



Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Election Protocol Panel

November 5, 2021 at 15:15 -16:15, via secure CTSN (A8-117)

Objectives

- Discuss SITE's draft after action report, including its key judgements and lessons learned related to General Election (GE44).
- Discuss plans for an independent assessment of the Panel.
- Discuss Panel preparation and operation plus election security "grey areas" and reflect on lessons learned.

Run of Show

- This may be the final meeting of the Panel (TBC by Clerk).
- Agenda will include: (1) Introductory remarks; (2) After Action Reports: SITE, RCMP, Independent Protocol Review & Report; (3) Discussion: Key takeaways: Panel Preparation & Operation (deck), Election Security Grey Area (deck); (4) Wrap-up.
- Participants will include: Janice Charette, Interim Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to the Cabinet; Nathalie Drouin, Deputy Clerk of the Privy Council and Associate Secretary to the Cabinet; François Daigle, Deputy Minister of Justice and Deputy Attorney General of Canada; Rob Stewart, Deputy Minister of Public Safety; Shelly Bruce, Chief of CSE; David Vigneault, Director of CSIS; and, David Morrison, Deputy Minister and Foreign and Defence Policy Advisor to the Prime Minister. Mike MacDonald, Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet from the Office of the National Security and Intelligence Advisor to the Prime Minister, will stand in for the National Security and Intelligence Advisor.
- **Departmental Representative:** Gallit Dobner, Director Centre for International Digital Policy

Key Messages

SITE After Action Report

- Welcome SITE's efforts to come to ground on the influence and interference activities they observed during GE44. In particular, online activities highlight gaps in our ability to monitor, attribute and respond that our departments should work together to address. For example, is our current CSIS Act definition of foreign interference sufficient to capture the evolving threat landscape? Are we sufficiently resourced to monitor an ever expanding and increasingly complex online information space? Are we supporting non government experts to shine light on information manipulation? Do we have a complete toolbox for effective and timely response?
- Support SITE issuing a public-facing version of their after action report to raise public awareness and build resilience. This is particularly important given that a number of non government experts have published on possible foreign interference in the election – including the recent report by the Atlantic Council's DFRLab. In the absence of information, disinformation inevitably fills the space, eroding public confidence in democracy.

November 1, 2021
BPTS: 03929-2021

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Election Security Grey Areas

- PRC-linked online influence activities were definitely a grey area in GE44. There are a number of things we can do to address this challenge going forward:
 - Undertake targeted outreach with Chinese social media platforms, as Australia has done.
 - Conduct an all-source mapping of the pillars of the Chinese influence/propaganda machine – including a public facing element – to better understand how the PRC influences and interferes in the information space and to raise public awareness and build resilience.
 - Foster – through dedicated funding – a richer non-government ecosystem for monitoring and reporting on foreign state sponsored disinformation. Government cannot be the sole purveyors of truth, particularly in the context of elections when they have skin in the game.
 - Collaborate with likeminded governments to fund Chinese-language media that provides a viable alternative to PRC sources and diminishes their hold at home and abroad.
 - Consider a more proactive communications approach where FI is below the threshold of a P5 announcement.

Lessons Learned

- We need to communicate better. We need to proactively communicate our plans to safeguard future elections to build public awareness, confidence and trust. And we need to figure out how our departments communicate about incidents below the Panel's threshold but still worthy of public awareness, again to build resilience. Communications is a tool in our toolkit to counter foreign interference.
- We need to ensure ongoing GoC funding to support academia and civil society to monitor for and report publicly on potential foreign interference in the information environment to further boost awareness and resilience. PCH's Digital Citizen Initiative is key but not designed to support snap elections.
- We should consider whether SITE should be an enduring body outside of writ periods (given foreign interference threats to democracy occur outside of writ periods and the current minority government environment requires an ongoing state of readiness) and how this could be appropriately resourced.

Context

- **Previous Interactions:** This meeting follows the September 23 meeting of the Panel during which members received a threat update from SITE and a discussion among members followed.
- **Introductory Remarks:** The Clerk will likely open the meeting with reference to three possible instances of FI, conducted by two different state actors, during GE44 (referenced in the SITE deck). This includes the question of online activity targeting Canadians of Chinese heritage. She will seek Panel views on whether these incidents constitutes FI and, if so, how the Panel should respond. She will seek an update from SITE members on their response. And she will Panel views as to whether the Panel's current mandate and operations are sufficient to address such threats going forward.
- **SITE After Action Report (AAR):** The SITE AAR is still in draft form and has not been formally shared with Panel members; it includes key judgements and analysis with respect to FI and other threats to GE44 as well as lessons learned. In the meantime, SITE has prepared a deck with preliminary key judgements and lessons learned (classified document provided separately). We expect the Chair of SITE/CSE will speak to the deck and other SITE members will contribute to the discussion. Global Affairs Canada fully supports both the key judgements and the lessons learned.
- The key judgements reflect a SITE deep dive assessment, led by RRM Canada, on online activity aimed at discouraging Canadians of Chinese heritage from supporting the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) and CPC candidate Kenny Chiu (classified document provided separately). You will recall that you and other Panel members asked SITE to "come to ground" on possible People's Republic of China (PRC) online interference/influence during GE44 – the deep dive is a direct response to this request. The deep dive concludes that while there was seemingl coordinated online

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activity of concern, there is no evidence it was PRC directed. The incident falls into a grey area as we do not have enough information to conclude it was foreign state-directed. The current CSIS Act definition for foreign interference (FI) does not encompass the tactics and techniques increasingly employed by malign state actors in the information space that pose a threat to democracies, e.g., the use of state media or the leveraging of diaspora populations – without explicit direction – to shape narratives to their benefit or polarize societies.

Discussion may seek to answer questions on what latitude to grant a totalitarian state's traditional and social media and when do propaganda and influence become interference in today's digital society where narratives are algorithm-driven and delivered at scale.

- It is important to note that the Atlantic Council's DFRLab – a global leader in monitoring and reporting on state sponsored disinformation and trusted partner of RRM Canada – advised RRM Canada on November 3 that it will publish a public report on Nov 4 that concludes China-linked actors took an active role online, primarily through WeChat, seeking to influence GE44 through our Chinese diaspora.
- Meanwhile, the lessons learned in the deck reflect challenges that we have been highlighting in the run-up to and throughout GE44, namely the importance of communications as a tool to counter FI; the need to clarify SITE's mandate; and the need for vehicles like the Digital Citizen Initiative to fund civil society, including in snap elections, to support elections integrity (see below).
- **Independent Assessment of the Panel:** The Cabinet Directive requires an independent evaluation of the Panel with a copy to be sent to the Prime Minister and the NSICOP. The focus of the evaluation, as with last time, will be on the processes rather than the decision-making of the Panel members. PCO will provide a brief update on the process of selecting an independent evaluator and the purpose and focus of the review.
- **Panel Preparation and Operation:** PCO will present a deck (see attached) on Panel preparation and operations for discussion. The central question here is whether the Panel has the necessary support in terms of resources and expertise to determine whether instances of foreign interference constitute a threat to the integrity of an election and, if so, if the Panel should report these to the public or defer to other senior officials (e.g., DMs of the intelligence agencies) to speak to the public.
- **Election Security Grey Areas:** PCO will present a deck (see attached) that examines three grey areas in which the S&I community operated during GE44: (1) FI; (2) domestic vs ideologically motivated violent extremism (IMVE); and, (3) physical security. PCO is seeking Panel concurrence on grey space issues in order to enable future work to close these gaps.
- On the FI front, the following considerations are highlighted in the deck:
 1. Challenges in distinguishing appropriate and illegitimate activities complicates risk analysis and calls into question whether new tools like a 'foreign agent registry' are worth consideration;
 2. Need capability for attribution on all platforms and origins (i.e. can we better understand what is happening on WeChat?); and
 3. Need to strengthen our understanding of activity in the social media space to enable better judgements on state-directed information manipulation and amplification.
- RRM Canada's reflections on this grey area are as follows:
 - It is important to note, SITE (via RRM Canada) raised the specter of possible Chinese interference – not only increased media and political attention.
 - The current CSIS Act definition for foreign interference (FI) does not encompass the tactics and techniques increasingly employed by malign state actors in the information space that pose a threat to democracies, e.g., the use of state media or the leveraging of diaspora populations – without explicit direction – to shape narratives to their benefit or polarize societies.
 - Attribution is a major challenge faced by all our likeminded, including those like the US, UK and France who are investing considerably more resources in identifying and responding to FI

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online. Attribution is a challenge on US platforms like Twitter, where we have even greater visibility than platforms like WeChat. Moreover, we encounter privacy issues when we engage with encrypted channels.

- A foreign agent registry would be useful and should address foreign agents distributing content inside and outside of election cycles.
- Actions RRM Canada would recommend to address this grey area:
 - Undertake targeted outreach with Chinese SMPs,
 - Conduct an all-source mapping of the pillars of the Chinese influence/propaganda machine – including a public facing element – to better understand how the PRC influences and interferes in the information space and to raise public awareness and build resilience.
 - Foster – through dedicated funding – a richer non-government ecosystem for monitoring and reporting on foreign state sponsored disinformation.
 - Collaborate with likeminded governments and through NATO to fund Chinese-language media that provides a viable alternative to PRC/CCP sources and diminishes their hold. This would apply both domestically and globally.
 - Consider a more proactive communications approach where FI is below the threshold of a P5 announcement. Actions similar to the media briefing provided to US press by various intelligence agencies during the 2020 elections could be considered.
- **Lessons Learned:**
 - **P5 Meetings:** The opportunity for SITE to meet with and brief the P5 in-person allowed SITE members to better understand P5 concerns and target reporting.
 - **Communications as a Tool to Counter FI:** Government of Canada communications was a challenge throughout GE44, in part due to the Caretaker Convention. For example, the Government of Canada did not proactively communicate plans to safeguard the election as was done for GE43; an updated web site went live without fanfare. As a result, academics, media and the leader of the Conservative Party – presumably unaware of the extensive measures in place – all criticized the Government of Canada's lack of action to safeguard the election. This was a lost opportunity to raise public awareness and build resilience. Similarly, in the context of the Caretaker Convention, it was not entirely clear how incidents below the Panel's threshold but still worthy of public awareness might be addressed. There is a need to be more strategic about both proactive and reactive communications with respect to election security, as communications is a critical tool in the Government of Canada's toolkit for building resilience to and responding to foreign interference.
 - **Support for Civil Society and Academia:** There was no Government of Canada funding available to support academia and civil society to monitor for and report publicly on potential foreign interference in the information environment to further boost awareness and resilience. Vehicles like PCH's Digital Citizen Initiative should be considered.
 - **SITE Mandate & Resources:** SITE is currently mandated to address foreign (not domestic) threats and during federal elections only. SITE has no role in helping to safeguard subnational elections or threats to other democratic processes or institutions. This is a gap. Moreover, SITE was established in the context of elections every five years, not the permanent state of readiness required by a minority government situation and snap elections. This is extremely taxing on Global Affairs Canada and RCMP resources in particular.

Attachments:

- Agenda for P5 Meeting (November 5)

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- Election Security Grey Areas (deck)
- Panel Preparation and Operation Discussion (deck)
- Classified documents to be provided separately: SITE Deck, SITE Deep Dive

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ANNEX

China-linked WeChat accounts spread disinformation in advance of September 2021 Canadian election

By Kenton Thibaut, Resident China Fellow at the DFRLab

China-linked actors took an active role in seeking to influence the September 20, 2021 parliamentary election in Canada, displaying signs of a coordinated campaign to influence behavior among the Chinese diaspora voting in the election.

As many democracies have watched with concern the uptick in exposed Chinese influence operations, expert assessments of this trend have been unable to find compelling evidence of real-world impacts of Beijing's online behavior. Recent assessments suggest that Chinese influence operation efforts are becoming more sophisticated from the growing number of case studies on the topic. For example, China has recently stepped up its operations to game search engines to spread conspiracy theories on COVID-19 origins, to expand its network of inauthentic accounts across a variety of platforms, and to influence an increasing number of real social media users.

However, unlike in the case of Russia, which has historically been a more assertive and successful operator in this space, current assessments have suggested that the impact of China's efforts in mobilizing offline activities remains very limited. This may be about to change. China seems to have found increasing value in openly attempting to influence communities through its popular WeChat messaging app as a means of galvanizing public favor internationally toward its own government and activities, including – as this case will show – attempting to impact electoral outcomes in democratic countries.

Evidence from the most recent Canadian election underscores the value China sees in controlling the information flow to its diaspora community. It also suggests an uptick in Chinese efforts to translate its online efforts into offline action.

Background: WeChat

China's propaganda efforts have long prioritized Chinese diaspora communities abroad, seeing these groups as key to building a positive amplification network around the globe. While current assessments have found that the impact of its attempts to spread positive messages on English-language platforms like Twitter have so far had limited reach, this may not be the case for Chinese-language apps like WeChat.

WeChat is China's most popular messaging app, with a monthly user base of over 1 billion users. The platform does not restrict users to maintaining only one account, but each account is tied to a unique phone number and subject to extensive restrictions around abuse of maintaining multiple accounts. WeChat was first released by Chinese technology firm Tencent in 2011. In addition to its messaging features, WeChat has become a multipurpose platform that integrates a variety of services, from mobile payments to ride hailing and social engagement.

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The platform can be thought of as combining the features of WhatsApp’s messaging service with Facebook’s social media functionality. WeChat account holders can engage in private or group chats with other user accounts, and they can also post life updates, photos, and articles through its “Moments” feature, where other user accounts can comment or “like” these posts.

Many companies, enterprises, and government organizations operate official WeChat accounts. These accounts are similar to Facebook pages – they allow businesses or organizations to gain followers, send them direct push notifications, and provide clickthrough links to external websites. For example, the Shanghai Municipal Education Department operates its own public WeChat account (上海教育) that updates followers on new policies and regulations, and publicizes department-related events and achievements.

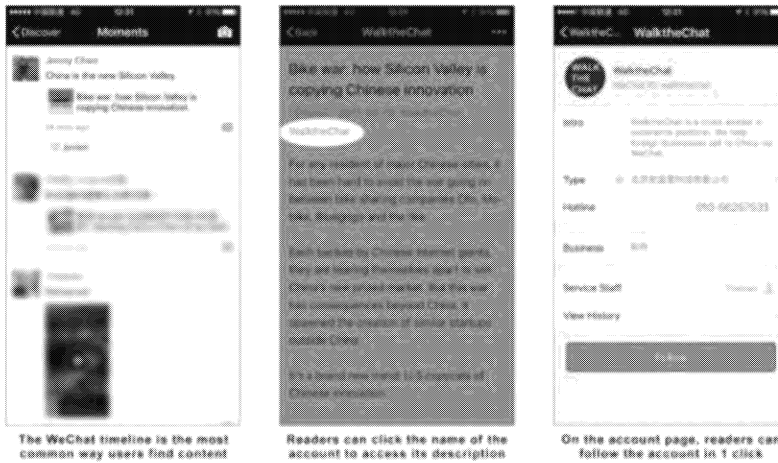
In 2017, WeChat rolled out its “mini programs,” which essentially function as sub-applications within the platform, complete with e-commerce and other types of built-in functionality. These mini programs are almost exclusively operated by large companies or organizations, as the administrative burden of creating and maintaining them is high. For those that do, however, they can operate commercial services within the app – as opposed to directing a user offsite, as would happen with an official account – and gain access to broader WeChat usage data for those users interacting with the mini program.

In short, WeChat functions as almost a “one-stop-shop” for its users. For example, a WeChat user can receive updates on their friends’ lives from the “Moments” page, chat with their family about dinner plans, pay their phone bill, catch a ride downtown, and buy the newest pair of designer shoes, all without exiting the WeChat app.

Given its popularity especially among the Chinese-speaking world, WeChat is the third most popular social media platform in the world and overwhelmingly the primary platform of communication between Chinese diaspora abroad and those living in China. It is also the primary outlet from which many diaspora Chinese – especially first-generation immigrants – receive their news. A May 2020 report from *Graphika* found that overseas WeChat accounts are still subject to censorship and surveillance from state-linked actors in Beijing. Additionally, researcher Yaqiu Wang of Human Rights Watch found that Chinese censors must approve content from media outlets publishing for an overseas Chinese audience on WeChat before it can be published. This means many in the diaspora receive a majority of their online information – good or bad – through a Beijing-approved lens.

One challenge in measuring the impact of disinformation that can circulate in WeChat is the closed and siloed nature of the platform. WeChat account users have three main ways to see the information. First, if they follow an official account, they will receive push notifications in the WeChat “Chat” section when the news briefing is published, which they can click on to see the full news brief.

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Screenshot of how WeChat push notifications work from the “Moments” timeline to a particular WeChat account, as illustrated on website for the consulting firm “Walk the Chat.” (Source: walkthechat/archive)

Second, another way to see this information is if it appears on a friend’s “Moments” timeline, which operates similar to a Facebook user account’s news feed, except it is more private. There is no option to have a public-facing timeline such that your updates are only seen by friends who you have verified, while comments on your timeline can only be seen by people who are mutual friends with the commenter. WeChat users also cannot see each other’s friends list.

Lastly, mis- or disinformation can be shared in private groups or group chats, which are impossible to access unless you are added as a member. This limited access closes the information loop; the only way to rebut bad information is to gain access to the discussion.

HuayiNet and the Chinese government

The principal actor behind the Canadian election case was HuayiNet, a private translation service with deep ties to a number of Chinese government entities. In particular, the translation firm has a close working relationship with Chinese consulates in both Canada and the United States, as well as with other Chinese government and government-affiliated organizations, including the Ministries of Culture and Foreign Affairs. HuayiNet also works closely with the China Association for the Promotion of International Friendship, which is the public face of China’s main external propaganda arm, the United Front Work Department. China’s use of its vast subnetwork of pseudo-government or government-adjacent entities in spreading approved narratives has been well-documented in other contexts, and the evidence in this particular case supports the notion that official WeChat accounts operated by HuayiNet at minimum take cues from Chinese state media.

One such official WeChat account bears the name *torontolingshiguan* (“Toronto consulate” in Chinese). The account, however, is run by an employee of *HuayiNet* and not directly by the Chinese government, as the name would imply. This fact appears to be intentionally obscured to give users the initial impression that it is a formal part of the Chinese government, as opposed to being connected to – but not a direct part of – it.

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The *torontolingshiguan* official account provides a daily news briefing titled *beimeihuarenzixun* (“North American Chinese Info”), aimed at the Chinese Canadian diaspora community. The news briefing provides a list of the top ten or so news items the account operators deem as most relevant to Canadian Chinese diaspora affairs. These news items are gathered from different sources on WeChat, including official WeChat account pages for the Chinese embassy, opinion pieces published on the official account pages of other news sources, and posts from individual users to their respective accounts.

In addition to mixing in misleading content or disinformation with more neutral news topics, the intentional naming of the *torontolingshiguan* official account further imputes an air of officially sanctioned and verified reporting to the stories featured on the news briefing, as it blurs the line between being run by a notionally independent translation service and that of an official Chinese consular source. Just glancing at the official account name, a less discerning reader could easily accept that the news briefing was supplied by the Chinese consulate in Toronto.

An additional layer of confusion for the casual reader is that the official account features a designation that it is “consulate certified.” This designation is supposed to indicate that HuayiNet is certified as a business provider to the Toronto consulate, not that the content of the news briefing is certified by the consulate itself, but this may not be immediately clear to users.

华人警惕：保守党国会议员赵锦荣提「外国势力注册」。安省计划3个月内，推出数字身份证刷手机就能办业务！谁代表中国出席塔利班就职典礼

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华人新闻摘要

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Screencap of torontoshiguan's WeChat News Brief for September 10, 2021. The text outlined in green reads "Chinese take heed! Conservative MP Kenny Chiu to Raise 'Foreign Influence Registration Act.'" The text in the blue box states "Consulate Certified," and the Chinese characters to the immediate right of the box read "North American Chinese Info." The text in the orange box provides the WeChat name for the translation service, "torontolingshiguan" or "Toronto consulate" in English. (Source: [torontolingshiguan/archive](https://torontolingshiguan.com/archive))

Targeting the Chinese diaspora during the 2021 Canadian elections

The DFRLab uncovered a number of articles on WeChat aimed at the Chinese diaspora population with the aim of influencing the diaspora vote. While many of these posts provided resources for how to access official information on voter registration and the platforms and positions of candidates running in particular areas, an equal if not larger number of accounts posted disinformation intended to dissuade Chinese voters from supporting candidates holding anti-China views. Among these posts were many from *torontolingshiguan*.

In its September 10 news briefing, *torontolingshiguan* included an essay lifted from a September 9 article posted to *jiarenjiashi*, an official WeChat account run by *Today Commercial News (TCN)*, a media organization purporting to share business and lifestyle-related news relevant to Chinese speakers in Canada. The September 9 essay featured warnings to the diaspora community regarding Kenny Chiu (赵锦荣), a Conservative Party member of parliament (MP) then seeking reelection, while the headline for the September 10 news brief – which has since been taken down – read: "Chinese take heed! Conservative MP Kenny Chiu to Raise 'Foreign Influence Registration Act.'"

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请广传！保守党国会议员赵锦荣提「外国势力注册」法案打压华人社区

加入加事 9/9



卑诗省的加拿大保守党 (Conservative Party) 国会议员赵锦荣 (Kenny Chiu)，早前在国会提出私人立法提案BILLC-282，即是「外国势力注册法」(Foreign Interference Registry)。

此法案在国会解散之前，已经通过一读，按照国会参读的立法程序，一旦赵锦荣在大选中胜出连任，「外国势力注册法」有可能成为加拿大的法律。

为甚麽华裔的加拿大人，必须关注这个法案呢？

Screencap of the September 9 article published to jiarenjiashi, an official WeChat account operated by Today Commercial News.(Source: jiarenjiashi/archive)

3. 请广传！保守党国会议员赵锦荣提「外国势力注册」法案打压华人社区

摘自：加入加事

卑诗省的加拿大保守党 (Conservative Party) 国会议员赵锦荣 (Kenny Chiu)，早前在国会提出私人立法提案BILLC-282，即是「外国势力注册法」(Foreign Interference Registry)。

此法案在国会解散之前，已经通过一读，按照国会参读的立法程序，一旦赵锦荣在大选中胜出连任，「外国势力注册法」有可能成为加拿大的法律。

原因很简单，因为一旦此法案成为法律，所有与中国有联系的个人或者团体，都有可能被认为是中国政府代言人而被要求专门登记。

登记又如何？登记之後，跟中国大陆社团有关的活动，以及正常的中加经济文化科技等交流都会有机会受打压，华裔的言论自由，亦有很大机会被遏制，对华社产生深远的负面影响，亦是很可能发生的事情。

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Screencap of torontolingshiguan's September 10 WeChat News Brief featuring the misleading post regarding the Foreign Influence Registration Act and urging people to "spread the news" about Kenny Chiu. (Source: [torontolingshiguan/archive](#))

The essay "urges readers to spread the word" that Chiu, if elected, would pass a law that would result in widespread suppression and monitoring of the Chinese community in Canada – a claim Chiu strongly refuted. In the news briefing, the essay was included as the third news item, following a piece detailing the Canadian government's rollout of a new digital identification card and other straightforward news items. The tactic of embedding this kind of incendiary, misleading content alongside other largely neutral, information-based topics is designed to impute an air of legitimacy to it, attempting to move it from the realm of opinion - or deliberate misinterpretation, as was seemingly the case here - to that of fact in the mind of readers.

There are several strong narrative throughlines between Chinese official state media and the WeChat posts referencing the Canadian elections that indicate at least the potential of coordinated behavior. As mentioned above, the essay targeting Kenny Chiu was originally posted on the official WeChat account for *Today Commercial News*, which also has a presence on Facebook, other Chinese social media platforms like Weibo, and its own website. Its Facebook page is printed in traditional Chinese, used in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and features a number of posts spreading official Chinese narratives on topics ranging from Xinjiang to Hong Kong, including by using the same terms and phrasing.

For example, an article on *TCN's* website from June 2019 described Hong Kong protesters as "thugs" (暴徒) who were engaging in violent tactics against peaceful police officers. This language mirrored similar language used by the official Chinese Communist Party newspaper, the *People's Daily*, which in an August 2019 Weibo post used the hashtag #HongKongPoliceStandFirm alongside a call for the "severe punishment of Hong Kong thugs" (暴徒) for their "violent tactics" during street protests. Similarly, a November 2019 article from the *People's Daily Online* also used the same language, calling for the "harsh punishment of Hong Kong thugs (暴徒)."

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必须对香港暴徒严惩不贷（香江观察）

张 盼

2019年11月22日08:39 | 来源：人民網·人民日報海外版

T: 小字号

5个多月来，暴徒在香港不断升级的激进暴力犯罪行为，使香港面临回归以来最严峻局面。临近区议会选举，暴徒及背后“反中乱港”势力愈发嚣张，妄图将香港推入万丈深渊，借此夺取特区管治权。止暴制乱刻不容缓，暴徒必须严惩不贷。香港行政、立法、司法机关要更好地担起责任，不负民意所托，不辱职责使命。

数月间，暴徒在全港多区疯狂打砸纵火，大面积瘫痪道路交通，破坏列车轨道，向行进中的列车投掷燃烧弹，占领并将暴力引入校园，妄图私设“法外之地”对抗政府，公然袭警抢枪并蓄意谋害，刺杀爱国爱港人士，种种极端恶行令人发指。

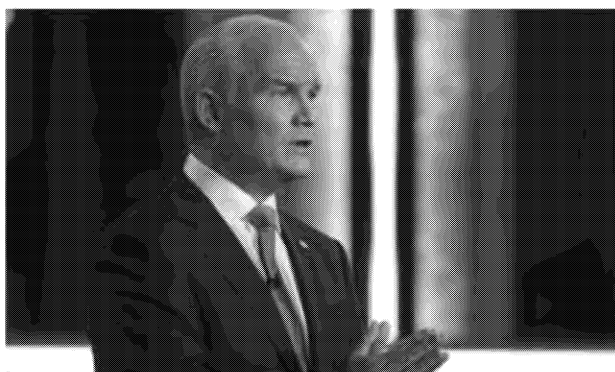
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Screenscaps from “Today Commercial News” and the People’s Daily calling for the harsh punishment of Hong Kong “thugs” while championing support for the police force. (Source: [Today Commercial News/archive](#); [People’s Daily/archive](#))

TCN published its story on the same day that *Global Times* – the nationalistic English-language offshoot of the *People’s Daily* – published a piece stating that the “unusually hostile” anti-China stance that Canada’s Conservative Party candidates were taking in the run-up to the September 2021 election would “invite counterstrikes from China, and Ottawa is the one the suffer.” It also claimed that Canada was acting as a shill for the United States, an accusation that has been made repeatedly in Chinese official media over the case involving Huawei executive Meng Wangzhou. The piece also reiterated past criticisms of anti-Asian racism in Canada and the United States, a tactic that Chinese media deploy with increasing frequency to counter widespread castigation from the international community regarding its treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

GI Global Times ☰ Canadian Tories’ ‘hostile China blueprint’ caters to toxic atmosphere against Beijing amid sour ties



Tim O'Toole, leader of Canada's Conservative Party, speaks during a federal leaders debate in Gatineau, Quebec, Canada, on Wednesday. Photo: VCG

The “unusually hostile” reference of Canada’s Conservatives in their blueprint caters to the country’s “toxic anti-China atmosphere,” Chinese observers noted, warning that hyping China during an election is usually the Western politicians’ “lip service” tactic. Yet if the Canadian government puts those hawkish words into action, it will invite counterstrikes from China, and Ottawa is the one to suffer.

*Screencap of the September 9 article from the *Global Times* stating that “Ottawa will be the one to suffer” for Conservatives’ anti-China stance. (Source: [Global Times/archive](#))*

These narrative themes were repeated in other Chinese-language posts circulating on WeChat targeting Chiu and other Conservative candidates. For example, following Chiu’s election loss, a [September 23 opinion article](#) from the *Global Times* repeated claims that Chiu’s anti-China stance and his support for a bill that “many ethnic Chinese [say] will make any individual or group connected with China considered to be a spokesperson of the Chinese government, and be required to register with the government” had lost him the vote. The article was popular, receiving over 3,700 comments, with one of the “top voted” comments criticizing Chiu for “throwing away their ancestors without hesitation for [his] own benefit.” Similar narratives emphasizing how “anti-China politicians will be abandoned and defeated by Chinese voters” and that politicians would lose by “provoking China” were repeated and circulated on WeChat from various accounts catering to the diaspora community.

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Following his re-election loss, Chiu blamed China's attacks on him as one of the reasons he was defeated. According to an article in *the National Post*, former Canadian diplomat Charles Burton warned Chiu about the disinformation campaign on WeChat, "but there seemed little they could do about it."

While it is difficult to measure direct impact of such messages on outcomes like the 2021 election, results from various Canadian government bodies indicate a shift in voting behavior did take place, especially among those in the Chinese diaspora community. While multiple factors are likely responsible for this shift – for example, an uptick in anti-Asian racism and the COVID-19 pandemic – the change from previous elections is notable. According to reports, voting preferences of Chinese Canadian voters shifted significantly from Conservative to Liberal Party support, with nearly two-thirds of Chinese voters reporting ahead of the elections in a poll from Mainstreet Research that they would be voting for a Liberal Party candidate. One of the biggest changes was seen in the Richmond Hill district, where Kenny Chiu lost his re-election bid.

On top of this, following the election results, the Chinese Canadian Conservative Association – a group representing Conservative-leaning Chinese voters in Canada – urged Conservative MP Erin O'Toole to resign, stating that the party's anti-China stance alienated Chinese Canadian voters and ultimately cost Conservatives the election. They also urged the party to take a less "confrontational" stance toward China. The use of racist tropes and othering language has been used by some on the Canadian right to foment hatred against the Chinese community. The unfortunate second-order effect of this is that authoritarian countries like China and Russia weaponize such societal cleavages to achieve their own interests.

The case of the Canadian 2021 election underscores that perhaps one of the areas with most "promise" for China in turning its online influence into offline mobilization is through influencing the debates taking place within Chinese diaspora communities in democratic countries. The Chinese government has a direct line of sight into and a degree of editorial control over the content these communities consume due to the nature and structure of WeChat's platform, while evidence shows how Chinese state narratives travel from official sources to appear on WeChat programs specifically tailored to the diaspora community. Most troublingly, even if the confluence of China-backed narratives and changes in voting behavior is entirely coincidental, the message the Chinese Communist Party may be receiving is that its attempts to influence voter behavior led to favorable election results. As China's attempts to influence debates around the world in its favor, ensuring access to multilingual sources of independent, fact-based news and information may help build up community resilience to foreign influence campaigns.

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