

# <Redirecting> the diaspora: China's united front work and the hyperlink networks of diasporic Chinese websites in cyberspace

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# <Redirecting> the diaspora: China's united front work and the hyperlink networks of diasporic Chinese websites in cyberspace

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years concerns have emerged regarding the loyalty of ethnic Chinese residing outside of China and whether they are agents of foreign influence. China has also recently declared its ambition to be an 'Internet superpower' and use the internet for political goals. This article will therefore explore the role of the internet in China's diaspora engagement efforts. By adopting an Information Technology (IT)-informed approach, this article seeks to provide insights to the following question(s): Does China engage in diaspora engagement on the internet, to what extent, and what are the implications of such? An in-depth look at a representative sample of Chinese-language websites outside of China reveals 'dual-track messaging' approaches where non-political (i.e. business) news exists alongside overtly political messages. This strongly suggests that the Communist Party of China's (CPC) United Front work to co-opt the diaspora is also taking place via cyberspace, in addition to traditional media sources.

## KEYWORDS

China; Chinese diaspora; overseas Chinese; united front; digital statecraft

## Concepts

### *Diaspora engagement and origin-state power*

Concepts of diaspora and diaspora engagement have had significant implications for contemporary international relations. The term 'diaspora' is used here to designate those residing outside of their origin state or descendants who retain some form of affinity towards their ancestral homeland. This is because from the viewpoint of a diaspora-sending state, these diasporic communities are the intended targets of its diaspora engagement policies. Therefore, the term 'diaspora' as utilized here serves as an analytical idiom and does not claim to delimit notions of place or identity.

Diasporas are often described as a transnational 'monolithic force' that threatens traditional conceptions of the Westphalian nation-state (Godin 2018). This is due to them being 'simultaneously embedded' in two localities: their origin state (or ancestral homeland), and their resident state where they now permanently reside (Brettell 2006). Despite

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being located elsewhere, diasporas do participate in the various economic, social, and political processes of their origin states (Smith and Guarnizo 1998; Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999).

The importance of diasporas in international relations can be seen through their potential real-world impact. In practical terms, diasporas serve as various sources of capital for their origin states. These can take the form of economic and knowledge capital to fuel the origin state's economic development (Leblang 2010, 2017; Bahar and Talvi 2018). Diasporas can also serve as a form of political capital by virtue of their 'bridging function' between their origin state and their resident state (Cohen 2008). Diaspora communities interact with the domestic political arenas of their resident states. Therefore, from the viewpoint of the origin states, diaspora communities can potentially be 'tapped-upon' for various foreign policy objectives (Gamlen, Cummings, and Vaaler 2019). These foreign policy agendas include seeking the diaspora's support to lobby their host governments to advance the interests of the diaspora's origin state (Adamson and Demetriou 2007).

Diaspora political mobilization may vary depending on a multitude of factors such as the domestic conditions of origin states, or the diaspora occupational profile. However, a common thread of diasporic political mobilization is that it first requires the fostering of an ethnocentric sense of belonging, or long-distance nationalism (Anderson 1998). Doing so provides the diaspora community with a form of 'cultural citizenship' (Suzuki 2018), which allows the origin state to compete with the diaspora's adopted state for political loyalty.

### ***Internet governance and political power projection***

The internet and internet governance are also topics of a transnational nature that has transnational implications. The internet is now a key component of communication worldwide and it can be used to undermine the security of states. Examples of how the internet affects states include attempts by political actors to use the internet as a tool to conduct surveillance and disseminate propaganda or fake news. This has given rise to a new series of geopolitical concerns over the internet.

There have been attempts at collective action by governments, civil society, and the commercial entities to bring about some form of 'internet governance'. The United Nations (UN)-sponsored World Summit on the Information Society (2005) declared internet governance to be 'the development and application ... of shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and programmes that shape the evolution and use of the internet'. This definition draws upon Stephen Krasner's definition of international regimes, indicating how internet governance can be situated within an international relations context. Issues of internet governance often revolved around standardization (i.e. 'norms'), resource distribution, and policy formulation and enforcement (Mathiason et al. 2004). Common problems faced include overcoming the lack of a central authority and attaining consensus on enforcing 'codes of conduct' for the vast number of networks that collectively constitute the internet (Rathmell 2001). These challenges present in internet governance thus mirror that of global governance.

Similar to global governance, internet governance rests on a 'multi-stakeholder model' and is similarly mired in a web where states' agendas and interests compete amongst

each other (ICANN 2014). The internet is therefore a medium of power projection where states strive to be the 'rule-maker' and place other states in a subordinate 'rule-taker' position (Carr 2015). 'Rule-makers' seek to exercise power and control over how the internet ought to be governed. Power in this context does not refer to coercive or 'hard' power but rather, the power to 'manufacture consensus' amongst the stakeholders (Franklin 2014). The 'rule-making' state controls the narratives, sets the agenda and lays out the parameters of reference so as to delegitimize any difference of opinion. The other 'rule-taking' states will then be bound to a series of normative claims set out by the rule-makers on what the internet ought to be.

### ***Sharp power***

Further building on the idea of transnational narrative-control and agenda-setting is the concept of sharp power. Sharp power refers to efforts by authoritarian states to influence and manipulate the cultural, academic, media, and publishing (CAMP) industries of democratic states and launch various disinformation campaigns. This allows authoritarian states to 'cut into the fabric' of democratic societies and exacerbate existing societal tensions present. The aim is to generate enough distrust and discord amongst those living in democracies and undermine the credibility of democracy as an ideological and governing model (Walker 2018). Wielding sharp power therefore allows the repressive values found in authoritarian states to be internationally 'exported' towards other non-authoritarian states. The repressive values that are found in the former often include top-down hierarchical model of authority, censorship of information and having a monopoly on political power (19).

The internet and associated technologies (e.g. social media platforms, mobile applications) has further empowered authoritarian states' sharp power capabilities and their ability to manipulate and influence foreign societies (Walker, Kalathil, and Ludwig 2020). Sensitive data harvested from mobile applications are utilized to generate the 'computational propaganda' needed for authoritarian states to launch disinformation campaigns in democratic states (Bradshaw and Howard 2019) and advance false narratives. These false narratives, which are aligned with the authoritarian state's interests, may end up influencing the decision-making milieu of democratic states (Giles 2016). In summary, the concept of sharp power illustrates how authoritarian states have been able to utilize the internet for their transnational ambitions.

### **Chinese diaspora engagement and political power**

An examination of the literature on China's diaspora engagement efforts reveals common themes of transnationality and extraterritoriality, where Chinese policymakers have often attempted to reconfigure the spatiality of the Chinese state and operate on the assumption that the diaspora belonged to China (To 2014). Chinese diaspora engagement is often based upon ethnocentric appeals to the notion of a 'native place', irrespective of the diaspora's nationality or place of birth, with such appeals often proving to be effective (Pan 2000). This is despite Chinese diasporic identity is often flexible and contingent upon local circumstances (Callahan 2005). It is worth also noting that virtually all diaspora engagement efforts by the Chinese state are

conducted in the Chinese-language and largely targeted at Sinophone communities: ethnic Chinese who maintain a good degree of Chinese-language capability and Chinese cultural affinity. The ethnocentric appeal deployed by the Chinese state is therefore emotive in essence and often intended to invoke a sense of longing and nostalgia, wrought by what Chen terms as a *'state of displacement as preserved in memory, in both the spatial and temporal sense'* (Chen 2015).

There is evidence to suggest that in its diaspora engagement, the Chinese government is attempting to advance new conceptualizations of national and social belonging (Ding 2014). Although previous Chinese governments have, in the past, sought to leverage the diaspora as an economic development resource (Gambe 2000; Smart and Hsu 2004), China today is no longer reliant on diaspora capital for economic development (Quinlan 2007). However, the PRC continues to adopt ethnocentric diaspora policies, such as the 'Shared Root, Shared Soul, Shared Dream' (同根同魂同梦) approach towards Chinese diaspora (Liu and Wang 2014). This policy advances the claim that based on shared ethnicity ('root') and shared cultural practices ('soul') between PRC nationals and ethnic Chinese living abroad, all Chinese worldwide share the same 'dream', regardless of their nationality. The term 'dream' refers to the Chinese Dream (中国梦), a vision articulated by Xi Jinping 习近平 on how China's future ought to be. The desire of the current Chinese government to extend its reach beyond its national borders to operate in a territorially unrestricted and transnational manner indicates a possible change in the underlying rationale for diaspora engagement, which can be attributed to a shift in attitudes within the Chinese policymaking sphere to now utilize the diaspora as a political, rather than economic, resource. Qishi (求是), the CPC's main political theory periodical, has stated a 'New Era' of overseas Chinese work (Qishi 2018). Additionally, the 2018 merger of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO), a body responsible for diaspora relations, into the CPC's United Work Front Department also signals the utilization of the diaspora for political purposes first, and economic purposes second.

Regarding the possible political objectives of China's diaspora engagement, the literature largely agrees that diaspora engagement now serves to extend China's political reach abroad. Specifically, China's diaspora engagement policies appear to serve as a front for China's United Front work and increase China's ability to influence the domestic politics of other states (Suzuki 2019). The extraterritorial and transnational nature of China's diaspora engagement policies have led to such policies being characterized as a 'magic weapon' for China to project its influence abroad, which now includes explicit political agenda-setting or censorship power, in the case of New Zealand (Brady 2017). Recent Chinese diaspora engagement efforts also appear to cultivate the diaspora to become 'public diplomats' for China. The objectives of such efforts are to utilize the diaspora to promote China's interests from their resident countries to portray it in a positive light – in the same manner in which Jewish diaspora functions as a crucial political influence pillar for Israel. In China's case, the interests that are to be promoted by the diaspora include China's perspective on sensitive issues such as Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang (Thunø 2018) and other foreign policy agendas (Wade 2019). Chinese officials have also frequently invoked the metaphor of 'borrowing a ship to venture out to sea' (借船出海) when describing the role of the Chinese diaspora in helping promote China's interests in their resident states (Sun and Sinclair 2015). Other possible political objectives

suggested also appear to serve the explicitly instrumental end of power. For example, by co-opting the identity and cultural heritage of ethnic Chinese worldwide, China gains the political assurance that the boundaries of its de facto jurisdiction now exceeds the territorial limits of a nation-state (Barabantseva 2005).

### ***Cyberspace governance and political power in China***

Alongside utilizing the diaspora for political ends, China has also become increasingly active in recent years with regards to cyberspace governance due to the potential power it could wield as an 'internet superpower' (Segal 2018). China has thus embraced a 'cyberspace spirit' in which the internet and other associated digital technologies are placed 'at the heart of propaganda, public opinion and social control work' (Creemers 2017). Realizing that uncontrolled online public opinion could threaten the legitimacy of its rule, the CPC has sought to deepen its control of information flow online and make the internet serve as a 'transmission belt' for government views (Yang 2012). Studies on how the CPC governs a 'digital China' reveal that such governance involves authoritative agents, hierarchical lines of communication, and power concentration where key government and party agencies dominate (Schneider 2018). The same authoritarian top-down approach appears to be implemented for both the actual and virtual world, indicating that Chinese policy makers make little distinction between the two when it comes to political governance (Economy 2018). Scholars at the People's Liberation Army (PLA) National Defence University (2015) have also explicitly called for attempts to harness developments in technology for propaganda and social management purposes. Additionally, rather than limiting its internet controls domestically, Chinese authorities are now explicitly looking to 'push China's model of internet governance to become an international consensus' (推动我国治网主张成为国际共识) (Qiusi 2017). China therefore seeks to become a 'norm-setter' in internet governance (Gross and Murgia 2020). Official documents also reveal the importance of 'cyber culture' as a pillar of the PRC's 'Chinese culture industry', indicating extensive CPC-led efforts to promulgate the PRC's conception of Chinese culture online (PRC State Council Information Office 2010). Considering that (1) appeals based on notions of shared culture and ethnicity forms the core of China's attempt at diaspora influence and (2) China has sought to export its model of internet governance abroad, this leads us to questions on the extent to which China's diaspora engagement and influence attempts are taking place via the internet.

### ***China's diaspora engagement in cyberspace for political power***

Studies have shown how China attempts to dominate the knowledge production and information flows that occurs amongst Chinese diaspora. As studies of Chinese diaspora news outlets demonstrate, China often attempts to establish 'authoritative discourse' by granting advertisement revenue and access privileges to diasporic news outlets that abide by official PRC narratives (Chong 2015). This results in China being able to influence the discourse of diaspora news agencies to promote themes that insinuate the diaspora has certain 'moral obligations' to serve the 'ethnic motherland' by virtue of consanguinity.

Therefore, building on previous sections, which discussed how China views both the Chinese diaspora and the internet as potential instruments of political power, this raises a point on what is to be made of the 'diaspora internet' and whether China's diaspora influence efforts extend into the virtual ('online') world. The term 'diaspora internet' is used here to refer to various Chinese-language internet websites that are based outside of China and utilized by the Chinese diaspora. These websites are thus part of a larger transnational internet-based Chinese cultural sphere (Yang 2003). The internet, as some scholars have suggested, is a social structure for cultivating online diaspora communities by offering feelings of community-belonging (Brainard and Brinkerhoff 2004). This is crucial for the diaspora's sense of self as it permits the diaspora to retain psychological links to their cultural identity (Georgiou 2006, 17). Rather than being merely computer servers and transmission cables, the internet is now '*an infrastructure of feeling, a social space that is human-designed and performative*' (Callahan 2020). Therefore, the Chinese diaspora internet is where the diaspora constantly renegotiates and reconstructs its transnational identity (Sun and Sinclair 2015, 11). The internet, as a virtual social space, has also made it possible to 'create an illusion of spatial contiguity' between China and the diaspora (Werbner 1999). Given the significance the diaspora internet has as a virtual space of diasporic identity construction, one must ask: to what extent is China able to influence the discourse of the diaspora internet and whether such influence has already taken place?

The literature on the subject of China's digital diaspora engagement appears to be relatively muted. Previous studies examining China's diaspora engagement often neglect discussing how diaspora engagement occurs via cyberspace. Instead, researchers primarily focus on examining China's influence on traditional media outlets such as local Chinese-language newspapers or television programmes (Pal 2015; Stenberg 2015; Dai 2015). Other studies, while examining the diaspora digital consumption practices, often do not discuss the wider political implications. For example, a study by Yu and Sun (2019) on the Chinese diaspora's use of WeChat outside of China fails to touch upon the political implications of such consumption. This omission is glaring, considering that political censorship often occurs on WeChat – a possible indication that China's cyberspace governance is increasingly extended beyond its territorial borders.

Other attempts to tackle the question on whether and how China engages the diaspora via the diaspora internet also fall short in various areas. Ding's (2008) study fails to analyse whether and how China's diaspora engagement takes place on diaspora internet websites. Instead, Ding's study ended up discussing the implications certain diaspora internet websites have on China and its global image. In his seminal study on the intersection between cyberspace and diaspora engagement, Wong (2003) primarily advances the claim certain diaspora Chinese websites do not function as extensions of China's '*Chinese nation*' project. However, he concedes that certain Chinese diaspora websites carry with them the potential for new politics of belonging to occur. As these websites function as platforms to facilitate and maintain incoming dialogue from external sources into the localized diaspora community, there exist the possibility that external political entities can manipulate existing local identities for their advantage. A more recent work is Ip and Yin's 2015 study of SkyKiwi, a Chinese-language website based in New Zealand. After performing textual analysis of the cyber discourses present on SkyKiwi, they concede that SkyKiwi's editorial stance and its content is heavily influenced



by China's official state media. However, they hold back from concluding that there is an intentional policy of control or influence from China, citing 'little evidence' of such. Other recent work has also spotlighted the role of the internet as a potential medium for diaspora engagement, such as Keane et al.'s (2021) argument that Chinese internet tech companies such as Tencent, ByteDance, and iQIYI might be more effective as platforms for promoting Chinese culture amongst various Chinese diaspora communities. However, the authors focus largely on questions of cultural power and China's creative industries and draw a distinction between Chinese commercial digital platforms and Chinese state media, leaving behind unanswered questions regarding the explicit interplay between the Chinese state and diaspora engagement efforts via the internet and its associated technologies.

However, when considering (1) the extraterritorial nature of China's diaspora engagement efforts, (2) its international advocacy of its internet governance model, and that (3) it has sought establish discursive power over other 'offline' forms of Chinese diaspora media, it is highly probable that China would seek to extend such influence over the Chinese diaspora internet. However, the question of whether this is the case remains largely remains unanswered. There have been no such study to-date. The next section will therefore attempt to build upon this gap and analyse whether China's diaspora engagement takes place on the diaspora internet, and if so, how.

## Methodology

### Introduction

In this section, we will explain and justify why the hyperlink network analysis (HNA) method was adopted to analyse if China's diaspora engagement takes place on the diaspora internet. Considering that much internet is accessed via websites, it is expected that internet-based political communication would therefore take place via websites. Understanding the social structure of such political communication and where power lies within the structure would therefore require an analysis of these websites. The HNA method is therefore useful in this regard, considering that it has been termed as an emerging method for analysing internet-based social structures (Park 2003). HNA has already been utilized to study various other political communication-related phenomena in the social sciences such as the political use of blogs (Park and Jankowski 2008). Before delving into the findings, a brief explanation of what HNA is and how it works is needed.

### How HNA works

A website is made up of webpages, and webpages often contains of links ('hyperlinks') that can be clicked to be brought ('redirected') to another page, either within the same website or to a different website. The hyperlink is therefore the basic element of the structure of the Internet as it permits websites to be connected with each other.

A website (e.g. 'Website A') that contains hyperlinks to another website (e.g. 'Website B') indicates that Website A 'endorses' the relevance of Website B and is willing to intentionally direct its users over to Website B. This carries with it 'certain sociological meanings' (Hsu and Park 2010). Therefore if a single hyperlink constitutes a so-called '*seal of*



*endorsement*', then webpages that receive a large number of incoming links from other external sources suggest that that webpage (and its website) is somehow deserving of attention due to the number of '*endorsements*' it receives (Halavais 2009).

An alternative way to think of a website is as though it was as an organization made up of members ('webpages'). Endorsements ('hyperlinks') leading to other external organizations ('other websites') would then represent the relationships that members have with these external organizations. See Table 1 below for more information:

Therefore, by looking at the immediate outgoing relationships that an organization (i.e. Organization A) has through its members, one is able to see which the other organizations are affiliated to the organization. If there are three different organizations (i.e. Organization A, B, C), a look at their immediate outgoing relationships will also reveal their affiliation networks and whether those three organizations have anything in common – which might be indicative of a particular phenomenon. For example, if all three organizations have immediate relationships with a certain 'Organization D', this is indicative that Organization D shares the same interest as the primary network (i.e. the immediate network of Organizations A, B, and C). If Organizations A, B, and C are airline companies, then perhaps Organization D might also turn out to be another airline company, or an organization with shared interests or industry as A, B, and C. Proceeding further by reiterating the process and examining the outgoing relationships of Organization D might very well reveal the larger aviation industry network. Based on this larger secondary network, filtering out which nodes (e.g. organizations) are the most 'central', or have the most influence, will reveal who the 'establishment' is within the larger network. Note that the term 'establishment' used here is not a normative one – it merely refers to key actors and entities within a specific issue area or policy domain (Rogers 2013).

The hyperlink network mapping process operates along the same line. It first collects a list of all the outgoing 'relationships', or outbound 'links' from the starting websites. It then looks for the external websites that have at least two 'links' from the starting websites. The process is then reiterated to reveal the larger secondary network, and so forth.

## Why HNA

The reason behind the selection of HNA as the method for this study is due to its ability to map the immediate and extended neighbourhood, or hyperlink network, of the websites that are the subject of study. As other studies have shown, the study of networks as a mode of organization can help advance our knowledge of international relations (Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009). Network analysis gives us insights as to how collective political action, or the lack of it, is facilitated by various nodes within the network. In the case of HNA, by using the generated data, the researcher will then be able to sort and filter the nodes (i.e. websites) within the network based on the amount of 'influence' those nodes

**Table 1.** Real-world terminologies and their corresponding internet and network theory counterparts.

Real world terminology	Internet terminology	Network theory terminology
Company/Organizations	Website	Node
Employees/Members	Webpage	–
Personal/Professional Relationships	Hyperlinks	Connections/Ties

Source: Authors.

have. Note that ‘influence’ here does not only consider only the raw number of ‘endorsements’ received but also the ‘quality’ of such endorsements – such as whether those endorsements came from nodes that are themselves relatively influential. The term ‘eigenvector centrality’ is used to describe this measure of influence and authority (Newman 2008). This is important because eigenvector centrality is linked to the notion of ‘programming power’ (Schneider 2018, 91). This refers to the notion that it is easier to program a network with a predetermined agenda or discourse from a node with a high eigenvector centrality score than to do so from one with a low score. A node with high eigenvector centrality score will have more influence, authority, and programming power as compared to others. By virtue of their influence and centrality within the network, discourses adopted by these nodes are therefore much more likely to be reflected throughout the wider network. Therefore, looking at the generated hyperlink network map and seeking out actors with a relatively high eigenvector centrality score will serve as an indicator of who the ‘establishment’ is within the network and where discursive power lies.

This is relevant, considering that existing research already shows how China is seeking to dominate the knowledge production networks of non-internet forms of communication and dictate the information being circulated through such avenues. However, such existing research often uses interviews, analysis of policies and case studies to inform their findings. As stated earlier, there is little research to-date concerning the diaspora internet that sheds light on *how* information might flow within it and how various discourses in cyberspace might be disseminated and by *whom*. The HNA scan is therefore intended to reveal to us the ‘wider neighbourhood’ of these websites and allow us to discern which nodes are part of the establishment. These establishment nodes therefore have the ability to set the discourse for the wider network. In summary, the HNA method allows us to look at the diaspora internet and discover whether Chinese authorities are seeking to influence the flow of information and knowledge production there, and if so, to what extent.

## Findings and analysis

### *Performing the scan*

To map or ‘see’ the extended neighbourhood of the diaspora internet, a hyperlink network scan of various Chinese diaspora websites was performed. The software tool used to perform this hyperlink network scan is IssueCrawler. IssueCrawler searches (‘crawls’) through several websites specified by the researcher. This is done in order to capture their outgoing hyperlinks and map the extended hyperlink network web-space (Rogers 2013). Examples of previous uses of IssueCrawler for political research include studies on right-wing politics in European states (Digital Methods Initiative 2013) and domestic Chinese nationalism (Schneider 2018, 80–108). GEPHI, an open-source network analysis and visualization software is used to visualize the data generated by IssueCrawler.

To attain a list of Chinese-language diaspora websites, this paper conducted searches on the search engines of Google and Baidu. Keywords used during these searches were Chinese-language phrases for Chinese diaspora websites, paired together with a locality. Some examples of these keyword searches (done in Chinese) include ‘*Overseas Chinese Website France*’, ‘*United States Overseas Chinese Businessmen website*’, ‘*UK Chinese People*

*Website* or *'Chinese in Africa website'*. Note that the terms 'ethnic Chinese (华人)', 'Overseas Chinese (华侨)', 'Overseas Chinese businessmen (华商)' are used in the searches here to describe the Chinese diaspora. Although these terms carry with them important distinctions in the lexicon, they are often deployed in an interchangeable manner when it comes to common everyday usage.

The searches brought out a multitude of Chinese-language websites catering to the Chinese diaspora, numbering in the hundreds. Some of these websites included Craigslist-style classified advertisement websites, message boards and forums, and various Chinese grassroots community websites. Websites in the third category were mainly catered to various developments in the local Chinese community, such as business and trade associations, news portals, and cultural exchanges. These websites are important as they are virtual representations of localities where interaction is most likely to occur between the diaspora and China. Take the case of the various Chinese Chambers of Commerce (or similar variations). Recent work on how the Chinese diaspora engages a rising China have highlighted that such business associations constitute an *"institutionalised form of transnational interaction"* between ethnic Chinese businessmen and China (Ren and Liu 2022), reflecting similar arguments advanced by other scholars that diasporic Chinese business and entrepreneurship remain *'inherently linked to the ancestral homeland (of China)'* (Zhou 2021). Diasporic news media agencies have also been argued to bear *'informal responsibilities'* when it comes to bolstering perceptions foreign publics have of a rising China (Liu 2022). It is therefore these that we are interested in, if we are to examine whether the Chinese authorities indeed have any sort of influence or presence there. As there were hundreds of websites, twenty of those websites were selected at random. The only consideration given to the selection process was that to ensure that there was no over-representation of a particular state or region. Using Issue-Crawler, a HNA scan was then performed on these websites. The list of websites, their corresponding organizations, and description (as provided) can be seen in Table 2 below:

### **HNA scan results**

The results of the HNA scan reveal that Chinese state authorities have a very dominant presence in the extended network of those initial diaspora websites. In other words, the HNA software perceives Chinese state authorities to be the 'establishment' of these Chinese diaspora websites.

Sorting the nodes further based on their eigenvector centrality allows us to rank the nodes based on their degree of influence and authority in the extended network. Using GEPHI, the network is visualized (as seen in Figure 1). Nodes in the network are sorted via colour-code and node size based on their eigenvector centrality. The higher a node's eigenvector centrality value, the darker its colour and the larger the size.

### **PRC influence and authority on the diaspora internet**

#### ***Finding 1: Chinese authorities have an extremely influential and authoritative presence on the diaspora internet***

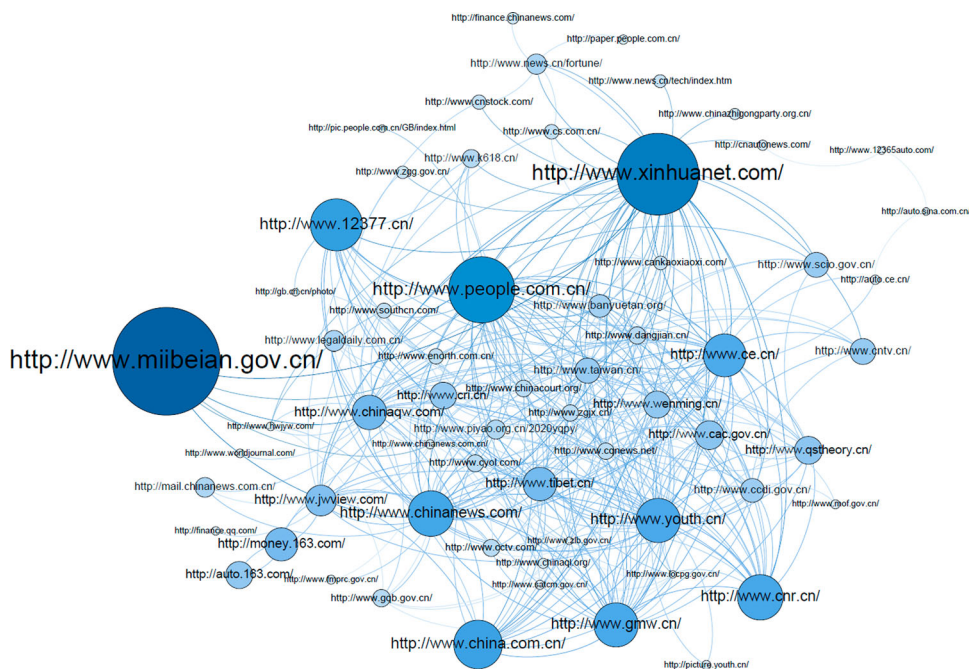
The result of the scan can provide us with some insights into the nature of China's diaspora engagement in cyberspace. The first insight is that the Chinese authorities have

**Table 2.** Selective list of Chinese diaspora internet websites.

Website address	Name (in English)	Focus
<a href="http://cccica.com">http://cccica.com</a>	Canada China Chamber of Industry and Commerce Association	Business exchanges
<a href="http://na-canada.com">http://na-canada.com</a>	North America Chinese Alliance of Commerce Association	
<a href="http://www.ccbuk.org.uk">http://www.ccbuk.org.uk</a>	Confederation of Chinese Business UK	
<a href="http://www.ccg.com">http://www.ccg.com</a>	Canadian Chinese General Chamber of Industry and Commerce	
<a href="http://hollandqw.com">http://hollandqw.com</a>	Dutch Overseas Chinese Network	Chinese-language news and information
<a href="http://www.italiapratohuashanghui.com">http://www.italiapratohuashanghui.com</a>	Italian Prato Chinese Chamber of Commerce	
<a href="http://www.qwitaly.com">http://www.qwitaly.com</a>	Italian Overseas Chinese Network	
<a href="https://huaren.us">https://huaren.us</a>	North American Chinese People Network	
<a href="https://www.br-cn.com">https://www.br-cn.com</a>	South American Overseas Chinese Network	
<a href="https://www.franceqw.com">https://www.franceqw.com</a>	France Overseas Chinese Network	
<a href="https://www.nychinaren.com">https://www.nychinaren.com</a>	New York Chinese People Information Network	
<a href="https://www.qiaowang.org">https://www.qiaowang.org</a>	African Overseas Chinese Network	
<a href="https://www.thevoiceofchinese.com">https://www.thevoiceofchinese.com</a>	The Voice of (Overseas) Chinese	
<a href="https://www.mccc.my">https://www.mccc.my</a>	Malaysian-China Chamber of Commerce	
<a href="http://www.ukcnetpa.org">http://www.ukcnetpa.org</a>	UK China Economic and Trade Promotion Association	Bilateral trade
<a href="https://chinese-usa.org">https://chinese-usa.org</a>	Chinese-American Federation	Umbrella organization of 120 Chinese-American associations; economic and cultural exchanges
<a href="http://ucahp.com">http://ucahp.com</a>	US-China Association of High-level Professionals	
<a href="https://www.new-broad.com">https://www.new-broad.com</a>	German-Chinese Tourism Culture Media Exchange Association	Cultural exchanges
<a href="http://aclsa.org.au">http://aclsa.org.au</a>	Australian Chinese-Language Schools Association Incorporated	Chinese-language education; cultural exchanges
<a href="http://www.chinamcec.com">http://www.chinamcec.com</a>	Sino-French Cultural Exchange Association	Cultural, scientific, educational, and economic exchanges

Source: Authors.

been relatively successful at establishing an influential and authoritative presence on the diaspora internet. The data indicates that the most influential and authoritative nodes within the extended network of the Chinese diaspora websites are those nodes representing Chinese state-government and government-linked entities. These nodes received the most incoming links from other influential nodes, which are themselves also government or government-linked websites. The entity with the most relative influence within the network is the Chinese Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (miibeian.gov.cn). In second and third place is the state-owned media organization Xinhua News Agency (xinhuanet.com) and CPC newspaper People's Daily (people.com.cn). Following closely behind is the Centre for Reporting Harmful and Illegal Information (12377.cn), a department within the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC). Note that the CAC is the agency responsible for regulating and censoring the Internet and is subordinate to the CPC. Other nodes with relatively more influence include state-controlled or state-linked media agencies such as China News Service (chinanews.com), Guangming Daily (gmw.cn), and China Net (china.com.cn). The visualized network graph also reveals that scattered within the extended network are plenty of websites through which China's



**Figure 1.** The Hyperlink Network of the Diasporic Chinese Websites. Crawl parameters provided by IssueCrawler to discover the ‘establishment network’. Gephi graph layout algorithm: ForceAtlas2. Source: Authors.

propaganda machine works. These websites are led by either the CPC's propaganda department or Chinese government bodies like the State Council. Such sites are usually based around a particular topic and serve as platforms to promote the 'official narrative'. These topics include Taiwan ([taiwan.cn](http://taiwan.cn)), Tibet ([tibet.cn](http://tibet.cn)) or even the spiritual (as opposed to material) aspects of civilization ([wenming.cn](http://wenming.cn)). These websites then go on to reference other government or government-linked websites, further cementing the Chinese state authorities' influence and authority within the Chinese diaspora internet.

Such PRC-led strong presence comes at the expense of other independent Chinese-language media organizations based outside of China. These independent media organizations appear to have been ‘crowded out’ and are totally absent from the extended network of the scanned Chinese diaspora websites. The overwhelming prevalence of Chinese state and state-linked organizations within the extended network also brings into question whether these diaspora websites (and the organizations they represent) are truly independent platforms, or whether they engage in some kind of collaboration with the Chinese authorities. As other scholars of the internet within China have found, the line between being a private organization that happens to reference PRC sources for the sake of convenience versus a private organization with actual links to the party-state system is not consistently clear (MacKinnon 2012). The actual affiliations of organizations are often vague and obscure (Schneider 2018, 101). This looks to be the case even for the Chinese diaspora websites outside of China. Nonetheless, the key point remains: Chinese state authorities have been relatively successful at establishing an influential and authoritative presence on the diaspora internet. This brings us to our second insight.

## **Exporting internet governance and information censorship**

### ***Finding 2: China seeks to export its internet governance and information censorship to the diaspora internet***

As these Chinese diaspora websites tend to have a strong preference for referencing the official PRC sources, they are therefore much more likely to reproduce official PRC narratives. As the visualized network graph indicates, Chinese internet censorship and news media agencies wield relatively large amounts of influence and authority within the extended network. As Schneider (2018, 103) argues, although hyperlinks are not indicators of direct top-down information transfer between nodes, they nonetheless indicate the extent to which there is deference to Chinese state authorities. In turn, this affords the Chinese authorities the ‘programming power’ necessary to embed the entire network with the necessary ‘traits’ (Castells 2013). As nodes within a network are bound by a common denominator, ‘traits’ in this case refer to certain specific ideas or visions by the PRC on how internet governance ought to be. Therefore, by virtue of their influence and authority within the network, Chinese authorities are able to produce and diffuse specific political and ideological discourses. These political and ideological discourses propagated by Chinese state authorities are then adopted by the Chinese diaspora websites through the latter’s hyperlinks to the former. This also indicates that Chinese state authorities also have the ability to exercise direct government control by acting as political gatekeepers of information (Castells 2013, 203) – they get to decide what information goes onto the information network and what does not. In other words, the discursive power wielded by Chinese state authorities over traditional forms of Chinese-language diaspora media is now extended to Chinese diaspora websites on the internet. This challenges long-held notions that the (diaspora) internet is a distinct space free from the reach of the (Chinese) state and operating on its own terms (Johnson and Post 1996). Rather, the Chinese diaspora internet very much behaves like an extension of the domestic internet within China. It reflects, according to Schneider (2018, 98), a ‘*traditional mass-media logic where a few authoritative sources broadcast their information to a mass audience*’.

As discussed in the earlier section on concepts, diasporas can serve as a resource for their origin-state to tap upon. China has therefore sought to utilize the diaspora as a political resource. From the perspective of the PRC, the Chinese diaspora can indeed play a bridging function between China and the states in which they live, as with the case of ethnic Chinese in Malaysia (China National Radio 2013). As discussed in an earlier section, scholars Thunø and Wade have also stated how China has therefore sought to cultivate the diaspora as public diplomats for the PRC’s foreign policy agenda. Seen in this light, it would be safe to claim that China’s exporting of its internet governance model onto the diaspora internet aims to serve those ends. By controlling the flow of information taking place on the diaspora internet, Chinese authorities are then able to carry out a two-phased strategy. The first phase involves moulding the Chinese diaspora into having a favourable perception of the PRC. The intention here is to influence the construction of the diaspora’s identity and reshape the diaspora’s digital milieu. The second phase then involves pushing the PRC’s desired narratives onto the diaspora. This fosters the conditions conducive for Chinese authorities to mould the diaspora into ‘public diplomats’ for the PRC. Therefore, the ‘programming power’ over Chinese identity wielded by



the PRC over the diaspora in cyberspace is power in terms of popular, rather than territorial, sovereignty. As Callahan (2005, 286) notes, popular sovereignty refers to power over people and populations that are outside of the PRC as a nation-state. In this case, such people and populations are the Chinese diaspora. Thus, one can see how the themes of China's diaspora engagement efforts in cyberspace largely mirrors the themes of its diaspora engagement effort in the physical world. Both contain themes of transnationality and extraterritoriality, as reflected by the Chinese government's attempt to extend its digital influence and authority to ethnic Chinese living outside of China.

Having now proven that China's diaspora engagement takes place in cyberspace and that Chinese state wield discursive power on Chinese diaspora websites, this paper will now deep dive into those websites. The idea is to further discover the extent to which official PRC political and ideological discourses are able to permeate the Chinese diaspora websites, and what these discourses actually are.

### ***Digital diaspora engagement as united front work***

#### ***Finding 3: China's digital diaspora engagement is part of its united front strategy***

It appears that the Chinese authorities have been very successful in ensuring that official PRC perspectives and slogans are propagated onto the diaspora websites. Take one of the organizations listed in Figure 1 for example. The 'Chinese-American Federation' is registered in the United States as a tax-exempt 'civic leagues and social welfare' organization (ProPublica 2019). Yet a closer look at its website reveals how official PRC propaganda and slogans have been weaved into its seemingly honourable goal of promoting the social welfare of Chinese-Americans. It dedicates an entire section on its website to 'Cadre Message' (干部寄语), in which the organization's chairman listed down eight different tasks to be accomplished. Strikingly, the first of these tasks was to 'tell a good China story' (讲好中国故事). Additionally, another one of the eight tasks involves 'unremitting integration into mainstream American politics' and 'learning from the Jews' to 'capitalize upon the large ethnic Chinese population in the United States to gain increased political participation and influence'. When put together, this serves as a possible indicator that the CPC is might actually be using sharp power to undermine democratic states. CPC Party Secretary and Chinese President Xi Jinping has previously emphasized the need to 'tell a good China story' at a CPC National Propaganda and Ideology Work Conference (China Digital Times 2013). Additionally, by drawing upon negative and false stereotypes of Jewish-Americans to highlight the alleged discrepancies between the population-to-power ratio (Nadell 2019), the Chinese-American Federation has sought to exacerbate existing societal tensions within the United States. This is characteristic of the sharp power concept previously listed. Taking into consideration that the CPC's United Front work involves co-opting ethnic Chinese personnel and communities outside of the PRC for political ends (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission 2018), all of this therefore strongly suggests that the Chinese-American Federation is an organization involved in the CPC's United Front Work. As part of the CPC's United Front, the Chinese-American Federation can therefore been seen to partake in diaspora engagement efforts whilst simultaneously using sharp-power (through internet messaging) to carry out United Front Work. This thereby serves the CPC's United Front objective of increasing its political influence and undermine foreign states via the use of sharp power efforts.



Another example of an organization located abroad whose website, upon closer scrutiny, bears all the hallmarks of United Front work is the *'Italian Prato Chinese Chamber of Commerce'*. Prato, a city in Tuscany, is home to the largest ethnic Chinese community in Italy. Although the website primarily functions as a Chinese-language information portal, there is strong evidence to suggest that it is actually a sharp power vehicle carrying out United Front work. For example, at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the website ran an article in Chinese titled *'Should Chinese-Italians contract the novel coronavirus, here's how Chinese experts can help'* (意大利华人要是确诊新冠肺炎 中国专家如何帮) (Italian Prato Chinese Chamber of Commerce 2020). Note that the phrases used in the Chinese-language title explicitly stated *'ethnic Chinese in Italy'* (意大利华人) and *'experts from China'* (中国专家). This highlights a very clear awareness from the organization of the distinction between non-PRC ethnic Chinese living in Italy versus experts from China (presumably holding PRC nationality). Yet the article alleges how ethnic Chinese living in Italy *'do not trust Italian hospitals enough'* and that *'the arrival of the group of experts from China brought great psychological comfort to the ethnic Chinese'*. This shows a willingness to operate on the assumption that despite the distinction between ethnic Chinese and PRC nationals, ethnic Chinese cannot find comfort in their resident states but instead find it in the actions of China, their so-called *'native place'*. Again, this showcases how the Chinese authorities are looking to *'tap upon'* upon the ethnic heritage of foreign nationals to co-opt them into having favourable views of the PRC. Such ethnocentric appeals to the ethnic Chinese diaspora are clear indicators of China's willingness to violate the Westphalian principle of sovereignty when it comes to the Chinese diaspora. Although this is not the first case of China portraying itself as the *'saviour of the ethnic Chinese diaspora'* (Suryadinata 2017), the website does showcase how the internet can be capitalized upon by the PRC to rapidly proliferate such portrayals amongst the Chinese diaspora community. This article is just one of many articles on the website, a significant number of which contain similar themes. A recent study by Ceccagno and Thunø (2022) regarding the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy also confirms the desire of the Chinese party-state to utilise digital platforms for diaspora mobilisation and extra-territorial governance. Ceccagno and Thunø had found that China had managed to successfully utilise the use of WeChat (an instant messaging platform commonly used in China) to nationalistic discourse to influence the actions of the Chinese diaspora in Italy. Just like the Chinese-American Federation, the website of this Chinese diaspora organization based in Italy has sought to undermine confidence and trust within the societies of other states while promoting and praising the China model – which are sharp power characteristics. The bridging function that the Chinese diaspora plays, as discussed earlier, appears to have been utilized by Chinese authorities to sow discord in democratic societies and increase PRC influence there. All of this strongly shows how China's digital diaspora engagement actually serves the goal of United Front work.

### **Active PRC leadership in the digital united front**

#### ***The digital front of united front work and active PRC leadership***

This proven presence of United Front work via grassroots social or business organizations within Western societies also further advances the work done by Brady. Brady (2017, 4)

previously stated Confucius Institutes, Chinese cultural centres, and Chinese festivals as primary channels through which CPC influence occurs. This paper now suggests in addition to what she mentions, Chinese diaspora grassroots/social organizations, as well as business associations may also function as influence platforms for the CPC. This is supported by the hyperlink network scan results and the resulting findings as stated in this paper.

Additionally, Brady has suggested the CPC has a preference for guiding, rather than leading, the Chinese diaspora communities. The objective given for this is to nurture Chinese diaspora communities to willingly and proactively partake in activities that enhance the PRC's interests. Scholars Ip and Yin also support this view, claiming that there exists little evidence of actual control or influence from the Chinese authorities within the diaspora internet. However, in contrast to earlier findings, the hyperlink scan results and findings seem to suggest the opposite for the case of digital United Front work. The scan results serve as actual evidence that prove that Chinese authorities indeed have extensive influence and control over the diaspora internet. As the deep dive (discussed in Finding 3) shows, these websites reiterate CPC propaganda slogans (*'tell a good China story'*) and political discourses typically expected of a CPC-news outlet, rather than an independent Chinese diaspora website. It is worth mentioning that Chinese authorities have recently launched the 'Qiaobao' (侨宝) social media mobile app, which caters specifically to the diaspora. The app name utilizes Chinese homonyms to turn the words for 'Overseas Chinese' (侨胞) into 'treasured diaspora' (侨宝). All of this indicates that rather than providing passive guidance, the CPC is actually playing an active leadership role when it comes to the engaging with the Chinese diaspora and conducting United Front work.

## Conclusion

The aim of this article was to identify the extent to which China is able to influence the discourse of the diaspora internet and whether such influence has already taken place. Via an IT-informed approach, this article has provided preliminary evidence to suggest China has been able to do so. The findings strongly indicate that Chinese authorities have indeed managed to establish an authoritative presence on the diaspora internet. Specifically, this article has identified how Chinese authorities are actually entrenched as influential and authoritative actors within the wider diaspora internet ecosystem. The Chinese authorities have also sought to export their internet governance practices onto these websites. Having successfully done so, the Chinese authorities then sought to utilize the diaspora internet websites as a 'digital United Front' to engage with the diaspora and co-opt them into aligning with the CPC's view. Additionally, this article also finds that this 'digital United Front' utilizes a combination of ethnocentric appeals to the Chinese diaspora and sharp power political messaging. This appears to be done with the objective of increasing the CPC's legitimacy in the eyes of Chinese diaspora communities and use them for political ends. Successfully doing so will ultimately benefit the CPC and increase its relative political influence worldwide.

However, due to space constraints, this article was not able to fully explore or explicate the full nature of China's diaspora engagement taking place in cyberspace. The findings of this article are preliminary, given that this is the first time the HNA methodology has been

applied to study the Chinese diaspora internet. Therefore, there still exists a number of gaps in our existing knowledge around China's digital diaspora engagement and influence. The methods and findings of this dissertation could be extended and further tested in several ways to fill those gaps including: building up a taxonomy of China's diaspora websites and digital platforms to assess changes in policy promulgation over time; and using discourse analysis to allow us to uncover the situational context and experiential meanings behind specific communication phases of digital diaspora engagement.

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