



Interview Summary: Benjamin Fung

Benjamin Fung, Professor & Canada Research Chair in Data Mining for Cybersecurity, School of Information Studies, McGill University, was interviewed by Commission Counsel on February 22, 2024.

Notes to reader

- Commission Counsel have provided explanatory notes in square brackets to assist the reader.
- This summary contains information that relates to the Commission's mandate under clauses (a)(i)(A) and (B) of its Terms of Reference. Information provided during the interviews that relates to other aspects of the Commission's Terms of Reference has been omitted from this summary, but may be adduced by the Commission at a later stage of its proceedings.

1. Background

- [1] Benjamin Fung is a Professor in the School of Information Studies at McGill University and the Canada Research Chair in Data Mining for Cybersecurity. He holds a B.S.c (Comp Sc.), M.Sc., and Ph.D. from Simon Fraser University and certification as an engineer (P.Eng., Software Engineering) in Ontario. He immigrated to Canada from Hong Kong in 1990. He has published over 200 papers on data mining and machine learning. Prof. Fung has closely collaborated with Defence Research and Development Canada on cybersecurity since 2010. One of Prof. Fung's areas of expertise is authorship analysis (the study of writing styles to identify the author of a text or the author's characteristics), which encompasses aspects of machine learning, deep learning, and data mining.¹

¹ Prof. Fung produced a PowerPoint presentation as an aid for use in the interview with Commission Counsel (DocID#CCC0000248). Slides from that document are referred to herein.

[2] Prof. Fung can read Chinese and Cantonese, in traditional and simplified characters.

2. Misinformation/Disinformation Relating to Kenny Chiu and the CPC in the 2021 Federal Election.

[3] Prof. Fung described former **Conservative Party of Canada (“CPC”)** MP Kenny Chiu (Steveston—Richmond East) as having been an outspoken advocate for democracy in Hong Kong and a critic of China’s human rights violations. On April 13, 2021, Mr. Chiu proposed Bill C-282, the Foreign Influence Registry Act. [Slides 5-6]

[4] In 2019, Mr. Chiu won his seat by a close margin (2,796 votes). The outcome of that election would have been different if 1,398 votes had swung from Mr. Chiu to his Liberal competitor. In 2021, Mr. Chiu lost to the Liberal candidate by 3,477 votes. [Slide 7]

[5] Between April and September 2021, there was a not a lot of discussion about Mr. Chiu’s bill in Chinese-language media.

[6] In early September 2021, however, disinformation about Mr. Chiu and his Bill began to appear. [The election writ dropped on August 15, 2021, and the election was held on September 20, 2021.] Prof. Fung cited a WeChat group post, dated September 2, 2021.² [Slide 8] The post was obtained by a Chinese Canadian Concern Group member from a WeChat group, the name of which translates roughly as “Canadian Chinese Organization Social Group.” The group had 56 members at the time of the posting. The author is identified as “Helen W.” The post includes both text typed by the author (which appears with a white background) and text that has been pasted from another source (which appears with a light blue background). The blue portion is well written and includes photos, which are designed to get attention.

² DocID#CCC0000001; translation found at DocID#CCC0000002. WeChat is a Chinese-language social media app that is popular in China and in the Chinese diaspora. WeChat permits large numbers of users to communicate with one another in a group. To gain access to the group, the user needs to know someone else in the group, but membership spreads quickly, and most of the people in a group may not know one another.

- [7] [The translation of the WeChat post (DocID#CCC0000002) characterizes the Conservative Party's policies as being strongly anti-China and warns about the risks of a foreign influence registry. It identifies Mr. Chiu as the proponent of the registry and as a critic of China on issues such as Hong Kong and China's treatment of the Uyghurs. It states that Mr. Chiu is on a "counter-sanctions" list and is banned from travelling to China.]
- [8] On September 9, 2021, an article appeared in **Today Commercial News ("TCN")**, a publication widely distributed in the Chinese-Canadian community. Prof. Fung described TCN as a forum for **Chinese Communist Party ("CCP")** propaganda operating in Canada. Portions of the TCN article reproduce word-for-word (or very nearly so) the text in the September 2 WeChat post. (The portions of the article that are substantially the same as the WeChat post are highlighted in yellow on Slide 13.³) Prof. Fung said that the similarity is obvious to any reader [in that they are nearly identical], and he did not use any technological aids to make the comparison.
- [9] Prof. Fung said there were only three realistic possibilities: the author of the TCN article copied it from the WeChat author (which would be very unusual); both were copying portions of the text from an unknown source; or both texts had the same author.
- [10] Reproducing the same text nearly verbatim is very typical of CCP propaganda. A small deviation from a source text might prompt repercussions against the author if it is thought to convey the wrong meaning. As a result, authors will often hesitate to make even small changes and will hew closely to the original text.
- [11] Prof. Fung noted that the WeChat post appears to have been shared in China, which Prof. Fung said was another indicator it was CCP propaganda. In China, WeChat is monitored and censored on sensitive topics. Outside China, WeChat is monitored, but not censored. Prof. Fung said he read a news article in the Vancouver Sun

³ DocID#CCC0000006_R and DocID#CCC0000002_R are translations of the TCN article and the WeChat post, respectively, in which Prof. Fung has highlighted the text that matches in the original documents.

(CCC0000010) stating that the WeChat post was shared in China.⁴ He also noted that it appeared on “QQ.com”, a WeChat website. Prof. Fung said that the fact the WeChat post, which addresses political issues, was not censored in China was an indication that it was at least tacitly approved of by Chinese authorities. [Slide 9]

- [12] Prof. Fung also described a proliferation of social-media posts and news articles in Chinese-language media that were critical of the CPC in the lead-up to the election. He noted a September 2 article on the website “chinesecanadianvoice.ca”, which was highly critical of CPC leader Erin O’Toole, as well as WhatsApp posts from the same day. [Slide 10, CCC0000201 and CCC0000202] Starting on September 9 (the day of the TCN article), the criticisms of the CPC appears to multiply. The Global Times (a CCP-affiliated publication) published an article describing the CPC as “unusually hostile” to China. (CCC0000003). Prof. Fung pointed to many social media posts and news articles hostile to the CPC and/or favourable to the Liberal Party in this period. [Slides 14 – 16] The text of these publications was not identical (i.e. they were not suggestive of being derived from a single document), but they all supported a similar message.
- [13] Prof. Fung said there would occasionally be social media posts (including on WeChat) pushing back against the anti-CPC narrative. But there were few of them and there were no articles in the Chinese-language media rejecting the anti-CPC message or advancing a different view. The lack of balance was another indicator of potential Chinese interference.
- [14] Prof. Fung also pointed to “Rise” magazine—a two-sided Chinese-language magazine, which is “Rise Weekly” on one side and “Rise Home” on the other. He said this publication was known to advance the views of the CCP, for example, on the war in Ukraine. Prof. Fung identified articles in Rise supporting candidates for the Liberal Party, the NDP, and the People’s Party, but none for the CPC. [Slide 17]

⁴ The article states, “The attacks on Chiu, his party and Conservative Leader Erin O’Toole are on various social media, including WeChat, Weixin and WhatsApp.” WeChat is used overseas, but Weixin is for users in mainland China. This implies the message was spread inside China too.

(CCC0000206) (He believed these were articles, not paid advertisements.) One of the articles related to Jenny Kwan, who is known to have supported the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong. Prof. Fung believed this was permitted because the NDP was not viewed as being likely to form government. Prof. Fung noted that the People’s Party was featured repeatedly, which Prof. Fung interpreted as a possible attempt to split the CPC vote.

- [15] The documents Prof. Fung relies on were collected by himself or other members of the Chinese Canadian Concern Group. At the time, he did not have the resources to systematically collect all the relevant articles and social media posts. As a result, a lot of data has disappeared, including data about social network behavior. Prof. Fung has since begun a formal research group on disinformation—for example, he recently analyzed Chinese interference in the 2024 Taiwan election—and is developing AI methods to identify patterns in misinformation/disinformation sharing.
- [16] Prof. Fung has no relationship with Kenny Chiu and no affiliation with a political party. He is a member of the Chinese Canadian Concern Group.

3. Broader comments on the CCP’s strategy in Canada.

- [17] Prof. Fung stated that the CCP’s strategy is to “plant seeds” that will create an environment in which disinformation can spread. He said the CCP’s strategy is based on fear (that Chinese-Canadians are subject to racist attacks and are at risk of discrimination from the government) and nationalism. He pointed to the Asian-Canadian Racism Alliance, which was formed largely of 300 Pro-CCP organizations in April 2021, as a group that is amplifying reporting about anti-Asian racism. [Slides 18-20] He said that the “seeds” planted by the CCP (e.g. that Chinese-Canadians face racist discrimination) were exploited in the disinformation campaign against Kenny Chiu over WeChat, social media, and Chinese-language news media by claiming that the bill he proposed would be used as a tool of discrimination against Chinese-Canadians. [Slide 21]