addition to the new behavior outlined in section II. We now briefly summarize each of these reports, broken out by their author.

Graphika

- Cross-Platform Spam Network Targeted Hong Kong Protests⁹

In 2019, Graphika identified a network of spam accounts used to push Chinese political narratives on YouTube, Twitter and Facebook. It was in this first report that Graphika nicknamed the organization “Spamouflage Dragon” because of their tactic of posting other content to hide their political focus. This report detailed how the campaign worked to boost a Chinese language channel named Rumor Shredder which often targeted the Chinese dissident Guo Wengui.¹⁰ Another

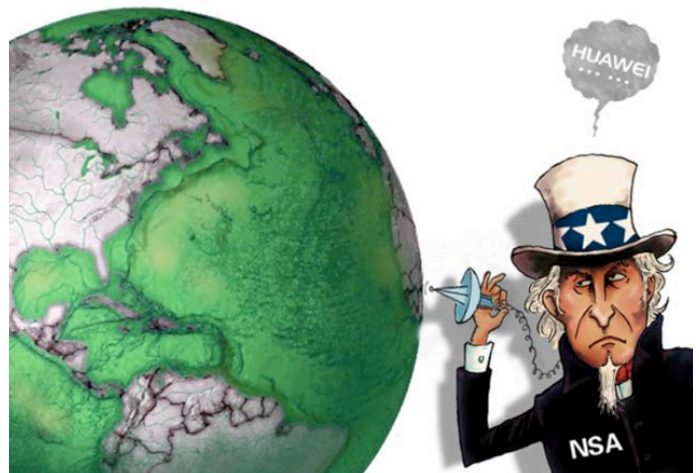


Figure 8. Cartoon Critical of the NSA

example of the type of account this report highlighted was a YouTube channel name Michael Welsh which interspersed Tik Tok videos with political content.¹¹ Another tactic used by the network was converting traditional accounts with normal content into spam accounts. Michael Welsh is a good example of this as well. Originally the channel did not post political content, but episodes of “The Good Life.” The channel stopped posting in late 2016 and became active again as a part of the Spamouflage campaign in 2019. The Facebook arm of the campaign was similar, with a high volume of low-quality posts. Rather than fake user profiles, Spamouflage on Facebook consisted of pages designed to look like people. Pages require less verification, which is consistent with the low-quality output seen elsewhere in the campaign. The Facebook pages also posted camouflage along with political content and links to YouTube videos. The network began the campaign targeting Guo Wengui in 2018, but shifted to the Hong Kong protests in mid 2019. The Guo content did not stop, but was reduced in frequency.

- Return of the (Spamouflage) Dragon¹²

In early 2020, Graphika discovered new accounts, all still following the same high-volume, low-quality strategy. These posts

8 <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-china-police-stations-citizen-crackdown/>



aoyue @aoyue55519315

The only reason that #Safeguard Defenders tries to defend those corruption suspects who fled abroad I can think of, is Safeguard Defenders protects its corrupted complices.

7:47 PM · Nov 14, 2022 · Twitter Web App

HanJiaqi @HanJiaqi86366554

The only reason that #Safeguard Defenders tries to defend those corruption suspects who fled abroad I can think of, is Safeguard Defenders protects its corrupted complices.

9:13 PM · Nov 13, 2022 · Twitter Web App

Figure 9. Dragonbridge Content Appearing on Twitter Regarding Safeguard Defenders

failed to reach wider audiences like the earlier network, but they demonstrated the tenacity of the organization.

- Spamuoflage Goes to America¹³

In August 2020, Graphika found activity targeting the United States which they attributed to this actor. In this report they tracked a campaign targeting politicians and institutions in the U.S. The campaign employed English-language videos spread over multiple platforms. The report detailed several techniques, both new and old — Machine-generated profile images, cross-platform persona, and a combination of batch created, hacked, and repurposed spam accounts.

- Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI)
- Tweeting through the great firewall¹⁴

This report analyzed 3.6 million tweets from December 2007 to May 2019 from 940 twitter accounts suspended by twitter for being related to a disinformation campaign centered around Hong Kong. Tweets from these accounts were found in Indonesian, Arabic, English, Korean, Japanese, and Russian. Brand new accounts were used for this campaign in addition to repurposed spam accounts. The network also engaged in a campaign against Guo Wengui, operating beginning in May 2017. Activity from the network follows a pattern resembling the work week, demonstrating that the network operates on a schedule and is likely made up of inauthentic accounts. Other targets of the campaign include Gui Minhai, Yu Wensheng, and ten Chinese People’s Liberation Army veterans who were arrested at a protest.

9 https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/graphika_report_spamuoflage.pdf
 10 <https://web.archive.org/web/20190330063007/https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCDnS5yAmmiXZDGCPCZ7hxx9g>
 11 <https://archive.ph/6LjUl>

- #StopXinjiangRumors: The CCP's decentralized disinformation campaign¹⁵

In response to the 2021 Winter Olympics being hosted in Beijing there was a large public outcry related to China's treatment of Uyghurs in the Xinjiang province. This report detailed how China engaged in an elaborate campaign that sought to suppress these online conversations by using baby, hacked, and other inauthentic accounts to flood the #Xinjiang hashtag with content related to their agricultural prowess and cotton production.

- #StopAsianHate: Chinese diaspora targeted by CCP disinformation campaign¹⁶

This report described a cross-platform campaign hijacking the #StopAsianHate hashtag to spam posts about Li-Meng Yan (a Chinese virologist who challenged the state's narrative regarding the origin of Covid-19).¹⁷ Cartoons were created in English and Mandarin and attached to messages.

- Smart Asian women are the new targets of CCP global online repression¹⁸

This report detailed targeting of high profile women of Chinese descent, with a particular emphasis on journalists. Targeted women worked at outlets such as the New Yorker, The Economist, New York Times, and others. ASPI asserts that this effort is another iteration of Dragonbridge. With some accounts created to harass multiple women and some dedicated to only one, the accounts address topics like the Milk Tea Alliance, treatment of Uyghurs, and US politics.¹⁹ Many journalists were bombarded with more abusive content. The main thread of this campaign is calling these women traitors and liars and betraying their

homeland and slandering their home country. People targeted include: Jiayang Fan, Muye Xia, Xinyan Yu, Lingling Wei, Alice Su, Mei Fong, and Jane Li.

- In addition to the above reports, ASPI researcher Albert Zhang reported on social media additional observations regarding Dragonbridge worthy of note. In an October 2022 Twitter thread, Zhang discussed Inauthentic accounts spamming social media (Twitter, TikTok, Soundcloud), covering up a report by Safeguard Defender about the actions of Chinese police.²⁰ Account spoofing was employed in the operation as a large number of accounts were created to resemble the authentic Safeguard Defender's twitter profile. Additionally, spamming the words "Chinese transnational policing" got the words banned from twitter so that authentic discussion about the report could not take place

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- Xinjiang Nylon: The anatomy of a coordinated inauthentic influence operation²¹

This report addressed much of the same content covered in ASPI's #StopJingiangRumors report. This report described how Dragonbridge employed hub-spoke networks and hashtag flooding. This report speculated there was likely an element of preparation in the hashtag flooding. By proactively flooding a hashtag early stages of public engagement the campaign could mitigate the effects of it.

- Oh the Places You'll Guo!²²

This report detailed a long term, multi-platform campaign that targeted Guo Wengui, Limeng Yan, and Steve Bannon over topics ranging

12 https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/Graphika_Report_Spamouflage_Returns.pdf

13 https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/graphika_report_spamouflage_goes_to_america.pdf

14 <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/tweeting-through-great-firewall>

15 <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/stop-xinjiang-rumors>

16 <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/stopasianhate-chinese-diaspora-targeted-by-ccp-disinformation-campaign/>

from Guo’s bankruptcy and cryptocurrency, Bannon’s arrest, and Li-Meng Yan and her role in promoting the theory that COVID originated from a lab in Wuhan. As described in previous reports, Dragonbridge made extensive use of cartoons.

- Mandiant
- 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.²³

This 2021 report detailed many of the same tactics detailed in previous reports. Mandiant described an extremely broad campaign across at least seven languages and a range of social media platforms and forums. The report pointed to specific instances of calls for Asian Americans in the U.S. to physically protest against racial injustice..

- Pro-PRC DRAGONBRIDGE Influence Campaign Targets Rare Earths Mining Companies in Attempt to Thwart Rivalry to PRC Market Dominance²⁴

In this report Mandiant reported on a new topic of interest to Dragonbridge, rare earth metals. They also noted ongoing messaging on some of the older topics (Covid-19, Miles Guo, and Li-Meng Yan).

- Pro-PRC DRAGONBRIDGE Influence Campaign Leverages New TTPs to Aggressively Target U.S. Interests, Including Midterm Elections²⁵

Finally, in October 2022, Mandiant returned to this actor, documenting new claims about

the U.S. being unreliable both domestically and internationally and behind many of the world’s problems, like hacking by the NSA or sabotage of the Nord Stream pipeline. It also demonstrated a new tactic, spoofing social media accounts and plagiarizing reports with deceptive editing along with ongoing tactics like creating novel videos and the mass creation of accounts.

TACTICS

An important characteristic that distinguishes Dragonbridge from many other influence operators is the wide variety of tactics they employ, as well as how those tactics have expanded over time. In this sub-section we describe and track thirteen of these tactics, which we divide into two categories, one pertaining to the content that accounts produced and one pertaining to the origins and characteristics of the accounts themselves. Figure 11 presents a timeline of the Dragonbridge’s documented use of these tactics. The darker color indicates periods in which specific examples of these tactics were observed and cited in the reports listed above, and the lighter color indicates periods in which the tactics were likely in use, but we cannot point to specific documented instances in a report.

Content and Messaging Techniques The first set of tactics we track relate to the content and structure of the messages that Dragonbridge shares. The exact form of the messages depends on the platform and context, a message on YouTube looks different from how it looks on Twitter versus how it looks on a message board or blog site, but these heart of these tactical elements spanned platform and time.

- **Original Cartoons.** This actor has created its own de novo cartoons. The same cartoon would often be spread over multiple

17 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/02/12/china-covid-misinformation-li-meng-yan/>
18 <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/smart-asian-women-are-the-new-targets-of-ccp-global-online-repression/>
19 <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/microsite/5/node/110680>
20 <https://twitter.com/AlbertYZhang/status/1576618785384955905>

21 <https://www.clemson.edu/centers-institutes/watt/hub/documents/ci-xinjiang-influence-operation-2021.html>
21 <https://www.clemson.edu/centers-institutes/watt/hub/documents/ci-guo-influence-operation-2022.html>
23 <https://www.mandiant.com/resources/blog/pro-prc-influence-campaign-expands-dozens-social-media-platforms-websites-and-forums>

platforms. These were created for the campaigns, either from scratch or through repurposing art by unrelated artists with picture-editing software like Photoshop. The cartoons often have the structure of political cartoons, with caricatured representations of individuals and labels to make those representations clear. They would often make Chinese cultural references, such as representing people as specific animals or spirits. A more complete thematic analysis of the cartoons can be found in *Oh the Places You'll Guo!*²⁶

- **Original Videos.** This actor has created its own de novo video content, including mashups of static content and clips of content from other sources. These videos are often accompanied by voice-overs, in Chinese, or automated voice translations in English. They are hosted on a variety of video hosting websites, especially YouTube, but also including Facebook video, Tumblr, and Rumble.

- **Multi-lingual Recycling.** Original graphical or video content was often produced with labels, captions, or voice-overs in multiple language variants. This tactic allowed the same relatively high-cost elements of the messages (the audio-visual elements) to be reused to address multiple audiences. In nearly every case, a Chinese language variant exists, and English variants are also very common. French is fairly common, and a handful of cases have been uncovered in Japanese and Korean.
- **Hashtag Flooding.** Hashtag flooding occurs when a huge collection of content is created at the same time to overwhelm a small set of hashtags, to make content from the influence campaign the overwhelming bulk of content one finds if searching that hashtag. This technique was used to overwhelm conversation around certain topics such as #GenocideGames during the Olympics, #XinjiangCotton during the criticism of forced labor in Xinjiang, and the names of targeted personalities, such as #LiMengYan and #MilesGuo.^{27 28}



Figure 11. Timeline of Dragonbridge Tactics

24 <https://www.mandiant.com/resources/blog/dragonbridge-targets-rare-earths-mining-companies/>

25 <https://www.mandiant.com/resources/blog/prc-dragonbridge-influence-elections>

- **Calling for Real-World Action.** Several campaigns explicitly asked users to move beyond virtual action. These calls were mostly invitations to protest at particular dates, times, and/or locations, often in the United States
- **Account Origins and Characteristics.** The second set of tactics we document relate to how accounts are created and how they present themselves. Again, the details will vary by platform and context, but these characteristics are, mostly, broad enough to be applied and measures across context.
- **Baby Accounts.** Baby Accounts are those that were created from scratch and immediately used to spread the actor’s messages, often with a collection of very similar accounts created at the same time, with similar names and profiles, all sharing the same sort of content. These accounts receive no background or realistic identity and rarely had any significant following or organic sharing. They are often used for the purpose of hashtag flooding.
- **Account Spoofing.** Account Spoofing occurs when the campaign targets an individual like Li-Meng Yan or Guo Wengui, certain accounts attempt to emulate the appearance of the targeted individual’s account (Figure 14). These accounts will interact with tweets by and about the target. Creating fake accounts can prevent the legitimate account from being trusted as well as controlling the narrative around the target by flooding posts with propaganda messages.
- **Hacked Accounts.** Some Dragonbridge accounts have clearly once been controlled by organic actors. Often there is a gap between the organic activity and the campaign activity, suggesting that these accounts lay dormant for some period of time before they were repurposed to these campaigns.
- **Repurposed Spam Accounts.** This actor also

makes use of a third type of account, which are neither brand new nor have an organic pre-history. Rather, this third sort consists of accounts that have a long history of (mostly commercial) spam behavior, but which have been repurposed to this actor’s political aims.



Figure 12. Example of Multi-lingual Recycling

- **Cross-platform personae.** Some of the identities this actor creates exists simultaneously and consistently across several different platforms. These cross-platform personas share the same username, giving the appearance they are run by the same individual. Some accounts post nearly identical content while others focus on certain unique topics that vary between each platform, despite presenting as the same persona.
- **Account Renaming.** To disguise the repurposing of accounts or accompanying the merging of accounts, Dragonbridge at times renames accounts. This is easiest to document on Facebook (Figure 15).

26 <https://www.clemson.edu/centers-institutes/watt/hub/documents/ci-guo-influence-operation-2022.html>

27 https://www.wsj.com/articles/pro-china-twitter-accounts-flood-hashtag-critical-of-beijing-winter-olympics-11644343870?st=5qfrmwtydqzm7dca&reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink

28 <https://www.lawfareblog.com/understanding-pro-china-propaganda-and-disinformation-tool-set-xinjiang>

- **Thematic Backstopping.** Some Dragonbridge social media accounts include thematic messages or profile elements that are not part of the common messaging of the campaigns.

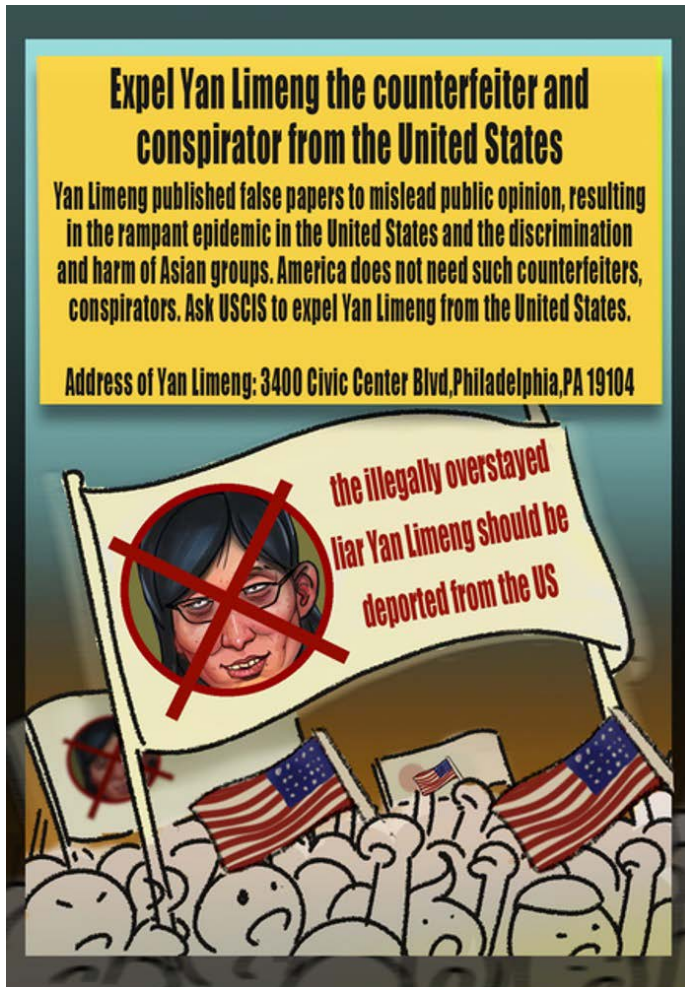


Figure 13. Example of Call for Real-World Action

Instead, they hang together under cursory inspection to tell a story about the identity of the alleged account owner. These themes include, for example, video games, anime, beauty/models, and sports-car enthusiast. These themes are typically quite shallow, consisting of a handful of messages, early in the account's life.

- **GAN Faces.** Using Generative Adversarial Network (GAN) algorithms is a common technique for obtaining realistic faces for inauthentic online profiles. These faces are nearly indistinguishable from real people, but

are not and cannot be traced back to any other source. Dragonbridge profile images are most often cartoon images or real photos obtained in unknown ways, but do include some GAN faces as well. (Figure 16)

TOPICS

In this section, we describe a collection of topics that appear in a substantial number of messages released by this operator. The details of the messaging on each topic varied over time, but the general positions the Dragonbridge took on each was quite consistent. These individual topics fall into four broad categories: criticisms of geopolitical competitors, aggressive responses to criticisms of China, messaging on disputed territory/regions,

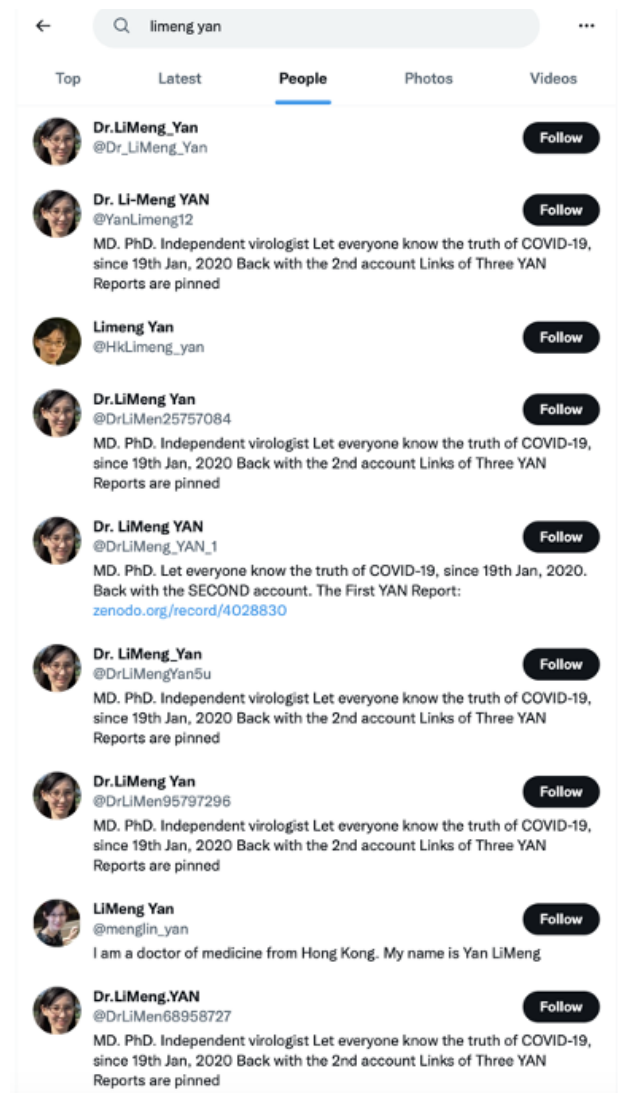


Figure 14. Screenshot of Twitter Accounting Spoofing Li-Meng Yan. User Search November 15, 2022

and attacks on expatriate or diaspora critics of China.

The timeline of these topics is presented in Figure 17. In it, the darker color represents periods for which specific examples of these topics is available in one of the reports considered. The lighter colors represent periods in which we have inferred the topic was being addressed, but which there is not a specific documented case in one of the reports.

Criticism of Geopolitical Competitors. One topic dominates this category, criticism of the United States. More recently, however, this actor has focused attention on the more specific topic of competition over rare-earth metals.

- **Anti-West and Anti-USA.** General criticism of the West, especially about racism, unrest, and their intervention in foreign affairs from the United States.
- **Rare Earth Metals.** Claims that American and Australian mining companies are destroying the environment of their own countries and the developing world in order to obtain cheap access to rare earth metals (Figure 18).

Responses to Criticism of China. The second category includes responses to a range of critiques leveled at both China and Xi Jinping.

- **Covid.** Combating criticism of China’s early failures around Covid, as well as the continued struggles with the Zero Covid policy. A strong insistence that China’s initial response to the COVID virus was as good or better than that of other countries, especially the U.S.
- **Accelerationism.** Flooding of the hashtag #accelerationism with a mix of criticisms of Western accelerationism and unrelated content from video games, car racing, or similar. This flood shuts down conversations critical of President Xi, denoting him as “Accerationist in Chief” (Figure 18).
- **Attacking Critical Reports.** Responses to reports criticizing Chinese policies. These include several reports from ASPI about Xinjiang and a report from Safeguard Defenders about Chinese international policy practices and, especially, ways in which the CCP induced wanted citizens to return by threatening or penalizing their families.



Figure 11. Timeline of Dragonbridge Tactics

unrest and disruption.

Regional Issues. The third category included several topics regarding regions in and around China which pose political challenges for China and the CCP.

- **Taiwan.** Criticism of Taiwan and Taiwanese leaders, calls for them to surrender to the mainland, and suggestions that the Taiwanese government is a puppet to the United States.
- **Hong Kong.** Criticism of the anti-mainland protesters and their leaders, especially portrayals of them as violent traitors who bring

- **Xinjiang/Uyghurs.** Efforts by the CCP to control the narrative around the threat of the Uyghur minority group in the Xinjiang province. Sub-themes include Uyghur contentment, Xinjiang’s agricultural prowess and mechanization, and claims that reports about mistreatment are Western propaganda.

Problematic Expats. The final category included several topics which targeted specific expatriate Chinese citizens or foreign citizens of Chinese descent who were vocal critics of the Chinese



Figure 16. Example GAN faces. Originally appearing in Graphika Report

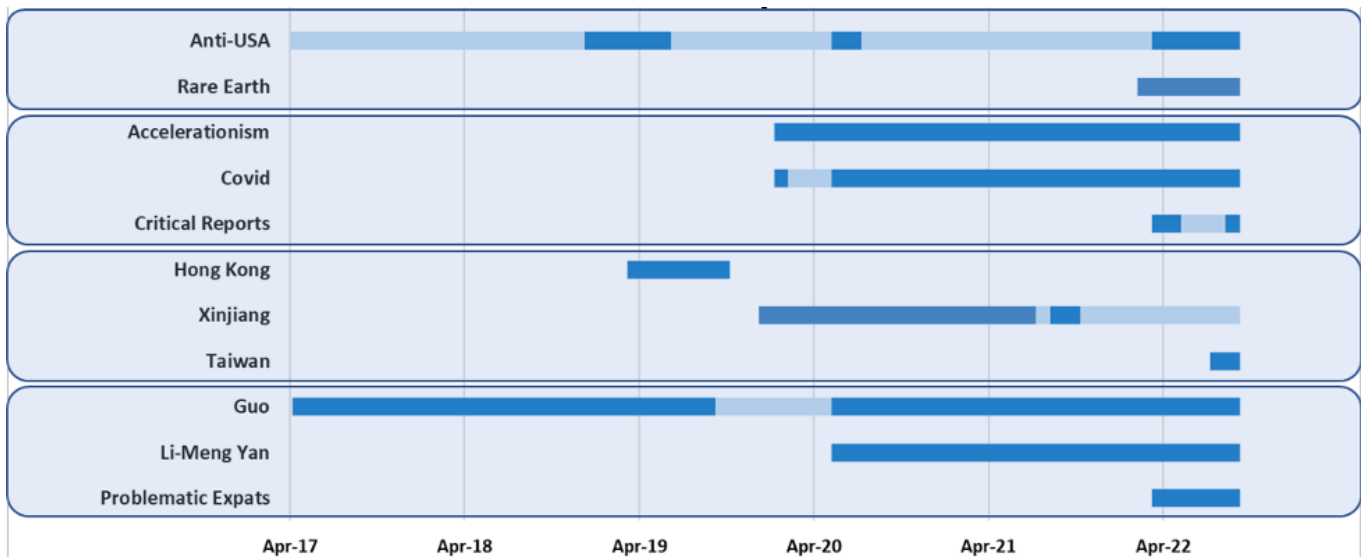


Figure 17. Timeline of Dragonbridge Topics

state or Communist Party.

- **Guo.** Guo Wengui (also known as Miles Guo and Miles Kwok) is a Chinese billionaire and dissident who left China for the United States in 2014. Dragonbridge has targeted him relentlessly. The campaign against him is wide ranging in focus as it highlights and distorts his relationships with Steve Bannon and Li-Meng Yan, his cryptocurrency, and his Himalaya movement. He is often portrayed as a rat, untrustworthy, and anti-Chinese.
- **Li-Meng Yan.** Li-Meng Yan is a Chinese virologist. She became well known when she appeared on a podcast hosted on the Himalaya Movement platform where she purported to know that COVID-19 was made in a lab. She saw increased fame when Steve

Bannon and Guo flew her to New York and she appeared on Tucker Carlson’s show to discuss her claims.²⁹ Dragonbridge targets her as the impetus for a wave of anti-AAPI hate. She is often depicted as a snake, a liar, and a puppet. Later cartoons called for protests for her removal from a position at the Perelman School of Medicine and from the U.S. (Figure 19)

- **Problematic Chinese Expatriates and Diaspora** A collection of expatriates from China or foreign-born people of Chinese descent have been targeted over time, but less consistently, often in response to their criticism of the CCP. Those targeted include Gui Minhai, a Chinese-born Swedish citizen, Qiu Jiajun, the host of a popular anti-CCP YouTube channel, and several Chinese and Chinese-American female journalists.



PATTERNS IN TACTICS AND TOPICS

The timelines of tactics and topics (Figures 11 and 17) paint a picture of the growth of this operator. In its early days, Dragonbridge focused on two topics—attacking Miles Guo and the United States of America. From this early state, multimedia content was central to this operator’s tactics, with original videos and cartoons being an important tactic from the start. At the beginning, they used relatively simple accounts, created from scratch for the campaign, which at times were used to spoof legitimate accounts.

Over time, both the topics and the tactics expanded, and that expansion was almost without exception. We observe only one instance of a topic coming off its documented agenda, the Hong Kong topic. The timing of the removal—late 2019—is surprising, as protests and political conflict continued well into 2021. Perhaps it was edged out by making Covid and Xinjiang a priority, or the operator simply decided to pivot after many accounts were shut down in late 2019. The true

Figure 18. Screenshot from Dragonbridge account @JessMadore11 illustrating both the Rare Earth and the Accelerationism topics

29 <https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/21/politics/coronavirus-lab-theory-yan-bannon-invs/index.html>

underlying reason is unclear. In all other cases, once a topic is addressed by this operator, it continues to be addressed throughout the period of our analysis. Similarly, when new tactics were adopted, old tactics were not discarded. Instead, they would often run in parallel.

The adoption of new topics and new tactics seem to be related. New tactics were often added at

CONCLUSIONS

This report has offered two views into the diverse and ongoing activities of a persistent influence actor known as Dragonbridge. This actor has spent the last five years meddling with topics across dozens of platforms and websites that are of interest to the Chinese Government.



Figure 19. Cartoon calling for the protest of Limeng Yan's involvement with the Pearlman School of Medicine. From Pinterest user @DFGNFXDFVBGX, pulled 11/15/2022

approximately the same time as new topics. This might be indicative of a segmentation of efforts across topics, where new teams learn from old. Alternatively, it could be simple inertia and programmatic adjustments, where the managers simultaneously revisit the topics and tactics, either to respond to counter-intelligence efforts and perhaps train their agents and managers to craft methods to spread their topic and reach target audiences in nuanced ways.

Some broad classes of topics — critics of the Chinese government, troublesome regions and neighbors of China, and the USA – are important throughout the whole period, while the details shift over time. In late 2022, the targeted critics included Safeguard Defenders and their report on Transnational Policing, the troublesome region was Taiwan, and a prominent criticism of the US regarded spying by the NSA.

Similarly, certain tactics were central throughout

the whole period – the use of original cartoons, videos, and shallow accounts made from scratch. But we also see adoption of additional tactics, over time, especially relatively simple account-level investments like GAN faces and mild thematic backstopping.

But the most striking characteristic of this actor is how it has expanded along all dimensions: size, scope, and sophistication. It addresses more topics over time, from two or three at the start to at least a dozen today. It applies more tactics, and operates more heterogeneous accounts with a dramatic broadening of the range of platforms and websites it targets. In early days, it was mostly found on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Today, this actor is actively posting messages on well over a hundred platforms and websites, including every major social-media, photo, and video hosting platform, every major blogging host we have investigated, and many small web forums, blog sections, and other websites that allow public comment, in at least 4 different languages.

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