

How Does the Chinese Government Use Social Media to Control and Direct the Collective Actions of Overseas Chinese Communities

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Abstract: Through the analysis of social media platforms, this study hopes to understand how the Chinese government exerts specific influence on the behavior of overseas Chinese through these media, and further explore how the country indirectly supports the practice of national strategic policy through the control of social media platforms. This study will mainly analyze the data of the three major mainstream media (wechat, Weibo and Facebook) to study and discuss how the Chinese government uses the platform of social media to achieve its national strategic goals. In addition, the study assesses the role of such controls in supporting China's soft power building and national strategies such as the Belt and Road Initiative, and explores their potential long-term impacts and risks. By comparing implementation effects in different regions, this study provides an in-depth understanding of how the Chinese government uses social media to exert influence overseas in the context of globalization.

Keywords: Social Media; Overseas Chinese; Media Control; Chinese Government.

1. Introduction

As science and technology continue to advance, people's daily lives are becoming more intertwined with social media. Social media has become an essential component and a significant instrument for governments to accomplish their political and cultural objectives. In China, social media serves not only as a means of daily contact, but also as a crucial instrument for the government to manipulate public opinion and exert social control. As China's power and influence continue to grow, it will attract greater global scrutiny. Hence, it is imperative for the Chinese government to not only regulate the activities of its citizens within the country, but also to impose limitations on the conduct of Chinese individuals residing abroad. Hence, the Chinese government employs social media as a crucial method to provide guidance to abroad Chinese. Overseas Chinese play a crucial role in connecting China with the global community, and the conduct and communication of overseas Chinese populations can influence China's international reputation to a certain degree. Hence, this study aims to comprehend the manner in which the Chinese government directs overseas Chinese, focussing on the precise techniques employed through several prominent social media platforms. Subsequently, an analysis will be conducted to evaluate the specific outcomes of these strategies in distinct overseas places.

The objective of this study is to examine and comprehend the strategies employed by the Chinese government in utilising social media to influence and regulate abroad Chinese. The intention is to offer a significant scholarly viewpoint on contemporary international relations and provide vital insights for both academia and policy makers.

2. The Utilisation of Social Media Platforms by the Chinese Government

2.1. Techniques for Maximising the Benefits of Prominent Social Media Platforms

2.1.1. Wechat

WeChat, being a prominent social media platform in China, is not only extensively utilised within China but also has a substantial user base within the global Chinese population. The Chinese government's influence and guidance of overseas Chinese populations through WeChat is mostly manifested in the following aspects. In the current period, WeChat dominates the market in China and has established itself as the leading mobile platform for quick communication and information exchange, boasting the greatest user base in the country. Despite initially being a platform for social connections, WeChat has expanded its capabilities in recent years to include several media services [3]. WeChat has been deeply ingrained in every facet of Chinese society, encompassing education, employment, recreation, and communication [25]. It has emerged as the social network that individuals engage with most frequently and intimately, exerting a profound impact on their emotions, thoughts, and actions [9]. The push function of WeChat's public accounts plays a crucial role in the overseas Chinese community and should not be disregarded [14]. The Chinese government's official certified public accounts will disseminate content pertaining to national politics, strategic objectives, social development, and other relevant topics. The sporadic promotion of this content will significantly augment the overseas Chinese's perception of affiliation with the Chinese government and their sense of allegiance to the nation.

2.1.2. Weibo

Weibo is seen by the Chinese government to be an efficient and open social platform that not only serves as a public opinion influencer but also as a means of controlling information. The Weibo subject list serves as a crucial

instrument employed by the government to regulate the trajectory of popular sentiment. Through manipulation of Weibo's trending topics, the Chinese government can effortlessly redirect public focus towards specific events of their choosing. This strategy serves the dual purpose of diverting attention away from issues that the government struggles to control, while also encouraging the public to prioritise matters that uphold national sovereignty [10]. Amidst the 2019 Hong Kong protests, Weibo, a popular search engine, prohibited the use of terms associated with the protests in its trending search terms. However, phrases such as "Hong Kong's return" and "one country, two systems" remained highly sought for.

Furthermore, prominent V accounts on Weibo serve as a powerful instrument for the government to influence popular sentiment. Big V accounts frequently exert influence on their substantial number of followers by sharing official messages and expressing support for the government. Through collaboration with these accounts, the government successfully ensured a favourable public perception on social media and effectively suppressed the dissemination of dissenting viewpoints [5].

2.1.3. Facebook&Twitter

Although China imposes restrictions on worldwide social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, these platforms nonetheless hold significant sway over overseas Chinese communities. The Chinese government employs various tactics to penetrate popular sentiment on these sites. For instance, counterfeit accounts and "water army" activities are often used to fabricate and disseminate public sentiment favorable to China on these platforms. These fraudulent accounts, frequently masquerading as regular users, attempt to manipulate public opinion by regularly publishing, sharing, and commenting on pertinent articles to promote China's stance on important matters. When discussions on national sovereignty arise on Twitter, a significant amount of comments that support and promote the unity and integrity of China's sovereignty are shared and spread, creating a favorable online environment for China [22].

Interestingly, Facebook's advertising feature could serve as an effective tool for the Chinese government's propaganda efforts. The Chinese government may strategically utilize this feature to specifically target overseas Chinese and disseminate propaganda that aligns with their interests, thereby enhancing the connection between overseas Chinese and the Chinese government and subtly evoking their patriotic sentiments [4].

2.2. Regulation of Social Media

The Chinese government will exercise oversight and employ algorithms to selectively control a significant volume of information on social networks. It will actively promote the dissemination and sharing of comments that are supportive of the country, while manipulating and diminishing the visibility of unfavorable comments until they are no longer prominent [12]. Furthermore, the Chinese government employs content filtering mechanisms to restrict the dissemination of politically sensitive terms on various social media platforms within China. This strategy is employed to shape a positive public sentiment on the internet, aligning with the government's objectives [24]. Moreover, this type of control extends beyond China and is also implemented in Chinese communities abroad. The Chinese government employs various technical methods and collaborates with

overseas social media platforms to shape the information landscape for overseas Chinese, making the information environment as favorable as possible to China.

The online water army is an important tool for the Chinese government to manipulate public opinion on social media. These web users, employed by the government or stakeholders, create and amplify public opinion in support of the government's position by posting, reposting, and commenting on mass content [6]. These accounts often appear as ordinary users on social media, but their job is to steer public opinion through frequent posts and comments. For example, in international controversies, online water soldiers quickly occupy the high ground of public opinion on social media platforms and suppress the emergence of opposing voices by posting a large number of comments in support of China's position. Such manipulation not only affects the direction of public discussion but also influences the international community's perception of events by creating a false public consensus.

The Chinese government's control of social media not only stays on the surface but also brings some subtle influences. The Chinese government has implemented it to a deeper level. Through the control of social media and the direction of public opinion, the Chinese government can effectively arouse the nationalist consciousness and patriotic feelings of overseas Chinese. During important national festivals, the Chinese government will release relevant propaganda films that can arouse patriotic feelings through WeChat, Weibo, and other social platforms [21]. This method has a deep and intangible influence on overseas Chinese and can also enhance their personal sense of belonging to China and the motherland. It also enables the Chinese government to achieve its purpose by involving the Chinese government in international affairs. Overseas Chinese can support the Chinese government when doing business, and when China is targeted by other countries in international affairs, overseas Chinese actively speak out for the Chinese government. When the Chinese government was involved in the South China Sea dispute, the Chinese government spread the sovereignty issue and history and culture of the South China Sea through social media, successfully leading the global Chinese community to support the integrity of national sovereignty.

2.3. Evaluation of the Efficacy of Strategy Implementation Across Various Countries and Areas

2.3.1. The Continent of North America

The Chinese government's control techniques are rendered more nuanced and intricate due to the diversity of Chinese communities and the significant desire for unrestricted access to information throughout North America, specifically in the United States and Canada. Nevertheless, North American countries possess a multitude of information channels and have access to a broad spectrum of sources. Therefore, the Chinese government must do greater effort in order to exert influence over the Chinese population in the region. The Chinese government plans to bolster pro-government content on social media platforms by providing support and financial resources to Chinese groups and cultural organizations. During significant Chinese festivals in the United States and Canada, these organizations utilize platforms like WeChat and Weibo to push information that is in line with Chinese government policy, creating an atmosphere of active support

for the motherland. The content promoted by these platforms is always related to the positive image of the Chinese government in the international community, including the content of economic growth and the image of a great power, which will have an impact on the local Chinese people [16].

The high degree of information openness in North America makes the Chinese government have to control the network water army to manage the network information. When there is an international dispute, the Internet water army will create a favorable public opinion environment for the Chinese government by frequently forwarding a large number of posts supporting the Chinese government, and quietly influence the attitude and opinions of users in North America[12]. In the Sino-US trade incident and the Taiwan incident, the Internet water army will dominate the direction of public opinion in the region by creating and forwarding a large number of posts favorable to the Chinese government.

However, due to North America's media pluralism and emphasis on freedom of expression, the Chinese government's strategies have not always been successful. Chinese communities in North America often have access to multiple perspectives of information and are wary of government manipulation. Therefore, the Chinese government's public opinion guidance and control in this region needs to constantly adjust and adapt to the local media environment.

2.3.2. Europe

In contrast to North America, the Chinese population in Europe is more widely spread out, and the regulations regarding social media and speech control differ from nation to country. As a result, the Chinese government's approach to controlling social media in this region is distinct.

Initially, the Chinese government in Europe has engaged with the Chinese population primarily through cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy. The government enhances the cultural identity of the Chinese community by endorsing Chinese cultural events and festivities via platforms like WeChat and Weibo. By strategically coordinating traditional festivals like the Chinese New Year and Dragon Boat Festival and leveraging social media platforms for extensive promotion, the government successfully strengthened the Chinese community's sense of belonging to Chinese culture, while simultaneously projecting a favourable national image [2].

Furthermore, the diverse regulatory regulations on information and speech among European countries create a favourable environment for the Chinese government to tailor its strategies accordingly. In nations with less stringent media regulations, the Chinese government has greater freedom to utilise social media platforms as a means to influence public opinion and distribute information. In nations with more stringent media regulations, the government tends to disseminate content in support of the Chinese government through indirect methods on social media, such as endorsing local Chinese groups or cultural organisations.

In spite of the increased diversity and openness of the media landscape in Europe, the Chinese government has effectively disseminated its fundamental principles and policies within the Chinese community through carefully planned cultural exchanges and public diplomacy initiatives. These efforts have not only enhanced the Chinese community's emotional connection to their homeland, but also impacted the local public's opinion of China to some degree.

2.3.3. Regions in Southeast Asia and Other Areas with a High Concentration of Chinese Population

The Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia is one of the most significant in the world, with strong cultural and historical connections to mainland China. Given the close cultural and linguistic similarities, the Chinese government's methods of controlling social media in Southeast Asia are typically more straightforward and successful [17]. The Chinese government exerts direct influence on Chinese communities throughout Southeast Asia through the promotion of information on WeChat and Weibo that is in line with Chinese government policies. Chinese populations in Southeast Asia exhibit greater cultural cohesion and emotional connections to China compared to those in North America and Europe. Consequently, social media methods employed by the Chinese government in this region are more readily embraced [23]. As an illustration, the Chinese government has effectively communicated its official position on territorial sovereignty on regional matters like the South China Sea disputes by utilizing social media channels. This approach has garnered extensive recognition and support [19]. Given the unique attributes of Southeast Asia, numerous locations in the region already possess established Chinese communities. The government can leverage these existing organizations to effectively disseminate Chinese culture. Additionally, Chinese social media platforms are extensively utilized in Southeast Asia. Therefore, the Chinese government simply needs to regularly share relevant content about Chinese culture through these platforms to promptly achieve its desired impact. This approach will also enhance the awareness of local Chinese individuals regarding the government's official stance on territorial sovereignty. This will result in an instantaneous impact, and the local Chinese population will readily embrace the increasing feeling of patriotism.

3. Facilitating Role in Implementing National Strategies

3.1. Provision of Assistance for the Development of Soft Power Capabilities

The augmentation of soft power necessitates the amplification of the influence and dissemination of culture. The crucial factor in expanding this influence lies in strengthening international communication capacity, which serves as a significant method and effective instrument for enhancing soft power. Improving the ability to communicate internationally has become crucial for increasing soft power. The capacity for international communication now serves as a central point for the conversion of cultural resources, playing a significant role in developing soft power [1]. Social media plays a crucial role in the Chinese government's efforts to enhance its soft power by disseminating information and changing public opinion.

The Chinese government has extensively utilized social media platforms to actively promote Chinese culture and cultivate a contemporary, affluent, and harmonious national image[7]. The Chinese government actively promotes China's traditional festivals, art, literature, and modernization successes, such as high-speed rail and 5G technology, through platforms like WeChat and Weibo. This content has been extensively circulated not only within the country but also across Chinese communities worldwide, exerting a favorable influence on both the general public and politicians in

Western nations in particular. The cultural production contributes to the expansion of China's cultural influence globally and fosters favorable opinions of China. Furthermore, cultural artifacts such as Chinese television dramas, movies, and music, which are endorsed on social media platforms, have garnered a substantial global audience and fan base. These cultural items not only exhibit the cultural allure of China but also subtly disseminate Chinese values through their storytelling and motifs. An instance of this is the TV series *Yanxi Raiders*, which has gained popularity in multiple countries. It not only presents traditional Chinese culture but also communicates Chinese family values and notions of social hierarchy [11].

Social media has significantly contributed to the improvement of China's worldwide communication. By utilizing channels like Weibo and WeChat, the Chinese government has effectively and promptly addressed global events, disseminated its official stance, and influenced foreign public sentiment. For instance, in regards to sensitive international matters like the disputes in the South China Sea or the issue of Hong Kong, the Chinese government efficiently spreads its viewpoint and perspectives via social media to create a cohesive public opinion front and shape the perception of the global community [20]. Public opinion guidance not only amplifies China's influence in foreign issues but also garners public support for the country's stance in global governance. Furthermore, the Chinese government has extended its influence in the global court of public opinion by providing funding to prominent Chinese academicians, cultural celebrities, and opinion leaders to express their views on social media platforms. The views of these personalities are commonly considered as authoritative viewpoints, and their words not only serve to promote China's stance, but also generate a wave of endorsement for China's policies across global academic and cultural spheres.

The Chinese government has achieved great success in establishing soft power through the extensive utilisation of social media. The enhancement of China's international image and the strengthening of its global cultural impact and discourse power have been achieved through cultural production and public opinion direction. This has laid a strong foundation for the advancement of national strategies.

3.2. Endorsement of the Belt and Road Initiative

In 2013, President Xi Jinping initially introduced the Belt and Road Initiative and established it as a significant initiative for both political and economic advancement. The term "One Belt" denotes the terrestrial route that traverses China, Central Asia, and stretches to Eastern Europe, whereas the term "One Road" signifies the maritime route that links Chinese ports with those in Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East [18].

To promote the "One Belt, One Road" initiative and engage more Chinese and local governments in its construction, the Chinese government has utilized the rapid dissemination and extensive reach of social media platforms such as WeChat, Microblogging, and Twitter. The Chinese government has effectively utilized the rapid and extensive reach of social media platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and Twitter to promote the advantages of the "Belt and Road" policy and its benefits for the countries along the routes. This strategic approach has successfully established a mutually beneficial perception of the "Belt and Road" project among the countries along the routes from the very beginning, while also

fostering the development of the project within China. The endorsement and comprehension of the nations involved in the Belt and Road Initiative have initially facilitated the Chinese government in overcoming project hindrances and establishing a robust basis for public sentiment [8]. Furthermore, the widespread exposure on social media has also fostered support among Chinese nationals residing in countries along the Belt and Road Initiative. They are encouraging people in mainland China to visit these countries as part of the national strategic objectives. The idea has received support from numerous Chinese entrepreneurs residing abroad. A significant number of Chinese entrepreneurs residing abroad are using social media platforms to exhibit the lucrative business prospects they have acquired as a result of the Belt and Road Initiative. This has further facilitated the seamless advancement of the Belt and Road project, enabling an increasing number of individuals to partake in the venture. The implementation of the Belt and Road initiative.

Furthermore, the Chinese government has underscored via social media that the Belt and Road project encompasses not only economic collaboration with the countries along the route, but also the amalgamation of cultural ties with other nations worldwide. Through WeChat, Weibo, Facebook, and other platforms, the Chinese government has widely publicized and emphasized the construction of the Belt and Road and promoted cultural exchanges and integration among countries and peoples along the routes, which reflects the spirit of openness and inclusiveness in Chinese culture and is the need for building a community with a shared future for mankind. The Belt and Road Initiative is conducive to promoting exchanges and mutual learning among different civilizations, promoting mutual recognition of each other's values, promoting mutual respect for each other's development paths and social systems, breaking down communication barriers between different countries and peoples, and enhancing cultural mutual trust, exchanges, and mutual benefit. The "Belt and Road" strategy has built a new platform for cultural exchanges and integrated development in the era of globalization. Through this platform, people of the countries along the Belt and Road can connect with each other and promote exchanges, mutual learning, innovation, and development of each other's cultures at a higher level and on a larger scale. In the cultural exchange activities themed on the Silk Road, through social media live broadcast and interaction, the audience not only learned about China's history and culture, but also deepened their understanding and support for the Belt and Road Initiative. This cultural exchange has imperceptibly enhanced China's influence among countries along the Belt and Road.

3.3. Potential Hazards

Social media is an important part of the implementation of China's national strategy, but we must also consider the possible risks when using social media. The hazards lie not only in the potential weakening of social media's role, but also in the possibility of incorrect social media use tarnishing China's foreign image and affecting its diplomacy. Excessive dependence on social media as a means of regulating information might result in many societal issues over an extended period of time. Initially, the implementation of long-term information filtering and opinion guidance could potentially restrict the public's access to a wide range of information, so diminishing their capacity to engage in

critical thinking and develop independent conclusions [15]. Although an information environment can influence public opinion in the near term, it can ultimately erode societal trust in the government and even foster a rebellious attitude towards government information in the long run. Moreover, the prolonged exposure of overseas Chinese communities to a singular information source amidst many countries and cultural settings can potentially lead to cognitive disparities and clashes with the host society. The long-term consequence of controlling information may raise concerns and objections about China's manipulation of information in the global community, so having a negative impact on China's efforts to enhance its soft power [13].

The manipulation of social media information has the potential to elicit negative responses from the international community, particularly when China's techniques for shaping public opinion are seen as intervening in the internal affairs of other nations or manipulating information. This can result in problems in diplomatic relations. Several nations have raised concerns in recent years regarding China's conduct on social media platforms, since they perceive it as a potential danger to their own information security and sovereign autonomy. In addition to the increasing apprehension in Western countries regarding the management of information on social media platforms, several Western nations have implemented strategies to restrict the impact of the Chinese government on their social media platforms. The Chinese government's efforts to garner support from overseas Chinese through social media will confront mounting challenges due to the West's escalating vigilance towards these platforms. Due to the swift advancement of social media technologies, the Chinese government must continually adapt its information control and opinion-guiding techniques to address the difficulties presented by developing platforms and technology. With the emergence of short-video platforms and the adoption of artificial intelligence technology, the process and pace of spreading information have undergone significant transformations. Consequently, the government needs to uphold a high level of technological proficiency and strategic adaptability to effectively respond to these changes. Nevertheless, the advancement of technology also introduces intricacy and unpredictability in managing information, potentially amplifying the challenges and expenses faced by the government in enforcing information management.

Based on the given description, it is evident that the Chinese government has derived certain advantages and played a constructive role by utilising social media. However, if the government continues to manipulate public opinion through social media in the long run, it may face opposition from the international community. Therefore, the Chinese government should take appropriate measures to mitigate potential risks while using social media to achieve national objectives.

4. Conclusion

This study reveals that the Chinese government has effectively utilised the communicative nature of contemporary social media to disseminate Chinese culture and enhance the sense of belonging and national pride of overseas Chinese. This has been achieved by taking advantage of the characteristics of digital globalisation. By leveraging social media, the Chinese government has effectively cultivated a favourable perception on the global stage and bolstered its diplomatic prowess through expanding

its sway over the diaspora Chinese community. Social media is not only an important tool for the government to achieve national strategy, but also an important way to enhance the country's soft power.

Although this study sheds light on the Chinese government's successful strategy on social media, there are still some limitations to consider. First of all, the limitations of data acquisition and the problem of sample representation limit the breadth and depth of the research. In addition, rapid changes in social media technology and user behavior pose challenges to the long-term applicability of the findings. Based on these limitations, future research could explore the effects of the Chinese government's social media strategies in different cultural contexts through a broader cross-country comparison. At the same time, in-depth qualitative research, such as in-depth interviews and case studies, can provide more detailed insights into how these strategies work. In addition, with the development of emerging social media platforms and technologies, future research should focus on the impact of these changes on information control and public opinion guidance strategies in order to better adapt to the dynamic changes in the global information environment.

Overall, this study reveals how the Chinese government implements public opinion guidance and information control strategies through social media platforms and successfully supports the country's strategic objectives. Through cultural export, public opinion guidance and effective publicity strategies, the government has not only enhanced the country's soft power, but also provided strong support for the promotion and implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative. However, as the global information environment changes and technology continues to advance, the Chinese government needs to continuously adjust and optimize its social media strategy to meet future challenges and opportunities.

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