CHINESE SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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IN A RARE SURVEY of Chinese public opinion on the Russia–Ukraine war conducted by the Carter Center in March–April 2022, we can identify two highly significant findings: first, the majority (about 75 percent) of respondents believed that supporting Russia was beneficial to the national interest of the People's Republic of China (PRC); and second, the consumption of state media and the use of social media were the top two predictors of a pro-Russia attitude.[1]

Outside observers and some China researchers once believed that social media was a place where the Chinese public could express diverse opinions, especially those alternative to or even critical of the dominant narrative of state propaganda. Contrary to this expectation, we see convergence between state and social media on the issue of the Russia–Ukraine war. This pattern is the product of a decade-long process of political censorship, cooption, commercial incentives, and transnational flows of disinformation, and reveals a much more complicated Chinese social media landscape than the traditional picture of top-down propaganda.

Pro-Russia as a 'Secret Code to Wealth'

On the YouTube-like video platform Bilibili, the most-watched video about the Russia–Ukraine war was not published by state media. Titled 'What kind of big power game is hidden behind the strange Russia–Ukraine conflict?', it was published by the *zimeiti* 自媒体 ('self-media') account Lu Kewen Studio 卢克文工作室 on 24 February 2022.[2] Arguing that Ukraine was a puppet of the United States and the war was the result of US provocation and the 'aggressive eastward expansion' of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), this was the top trending video on the site the day after its publication, and accumulated more than 9.5 million views by the end of August 2022.

Another top video on this issue is titled 'Emergency deletion, mysterious virus, biochemical experiments … What exactly did the US do in Ukraine?', which was posted by another *zimeiti*, Sai Lei Hua Jin 赛雷话金, on 25 March 2022.[3] It had more than seven million views by the end of August 2022. As the title suggests, it is a video promoting conspiracy theories about US biolaboratories.

Both Lu Kewen Studio and Sai Lei Hua Jin are notorious *zimeiti* accounts that have built extremely large followings by publishing sensationalist, nationalistic content, including articles on WeChat's public platform and *Jinri Toutiao* 今日头条 (China's leading news aggregator and a core product of the company ByteDance), and videos on Bilibili, Xigua Video, and Weibo. And they are far from the only prominent actors in this business; other big *zimeiti* accounts include Zhan Hao 占豪, Wuheqilin 乌合麒麟 (who created the infamous computer-generated image of an Australian soldier slitting the throat of an Afghan child that was promoted by Chinese foreign affairs official Zhao Lijian in November 2020), and Digua Xiong Laoliu 地瓜熊老六, among others. All harvest and monetise user attention on social media by waving the nationalistic flag, which includes rooting for Russia — the 'friend without limits', as proclaimed in the joint statement issued by the Chinese and Russian

Chinese programmer Wang Jixian in Odessa Oblast, Ukraine
Source: Wang Jixian, Wikipedia

governments during the meeting between Presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping in February.

Some may wonder whether *zimeiti*, like Lu Kewen Studio, Sai Lei Hua Jin, and Zhan Hao, are affiliated with the party-state. For example, Sai Lei Hua Jin's video pushing the US biolabs conspiracy theory was a collaboration between Sai Lei Hua Jin and the Henan Provincial Committee of the Communist Youth League. Zhan Hao is a member of the Hubei Provincial Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. However, the emergence of nationalistic influencers is more about commercial incentives than political manipulation. As I have argued in a previous paper on *zimeiti*, the industry is enabled by social media platforms and the business model of the attention economy and focuses on strategies to attract traffic that can translate into advertising revenue.[4] Nationalistic content, while politically safe and unlikely to be censored, is highly effective in generating attention due to its highly emotional nature. Not surprisingly, many astute businesspeople have chosen this path.

Lu Kewen and his peers have, to use a popular online catchphrase in China, found a 'secret code to wealth' 财富密码. Praising Russia and President Putin, denouncing the United States and NATO, and mocking Ukraine and its actor-

turned-president has proven a fruitful way to activate the 'secret code'. Seeing the influencers' huge follower bases on social media platforms, the state has chosen to collaborate with them, offering the political connections the entrepreneurs crave, while piggybacking on their popularity to spread pro-government messages.

Strategic Filtering and Imports of Information

The party-state closely monitors and censors information about the Russia–Ukraine war on Chinese social media. A few days after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, five renowned Chinese historians published an open letter online, denouncing Russia and calling for peace. 'In the midst of all the noise, we felt the need to make our voices heard,' the letter said. 'We are concerned that Russian military action will lead to turmoil in Europe and the entire world, and trigger a wider humanitarian disaster.'[5]

Censors took down the letter after two hours and forty minutes. Although the authorities never provide the reasons for censorship, in this case, we can speculate that what triggered the alarm was not only the writers' anti-Russia stance — in contrast with the Chinese government's position — but also the nature of collective action in the drafting and public release of the co-signed letter.

However, the party-state does not simply block all information about the war that is not published by its official sources. Rather, it strategically allows certain messages from outside the 'Great Firewall' to be introduced into Chinese cyberspace.

The Russian government's mouthpieces RT and Sputnik both have official accounts on Weibo, with tens of millions of followers collectively. They are two of the main providers of pro-Russia narratives on Weibo, which also amplify their voices through algorithmic recommendation and putting their posts on the trending list. The public WeChat account of the *China Daily* interviewed the deputy chief editor of RT in March, who argued that the Western world was waging a war of information and public opinion 信息舆论战 to isolate and censor Russia's voice.[6] An underlying message of the interview was that, unlike Western audiences, who were 'blinded' by Western media, Chinese

readers could get 'comprehensive' information about the war thanks to their access to Russian media on Chinese platforms.

Under such arrangements, the Russian government and media can easily export disinformation to Chinese social media. Sai Lei Hua Jin's US biolab story — originally disseminated by the Kremlin — chimed with conspiracy theories that had already spread across the Chinese internet about the origins of COVID-19. It was reported by multiple state media outlets and promoted to the trending topics list by Weibo. No wonder about half the respondents to the Carter Center's survey had seen the conspiracy theory, and only 13 percent deemed it inaccurate.

There is also a large group of Chinese social media users spontaneously importing pro-Russia information from the outside; many are military enthusiasts with nationalistic attitudes. The dynamic resembles that of the importation to Chinese platforms of Western (anti-Black) racism and Islamophobia by influencers — the subject of a previous study of mine.[7] The influencers selectively translate messages from foreign media and social media sites such as Twitter. If the messages are not favourable to Russia, they are interpreted as fake news or evidence that the West is targeting Russia (and China) for political reasons. For example, when an influencer posted a video of destroyed Russian military equipment on Ukraine's Independence Day, he added a comment that Russian people questioned why there were no visible 'Zs' or 'Vs' (Russian symbols of its military actions in Ukraine) and figured that 'they might be Ukraine's own stuff'. His followers commented on the video: 'It's natural for an actor to borrow some props.'[8] A wide range of information can find its way on to China's social media platforms, but it is largely twisted and used to support, rather than challenge and diversify, the mainstream narrative.

The Small Yet Important Group Sympathising with Ukrainians

Although pro-Russia attitudes and content prevail on Chinese social media, there is a small yet important group of people who openly express

their support for Ukraine, despite heavy censorship and possible offline retaliation.

As well as the open letter published by the historians, there have been other notable initiatives. For example, a group of Chinese internationalists launched an 'alternative news agency' 替代性通讯社 named hxotnongd 与此同时 ('*Meanwhile*') that publishes articles on WeChat with a firm anti-war stance and expressing solidarity with Ukraine.[9] Although censors eventually deleted the content and the WeChat account, the group's articles managed to circulate among some young and well-educated people in China (see their Facebook page).[10]

Videos published by Wang Jixian 王吉贤, a software engineer living in Ukraine's third-largest city, Odessa, reached a large audience on WeChat's video channel before being censored. In the videos, Wang shared his fear of living in a country at war and his anger at his fellow Chinese citizens who supported Russia. Although we do not know how many people followed his WeChat video account before it was blocked, his YouTube channel had more than 110,000 followers by the end of August 2022.[11]

Some of the more subtle voices sympathising with Ukrainians have survived on the Chinese internet. For example, Guyu 谷雨, a media account focusing on non-fiction storytelling, published a story in late March, in which the author described her experience of volunteering at Berlin's central railway station to help Ukrainian refugees.[12] The podcast *The Weirdo* 不合时宜 produced two episodes about the war, one in February and the other in August.[13] The host and the guests on both episodes expressed a clear pro-Ukraine stance. The second episode also featured a Chinese student studying in Ukraine, who volunteered in the community by teaching painting to children in a shelter and raised money from his Chinese friends and followers to help Ukrainians. Another popular podcast, *Story FM* 故事FM, released an episode in June about how museum staff in Ukraine protected artefacts and preserved culture and history.[14] The message of the brutality of war and the impressive efforts to save culture was clear.

It should be noted that such voices mostly appear on platforms that do not allow public comments and limit direct interactions among users. Such platforms, like the WeChat public platform and podcasts, make it hard for trolls to harass and attack the authors. It is much more difficult to express anti-Russia opinions on relatively open platforms such as Weibo and Bilibili, which are more vulnerable to cyberbullying. That said, the official Weibo account of Ukraine's embassy in Beijing, which constantly publishes anti-Russia posts, has a moderate number of followers (roughly 136,000 at the end of August) and an average post will receive hundreds of comments and shares. Comments like 'Go Ukraine!' and 'Support for Ukraine' can be easily found on this account, despite the obvious risk associated with such open expression.[15]

Although publicly audible anti-Russia voices are understandably fewer than those supporting the invasion, they demonstrate that discussions of and opinions about the Russia–Ukraine war in China are far from black and white.

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