

China and its Disinformation Operation: Some Theoretical Insights
and Implications for International Politics

by

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Abstract

There is some growing evidence that the People's Republic of China (PRC) is exerting its influence on states by employing and deploying disinformation tactics to pave the way for its ideology of the China model to permeate over advances and its economic expansion over the globe, China's disinformation operation is presumed to be a main lever to realize its dream of being the world's hegemony. Despite the world economic growth that China has considerably contributed to so far, it is criticized for working for its self-interest and has yet to be illuminated what the motive is for China to strive forward and embark on such a cause. Resting on the long-lived ideology of Sinocentrism deep-rooted in the Confucianism of China, this study will examine how its disinformation operation is capitalized on and how it fits into that ingrained ideology of the PRC. Together with that, this reset of Confucianism of China, this study will examine how disinformation has stretched so far and propounds the accounts for the reasons why the international community should outline adequate countermeasures to respond to such malicious information manipulation schemes. As such, it would supplement the insight into how China utilizes disinformation as an instrument to hold up its Sinocentrism to outdistance the Western ideology and inch to the seat of the global helmsman.

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List of Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
BBB	Build Build Build
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCTV	China Central Television
CGTN	China Global Television Network
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
DPP	Democratic Progressive Party
FOCAC	Forum on China-Africa Cooperation
HIPC	Heavily Indebted Poor Countries
HRC	Human Rights Council
IC	Intelligence Community
ICJ	International Court of Justice
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and Levant
KMT	Kuomintang (Nationalist Party)
LDCs	Least Developed Countries
LOE	Line of Effort
NGOs	Non-governmental Organizations
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PR	Public Relations
PRC	People's Republic of China
PTT	Professional Technology Temple
SARS	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome

SCIO	State Council Information Office
SCS	South China Sea
TAO	Taiwan Affairs Office
UFWD	United Front Work Department (of the CCP)

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References

1. Introduction

The whole world recently has encountered a plethora of adverse impacts arising from the increasingly rampant disinformation diffusion. In a recent example, fabricated and counterfeit information emerged right during the outbreak of the pandemic of COVID-19 (United Nations, n.d.). A deluge of disinformation campaigns against human rights activists and journalists was revealed ("UN's rights council adopts 'fake news' resolution, states urged to tackle hate speech," 2022). After a long course of time combating extreme disinformation waves, on 24 December 2021 the resolution 76/227 on *Countering Disinformation for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms* was adopted, which denotes "the global concerns about, i.e., 1) the rapid spread and proliferation of disinformation", 2) the capitalizations on online platforms as conduits for disinformation and vicious *propaganda* which "negatively impact the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms." and, 3) the intimidation of global peace, stability, and sustainability via sabotaging the targeted vulnerable individuals and groups (United Nations, 2021). Along with that resolution, at the 49th regular session of the Human Rights Council (HRC) in 2022, the United Nations (UN) came to pass resolution 49/21 on the *Role of States in countering the negative impact of disinformation on the enjoyment and realization of human rights* (United Nations Human Rights Council, n.d.) that sets forth a concern about the threat of disinformation concerning human rights in the entire world. In the resolution, the UN calls for states' actions against disinformation proliferation with a whole slew of emphases on the concern about:

"the increasing and far-reaching negative impact on the enjoyment and realization of human rights of the deliberate creation and dissemination of false or manipulated information intended to deceive and mislead audiences, either to cause harm or for personal, political or financial gain." (United Nations, 2022)

It is suggested that much evidence of disinformation dissemination found in some countries in recent years is imputed to China, singularly in Taiwan and Hong Kong (Roberts, 2020). Over the last few decades, China has proven to be “a global competitor” with its achievement of the world’s second-ranking economy and gaining a quantum leap in economic growth, military capability, trade, and diplomatic affairs (Allison, 2017, pp. 16-24). As a result, China’s stature in the international plane has improved significantly. By exerting its influence in the economic field, which is called the *Economic Coercion Line of Effort* (LOE) (Curtis, 2021), China attained more support in international fora such as the case of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) with Cambodia’s upholding by investing in economic projects in this country (Chong, 2017); obtaining the favor of Greece, a member of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) at the 2017 UN Human Rights Council meeting in Geneva for the critiques of EU on China’s Human Rights issues (Emmott & Koutantou, 2017). Also, China acquired higher support sentiment from the Philippine populace with a slight increase from 54% to 55% between 2015 and 2017 (Harold et al., p. 98) and by building up a strong relationship with President Duterte to mitigate its pressure in the South China Sea (SCS) to influence the process of policy modifications from Duterte’s side, particularly in the relationship with Taiwan, the US, and *sovereign rights* in Manila (Harold et al., p. 100).

Yet China appears to advance not much in its ideology promulgation, particularly in promoting the universalizing process of its “China story” or “China Dream” (中国梦 - Zhongguo meng) coined by President Xi, which was meant to build up China as the world's largest well-off and powerful nation that “realizing the great renewal of the Chinese nation is the Chinese nation's greatest dream in modern history,” accentuated Xi at the “The Road Toward Renewal” exhibition, on November 29, 2012 (Fan, 2013). To improve that standstill, China is considered to increasingly engage in sowing disinformation by making use of its state-sponsored media agencies and Western media platforms. As Robert (2020) puts it, “All

this is an effort to strengthen China's discourse power—or a country's power to set the agenda in the international arena by influencing the political order and values globally.” (p. 4).

It is said that the disinformation operations of China are becoming increasingly refined and sophisticated, especially the official statement to employ Artificial Intelligence (AI) in social media to target other nations' citizens like those in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the US (Robert, 2020). Roberts (2020) notes that China is now reinforcing its *disinformation ecosystem* to cultivate its global-leading role (p. 5). Curtis (2021, p. 231) also emphasizes the aspiration of China to create “a new world that ostensibly ‘is more “correct,” more just’ than the present one.” Still, it remains unclear to what extent its effort has been reached to redefine the world system by China's endeavor and how the world will be transformed once that comes true.

This leads to a set of two questions: first, how has China's disinformation operation been affecting international relations? Second, should the world design countermeasures to respond to disinformation operations, and if yes, why? By answering these questions, this study is expected to join the efforts to contribute to the exploration of how far the landscape of disinformation originated from China extends and presents some theoretical insights and implications that might be pragmatic for studies of China's disinformation operations in the context of international politics, in particular, the apprehension of hybrid war's emergence in this uncertain era of information.

In the following chapters, this paper first introduces the fundamental background of dynamics that are associated with the Chinese Communist Party's growing exertion in influencing information over the past decades, which is an alleged composition amongst the state's long-standing sovereignty primacy along with the fear of lagging behind the Western superpowers which are deep-rooted from the century's humiliation (百年国耻 (bǎinián guóchǐ)) in the past (Roberts, 2020), and the ambition to be the top hegemony of the world

(Miyamoto, 2019, p. 38). Second, it elucidates how the current situation of China's expansion with disinformation is spreading over the world and proposes the emphasis of consideration on what would result in following the growing efforts in the information operation of China. Third, it puts forward the findings and implications in Chapter 4, followed by some suggestions for countermeasures for the international community to respond to the growing intensity of disinformation operations.

The methodology employed in this study is the qualitative analysis which consists of 1) researching and analyzing the existing materials and 2) observations on Chinese-sponsored agencies' presence, mainly on Western social media platforms, to decompose how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its government-driven actors activate and perform in such a novel battleground-the cyberspace.

Despite the efforts made, some limitations remain in this research.

First, this research solely relies on secondary sources and previous research. There are some new findings, but those are minor.

Second, there were few original Chinese language sources and materials due to linguistic challenges. This research's findings are drawn mainly from English-written papers.

2. China's Disinformation Operations

2.1 What is 'Disinformation'?

In this very digital age, information, along with the stimulation of technological advancement increasingly becomes a destructive power that's associated with overwhelming effects. Indeed, Major-General Copinger-Symes once forewarned, "we risk drowning in information; asphyxiated by a lack of understanding" (Wavell Room, 2020). One of the newcomers in a set of issues in that context is **disinformation**, which is defined by Merriam-Webster as "false information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by the planting of rumors) to influence public opinion or obscure the truth" ("Definition of disinformation," n.d.). In the same manner, disinformation is recognized as a perilous actor of the era by UNESCO and is described as "deliberate (often orchestrated) attempts to confuse or manipulate people through delivering dishonest information to them." (Ireton & Posetti, 2018, p. 7). Most of the time, disinformation is intended to exploit the targeted communities susceptible to being convinced by headline-grabbing news and even the objectives, who cannot reach trustworthy sources as a channel for circulating such fabricated information.

Even though disinformation is quite a novel jargon, it's no more than old wine in new bottles. Historically, disinformation has existed with a long-lived history before the appearance of journalism (Ireton & Posetti, 2018). Its roots can be traced back to ancient Rome in the war between Octavian and Antony when he met Cleopatra. Octavian then became the first Roman Emperor by resorting to fake news "to hack the republican system once and for all" (Ireton & Posetti, 2018, p. 15).

2.2 The Journey to Disinformation

To enlighten a thoroughgoing insight into the origination of disinformation, it might be necessary to closely examine the process that, in chronological order, has modified information to disinformation. Thus, this section hereafter will introduce a brief history of information and the pathway which links it with information operation. Further, the definition of disinformation, as well as a comparison amongst conceptualizations of disinformation and other notions, namely propaganda, public diplomacy, and misinformation, is also explicated to provide a systematic and precise view of disinformation and different correlative denotations.

2.2.1 From Information to Information Operation

Information is the form of data that makes sense and is practical to human beings (Clack and Selisny, 2021). Once exploited as a weapon, it can amount to a traditional form of “state and military enterprise” because of its capability to distort and rewrite the truth (Clack and Selisny, 2021, p. 260). The misrepresented information might lead to an adverse shift in the target audience’s *feelings, ideas, attitudes, or behaviors* (Clack and Selisny, 2021, p. 260).

Adopting the power of the information element, information operation is increasingly becoming a productive instrument for states to expand their influence. Russia's manipulation of the 2016 US presidential election is an example of this practice. Indeed, Virilio (1998, 2000) states that the combination of *conflict, information, and technology* is associated with manipulating the human perspective. Inkster (2021, p. 283) also stresses the *Gerasimov doctrine* of valuing non-military forces rather than military capability in terms of showing off the power of states.

The term *information operations* or *influence operations* was first introduced in the U.S. Intelligence Community (IC) via the *seminal unclassified assessment*, which revealed the evidence of the intervention of Russia in the 2016 US election to describe “the collection of tactical information about an adversary as well as the dissemination of propaganda in pursuit of a competitive advantage over an opponent.” (INSIKT Group, 2019). Similarly, as Clack and Selisny suggest, *an information operation* combines manipulation and psychological warfare designed to direct the public’s perspective via disseminating distorted information on media to acquire a *comparative advantage over adversaries* (p. 259). Clack and Selisny (2021, p. 259) add that these efforts of influence operation can be capitalized on to “invent or recast their ‘reality.’” In the lexicon of Russia, these operations are called *information confrontations* or *IPb* (*informatsionnoyeprotivoborstvo*) to identify *conflict in the information sphere*, according to the Defense Intelligence Agency (INSIKT Group, 2019). The IPb consists of two influence tactics: *informational-technical effect* and *informational-psychological effect* (INSIKT Group, 2019). In short, the IPb is intended to guide and control the public's perceptions in favor of the Russian government. Also, in the same report, the term “information manipulation” was used to denote “the intentional and massive dissemination of false or biased news for hostile political purposes.” (France Diplomacy, 2018).

2.2.2 Disinformation vs. Propaganda, Misinformation, and Public Diplomacy

To better understand disinformation, it’s necessary to distinguish this notion from other similar concepts, including propaganda, misinformation, and public diplomacy. Curtis (2021) mentions the two concepts of “disinformation” and “propaganda” with their contrasts that though both are official statements to the public as “authorized version of the truth” (p. 230), propaganda appears to be more credible, whereas disinformation is intended to distort

information dissemination to direct public opinion. In addition, disinformation differs from misinformation in that misinformation is unwilled practices while disinformation is conducted purposefully or “frequently organised, well resourced, and reinforced by automated technology” (Ireton & Posetti, 2018, p. 7). Clack and Selisny (2021), to a similar extent, define disinformation as “the deliberate creation or distribution of false information to mislead or confuse.” (p. 269), which differs from misinformation which occurs when information is shared without confirming its authenticity. Compared to the abovementioned concepts, public diplomacy is “a two-way conversation ‘that focuses on exchange and collaboration and emphasizes dialogue, relationship building, and the role of non-state actors.’” (Curtis, 2021, p. 231). These distinctions provide clarified and concrete definitions as lenses for a close examination of how hostile actors exercise information for their own sake and how much these concepts are bent from their beginning point.

2.3 The Revival of China

It is predicted that the 21st century will be the heyday of China. As Napoleon once forewarned, “Let China sleep; for when she wakes, she will shake the world.” (Allison, 2017, p. vii). That forecast today appears to be coming true as China has not only expanded its economic power, technological advances, and military capacity but also outstretched and increasingly attempted to diffuse Chinese norms to every corner of the world. Lee Kuan Yew, in his book named “One man’s view of the world” (2013), recognized the rise of China in the 21st century in terms of how it systemizes the regime in China’s fashion. Also, in the same book, Lee Kuan Yew (2013) accentuated the critical role of breakthroughs in technology, which is closely associated with information technology, social media, and technological devices, that contribute primarily to maintaining the stable ruling of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and particularly in exerting its influence over other countries. In the Philippines,

as an illustration, there is an intertwined association between China and this island country in the economic field and information communication system. Namely, there are a series of signed agreements between China and the Philippines, the economic strategy labeled “Build Build Build” (BBB) with considerable investment, and a rigid position of China in the telecommunication domain with the domination of Huawei and its 12,000 state-of-the-art mass surveillance security cameras which will be operated in cities like Clark, Pampanga, and Bonifacio Global City, Taguig (Manantan, 2019).

It is nothing new for a government, especially an autocratic regime, when it comes to influencing operations, and communication control is exercised as a toolkit in international fora in general and in foreign affairs in particular. In that context, governments generally seek to intervene in cyberspace by seeking to access, regulate, and takedown the unwanted information that might threaten their ruling system (Keremoglu & Weidmann, 2020) and sow fabricated, distorted content for hostile and vicious intentions aiming at targeted objectives. In line with the latter, it would be noteworthy when one resort to information as an instrument to reach goals in its distinct manner. During the last decades, China has arguably increasingly become a prominent figure in the international scope of adopting technological advancement into its national image propagation as well as inducing an extraordinary shift in the world's view toward China, which contributes substantially to bolstering China's status in the international dimension. Those striking expansions are the outcomes of the CCP's outstanding effort to adopt disinformation by exploiting state-run media with the support of the governmental attributed departments and foreign social media platforms operations (Roberts, 2020). As but one example, according to the Military Correspondent article published in September 2018, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is considered to be the new potential approach of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) toolkit to accelerate the PRC's aspiration to manipulate the global information system for reinforcing its military tactics: “fully exploit AI technology

to accurately recommend military information to broad media platforms, [and] for different audiences... make even more international audiences see our [PLA] reporting that they enjoy, thinking that they chose the content.” (Beauchamp-Mustafaga & Chase, 2019, p. 102). Yet, it remains obscure what the deep-rooted origination of these endeavors is. While the idea of pure military force operation is considered cost-intensive, the hypothesis that strife might be spurred from the beginning at the gray zones, notably the information area, is strongly believed to be accelerated by the PRC with a demonstration of its toolkits such as narrative-shaping; public opinion management; influence operations; and information warfare, including disinformation campaigns (Harold et al., 2021, p. 2). Then, what are the exclusive identities that underlie the CCP's party lines and will make such a great effort to have influence over other states in the flow of information? Is there any historical “trauma” embedded for centuries in the CCP's tendency of behavior? These questions will be elucidated in the next small section of this chapter, which sets the ground for further exploration and discussion in the following chapters.

2.4 ‘China Dream’ or Modern Sinocentrism?

2.4.1 Sinocentrism as a Fundamental Background

The CCP's attempt at information operation during the last few decades is arguably a substantial part of the journey it heads for the post of the helmsman of the world. In pursuit of fortifying China's discourse power (中国话语权 (zhongguo huayu quan)) in international fora, propaganda and disinformation are the main elements that are packed in the baggage of China's leadership (Scott, 2015). What is remarkable about the two presidential terms of President Xi is a new ideology denominated “Xi Jinping Thought for a New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想) which he himself coined and included as part of China's constitutional amendments after the 13th National People's

Congress (Xiang, 2018). In addition to the foci of “*socialist modernization and national rejuvenation*,” the thought strongly emphasizes the term *with Chinese characteristics* (Xiang, 2018), which is considered to be the principal element in setting up the *China model* (中国). The primary narrative distilled from this thought is, as mentioned above, a rejuvenation (复兴 (fuxing)) (Allison, 2017, p. 122) of China, which is inextricably linked with the idea of Sinocentrism, the central value of Confucianism. Sinocentrism ((中華思想) zhonghua sixiang) is an ethnocentric political ideology that values China as the top country from others, and thereby, China stays at the center of the world ("Sinocentrism," n.d.). Likewise, China's belief in its “center of the universe” position can also be easily perceived in the country's name, *zhong guo* (中国), implying the “Middle Kingdom,” which resides “between heaven and earth” (Allison, 2017, p. 109). Accompanying that belief is a long-lived ingrained confidence that China is always the world's superior state and that the recent leading West is merely temporary (Allison, 2017, p. 109). The Sinocentrism ideology is not only pushed forward to circulate inside the mainland but also intended to be promulgated globally with the principle idea called *pragmatism*, an emanated-Sinocentrism conception that mainly focuses on the economic field (Park, 2015, p. 636).

The economic pragmatism element of Sinocentrism can be inferred through the CCP's pre-eminent leaders: Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and now President Xi. The reformer Deng once underlined economic pragmatism gained benignly with the metaphors of “white cat” or “black cat” (Park, 2015, p. 636). Most of the PRC's attempts at economic expansion to foreign countries appear to be in line with the thought of Confucius (孔子 (Kǒngzǐ)), who values the role of *FùGuóLìMín* (富国利民), which is intended to ameliorate its peoples' living conditions via enhancing the wealth and well-being of the country (Park, 2015). One region where Jiang Zemin's ascension to the CCP's leadership position opened a new era of cooperation is between China and Africa in a wide range of fields, including

economy, public health, culture, and many others ("Diplomatic history," n.d.). Since then, there has been a myriad of financial commitments signed between China and Africa, typically the debt cancellation for the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) and Least developed countries (LDCs) in Africa, and a deluge of investment, cooperation in different areas have concentrated among the two parties ("Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) - Political rationale and functioning," n.d.). Following the former leaders' footsteps, under the presidential term of Hu Jindao, a commitment adopted in 2006 to double aid to Africa by 2009 in the FOCAC III, there have been many offers of duty-free and quota-free treatment for African LDCs countries' merchandise and a variety of loans, grants as favorable financial supports benefiting Africa, for instance ("Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) - Political rationale and functioning," n.d.). At the Moscow State Institute of International Relations during a state visit to Russia on March 22, 2013, President Xi once said, "Our aim of achieving the Chinese dream will not only benefit the Chinese people, but also the people of all countries." (Fan, 2013). Also, in the same year, President Xi stated in the closing meeting of the National People's Congress that "The Chinese dream, after all, is the dream of the people." (Fan, 2013). In tandem with the notion of pragmatism is the invention of the PRC's policy, for instance, the Going Out policy, which is often referred to as the Going Global Strategy (走出去战略 (Zǒuchūqù Zhànlüè)) which came to be in 2001 (Yelery, 2014) and was intended to stimulate Chinese enterprises' investment to abroad (Wang & Hu, 2017). This policy today remains to be underscored alongside the needs of the times that shores up the statement of the CCP's leaders' guarantee for global peace and development in which China serves as an active part in fostering "the evolution of the global governance system"(Xinhuanet, 2017) "through our own development" (Xinhuanet, 2022). On the whole, this FùGuóLìMíng notion today already permeates every part of the world with the presence of the PRC's economic projects like China's *development corporation* with Africa (Park,

2015), the BRI, the AIIB in which all of them predominantly center on massive infrastructure investments and aids that the related participants are more and more bound by.

2.4.2 The Concept's Modification

While Mao was called the legendary leader of the PRC for being a “master of guerilla warfare and with deft military moves” (Lee, 2013, p. 29) that contributed to the revival of China after two centuries of turbulence in the country, Deng is renowned for his political aptitude which incited China to turn to a new route with *gai ge kai fang* (改革开放), or *reform and opening-up* within over three decades (Lee, 2013, p. 54). The next leader, Jiang Zemin, who is likened to the successor of Deng Xiaoping, followed Deng's steps and accomplished Deng's modernization mission (Lee, 2013, p. 31). Then, Hu Jindao, during the period of the SARS outbreak and the Tibetan revolt, was celebrated for his decisive responses throughout his presidential term (Lee, 2013, p. 32). And today CCP after the rise to power of President Xi Jinping, a high-profile statesman along with his military clout in one decade, China appears to be on a trajectory that reverses Deng's well-known policy of *tao guang yang hui* (韬光养晦) (Lee, 2013, p.33) which was pronounced by Deng himself: “be good at maintaining low profile, never claim leadership” (Park, 2015, p.632).

It has been ten years since the milestone of President Xi coming into power in 2012, and has been continued to stay in power for the unprecedented third term as a party leader in CCP since October 2022 (The Guardian, 2022). The rise to power of President Xi brought in shifts for China in many aspects, notably the popularization of the “China Dream” (中国梦 (Zhongguo meng)) with the aims of reforming its governmental administration, hardening its nationalism and patriotism, devising China's third economic revolution, and consolidating its military vigor to “fight and win” (Allison, 2017, pp. 116-117) which is concerned with a “more offensive and expansionist view of the future” (Callahan, 2016). The looming threat of

Western democracy pushed China's leadership to be more concerned about the alteration in setting up a new model, which is assumed to enable China to "shape the global governance system more offensively, to advance its model of political and economic development"

(Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.).

2.4.3 Sovereignty Primacy and the Resurgence from the 'Century of Humiliation'

The first and foremost goal of China today is to "Make China Great Again" (Allison, 2017, p. 107), which discloses China's faith that, sooner or later, it will retrieve the posture of a world leader. Allison (2017, p. 109) explicates that this motto means (1) to regain the predominant status of the country before intruded; (2) to solidify its authority over disputed areas such as Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong, and Taiwan; (3) to regain the former clout over the neighboring states; and (4) to acquire the reciprocity from others powerhouses on the international stage.

Roberts (2020, p. 7) argues that the critical element that dominates Chinese leadership is *territorial integrity*. That explains the harsh and barbarous repressions of Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang, the strict national security law adopted in 2020 in Hong Kong, and defying activities of the PLA over the near Taiwan Strait areas (Robert, 2020). The complex historic setting drives China's policies in disinformation operations, ranging from the former leader of Deng Xiaoping to Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, to the rule of President Xi. Arguably, the motive illuminating the CCP-led disinformation operation originated from its "sense of encirclement and acute vulnerability" that dates back to the early days of the Party's foundation (Curtis, 2021, p. 232). To China, sovereignty is the central narrative which is well-elaborated in its one-China policy to pursue the goal of rejuvenation (Xinhuanet, 2022), namely in the hot spots including Taiwan, South China Sea, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China, 2022).

Besides, state sovereign supremacy is the disquiet of the penetration of Western values, which were defined as the threat that intimidates the independence of China as other foreign powers' intrusion in the "Century of Humiliation" from 1839 to 1949 (Kaufman, 2011). To the Chinese government's reference, *American values (like the freedoms of press, assembly, and religion)* are considered risky to the leadership of the CCP (INSIKT Group, 2019). It is for this reason that the CCP recently increasingly stepped up its control over the education that debars "Western values" in the universities' textbooks, suppresses every sensitive topic like human rights or democracy to be discussed, and tightens "ideology guidance" for its nationals at schools as well as invigorating the national censorship over every corner on the Internet (Anderlini, 2015). Along with that is a variety of determined actions from the CCP prohibiting Chinese celebrities from using sound-like-foreign names on stage (Wang, 2022), shifting national stations into Chinese pinyin rather than English characteristics (Du, 2022), and regulations on primary school student's exam for the reason of "sweeping reforms to ease the academic burden placed on students" (Zuo, 2021). These motivations seem to disclose the increasingly radical ideology of the CCP's leaders on Western elements, which might blur and pose a risk to the survival of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Xinhuanet, 2022). That, in company with the prevailing nature of social media with the increasingly close engagement of users, sparks off the extension of the goal and dimension of China's *influence operation* in which China will "seek to redefine China's place in the world as a global player." (Diamond & Schell, 2019).

Even though China is now the world's second-largest economy, there are many potential challenges facing its economy: elderly population, a decline in the labor force and productivity, a high proportion of debt, the tricky landscape of a domestic-market-driven economic transformation, a high percentage of second-class citizens that cannot access high-quality education and healthcare systems, and an alarming rate of domestic spending

(Roberts, 2020, p. 8); and the *household registration system* (戶口 *hùkǒu*), which is similar to the Japanese *koseki* system (Lee, 2013, p. 56), partially linked to the wealth gap in the big cities (Ako, 2022). Accordingly, this is the primary incentive for the CCP to reinforce its influence and control.

The Tacitus Trap—a political theory originated from a Roman historian named Tacitus, is a theory invented by President Xi in 2014, which characterizes the situation arising when a government loses the faith of its population (Huang, 2017). To the CCP, the Tacitus Trap poses a potential risk threatening the party's rule. The PRC has witnessed and challenged historical events that obsess its leadership, for example, the Tiananmen event (Barron, 2019). Thus, strategies that regulate and manipulate the state's narrative inside and outside China's mainland favor the party's will.

In addition, it is argued that the “victim narrative” is employed as a pretext for the driver of CCP-sponsored disinformation that, according to China's justification, aims to correct its distorted image resulting from international events and that, in turn, restores an inequality for China (Curtis, 2021, p. 234). The “victim narrative” is the concept rooted in the “century of humiliation,” the period that China was subjugated by foreign powers (Hwang & Black, 2020). The discriminatory treatment by the Western media regarding China (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022) is presumed to be a danger to China's security (Hwang & Black, 2020). Therefore the exercise of information operation is essential for correcting the unfair behavior of the West.

3. The Era of Insecurity Looms Large: Influence Operation as a Multifunctional Instrument

The CCP-sponsored censorship aligns with its disinformation strategies; for instance, the *Wolf Warrior Diplomacy* illustrates the insidious intention to undermine the democratic society by capitalizing on its openness (Shiroyama, 2022). That brings the question as to *why the world should design a countermeasure to respond to disinformation operations* to a head. The following sections will give clarified positions shedding light on this question.

3.1 Online Disinformation as a Vector to Realize the China Model

3.1.1 A Systematic Machine for Disinformation Reproduction

The coverage of news in China is almost always overseen by the government, namely under the guidelines of the Communist Party's Propaganda Department. The state-sponsored media in China play a pivotal role in guiding the foreign public's perceptions of China (Harold et al., 2021). In President Xi Jinping's words, it is the "publicity front" of the CCP to "*promote the Party's will*" and "*protect the Party's authority and unity.*" (Tiezzi, 2016).

The government-sponsored agencies that work on disinformation are the PLA, the State Council and its Taiwan Affairs Office (TOF), the Cyberspace Administration of China, the CCP's United Front Work Department (UFWD), China's Cabinet, and the State Council Information Office (SCIO) (Roberts, 2020, p. 5). The disinformation operations are exercised by sowing disinformation on social media to target its objects like the Hong Kong protesters, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)-led Taiwanese government, and the US democracy (Harold et al., 2021). The prominent state-sponsored propaganda agencies, including the People's Daily, China Central Television (CCTV), and the Global Times, play a pivotal role in

sparkling nationalism in targeting Hong Kong protesters and distorting the image of Taiwan's DPP government (Datt & Huang, 2022). The state-sponsored media outlets, such as the China Global Television Network (CGTN), have coverage channels in many different languages designed to target non-Chinese speaking communities. Besides, some other state-affiliated media firms such as Xinhua, People's Daily, China Plus News, and the Global Times also play a vital role in the cause of propaganda of the PRC. Xinhua is one of the most prominent digitized news outlets, which is remarkably dubbed as "the world's biggest propaganda agency." (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.) and "can be seen as an extension of China's civilian intelligence service." Similar to Xinhua, the People's Daily is deemed to have a close relationship with the Ministry of State Security (MSS) and the PLA as a form of intelligence service agency. The presence of these giant news services has heavily contributed to promoting the intelligence service of the CCP and, thereby, indirectly reshaping the Western perspectives toward China (INSIKT Group, 2019).

Alongside the media agencies, the PRC controls over 470 Chinese-language printing and broadcasting outlets globally to tend to the Chinese diaspora and its overseas nationals to keep them stuck to the party line (e.g., the BRI project) (Curtis, 2021). Another force plays as the representative for the netizen community, namely the Fifty-cent Army (五毛党 (wumao dang)), known as the online paid commentators to advance the expected image of the regime (Han, 2015) and exerts China's influence mostly on Western platforms (i.e., Facebook, Twitter) (Curtis, 2021).

The United Front, operated by the UWFD, is supposed to be a 'method' as a core value of the 'Mao's people war' for the CCP to defeat its internal enemies (Curtis, 2021, p. 237). Brady (2019) explains that the United Front pertaining to propaganda work is separated into three groups: "international united front work," "foreign affairs work," and "overseas Chinese affairs work." Today, the agency's activities mainly revolve around influence

operations to direct the global Chinese diaspora's mind (Harold et al., 2021, p. 5) and restrain the unity of international institutions and officials that favor its opponents (Cronin & Neuhard, 2020). The 'front organizations' (Curtis, 2021, p. 237) here set up by the CCP are actively encouraged to engage in repression events to push the party's power up.

Meanwhile, the most significant national social media firms such as Sina Weibo and Wechat serve as active censorship bodies of possible harmful information to the Chinese government and broadcast "positive energy" (正能量 zheng nengliang) with good news at the same time (Roberts, 2020, p. 8). The state-run social media companies also harm the credibility of the US leadership, for instance, in the cases of former President Trump, President-elect Biden, and Vice President-elect Harris (Timberg, 2020).

Beyond China, the most prominent Western social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are also exploited to sow counterfeit news via the growing presence of the Chinese governmental departments' and officials' accounts. Roberts (2020) portrays these agents' rise as "the phenomenon of "wolf warrior" (p. 9) to seed disinformation to demean the face of its opponents (e.g., the US).

China's growing effort in disseminating disinformation is designed not only to target its rival, the US, but also to lure overseas Chinese communities to repatriate, which indicates China's goal of reunification (Everington, 2019). The Chinese disinformation audience includes the mainland people and the citizens of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the North American Chinese diaspora community (Harold et al., 2021).

A report by Roberts (2020) revealing the evidence of China's effort to employ disinformation in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Chinese diaspora in the US is outlined as follows:

Disinformation in Hong Kong

The disinformation sown by CCP in Hong Kong is bolstered by the state-run media outlets such as CCTV, say, the creation of memes and music videos, and the spreading of the call of “Wan Wan to come home” (湾湾, 回家吧) (Everington, 2019). Others like Weibo, Douyin, and TikTok are intermediaries to make the related content viral. On foreign social media platforms, anonymous accounts or “sockpuppets” actively plant falsified information based on false identities, for instance, ordinary Taiwanese or Hong Kong citizens with falsified news from “content farms” or websites with contesting *content or clickbait* (Roberts, 2020, p. 9). These efforts are designed to attack Hong Kong protestors, foster the Hong Kong police, and demean the Taiwanese government. Evidence of a slew of fake accounts run by Chinese agents to attack Hong Kong was found on Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube in 2019.

Roberts (2020, p. 9) adds that the CCP also stimulates nonstate actors such as the 50 Cent Army, overseas Chinese students, celebrities, fan girls, Diba expedition (帝吧出征-Diba chuzheng)-an online nationalist community, to engage such a crusade to target Hong Kong online.

Disinformation in Taiwan

Roberts (2020, p. 9) argues that Taiwan is not only part of China's dream of unification but also plays a pivotal role as a test bed for China to nose into the strait's elections, which might be then adopted in the case of the US. The UFWD is the governmental body that takes accountability for influencing operations over Taiwan by aiming at nonparty objectives to bend them to the CCP's will. The Chinese government was shown to pay \$337.8 million annually to gain these objectives' supportive sentiments toward China (Roberts, 2020, p. 10).

Engulfing the domestic social media platforms in Taiwan (i.e. (Professional Technology Temple) PTT, Dcard) with counterfeit information is another strategy of Chinese-sponsored media agents. Also, China often reinforces the integrated relationship with

Taiwanese media corporations to intensify its ambition. Want Want China owned by Taiwanese billionaire Tsai Eng-meng and Chung T'ien News, exemplifies these malicious efforts.

Disinformation and the Diaspora

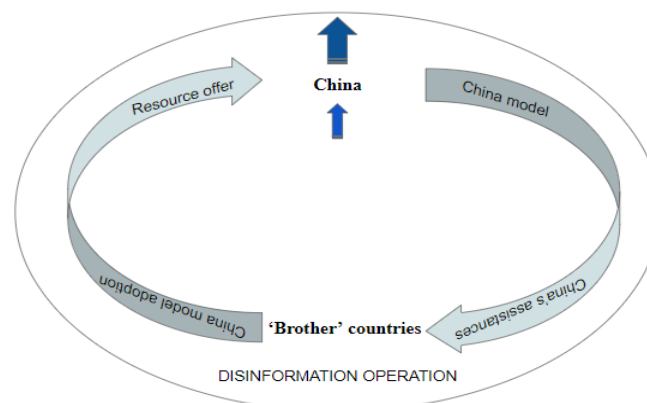
In general, China's disinformation efforts still have many defects, especially in comparison with Russia's. Roberts (2020, p. 10) notes that CCP's attempts to repress its dissidents, say, the Chinese diaspora in the US, failed. He also emphasizes that the CCP's method remains clumsy and is still not adept at using the native languages of Hong Kong or Taiwan, as well as suffering from a shortage of literacy about the targeted election landscapes and operation of foreign social media platforms like Twitter.

However, recently the Chinese government started to focus more on improving the situation with new technologies, namely AI advancement adoption. This new approach was mentioned in the PLA publication named *Military Correspondent*, drumming up the exploitation of AI to reach more audiences all over the world (Roberts, 2020, p. 10).

3.1.2 Conceptualization of the China Model

Figure 1

Disinformation as an underpinning lever to consolidate the Sinocentrism



Arguably, the ultimate goal of the Chinese leadership is to promote a China model which can contest Western democracy (Li, 2015, p. 134). After all, this is considered an overriding emphasis as seen by a focus on the US's blemishes, especially throughout the pandemic countermeasure and the following frustrations in Trump's presidential term (Roberts, 2020). In addition, it has relentlessly reiterated its significant role in the world's development. Notably, at the General Debate of the 77th Session of The United Nations General Assembly in September 2022, Wang Yi, as the State Councilor and Foreign Minister of the PRC, delivered a speech that mainly put weight on the major role of China as "a contributor to global development"; "a defender of the international order" that it "will forever stand together with other developing countries"; "a provider of public goods" with centering on its medical aids and vaccines during the pandemic, and its leadership in its global initiatives that shares a colossal contribution. It continuously underlined its recent outperformed achievements with approximately "30 percent of annual global growth", stated that "China is the biggest engine driving the global economy," and made clear its commitment to "drive global growth and deliver more benefits to the people of all countries" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China, 2022).

Curtis (2021) also makes a comparison between disinformation operations by Russia and China by holding that Russia is a "disinformation terrorist" while China is a "disinformation insurgent" in which the goal of this "insurgent" is to establish "a new world" that is more credible, but the "terrorist" does not intend to (p. 231). The CCP thereby wields disinformation as a vital toolkit, along with its global investment projects, to stress its "evolution of the governance system" (Curtis, 2021, p. 231). As mentioned in the previous chapter, the China model is a national narrative that is not only being circulated within the Chinese population in mainland China but also being popularized internationally. The progress in information technology in this setting plays a pivotal role or a dynamic vector in

pushing forward the expansion of the Chinese narrative. Generally speaking, this national narrative, on the one hand, is bolstered ostensibly and overtly via propaganda agencies and the Chinese state-sponsored media. However, the term propaganda to the Chinese leadership reference is vague. On the other hand, an effort to encourage social media outlets to push the China model online is attributed to the covert endeavors of the CCP to build up the China model in general and to preserve its “strong centre” (Lee, 2013, p. 13) in particular.

China started to put an eye on influence operations in the late 1990s with ‘unrestricted warfare,’ which is dubbed ‘grey zone’ conflict and Curtis (2021, p. 230) holds that those are designed “to attack the existing U.S.-led international order but at a level unlikely to provoke a violent response.” As presented in the previous chapters, the CCP’s influence operation is partially associated with its state-sponsored propaganda agencies. Based on the original sense of propaganda, it is, therefore, too early to say if the CCP’s exertion on cyberspace by propagation links with malevolent intentions.

Nonetheless, this is not to say that the CCP is not involved in some unfavorable schemes. As Bolsover (2021, p. 124) propounds, “...propaganda is often seen as nefarious because it deliberately misrepresents symbols and presents biased or inaccurate versions of reality to propose its aims.” However, “The deliberate misrepresentation of the content of propaganda is what makes it effective, but this effect is achieved through the opacity of its nature.” (Bolsover, 2021, p. 124). This holds particularly true for the practice of government-led propaganda in China, where the concept of propaganda is significantly modified from its primal sense. That notion, with a murky impression, is likely to be bent to the party’s will for exercising intended purposes. This variation of propaganda’s definitions is not a new phenomenon in its long-lived history; for instance, Jowett and O’Donnell (2012, p. 7) note that propaganda is also “*the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the*

propagandist.” Roberts (2020, p. 8) also underlines that propaganda is implied to be the most critical *arm of the CCP* to its cause of preserving the sovereignty of the country. In this sense, propaganda in the Chinese leadership’s lexicon appears vague and ambiguous, particularly in the maligned manipulation of information on social media.

Besides premeditated purposes, the propagandists’ aim is intended to stir the unconscious nature of “emotion and prejudices” (Bolsover, 2021, p. 124) without thoughtful consideration of any sensational information once they encounter it. Bolsover (2021, p. 124) exemplifies this with an argument from an article of the Institute for Propaganda Analysis that stresses, “Observe that in all these devices our emotion is the stuff with which propagandists work ... without the appeal to our emotion – to our fears and our courage, to our selfishness and unselfishness, to our loves and to our hates – propagandists would influence few opinions and actions”. As a result, propaganda with its partial meaning below the threshold of conventional military conflict appears to be a fruitful instrument for the CCP to adopt for well-functioning in terms of manipulating the public’s sentiment via capitalizing on “dextrous use of images, slogans, and symbols (propagandists) playing on our prejudices and emotions ... with the ultimate goal of having the recipient of the appeal come to ‘voluntarily’ accept this position as if it were his or her own.” (Pratkanis & Aronson, 2001, p. 8).

Again, there seems to be a big gap between the perception of the Chinese leadership toward the concept of public diplomacy and that of common sense. While public diplomacy, in the traditional sense, comprises *对外宣传* (*external propaganda*) and *民间外交* (*people-to-people diplomacy*), is often used as a mechanism for the government to spread the positive images of the country to its nationals and to foreign countries (Yeo, A. and Gloria, E., 2022). The contemporary practice of this mechanism in the Chinese leaders’ perception is likely to be an instrument for the CCP’s to step up its influence operations over the other countries.

This ambiguous setting incidentally comes to be the fertile ground for the Chinese government and its attributed agencies to muddy the waters to project its manipulation in the information system. Dr. Ivana Karásková once said, “China’s influence toolbox has contained a mixture of public diplomacy and propaganda targeting political and economic elites, but in recent years, it has added new tools and techniques to its influence portfolio focused on new targets.” (Karásková, 2020). As a result, it’s evident that in these circumstances in China, similar to the commonplace rhetoric of the CCP in public diplomacy, the concept is falsified and absorbed in a *modus operandi* that completely deviated from the starting-point consciousness as a fashion for the government, in the short term to attain its strategic goals and in the long term, to shift the public’s perception on the avenue to conduct public diplomacy affairs in China (Yeo, A. and Gloria, E., 2022).

3.2 Information Warfare Assessment: The Insurgence of Irregular War

Information warfare dates back to the sixth century BC when the Persians of Achaemenid employed the image of cats, which are considered gods in Egypt, to combat their empire psychologically (Wylie, 2019, p. 41). Communication via media may lead to conflicts with *relay, economic, and semiotics functions* which signify the transmission of information through space, time, and culture; the capability of accessing mass communication; and the devices that form consciousness (Clack and Selisny, 2021, p. 260). Today, influence operation is valued as the strategic vehicle in military operations (i.e., *a seventh joint function* to the US; part of the Land Information Manoeuvre Operation Center (LIMOC), 77th Brigade, and the concept of information advantage in the UK) (Clack and Selisny, 2021, p. 260). In this era of information technology’s promotion, partially due to the asymmetric rhythm between technological advances and their operations in reality (i.e., the access imbalance between TV,

radio, and social media platforms) (Clack and Selisny, p. 262, 263), disinformation appears to be easier to be viral and more effective than the truth, or in other words, “In contrast to a scholarly debate, the most inventive liar wins in conflict” as Vladimir Lefebvre observed (Vasara, 2020, p. 40).

The five core elements of effective information operation include narrative, emotion, authenticity, community, and inundation (Singer & Brooking, 2018, p. 54). Also, the configuration of behavior and perception might be easy to achieve by focusing on the populations based on their setting of *culture, symbolism, and communicative modality* (Clack and Selisny, 2021, p. 262). Information operation does not only reshape the public consciousness, but rather it leads to the transformation of *identities* and, eventually, a *future behavior* modification (Clack and Selisny, 2021). This era witnesses the inundation of distorted information sown on every corner of the Internet with startling speed. The consequence is the adverse impact on politics with the presence of media instead of *democratic participation* (Clack and Selisny, 2021, p. 261). That’s why, as a representative example, the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) appended communication experts like social workers and teachers to build a hybrid propaganda structure to confront this risky prospect (Archetti, 2019, p. 88).

3.2.1. Information as a Non-military Force

In an era without “pure military force” (Inskter, 2021, p. 286), which implies the combination of “military and non-military as well as covert and overt means, including disinformation, cyber-attacks, economic pressure, deployment of irregular armed groups and use of regular forces” (NATO, 2022), the capability to manipulate information appears to be the productive instrument for states to expand their power. In line with this, Inkster (2021)

also indicates this concern by mentioning the *Gerasimov doctrine* of valuing non-military forces rather than military capability to show off the power of states (p. 283). There has been a shift in the form of conflicts (proxy warfare) to a more obscure and vague fashion of warfare since post-1945. Notably, the terms “hybrid,” “grey-zone,” and “sub-threshold” appear to be ambiguous in the context of the involvement of elements like information, cyberspace, military, etc. (Clack & Selisny, 2021, p. 266). States, their actors, and non-state actors are increasingly agile in such a setting. To accelerate the speed of controlling information, states might consider resorting to the backing of technology, which closely ties to *grey zone* activities. These efforts comprise operations designed to undermine the adversaries at a lower price and even though they are not as forceful as *armed conflict* (Nakasone, 2019, p. 2). To cite but one example, Russia, which is called the *disinformation terrorist* with its endeavor to form the outcome of the 2016 US presidential election via deploying disinformation campaigns on Western platforms like Twitter and Facebook, finally ended up with deep fragmentation of the population in terms of society and politics (Inkster, 2021). In addition, connection in cyberspace today appears to accumulate an oxymoron paradigm, which Brands (2016) calls the “paradox of gray zone,” where people are more susceptible to malicious information operations rather than accessing the Internet for their own sake at the origin. Also, there is no clear border between employing cyberspace for intelligence operations and sowing malign information for hostile intentions. In this sense, Inkster (2021, p. 284) argues that “peace is merely an armistice in a war that is always ongoing” because of this persistent practice. Information warfare, as a result, once it happens, might be much more devastating than other warfare because it would be more inclusive with everybody’s engagement in a tremendous scope of communication. The CCP’s attempt to exert weight on other states’ politics is often described with the terms “foreign interference” or “foreign influence” defined as “political warfare” or “gray zone strategies” (Brady, 2019).

The malign attempt of hostile parties to disseminate disinformation must start from the human element, namely, their decision-making. One of the aspects that is vulnerable to be capitalized on in the elaboration of disinformation strategies in this model is the duality of technological progress, which, on the one hand, contributes to the image of a state in front of the international community. Still, on the other hand, can also be leveraged as a vector to strike one's objects. According to Nothhaft et al. (2019, p. 40, 41), there are a variety of malicious skills to dominate the information ecosystem and have impacts on decision-making, which are: *forging and leaking*, *malign rhetoric*, and *social bots and botnets*. On social media, individuals unquestionably are the critical actors in circulating information among the population based on their interactions (Tegha, 2022). Therefore, once information is disseminated, it may cause violent destruction due to its function of community cohesion.

The manipulation of human decision-making via disinformation tactics is arguably the premise for leverage in the politico-military sphere (Clack & Selisny, 2021). Arguably, information is similar to advertising in that it might be associated with the same effects on the public regarding military and political issues, in which its audience may become both prey and transmitter of information. While advertising is the core idea of information operations, technological advances are powerful accelerators. According to the Security Council Report (2022), disinformation promulgation by misemploying technological advances can aggravate society's uncertainty and even light the fuse of conflicts, for instance. The elements like algorithmic social bots originated from technological progress, the consequences, echo chambers, and information bubbles, for example, are the dynamic drivers within the process of spreading information (Clack & Selisny, 2021, p. 265). In this way, the private sector, which possesses advanced expertise, appears to have a dominant role rather than the government. Thus, information might be subjected to trade for enterprises to earn their interest.

Besides, algorithms and data are utilized to aim to attack the given objects (Clack and Selisny, 2021, p. 264). As Wylie (2019, p. 42–51) notes, the Western military has integrated modeling programs to capture human socio-cultural behavior and boost the related research activities in this realm. In the UK, the Strategic Communication Laboratories (SCL) was recognized to be the privileged department that enjoys the ability to reach the information sources of “military, defence, intelligence, and security realms” (UK Parliament, 2019). Another illustration of this engagement is the infringement of Cambridge Analytica, which was uncovered in 2018 due to its illegitimate operations in the political realm (UK Parliament, 2019).

Likewise, *leaking* is a dangerous threat in political areas and to the social public. Leaking also appears to be complicated to separate from hacking because hacking is simulated as revealing quite often. The related actors might differ, ranging from private institutions to governmental and even nongovernmental areas (Briant & Wanless, 2018, pp. 45-53).

3.2.2 ‘A New World’ System Concern

3.2.2.1 The Economic Monopolist, the Rule-maker

Building up monolithic economic projects that reach every corner of the world can amount to a host body for China to convey its influence operation. Simultaneously, the PRC’s economic power, along with its information operation, also mutually stiffened to consolidate the China model for more clout. Indeed, China is seemingly aware that other than military strength, economic potency is the contemporary world's most critical instrument for achieving a balance of power (Allison, 2017, p.20). The domination of China’s economic power may be elucidated via the extent that its expansion has spread so far with cooperation projections

including BRI, a massive economic investment course stretching over Asia, Eurasia, the Middle East, and Africa with 147 participant countries as of March 2022 (Wang, 2022); the Beijing-based Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) with 105 members in 2022 from all over Asia, in Europe, Africa, Oceania, South America, and North America ("Members of the bank," n.d.).

The economic expansion of China is arguable to be a conduit for disinformation campaigns to be transferred to the PRC's targeted countries. *Borrowing a Boat Out to Sea* (Beauchamp-Mustafaga & Chase, 2019), run by investment into media infrastructure in some countries (Karásková, 2020) and benefits China by smoothly expanding the network of disinformation popularization. The PRC, by planting disinformation in these countries, enhances and gains more leverage via the harmonious and benign image of China. Thereby China attains more support in international fora. The Philippines mentioned above' shift into a more favorable view of China in recent years thanks to the BBB project and other infrastructure investments are one illustrative example. This tendency is also witnessed in some European countries, including Belgium, one of the first states that engaged in China's BRI project (Wang, 2022). With more support in terms of trading, infrastructure installation (e.g., port of Antwerp-Bruges) (Xinhuanet, 2022), and commitments for supplying medical facilities (COVID-19 vaccination aid) (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Belgium, 2020), China appears to be reaching for more supportive sentiment from Belgium over the last few years. According to a research report by Pew Research Center at the end of September this year, as of 2021, the unfavorable view of Belgian people to China had substantially improved with a drop from 71 percent to 61 percent. This begs the question of what are the information manipulation tactics employed by the PRC to gain such a high positive sentiment. Also, what is the relationship between China and Belgium exactly? Because behind that supportive backdrop of the Belgian government, it is suggested that there

remains some concern about the militarization of some China-based ports in Belgium, which might stir uncertainties in the country (Bermingham, 2022). China is also attributed to disinformation dissemination activities taken in some European countries (i.e., Czech, Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia) by investing in the media outlets in these countries. The outcomes are not only that the grievance about the PRC had been removed, but the “tone” of stories about China also transformed into a more positive fashion (Karásková, 2020, p. 3). These are the typical illustrations of how China diffuses foreign countries with a compatible perspective with the PRC.

3.2.2.2 The Ultimate Goal of Disinformation Dissemination Efforts

What has been mentioned earlier about disinformation and its adverse impacts might be vague without taking a closer look at its ultimate goal. Planting disinformation operations, in general, can be seen visibly via the crisis of authenticity by fake news for the public views on public health, culture, and politics (Ireton & Posetti, 2018). If so, then it begs the question of what the terminal goal of that disinformation aims to, if that is not merely to persuade the public to believe in its given content.

The answer to this question might tease out further insight into the harmful impacts of disinformation that its ultimate objective is an exhaustive systematic modification in people's consciousness that makes them baffled when they come upon a piece of information rather than discerning its truthfulness. Psychologically to say, the *amplification of the effect* of disinformation spreading rests on human attributes, which are distinctively noted by Nothhaft et al. (2019) that “humans tend to be lazy in checking facts” (p. 34) and thereby, they are susceptible to large-scale fabricated information. This is precisely what Clack and Selisny (2021) describe as the human deficiency of awareness towards *decision-making capacity and*

associated energetic cost called “skimping on thinking” (p. 269). Consequently, there would not be a precise decision on what to believe. Still, more than that, the possibility of consideration of what to have confidence in is eroded, and people are subject to count upon their senses. Ireton & Posetti (2018) also refer to the unusual aim of disinformation, which is “not necessarily to convince the public to believe that its content is true, but to impact on agenda setting ... and to muddy the informational waters to weaken rationality factors in people’s voting choices.” (p. 10). Capturing this central pivot, perpetrators might invigorate disinformation strategies to interrupt the elections and issues of human rights, migration, climate change, and many others (Ireton & Posetti, 2018, p. 10). These are leading examples of election intervention by deploying the digital campaign with the assistance of a paid group to bend public opinions and decision-making, specifically the flash ahead of the 2019 election in Indonesia in which the “buzzers” received \$500 for each shared post (Lipson, 2018) and the employment of influential users on the internet to guide the public mind directed by partisan actors in the 2020 US elections run up (Center for Media Engagement, 2020).

Arguably, China appears to be a good expert in adopting these intellectual insights. Taiwan, so far, has been the most susceptible target of the CCP via a deluge of attacks with disinformation strategies derived from a combination between information manipulation and psychological warfare called *strategic messaging* (McDonald & Burgoyne, 2019). The research implemented by RAND Corporation exposes some significant indications as follows.

In 2015, information warfare was raised around the time of president Tsai’s election when her Facebook fan page was inundated with attacks from Chinese users requesting the reunification of Taiwan with China. Along with President Tsai's election is some typical fake news misrepresented by online users, such as false content suggesting that Tsai was convoyed by ammunition-equipped soldiers intended to subvert her image in the Kaohsiung flood in 2018. In addition to disseminating fake news, China is believed to engage in echoing,

amplifying, and intensifying disinformation content on social media in such cases, as mentioned earlier. The PRC was indicated to interfere in “underground political betting markets to create an impression of momentum, and inevitability have also circulated,” precisely the suspicion that with massive advocacy of Chinese media in the mayoral election of Kaohsiung in 2018, and then become the presidential candidate of the Kuomintang (KMT). Following the case described above of the 2018 Kaohsiung election, another candidate for the mayoral position, Chen Chi-Mai, was supposed to be targeted by fabricated news from the PRC (Horton, 2018). Chen Chi-Mai, after that scandal, was extremely criticized by the public and defeated by Han Kuo-Yu. Again, an event emerged ahead of the Tainan election of the DPP in 2019, which is attributed to a case of disinformation launched by the PRC. This news is about a statement of a farmer who criticized the opposition of the Taiwanese government against the “1992 Consensus,” which led to the failure of the pomelos consumption market of Taiwan in China. Due to the timely occurrence of the event, the news was questioned about its origination. These are leading examples of the disinformation campaigns imputed to be waged by China (Harold et al., 2021).

It is noted that the nature of a democratic community is susceptible to disinformation strategies (McKay & Tenove, 2020). These include “free expression,” “competition ideas,” and “the decentralized nature of the U.S. federal system,” which are associated with a risky situation for the U.S. to compete with a one-party state like China (Curtis, 2021, p. 230). Curtis (2021, p. 231) claims that disinformation is a prudent approach for *revisionist powers* like the CCP to head off other superpowers with the lowest cost that does not only contribute to bolstering internal censorship but also to humiliating others’ prestige globally.

Capitalizing on the open nature of the democratic societies together while utilizing some more refined and sophisticated techniques, the recent PRC’s performance of information manipulation via the event of Russia's invasion of Ukraine targeting the US, some democratic

institutions, and media outlets appears to be ever more active and outrageous. According to the findings of the United States Department of State reported in May 2022 regarding the amplification of attempts of Russia's positions on Ukraine, the PRC's disinformation tactics are significantly improved with the application of various languages and the widening dimensioned over the globe (U.S. Department of State, 2022). At the same time, it was backing out the adverse external information about Russia inside the mainland. The PRC maintained a neutral tone regarding Russia's stance towards the conflict in Ukraine by directing the public to criticize NATO and the US for the behavior of Russia. As the United States Department of State reported, the toolkit of the PRC for disinformation proliferation this time is considerably upgraded as the following descriptions show. First, these include the news coverage of unendorsed information among the China-based media confirming that it's collected from Russian official sources and news outlets, then echoing those distorted sources to prove the highly supported status of Russia. Second, accompanied by the rigorous domestic censorship of headwind sources, the Chinese-sponsored media tends to popularize falsified stories from Russia. Third, there are implicit acts intended to erode the credibility of NATO and the US by boosting the US's opposite perspectives and pro-Beijing views found on China's media channels. Though it is not clarified that the PRC is directly involved in attacking democratic societies, particularly the US and its allies, it's evident that China has engaged in disinformation promotion to support Russia's position while indirectly undermining the trust of the international communities in democratic societies.

3.2.2.3 Accelerating the Pace to the World Hegemony Position

The ambition to subvert the US to replace its global hegemony calls for a transformation from a "rule-taker to rule-maker" (Dyer, 2014, p. 130), in which the CCP can

reform the international system to serve its interests. The goals of becoming “a global leader” with the goal of “moving closer to center stage” or “a great modern socialist country that leads the world in terms of composite national strength and international influence” by the middle of the century were reiteratively underlined via the speech delivered by President Xi at the 19th (Xinhuanet, 2017) and the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (Xinhuanet, 2022). Curtis (2021) claims that economic dominance is the crucial element for the CCP to fortify the party’s rule and simultaneously redefine international norms and values, overpowering its rivals without losing interest. To intensify the party’s *legitimacy*, the CCP plans to introduce ‘Chinese cultural diplomacy with Chinese characteristics with the adoption of government-sponsored media, Chinese film production, and the Confucius Institutes (Becard & Menechelli Filho, 2019).

4. Implications for the International Communities in the Era of Rising Disinformation Permeation

4.1 Findings and Implications for the Democratic Community and the Involved Actors

The results of this research teased out five findings and implications for the international communities about China's disinformation operation on international politics in general and the effects of that effort in individual countries as well as the non-state parties who appear to be accidentally caught up in disinformation campaigns in particular.

First, the extent of China's disinformation operation should be broader than suggested in the previous studies. As revealed earlier, the dimension of disinformation strategies exercised by the PRC is mainly founded in some regions, namely Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Chinese diaspora in the US. Nevertheless, the evidence emerging from the cases in some European countries and especially the pro-Russia behavior of China via enhancing the Kremlin's stand unfolds a larger dimension of China's disinformation operation. This implies that China is likely to be a colleague of Russia by adopting disinformation by sharing the same media outlets to pursue its own goal of sabotaging the reputation of the democratic community, especially to overmatch the US associated with enhancing its international position. Seemingly, the collaboration of China and Russia is not only limited in the scope of several targeted countries, but instead, it may stretch to the international level, and that may lead to other unexpected outcomes vis-à-vis the stability of the world with the threats of extreme conflicts accompanied by information warfare springing up.

Second, at the practical level, concerning the outcome of the recent 49th session of the HRC, it seems to be intricate for the international communities to work on responding to the growing dissemination of disinformation. There was not a total concurrence, but rather, a fragmented consciousness amongst states toward the draft resolution of the Council ("UN's

rights council adopts 'fake news' resolution, states urged to tackle hate speech," 2022) takes a dim view of the deployment actions against disinformation promulgation for the entire world. Besides the agreement on the resolution of some states, Venezuela expressed its disapproval of the document's content due to a mistrust purporting that part of the Council's stakeholders is involved in disinformation operations. The statement of Venezuela begs the question if there is any division inside the organization due to disinformation tactics. If yes, it might stir suspicion inside the Council in particular and hurt the trust of states in this body of the UN in general, which might, in the future, more or less hinder the promotion of campaigns responding to disinformation actors, and simultaneously prejudice credibility of the UN's performance from this time forward at worst. More importantly, though China declared its resolute opposition to disinformation operations, its delegation at the same time rejected the draft resolution in which it argued that the text still had some shortcomings regarding the "root causes of disinformation" and the "negative impact of disinformation on the work of international human rights mechanism" (UN Geneva, 2022). This, thereby, calls into question the ambivalent instance of the PRC over the agenda and what precisely this rhetoric is; if not taking into account the alleged imperfection in the Council's resolution, this veto of such a superpower as the PRC at least links directly to the impediment of development of the major's action on the issue.

Third, the capitalization on disinformation dissemination may engender a counterproductiveness to the states, which intend to exploit it as an instrument to recast states' positions and redefine the world order. For China, in one sense, the efforts to control the domestic public opinion and let only favorable information from outside seep into the state's censorship system are discrepant because it contributes to stirring the outcry of the public, namely in events of Hong Kong protests and Uyghur Muslims repression in Xinjiang, for instance (Curtis, 2021). As such, rather than achieving peaceful reunification and rejuvenation

with such disputing regions, the assertive behavior of the PRC turns out to be counterproductive, particularly in escalating the tensions and military conflicts with the involved parties, for instance, in recent deteriorating relationship among China, Taiwan, and the US due to the dispute on the one-China principle (Maizland, 2022).

Fourth, in the colossal development cooperation projects of China mentioned in the preceding sections, such as the BRI and AIIB, the participant countries may serve as the channel for circulating and promoting disinformation campaigns and, in the long run, if worse comes to worst such malign information manipulation concepts may be adopted by the other states to serve their interests. Misusing disinformation in the domestic dimension may be associated with the erosion of public trust in its governmental administration. This again appears to correlate with the Tacitus Trap, coined by the Chinese leadership, and implies the peril of governmental credibility deprivation.

Fifth, the non-state actors are susceptible to being targeted to become the transmitters of distorted information. The proliferation of disinformation via these channels can fall into the sorts of unwilling or subjective. In the former situation, the actors like “NGOs, activists, think tanks, lobbyists, public relations (PR) firms and ideological media also amplify and frame leakers and content following the initial disclosure” (Briant & Wanless, 2018, p. 47). In the latter, disinformation can be generated and leaked subjectively in cases when the originated sources, for instance, the human rights activists in China, are arguably forced to forge falsified information toward a given sensitive human rights violation event (P. Poon, personal communication, December 29, 2020). Most importantly, these are the representatives of the most reliable and authentic public information sources. Thus, exploiting such productive actors is likely to be promising for evil information manipulators.

Together with the potential supremacy of authoritarianism is a possibility of conflict between the democratic societies and the Confucius descendants' ideology, like a clash between two civilizations. It is impossible to contemplate the likelihood of a hybrid war waged by disinformation even though China states that it "will never seek hegemony or engage in expansionism" (Xinhuanet, 2022). Nevertheless, the current practice unveils that the position of hegemony is unlikely to be far-fetched for China due to its growing information, technological advances, and economic power. The question remains: How will China refine its modus operandi in this opaque turbulent setting, and how will it continue on its way to the helm post? Only time will tell whether China, with its exclusive values, can defeat the Western long-lived ideology domination to have its dream stature.

4.2 Response of the International Community

The contemporary overwhelming disinformation situation leads to the need of the time that international bodies must outline a more unified system for disinformation countermeasures, whereby states, via cooperation and coordination, can strengthen themselves to fulfill their competence to respond to disinformation. As such, the international community should reinforce its programs designed for disinformation responses, the programs educating the world populations in general and vulnerable groups such as human rights activists and journalists in particular about how serious disinformation's effects are and how to counter its proliferation. The UNESCO publication of *Journalism "Fake News" and Disinformation: A Handbook for Journalism Education and Training* (UNESCO, 2022) is highly relevant but remains inadequate. These programs should be well-designed to exclusively guide states that are susceptible to disinformation broadcasts, such as less-developed country communities or the populations ruled under strong-censorship governances

that have no sufficient infrastructure of information technology to calibrate the scale of potential disinformation and to assess genuine and verified information resources (Ireton & Posetti, 2018). Hence besides the mainstream programs of disinformation education provided for the related experts, it is necessary to call upon the stakeholders from every country to join, share, and amplify the countermeasure system on their stance. These stakeholders might be experts or even students from every field, at least cybersecurity, information technology, media, and education departments. The need for drawing disinformation countermeasures is urgent and a prerequisite for everyone.

As for states, the first and foremost task is upholding the education system regarding literacy and disinformation while intensifying cooperation with the international community and other countries. Countries susceptible to being victims of aggressive movements induced by disinformation strategies should be more attentive and sensitive to react to vicious intentions. The successful response measures to distorted information, such as the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Law and the campaigns on media literacy in Singapore (Harold et al., 2021), can inspire other states to follow. In the case of China, its massive number of subordinated states who are parties in the PRC's development cooperation projects like the BRI and the AIIB, and states involved in sensitive regions like SCS might be potential for disinformation diffusion. The precedents of China and its targeted objectives, like Taiwan, Hong Kong, the US, and its allies, must be the guide for other states to be ready to reply to any alleged disinformation operation under the term propaganda or public diplomacy.

Apart from the orthodox countermeasure, namely disinformation literacy reinforcement, some subtle aspects that might be productive for both the international community and states to utilize for responding are the significant role of "agility" and "responsiveness" in the information realm (Clack & Selisny, 2021, p. 267). The timeliness of

the establishment of relevant agencies by NATO is the typical practice (e.g., Media Operations Centre in 1999, Public Diplomacy Division in 2003, Strategic Communications Center of Excellence in 2014, and European Center for Countering Hybrid Threats in 2018) (Clack & Selisny, 2021, p. 267). Along with that, it is requisite for consideration to regulate the asymmetric pace between the development of technology and the adverse impact it caused due to malign abuses in cyberspace. Thus, centering on information technology fluidity before fact-checking must be the starting point for everyone to work together on this vast project.

Also, in that setting, it's noteworthy to distort rhetoric by operating malignant propaganda and public diplomacy, which can amount to disinformation. China and its state parties in the economic projects it designs purport much intimidation rather than advantages. As a representative example, China appears to gain dominance over Western parties in Africa by using the expression "development co-operation" rather than "foreign or development aid," which is often employed by Western countries (Park, 2015, p. 628). Nevertheless, behind that promising brotherhood is an opaque reality for China's younger brothers, in which African countries now incur huge debts and more depend on China (Yu & Wallace, 2022), which is likened to a "new neo-colonialism" (Park, 2015, p. 637). This conclusion for China might be premature but not redundant for the other Chinese development cooperation projects' participants.

5. Conclusion

As scrutinized in this paper, there seems to be no clear evidence showing that disinformation operations so far have triggered much severe detriment in the global scope. Disinformation operation appears to be utilized as a secondary tool to intensify the malicious schemes of hostile actors to attack their targeted objects. Still, China has already expanded the extent of its targeted objects, and the goal to surpass the US to be the world leader gradually becomes clear. Adopting disinformation operations for the PRC serves as a tactical instrument exercised in the grey zone as a cost-effective means but productive to counter its opponents. The toolkit of China's disinformation is increasingly fluid, well-elaborated, and evolving. This can be found not only in the methods the PRC employs by adopting the techniques of Russia but also in the multiple languages to extend its audiences. Again, it has yet to be clarified whether China might amplify its disinformation toolkit to sabotage its rivals in the style of an information terrorist as Russia performed. Realities reveal that it has yet to be perfect, and a slew of critiques face China, as in the case of the BRI, for example. This is analogous to Sinocentrism's success and the upholding of disinformation. However, this is not to say that the threats facing individuals and the international community are trivial and inconsiderable. It's essential to bear in mind that the insurgence of China's disinformation operations found in some states is evident, and that might be designed for the first and foremost objective: highlight and spread the China model in the international dimension and challenge Western ideology simultaneously.

In addition, this paper has explored that disinformation promulgation may become a sizable impediment for the international society to function properly once it is abused. On this front, the exertion in some states may involve numerous victims at worst. Or else, disinformation at least would be employed as an instrument for China to obtain its aspiration in some vulnerable regions. Some illustrations are the flashpoints in disputed areas like

Taiwan Straits and Hong Kong (Harold et al., 2021) with increasing disinformation campaigns attributed to China and its above-mentioned subtle intervention to disrupt decision-making over the US elections in the past. The counter-disinformation effort propounded by international organizations, namely the UN, so far has been responsive and timely; however, it remains fragmented and immature in cooperation and coordination plans. It was witnessed in the scattered perspectives amongst delegations, notably that of China, France, Venezuela, Indonesia, and India when offering their viewpoints towards the agenda of the UN in the 49th HRC session recently ("UN's rights council adopts 'fake news' resolution, states urged to tackle hate speech," 2022).

The twenty-first century has witnessed a startling transformation of China in terms of its second technological advances. Behind that revolutionary rise or rejuvenation in the lexicon of the Chinese leadership is the honed but unanticipated line of the party. This is one suggested by Lee Kuan Yew:

“For Deng Xiaoping, it was reforming and opening up. For Jiang Zemin, it was consolidation and development. And for Hu Jintao, it was harmonious society - in particular, reducing the gap between the rich and the poor. What legacy will Xi leave?” (Lee, 2013, p. 29)

It appears to be murky for grasping what the following motivation China will step up; however, it is clear that Sinocentrism remains the fundamental ideology for the Chinese leadership to elaborate their modern *socialism with Chinese characteristics*. By wielding disinformation with the backing of technological advances, China increasingly inches along the pathway of becoming the supreme leader of the world. The symptoms of the attributed infodemic from China remain sporadic in some regions and states at different levels. Still, it's recognizable that the capabilities of tailoring and manipulating disinformation of China has

become more sophisticated, with skills and instruments adopted from states like Russia, for instance (Karásková, 2020). This poses concerns and threats for the world in different degrees with undetermined scope. It's suggested that China and its skilled technique in disinformation may bring it to the top of the world following concern of being synchronized under an autocratic dominance with *Chinese characteristics*, which is often criticized for its extreme surveillance system and inclement social control like "North Korea to the East" (Yi, 2022).

In general, China dream is a great dream of the PRC to become the world leader. To realize that dream, its leadership over generations has stuck to the concrete goals of outdistancing the US and rejuvenating the former prominent status in Asia with a plan of reunification with the disputed regions such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, South China Sea, Xinjiang, and Tibet. Along with those plans is the effort to popularize the China model to the world under the ingrained Sinocentric ideology. The trauma of the Century Humiliation, the sovereignty supremacy position, and the international communities' increasing critical perspectives toward China's offensive behavior has contributed to the PRC's switch to a more grey zone form of operation with furthering disinformation strategies more comprehensively and aggressively. Optimization of disinformation strategies' effectiveness in the global scope of the PRC is primarily implemented via the enormous economic development projects with a large number of participating countries that serve as the disinformation consumers and conduits for China's disinformation, as well as highlighting the China model. Over time, the extent of China's disinformation operation has expanded clearly, and it has contributed to exacerbating the concern of a precarious future for the whole world.

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