



Fake News, Real Consequences: The Growing Threat of Chinese-Language Disinformation

PiYaoBa Disinformation Report
April 1 - Sept. 15, 2022

Introduction

Asian Americans are the fastest growing electorate in the U.S. with the power to shape elections local and national. The 2020 presidential election saw record-breaking turnout by Asian American voters. However, along with a growing electorate comes increasing misinformation and disinformation, especially among Chinese Americans, who are the largest Asian community in the U.S.

Through our Chinese Digital Engagement program, Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA) has documented an increase in political lies and attacks that demonize progressive causes and policies. Much of this disinformation is spread through WeChat, which is part of the everyday life of many Chinese Americans. As of August 2020, WeChat had 3.8 million monthly active users in the U.S. That means 60% of Chinese Americans are active on WeChat, a space where right-wing disinformation dominates. To share accurate information on the platform is difficult because of its closed nature and the Chinese government's censorship.

The groups behind disinformation are well-resourced, including the two largest media giants focused on Chinese Americans: The Falun Gong-backed Epoch Times Media Group and Guo Media Group, formed in April 2020 by billionaire Guo Wengui and former Trump strategist Steve Bannon.

From affirmative action to the recall of former San Francisco District Attorney Chesa Boudin, disinformation circulating in Chinese-language social media plays an increasingly worrisome role in shaping elections and policy. The most popular conspiracy theories in these spaces push the narrative that election fraud is prevalent, threatening the very foundation of our democracy. There will be serious consequences for election integrity in the midterms and 2024 if we do not tackle this growing threat.

About PiYaoBa

PiYaoBa is the first centralized fact-checking website to combat right-wing disinformation in the Chinese American community. “PiYaoBa” means “let’s fact-check it” in Mandarin Chinese. Launched in early 2022, PiYaoBa offers in-language resources and tools to help Chinese Americans dispel disinformation, such as real-time alerts, reports, and in-depth fact-checking articles. Piyaoba systematically researches and documents misinformation and disinformation. Readers can also suggest topics for fact-checking.

PiYaoBa is part of CAA’s pioneering Chinese Digital Engagement program, which began in 2019 to provide accurate information to the Chinese American community about issues related to social justice. Our work includes three WeChat channels and the websites JusticePatch.org and PiYaoBa.org. Since its launch, PiYaoBa has published a total of 100 in-depth fact-checking articles and 91 disinformation alerts.

This report summary covers our findings from April 1 to September 15, 2022.

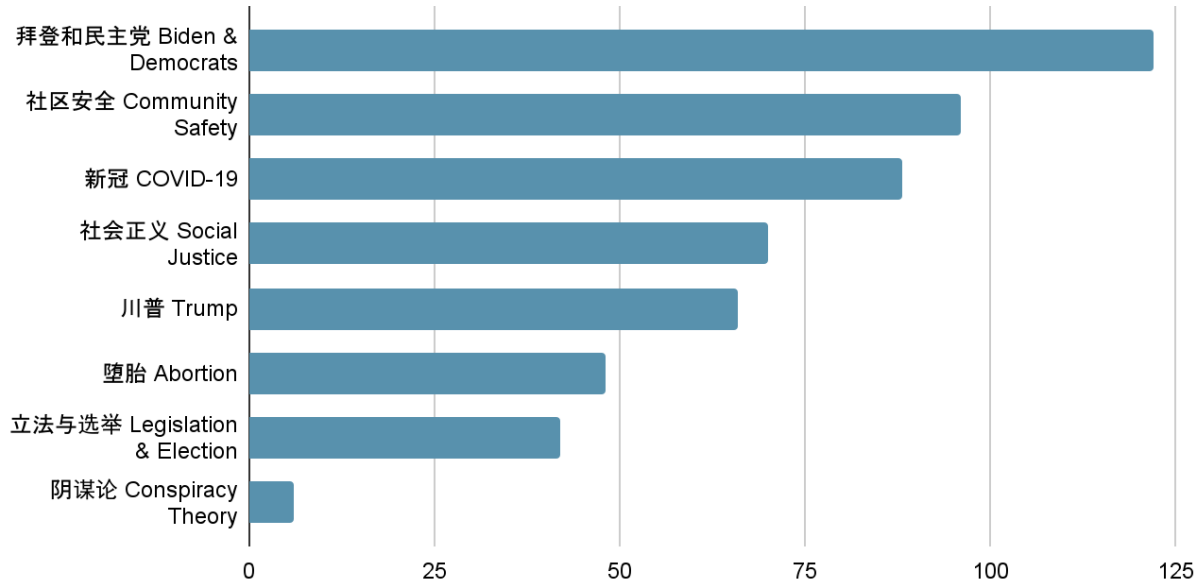
Disinformation Topics

PiYaoBa detected and recorded a total of **320 major disinformation articles** (including those verified as mixed with partially accurate information) on Chinese-language social media networks (including WeChat, Chinese Twitter, Chinese YouTube, etc.).

Here are the top topics of Chinese mis/disinformation we tracked, with examples:

2022年四月至九月中旬中文假新闻话题分布

2022 Apr-Sep.15 Disinformation by Topic



Community Safety includes immigration, crime, gun violence, and homelessness.

Social Justice includes race, gender, and education.

Conspiracy Theory is disinformation that is specifically about QAnon and the Deep State.

- **Biden & Democrats**

- Example: The Biden administration's Title IX gender identity rule will usurp parental authority and encourage children to change their gender.

- **Community Safety**

- Example: Undocumented immigrants caused the U.S. formula crisis because Biden gave all the baby formula to them.
- Example: The public is safer with more guns. Blue states, which have the strictest gun control, have the most frequent shootings and higher crime rates.

- **COVID-19**

- Example: COVID-19 was exaggerated to increase the use of mail-in ballots in order to steal elections.

- **Social Justice**

- Example: Banks are offering zero down payment and not checking credit scores for Black and Hispanic borrowers.
- Example: Critical Race Theory has influenced math curriculum by inserting info about prostitutes and sexual abuse into algebra problems.

- **Trump**

- Example: The FBI raid on Mar-a-Lago was orchestrated by the Democratic Party as a way to rig the midterm elections in favor of the Biden administration and to prevent Trump from running in 2024.

- **Abortion**

- Example: Abortion in the United States is too lenient and allows mothers to kill their babies within seven days after giving birth.

- **Legislation and Election**

- Example: California will become the first state in the United States to legalize street prostitution through California Senate Bill SB357.

- **Conspiracy Theory**

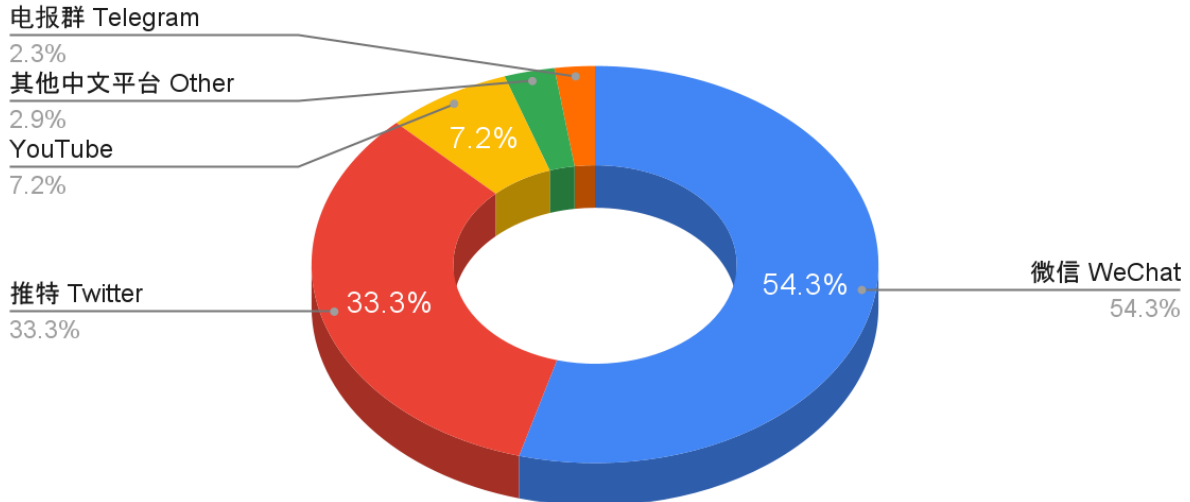
- Example: The CIA and FBI could protect people if they wanted to. They knew about the Uvalde school shooting, but didn't do anything about it because it was the Deep State's plan to allow it.

Platforms

WeChat is the largest source of mis/disinformation, accounting for 54.3% of the mis/disinformation circulated, followed by Twitter (33.3%) and YouTube (7.2%).

2022年四月至九月中旬中文假新闻平台分布

2022 April-Sep.15 Disinformation by Platform



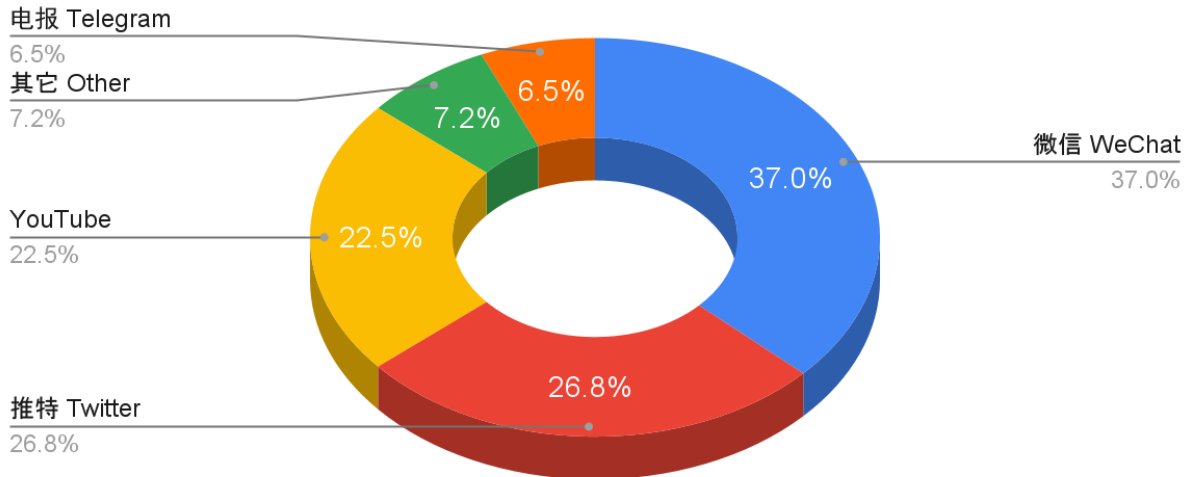
When highly similar disinformation narratives were detected multiple times on the same platform, we only recorded once. “微信 WeChat” includes: WeChat public accounts, WeChat group message, and individual users’ share. “其他中文平台 Other” includes disinformation detected on Weibo and other Chinese websites.

Types of Accounts

We monitored a total of **138 active mis/disinformation accounts**, including a total of 51 WeChat public accounts, 37 Chinese Twitter accounts, and 31 YouTube channels.

2022年四月至九月中旬中文假新闻账号平台分布

2022 April-Sep.15 Disinformation Accounts by Topic



“微信 WeChat” represents WeChat public accounts. “电报群 Telegram” refers to Telegram group chats of at least 1,000 users. “其他中文平台 Other” includes Weibo accounts and Chinese websites that actively share disinformation focusing on issues within the U.S.

These mis/disinformation accounts can be divided into three types:

- 1. Individuals:** Most accounts are run by individuals holding conservative positions. Some of these accounts are active on multiple social media platforms and usually have close ties to Chinese American right-wing conservative activists. We do not rule out the possibility that these accounts are operated by or involved with conservative organizations.
- 2. Media Companies:** These accounts are run by Chinese-language media companies, including the Epoch Times and Guo Media, that often manage WeChat public accounts and groups in multiple U.S. cities.
- 3. Lifestyle Accounts:** We found a more deceptive type of conservative Chinese WeChat operator: individual-run WeChat public accounts and groups that mostly focus on lifestyle, but when conservatives launch political campaigns, they transform themselves overnight to use their large audience to serve the conservative agenda.

Trends & Observations

1. Trump continues to strongly influence supporters within the Chinese American community who repeat his election fraud narrative while applying it to any Trump-endorsed candidate.

The FBI search at Mar-a-Lago re-invigorated WeChat groups of Trump supporters, who are even more active now than during the 2020 election. They've given Trump the nickname "Chuan Bao川宝" (Trump baby), copying the way that Chinese fans refer to their idols in Chinese. Key false narratives surrounding the FBI search are: that it is a political persecution from the Democratic Party, that it is a Democratic Party conspiracy to rig the midterm elections, and that the Democrats' goal is prevent Trump from participating in the 2024 election.

These right-wing influencers also diligently promote candidates endorsed by Trump and call on Chinese Americans to vote for them. During the primaries, when Trump-endorsed candidates did not win or were behind in votes, Trump supporters claimed votes had been stolen.

2. The key strategy of right-wing Chinese-language disinformation is to attack Biden, the Democratic Party, and progressive policies.

By far the largest number of mis/disinformation we observed falls under this topic category. The mis/disinformation includes: spreading false information about policies developed by the Democratic Party; attacking progressive issues; and using conspiracy theories to speculate on some of the federal government's decisions. These attacks increased after the FBI search at Mar-a-Lago this August.

3. Multiple conspiracy theories on Chinese-language social networks spread the same disinformation as English-language ones, but couch the mis/disinformation in relation to self-defense, especially on the issue of gun violence.

The long-existing deep state conspiracy theories appear frequently on Chinese-language social networks. After the mass shooting in Uvalde, Texas we saw the frequent mention of keywords such as "deep state" and "false flag" in addition to pro-gun narratives. While the English narrative generally emphasizes the constitutional right to bear firearms, Chinese American conservatives focus on self-defense.

4. Amidst censorship in China, anti-vaccine narratives from the U.S. are influencing Chinese citizens in a more conservative direction.

We observed a growing number of users in mainland China using anti-vaccine "evidence" from American users to argue that vaccines do not work. On the flip side, many American

conservative users cite the strict “zero case” COVID-19 policies in China to argue that the Democratic Party is moving toward communism.

5. WeChat-based Chinese disinformation is becoming a powerful tool for conservative Asian American political engagement.

During the recall election of San Francisco’s former District Attorney Chesa Boudin this year, propaganda and disinformation spread widely among WeChat groups. Asian American conservatives adopted a strategy of targeting Chinese American voters through WeChat public accounts and WeChat groups.

Our Chinese Digital Engagement team has identified more than 138 Chinese-language accounts that are actively spreading disinformation and political propaganda. Conversely, the few fact-checking sites that do exist are all volunteer-run or maintained by nonprofit organizations.



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