

Chinese Anti-Westernism on social media

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Abstract

The Chinese Communist Party and its supporters are increasingly using social media platforms to shape China's public image. This online image is a means of strengthening domestic nationalism and of projecting "soft power" abroad. This paper examines various forms of anti-Westernism that are central to this image-making. It analyzes several recent topics—the Belt and Road Initiative, climate change, the COVID-19 vaccine, the Beijing Olympics, and the conflict in Ukraine—on the r/Sino subreddit page of Reddit and compares them with two online news outlets, the *South China Morning Post* and *China Daily*. The paper focuses on how these media frame the contest between a rising China and a failing West, so creating a discourse that competes with the negative portrayals of China outside the country. The paper contrasts the aggressive strengthening of China's image against the West on social media with more sober accounts of the same topics in China's official media and in commercial news outlets. The contribution of the paper is to document an emerging online anti-Westernism that is playing an increasing role in the changing geopolitical landscape.

Keywords

China, soft power, Reddit, belt and road, climate change, Beijing Olympics, Ukraine

Introduction

China's rise as a great power since the 1990s has been accompanied by an increasingly assertive nationalism, much discussed in Western media and scholarship. What has been less well remarked on are the anti-Western tropes that have become increasingly prominent on social media, including

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in English-language outlets that are aimed at global audiences. “Western” is of course becoming an outdated term as academics speak more commonly of the “Global North” and “Global South” and as geopolitical rivalry revolves ever more around the US-Sino conflict. Anti-Western sentiment (which is, more often than not, anti-American) has been growing in China, particularly in the wake of recriminations over the outbreak and handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. But there has also been a longer-standing effort spearheaded by the Chinese government to influence its positive image in the world, an effort that can be seen as a bid to enhance its “soft power” (Repnikova, 2022).

While these efforts are often regarded as “top-down” and initiated by the party-state, they are also supported from the “bottom-up” by netizens on various social media platforms. Chinese media are controlled by the government, although state media more so than commercial ones (Stockmann, 2013). For digital-only media, it is often unclear how private companies are shaped by the party-state’s guidance. And as we shall see, it is often difficult to tell if online posts originate from state-orchestrated sources or ordinary netizens. This paper will compare the less filtered expressions of anti-Westernism on non-gatekept media with the messages in online traditional news outlets. Our findings indicate that the former are much more outspoken in celebrating China’s success, denigrating the West, and comparing a successful and prosperous China to a declining, hypocritical West.

The focus of this paper is an in-depth examination of posts on the r/Sino subreddit page on Reddit, a highly popular US-based discussion platform. Reddit was the eleventh most popular website in the world as of November 2021 by total number of visits and the sixth most popular website in the United States (Amaya et al., 2021). Reddit hosts specific subreddits divided by topic area and the r/Sino subreddit includes posts about Chinese culture, history, economics, politics, and policies. The paper examines five topic areas—the BRI, climate change, the COVID-19 vaccine, the Beijing 2022 winter Olympics, and the conflict in Ukraine—which were much discussed during the period of analysis (2015–2022), some only recently for obvious reasons. These posts will be compared with the framing of these topics in both official and non-government online media outlets, *China Daily* and *South China Morning Post* (SCMP). Our main research question, detailed further below, is: can we detect a bottom-up anti-Westernism on social media that differs from the attitudes toward the West in Chinese news media?

The paper proceeds as follows: after a review of the related literature, we provide an overview of Reddit and r/Sino and how the five topics are covered in *China Daily* and SCMP. Then we describe the data gathering methods for r/Sino, and analyze the anti-Westernism of topics separately. The conclusion locates anti-Westernism amidst the Chinese government’s wider efforts to shape its image in a changing digital media landscape.

Literature Review

The term “soft power” stems from Joseph Nye (1990) who identified a number of factors that could change the balance of power in the post-Cold War era that would become more important than military power. In his view, soft power consists of the cultural outreach of the great powers and how their attractive ideals could influence the preferences and actions of other states. Nye wrote before the advent of online digital media. Maria Repnikova has recently argued that China has adopted Nye’s notion of Soft Power, but has also expanded it to include not just foreign policy goals, but also the appeal of “traditional culture, moral principles, and political ideology” (Repnikova, 2022, p.4). In other words, it seeks to make not only its policies, but also its civilizational distinctiveness more appealing and more prominent in the world, it can be described as “cultural soft power.”

Within China, Hu Jintao introduced “soft power” in a 2007 speech which gave it a distinctly Chinese flavor centering on China’s “peaceful rise” and ascendancy among nations and reclaiming its historical great power status (Zhang, 2010). But while Chinese leaders and the government have adapted the idea of “soft power” in a cultural direction, there has also been academic criticism of its uses as well as analysis of how the concept and strategies apply differently in regions and countries around the world (Chitty et al., 2020). And the Chinese uses of “soft power” have not been steady: Keane et al. (2020) traced China’s rise in the Asia-Pacific region, focusing on how its digital platforms have spread but also pointing to barriers which include the Chinese language and the Chinese government’s effort to maintain sovereignty over the internet. Further, as Keane et al. point out, while there is considerable national pride in China’s technological achievements, its digital platforms are also coming under increasing scrutiny and pushback from the West, especially concerning data policies (see also Kokas, 2022).

More importantly, it is not clear how much “soft power” applies beyond the efforts of governments and leaders and other top-down actors to the bottom-up online user-generated content that will be discussed here. Of course, top-down actors can also pretend to be or mingle with ordinary internet users. But internet users are not official actors and nor are digital media like Reddit traditional gatekept media like CCTV or China Daily. Users of Reddit are not entirely bottom-up or grassroots in the sense that those posting about and discussing China’s place in the world are likely a small sample of the population. But they can be a significant force, as the Diba expedition, an online movement that mobilized nationalist Chinese forces against Taiwan, showed (Liu 2019). Nationalists or ultranationalists are often strongly represented online, in China as elsewhere (Schroeder, 2018: 74–78). It is thus difficult to label bottom-up mobilization “soft power,” since it also not just not gatekept, but can be unpredictable and less controllable. Bottom-up users or users of digital media can also complicate foreign policymaking when they go against official foreign policy. Still, as we shall see, the anti-Westernism that will be discussed here can be seen as “soft power” in the negative sense that a Chinese model is now being defended, by the government and also by (ultra)nationalists online, against Western (or, again, mainly United States) criticisms of its model.

The degree to which Chinese nationalism has recently been gaining in stridency or intensity, also among a younger generation, has been much debated (Dickson, 2021: 192–225). Zooming out from these recent changes, however, Tang (2016) has shown that Chinese nationalist fervor is part of a long-standing tradition whereby populist mobilization has been generated in support of authoritarianism since Maoist times and earlier. Zhao (2004) has argued that the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) campaigns successfully blur the lines between “patriotism, nationalism, socialism, and communism.” Chinese nationalism, he says, has veered between a more pragmatic type of nationalism that builds solidarity and what he calls “ultranationalism,” the key feature of which is to denigrate foreign and domestic enemies (see also Schroeder, 2021), a type which includes spontaneous populist support “from below.”

Anti-Western sentiment has been a steady accompaniment to Chinese nationalism. This is mainly due to China’s attempts to overcome the legacy of the “century of humiliation” (the 19th century) when China was partially colonized and declined as a great power. Yet it is also part of a narrative of China’s “rightful rise” (Miller, 2021) whereby, with its growing economic strength and confidence in its political system, China could now retake its preeminent place in the world order. This reassertion has been particularly prominent online, leading some to speak of cyber-nationalism (Wu, 2007). Nationalist online discourses have been particularly directed against Japan as “a foreign Other,” as documented by Schneider (2018), which also shows that China’s cybernationalism is not just oriented against the West.

In China, the state “actively uses the media to shape the contours of Chinese modernity through its control of the media” (Zhao, 2011, p.152). But China’s digital media have also constituted a space for public discussion, as (Rauchfleisch and Schäfer, 2015) showed in their examination of Sina Weibo’s “multiple public spheres” (2018). And although the popularity of Weibo has given way to WeChat and other social media (Chen, Mao and Qiu, 2018), China’s online space still provides lots of room for lively debate, though this is also shaped by a combination of bottom-up and state-sponsored content that is pro-CCP, manufacturing seemingly spontaneous and legitimate pro-regime discourse (Han, 2018). The extent to which recent years have seen greater crackdowns on online content is less relevant here since we are mainly concerned with content that supports the party-state and social media in English within and outside of China, though we will return to the wider role of anti-Westernism within China in the conclusion.

Reddit and r/Sino

Reddit had 52 million daily users and 430 million monthly users in 2019 (Curry, 2022), with 41.4% of Reddit screen views from the United States and a majority of the content posted in English (Amaya et al., 2021). Given the anonymity of the platform, demographic information is not available, although surveys and other evidence suggest that Reddit users are more likely to be male and are younger than the general population (Amaya et al., 2021). Though Reddit has fewer daily and monthly users than do Twitter and Facebook, the relatively narrow discursive scope of specific subreddits makes Reddit ripe for analyzing political discussions and topic-specific analysis. Each post contains a title, making it easy to determine the subject matter of each post and related comments. And while the anonymity of Reddit makes it difficult for researchers to determine the identity of users, this can be an asset in that users may feel more comfortable posting and engaging with contentious content.

Reddit has been periodically blocked in China and there are relatively few Reddit users in China. Despite this, Chinese tech giant Tencent invested \$150 million in the company in February 2019, provoking fears of Chinese censorship on the platform (Liao, 2019). A month after the deal was announced, Reddit users reported a marked increase in pro-CCP content on the platform, raising concerns among users that the platform was being inundated by trolls who were posting content in line with Chinese government propaganda (Lytyvnenko and Silverman, 2019). Moderators reported “an increase in posts from newly created accounts that [downvoted] anything critical of China, [swarmed] threads to push pro-Communist party views, or [attacked] anyone criticizing the country,” suggesting a coordinated pro-government push (Lytyvnenko and Silverman, 2019). Given the anonymity of the platform, it is difficult to say with any certainty who is behind these posts. Still, it seems there have been coordinated attempts to control the online narrative about China on Reddit.

The r/Sino subreddit page was created on June 9th, 2015, and had 82.6 thousand members as of July 25th, 2022 (Reddit, 2022). The subreddit’s welcome page positions itself as pro-Chinese government, asserting that the community is “for people who have the critical thinking skills to see past the western propaganda of China and have a more nuanced view of the country” (Reddit, 2022). There are explainer pages about Hong Kong and Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang, and the social credit system, allegedly to “educate people on what” China is really like and to dispel misinformation and fake news. This indicates that there is a desire for people sympathetic with the Chinese ruling party to educate Westerners and elucidate what China is actually like, in contrast to what are perceived to be flawed and biased Western media and government accounts. Users contributing pro-Chinese content to the r/Sino page could be individuals paid by the government, Chinese nationals with nationalist pro-government sympathies living in China or abroad, or non-Chinese people who

support a positive view of the authoritarian party-state—although, again, since users are anonymous, this is speculative and can only be inferred from the content posted.

r/Sino is just one of many China-related subreddits, the most popular of which is r/China, which was created in 2008 and had 399,000 members as of July 25th, 2022 (Reddit, 2022). Stine and Agarwal (2020) compared r/Sino and r/China and found that the latter mainly concentrated on personal advice and practical issues rather than discussions of politics and geopolitics, which is our focus here. And unlike r/Sino which has only seven rules (i.e. don't troll, only post relevant topics, don't spam), r/China's first two rules state that posts must "be respectful" and users may not engage in "bad faith behavior," including "combative argumentation or statements intended to disrupt others' points of view rather than engaging with them" (Reddit, 2022). The content on the r/China subreddit that does concern politics tends to be more critical of the Chinese government, though interestingly, despite the fact that r/China and r/Sino are two of the most popular China-related subreddits, r/China does not include r/Sino in its list of "China-related subs," nor does r/Sino include r/China in its "r/Sino Network" or its list of subreddits with which it allows cross-posting. In other words, they are aware that they are competing for different ways of discussing China.

China Daily and South China Morning Post

More critical and more adulatory views of China also exist in traditional media. To gauge these differences, we can first get a sense of how the five topics examined here are covered by *China Daily* to determine how traditional, state-owned media present China's image abroad. *China Daily* is an English-language Chinese newspaper that is owned by the Publicity Department of the CCP. Launched in 1981, the newspaper has a readership of 350 million, including print, online, and mobile. According to its website, *China Daily* is the most quoted Chinese publication by international media (China Daily, 2022a). Both sources were examined for the same period as Reddit (and slightly longer to capture a period of coverage beyond the topics examined).

The *South China Morning Post* (SCMP) is another English-language Chinese newspaper that is based in Hong Kong, owned by the Chinese tech company Alibaba. The paper attracts 31 million users each month through its various platforms and it claims to be the most globally impactful newspaper within Asia (South China Morning Post, 2022). The paper aims to be the "most trusted and respected source of information on China," upholding the values of truth and fairness, freedom of information, and freedom of the press. It therefore presents a commercial outlet that can be expected to be more critical of China than *China Daily*, although changes in the ownership in SCMP and in Hong Kong politics and Hong Kong's relation with the mainland mean that its critical stance is no longer what it was.

With this, we can turn to our five topics: The BRI, launched by President Xi Jinping in 2013, aims to reshape China's place in the world, especially by providing low-interest loans to other countries to help facilitate infrastructure development projects. The search query "belt and road initiative" on *China Daily*'s website returns 18,283 results. Articles that mention the initiative are overwhelmingly positive, with the BRI touted as a symbol of Chinese global openness and international cooperation. Articles announce trade agreements being signed between China and other countries, the construction and opening of ports and railways as part of the BRI's expansion, and the failure of the West in countering the BRI or in offering alternative development funding. One article describes the amount pledged by the United States to support infrastructure development in Southeast Asia as "miniscule," noting that President Biden's \$150 million pledge "pale[s] in comparison" to China's pledged \$1.5 billion (Azam, 2022). Articles that mention the BRI focus on cooperation, unity, and

friendship, and underscore how the BRI can be used to promote environmentally stable development.

The same search in the SCMP returns articles that portray the BRI in a more balanced manner, presenting both the pros and cons of the initiative. Several articles aim to summarize the effects of the project, discussing the benefits provided to developing countries via infrastructure developments. These are balanced against the cons, including potential debt traps due to impoverished nations being unable to pay off the costs of such projects. Individual articles delve deeper into both perspectives, for example, detailing the great potential provided to landlocked Laos through the development of high-speed rail, which would unlock trade and tourism for the country (Duangdee, 2021). Other articles focus on countries such as Montenegro which are unable to pay off the billions in debt they owe to China (Bermingham, 2021). Western alternatives to the BRI are also covered, specifically the “Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment,” but unlike in *China Daily*, Western projects are seen as strong competition for China’s own initiative with the potential to “pose challenges for China in the long run” (Shi, 2022).

Turning to climate change, China is the world’s largest emitter of carbon dioxide and is responsible for more than 25% of the world’s total greenhouse gas emissions (Brown, 2021), though in terms of per capita carbon emissions, China’s 8.4 tons compare to 14 tons per capita in the United States (IEA, 2022). China has also become a leading manufacturer of green technology (Li and Shapiro, 2020) and signed onto the Paris Agreement and the UN’s long-term climate plans (Liu and You, 2021). A search on the *China Daily* website for the term “climate change” produces a range of articles, including about how Beijing’s climate pledges set “galvanizing target[s]” (China Daily, May 23, 2022d). Others highlight China’s influential role in leading the agenda on climate, as when the executive director of the China-Africa Center at the Africa Policy Institute in Kenya says that “China’s quest to curb the effects of climate change is unstoppable” (Munene, 2022).

Like *China Daily*, articles on climate change in the SCMP report on China’s progressive climate goals and transition towards renewable practices. Several articles note the steps that have been taken and that are planned for China to meet its clean energy goals, highlighting China’s commitment to combatting climate change. However, there is also a thread of articles discussing the need for the China-US rivalry to be put aside to better address climate change through synergies between the world’s two largest economies; “Enmity is blinding Washington and Beijing to the need to work together to save the planet. Instead, they are locked in a race to develop even more lethal weapons” (Chang, 2022). This sentiment differs from *China Daily* where China is only presented in a positive manner. While the tone of articles in SCMP is generally positive, there is also criticism that more collaboration is needed both domestically and globally.

China’s COVID-19 policies were, until late 2022, among the strictest in the world with lockdowns, severe travel restrictions, and mandatory closures of businesses and schools. Chinese pharmaceutical companies developed two COVID-19 vaccines, CoronaVac and Sinopharm, in mid-2020 and began rolling them out in January 2021. Together, these two vaccines account for nearly 50% of all vaccine doses distributed globally (Mallapaty, 2021). A search on *China Daily* for “vaccine” returns two kinds of results: articles that laud the success of China in its vaccination campaign and those that criticize the US’ handling of the pandemic and COVID vaccines. One article, headlined “Zero-COVID plan achievable, sustainable in China,” defends China’s vaccination and lockdown strategy as successful in preventing the healthcare system from becoming overrun (Lam and Wan, 2022). Chinese pharmaceutical companies are regarded as “a major force for China to help the world narrow the vaccine divide” (Liu, 2022). Meanwhile, articles that mention the West call on major powers to do more to help vaccinate the rest of the world, urging leaders to “shoulder their responsibilities” (Zhao, 2021). One article, titled “Washington’s politicization of

COVID-19 at expense of million lives,” describes the failure of the US government to acknowledge the “brutal reality” of the virus early-on, claiming that the government’s desire to “project...nonchalance” was “about political expediency and optics” *China Daily*, May 17, 2022c). The closing lines of the article suggest that Washington’s political elites should “focus on saving lives” rather than on their “insidious political agenda.”

The same search in the SCMP reveals a range of articles that both applaud and criticize the scientific advancements made within the United States and China. There is not the same anti-American and pro-Chinese sentiment seen in *China Daily*. Instead, the tone is neutral. A Reuters news agency story in SCMP applauds Chinese pharmaceutical companies for their work in developing additional WHO approved vaccines, while China as a whole is simultaneously reported to have blocked “a deal with Germany’s BioNTech SE for Covid-19 vaccines” (Reuters, 2022). The United States is presented similarly with both positive and negative portrayals. In other news agency stories in SCMP, details are reported about how “Pfizer offers to sell medicines at cost to poorest countries in new initiative” and express concerns over America’s waning coronavirus response fund and the resulting detrimental effects (Agence France-Presse, 2022; Associated Press, 2022).

In February of 2022, China hosted the Beijing Winter Olympic Games. Hosting the Olympics has become an increasingly popular way for states to burnish their international image and increase their soft power by influencing the attitudes of foreign audiences (Cull, 2008). However, the 2022 Olympics were more closed off to the world than is usual due to stringent rules around COVID-19. China had to find new avenues to promote its messaging about the Winter Games, including by paying an American consulting firm to promote positive content about the Olympics on Western social media sites (Osno, 2022). A review of searches on *China Daily* for “Olympics” found numerous articles that lauded the success of the Games or pushed back against Western criticism. Articles praised the effectiveness of the Games’ COVID protocols and sustainability efforts, oftentimes quoting an IOC official who proclaimed that Beijing 2022 was “probably the best-ever Winter Games program” and would “go down in history as a resounding success” (*China Daily* May 23, 2022b). Another article titled “Western media twists Uyghur’s role at Games” criticized the Western media for attacking China and creating a “false narrative” about China’s Xinjiang region (*China Daily*, March 18, 2022c).

The SCMP’s coverage of the Olympics also praised China for its hosting of the event. Regular remarks were made about its success, praising it as the “most-watched Winter Olympics ever” (Ip, 2022). The efficacy of China’s “zero-spread” policy to contain the spread of COVID was also applauded, even if the measures were regarded as somewhat draconian. The SCMP also commented on the development of China’s diplomatic ties with countries such as Argentina with the signing of new trade deals. However, there were multiple articles that expressed concern at certain features of the games, such as cybersecurity issues for international athletes and the lack of any natural snow in an Olympics advertised for its renewable nature. Further articles commented on the international political criticism and the resulting boycotts that continued to overshadow the event. The overall tone of articles in the SCMP was much more critical than articles in *China Daily*, though SCMP also noted the successes of the Games.

China’s response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine took a different path to that of the Global North. Instead of implementing sanctions and providing Ukraine with aid and military support like its Western counterparts, the Chinese government adopted a neutral stance as it sought to promote the avenues of diplomacy and negotiations in resolving the conflict (Jun, 2022). It called on involved parties “to exercise restraint to prevent the situation from getting out of control” (Chunying, 2022). However, as the fighting continued, Sino-Russian ties have strengthened with Russia increasingly relying on China in the face of widespread Western sanctions (Russian International Affairs Council, 2022). A review of

Table 1. Keywords for Reddit analysis.

Dataset Topic	Keywords	Size of dataset (number of relevant posts)	Date range
BRI	belt and road, BRI, bri, belt and road initiative, digital silk road	498	2015-08-19 to 2022-07-07
Climate change	climate change, global warming, climate, carbon, renewable energy	422	2015-08-20 to 2022-07-26
COVID-19 vaccines	vaccine, vaccination, vaxxer, sinovac, Sinopharm	441	2020-01-29 to 2022-06-17
2022 Olympics	Olympic, Games, Beijing 2022, Opening ceremony, Closing ceremony, Team China, Eileen Gu, Gu Ailing, Chloe Kim, Beverly Zhu, Zhu Yi	290	2021-03-11 to 2022-03-10
Ukraine	Ukraine, Crimea, Ukrainian, Ukrain	356	2022-01-15 to 2022-07-31

searches on *China Daily* for “Ukraine” reveals a range of articles reporting on the developments of the war. A number of these present strong anti-Western sentiment with particular focus on the United States. The United States is criticized for its role in exacerbating the crisis as well as its role as part of NATO in causing the conflict (Xu, 2022). This is contrasted with a reflection on China’s own stance in the conflict and the beneficial steps it is taking to help de-escalate the situation.

Reporting on the Russian invasion of Ukraine within the SCMP takes a very different tone to that of *China Daily*. Instead of the strong anti-Western and pro-China sentiment, a more balanced stance is used in reporting on the war. Salience is given to both Western and Russian perspectives. However, against the backdrop of this neutrality, there is also criticism of China’s stance and portrayal of the war. The Chinese government is criticized for its alignment with Russia and the resulting damage caused to its own economy as well as its problematic efforts to diminish and negate the effects of the war as it seeks to “deny something in plain sight” (Cunningham, 2022).

Reddit Data Collection

To understand pro-Chinese nationalism and anti-Western discourses on r/Sino, this study created a novel dataset of Reddit posts using the Reddit.io API and using several keywords for each topic (see Table 1). The datasets were limited in time (up until 2022-08-01), and posts by author “Auto-Moderator,” producing duplicates, were excluded. Irrelevant posts that did not pertain to the areas of inquiry were removed from each dataset.

For each of these datasets, a dataframe was created with information containing the post title, the author, the text of the post, any URLs that were included in the post, the number of comments on the post, the score for up- and downvotes, the date and time the content was created, and the post id. The top 11 commenters on r/Sino for each of the five categories of analysis were identified and the Reddit API was used to determine additional information about each user’s Reddit activity, including the percentage of a user’s activity on r/Sino and other top subreddits. There were 36 individual users (some users were top commenters for two or more of the five categories) whose Reddit activity was analyzed in depth.

A coding scheme was developed (coding scheme available upon request from the authors), both inductively and deductively, or starting from what is known about the theme of Chinese nationalism and anti-Westernism, for each of the five datasets, though some posts were not relevant to the themes.

For the BRI, ($n = 498$), there were two dominant parent codes: Chinese Values—Attracting Cooperation, and Western Values—Failures and Shortcomings. These two overarching categories highlight how the BRI is presented in terms of positive cooperation in the face of Western decline and hypocrisy, both in terms of geopolitics and economics. The coding scheme about climate change ($n = 422$) had three parent codes: China's commitment to and success in achieving climate goals, the West's failure to address climate change, and Chinese/Western collaboration and cooperation regarding climate change. All three present China as a global leader against the West's declining role. The dataset about COVID-19 vaccines ($n = 441$) similarly had two high-level parent codes, juxtaposing China's successful response to the Coronavirus pandemic with the failed Western response. A third parent code compared the efficacy of Chinese and Western vaccines. In this case, there were subcategories for each top-level code about the efficacy, deployment, and donation of vaccines, and false narratives in the Western media. The coding scheme about the 2022 Beijing Olympics ($n = 290$) had two dominant parent codes: anti-Western and pro-China. Comments expressing anti-Western sentiments fell into four subcategories, highlighting the decline of the West, criticizing Western media bias against China, opposing Olympic boycotts, or condemning racism in Western countries. Pro-China sentiments were divided into subcategories about China's increasing global power and the success of the Olympics.

Interestingly, the posts about the Russian-Ukrainian conflict on r/Sino do not demonstrate a cohesive Chinese attitude toward Ukraine. There are three main parent categories: China's response to the conflict, Western response to the conflict, and Western antagonism toward China. Posts about China often include references to Taiwan (most notably to highlight the differences between the issue of territorial sovereignty in relation to the two regions) and President Xi Jinping's role as a powerbroker between Putin and Zelensky. Posts about the West's stance toward Ukraine highlight a shifting world order, biased media coverage, and Western self-interest in the conflict. Relatively few posts pit China against the West against the backdrop of the conflict.

We also analyzed the Reddit activity of the top posters across the five subject areas. It must be stressed again that although r/Sino is a public forum, discussions around Chinese geopolitical issues are potentially sensitive, so that all data has been de-identified and quotes have been changed to preserve the meaning of the original content without being traceable to an individual user. Looking at the activity of a few active posters on the subreddit and analyzing the content gives a flavor of the kind of anti-Westernism dominant on the page.

The top 11 posters within each dataset were identified for each topic, with some overlap between them, thus leaving 36 unique posters overall. These posters, as mentioned, are anonymous. Based on the volume and substance of the content they post, however, it can be assumed that they are highly interested in China and highly supportive of the aims of the government. This could include users paid by the Chinese government to advance a particular narrative, pro-Chinese nationals living outside of China, pro-Chinese nationals living in China using VPNs or other workarounds to access Reddit, or non-Chinese people who are pro-CCP. Again, this is speculative, but we can get further clues about their identity by examining the content of their posts. One such clue is that their activity was heavily concentrated on r/Sino, with a few contributing extensively to r/Sino and only one or a few other subreddits.

Users labeled 1, 3, 4, and 6 here post almost exclusively on r/Sino, which is surprising given that Reddit has more than three and a half million subreddits (though it is possible that they have multiple

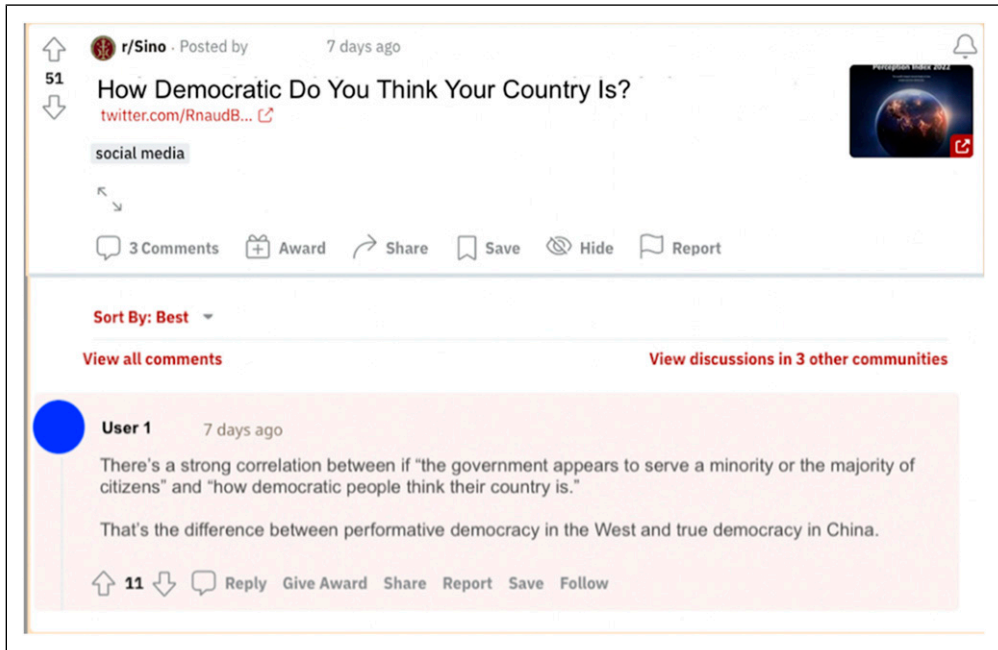


Figure 1. Comment by User 1 comparing democracy in China and the United States.

accounts). User 1, for example, had an account created in October 2019 and commented 1781 times on r/Sino in addition to their 986 posts. This user's posts, which included many links to Western and Asian news sources, made stark contrasts between China and the West, for example, contrasting "the difference between performative democracy in the West and true democracy in China." (see Figure 1).

User 3 joined Reddit in March 2020, and their posts link to a range of external websites, including the *New York Times*, the BBC, Forbes, and NDTV, an Indian news website, but singling out links that are critical of America and allegedly false Western political and media narratives about China. One, for example, links to a *New York Times* article about President Biden's upcoming trip to Saudi Arabia with the post title describing the purpose of the trip as "groveling for oil" (Figure 2).

This user also posts about the COVID-19 vaccine, criticizing America's "hoarding" of the vaccine supply and refusal to "share patents" with the "global poor" (Figure 3). In regard to Ukraine, User 3 posted that the United States had an interest in "prolonging the conflict in order to weaken Putin."

User 4 was active on r/Sino between August 2015 and November 2019, and posts include links to YouTube videos of traditional instrumental music, Chinese cooking recipes, national sports wins, the entertainment industry, and foreign relations. This user was supportive of the BRI and the announcements about regional partnerships, including with China and Malaysia, the Philippines, Myanmar, and India. User 4's nearly 80 posts about climate change similarly announced partnerships between China and other countries regarding climate change initiatives, and included quotes by a range of actors, including the chief economist for British Petroleum and Leonardo DiCaprio.



Figure 2. Post by User 3 regarding American foreign policy.



Figure 3. User 3 criticizing the US' inadequate vaccine diplomacy.

Against this backdrop, we can focus in more detail on the five topics. In terms of the BRI, the main image is of Chinese cooperation and the failures and shortcomings of Western values. The BRI can strengthen ties between countries and help with infrastructure development, which is also reflected in the most common keywords which include the countries that “will benefit from the BRI.” One post, for example, announces China’s invitation to Latin America to join the BRI to “deepen economic and political cooperation” between China and the region, but also to counter the US’ “historically strong influence.” Posts mention specific BRI-funded projects, including a port in Pakistan, land and sea trade routes between Nepal and China, trade routes to the Arctic, and railways in Vietnam, and they are often couched in language about the regional and global success of the BRI in direct contrast to the West’s “misguided” focus on poverty alleviation. But they are also aggressively anti-Western, as when two posts allege that the 2020 explosion in Beirut, Lebanon was part of a “Western Sabotage Operation” meant to interfere with China’s BRI. In another post, America is referred to as “Amerikkka”—an allusion to the Ku Klux Klan and its racism.

Climate Change discourses on r/Sino are generally celebratory of China’s successes in reducing carbon emissions and investing in renewable energy in direct contrast to Western failures to address climate change, which the West, moreover, is held responsible for. A small percentage of posts focus on collaborative efforts between China and Western partners for developing new, environmentally sustainable technologies and pledging cooperation in terms of climate change. But more than half of the content in the climate change dataset fell under the parent category of posts that demonstrate China’s commitment to climate goals and its success in meeting them. For example, one post linked to an International Renewable Energy Agency (IREA) press release and summarized the document in the post title, which read “In 2020 China added more renewable energy capacity than the



Figure 4. Post showing Western leaders sleeping during a climate summit.

combined total of the rest of the world.” Many posts also compared China’s investment in renewables to that of the United States. One post, from 2019, includes a chart from the UN showing the top 20 countries that have invested in renewable energy from 2009 until 2019, and summarized: “China has invested twice as much money in solar, wind, and hydropower as the United States. America has been wasting money on wars trying to maintain its empire, while China has used its money to invest in infrastructure.”

There are fewer posts about Western failures in terms of climate change than for the BRI, but these posts tend to underscore American hypocrisy and lack of initiative. One post includes a photo of Western leaders asleep during a climate meeting with the sarcastic heading “Look how much the West cares about Climate Change!” (see Figure 4). A comment praises China’s President Xi for avoiding this “circus.”

A few posts focus on how Western media wrongly blame China for climate change, while still others highlight the responsibility of the United States when it comes to the climate crisis and inadequate steps taken to address climate disasters, though some also say that the United States and China can cooperate in this area.

The discourses about the COVID-19 vaccine on r/Sino tend to focus on China’s success in developing effective vaccines and vaccine diplomacy in contrast to the politicization of vaccine production in the United States and vaccine “imperialism.” One post describes China as “winning the race to develop a vaccine.” The post, which links to a *Foreign Affairs* article, generated much buzz in the comments, with one commenter referring to the article as “garbage” for alleging that China “bungled its initial response” to the pandemic. The original poster agreed, adding that “it is extremely difficult to read American media and distill relevant facts from all the infuriating propaganda.” (see Figure 5).

Another post that links to a *New York Times* article says that the American newspaper is “outraged” by the WHO’s approval of the Sinopharm vaccine. Among the 69 comments, one calls the newspaper “tabloid filth,” another calls the headline “bullshit” and yet another user is “disgusted” to share the same nationality as the author, who is deemed “racist” in another comment. Other posts announce the approval of Chinese vaccines by other governments, and credit China’s vaccines with helping to create “oases from the pandemic” and describing China as pursuing “vaccine internationalism” by donating vaccines to poorer countries. This vaccine diplomacy is presented in direct contrast to the West, whose hoarding of vaccines is described as “beyond disgusting.”

Western vaccine imperialism is related to criticisms of the West for controlling patents and limiting exports, the inadequacy of vaccine donations to other countries, and the use of vaccines as geopolitical leverage to advance Western interests. European export bans and American hoarding of vaccine materials are used as evidence of “vaccine apartheid,” whereby wealthy Western countries

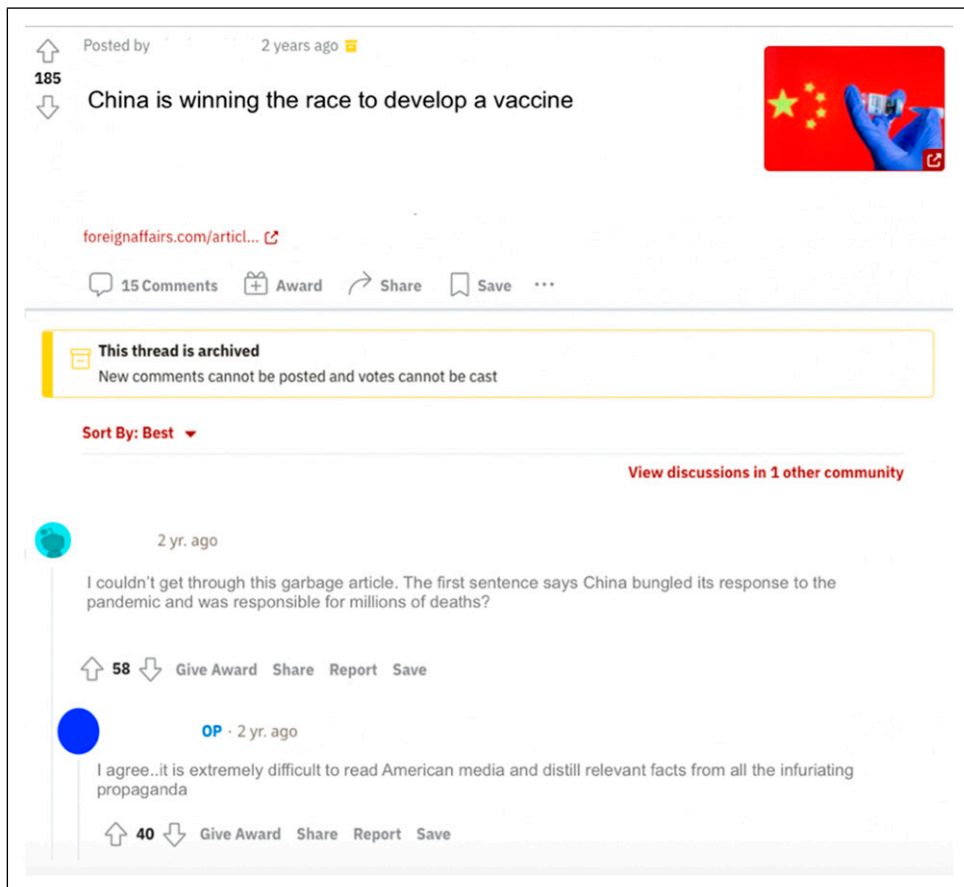


Figure 5. Criticizing American media bias and a *Foreign Affairs* article about the pandemic response.

“hog the vaccine supply” leaving countries in the Global South to suffer. A few posts compare the efficacy of Chinese- and Western-made vaccines and assert Chinese COVID vaccines are “as effective as” Western vaccines. One anecdote describes a Brazilian woman who held out for a Pfizer shot instead of getting SinoVac and who developed the only severe case of COVID in the city.

r/Sino discussions about the 2022 Beijing Olympics reinforced many existing narratives about China and the West that are common among the other topics on the subreddit. Comments expressing anti-Western sentiments emphasized the decline of the West, denounced Western media bias against China, argued against Olympic boycotts, or criticized racism in Western countries. Users discussed the poor living conditions in American cities, emphasizing the rates of crime and unclean facilities, especially in comparison to Beijing. One commenter announced, “I hope people take photos of the disgusting conditions of Los Angeles when it hosts the 2028 Olympic Games.”

Criticism of Western media played a large role in the comments; users frequently referenced the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, arguing that the outlets promoted poor perceptions of China and spread lies to advance the Western agenda. Many users pushed back against Western media’s descriptions of the Games. One comment argued that “the media promotes a narrative that viewership is low, they are blatantly ignoring online streaming and other ways people are able to

watch the Olympics besides television.” Other comments disagreed with the characterization of the Games as “dystopian” and “chilling,” arguing that “the Western media acts like the Games were cold and scary, but they were actually a happy, exciting celebration of China and sports.”

Boycotts against the Olympics were framed as futile displays of Western hypocrisy and American arrogance. Users posited that “the Chinese government never invited the United States to the Olympics. This diplomatic boycott is pure narcissism.” A frequent tactic was to reference human rights abuses in Western countries as a rebuttal to boycotts of the Olympics due to China’s treatment of the Uyghurs. Discussions around the prevalence of racism in the West usually centered on the Asian-American athletes at the Olympics. One comment argued “Americans subject an Olympic gold medalist of Asian descent to racist hatred and lies. She should represent China instead.” Discussions around racism usually presented China as a foil to the West and a place that would be more welcoming to the contributions of Asians.

While there was significantly more anti-Western content than pro-China content, comments with pro-China sentiments focused on the success of the Olympics and China’s increasing global power. One user celebrated that the opening ceremony was “astonishing” and praised the Olympics for being “the most environmentally sustainable games in history!” Several comments used the microcosm of international relations within the Olympics to argue that China was growing more powerful and solidifying new alliances. One user posited that “Putin’s attendance at the opening ceremony shows his respect for China. I am proud to see Russia and China forcing the West to show respect and fear.”

Meanwhile discourses on r/Sino about the Russian-Ukrainian conflict focused on the geopolitical implications of the war for China and the United States. Many posts talked about the ushering in of a new world order and China’s elevated place in mediating talks between Russia and Ukraine. Taiwan was also frequently mentioned in relation to the conflict, with users accusing the United States of using Ukrainian sovereignty to provoke conflict between China and Taiwan. As with other topics on the r/Sino subreddit, the United States is frequently criticized for its biased media coverage of conflicts and perceived hypocritical stances. One post that underscored this hypocrisy calls for the United States to “lift sanctions against China” if it wants China to respect Western sanctions against Russia.

Discussion and Conclusion

The discourses on the r/Sino subreddit are an attempt by China boosters to shape China’s public image, specifically among global and mostly Western Reddit users. It can be interpreted as a “soft power” effort to attract the rest of the world into China’s sphere of influence in contrast to a declining, failing West. More content is pro-Chinese and pro-CCP than it is anti-Western, but the contrast between the two camps is highlighted often. Western media are perceived as hypocritical and full of misinformation about China, and the r/Sino Subreddit can be seen as a pro-China channel that can reach non-Chinese users. The r/Sino posts promote the idea that Chinese nationalism is more beneficial to the world than is Western nationalism; the latter is characterized by its imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism. China, in contrast, is fostering domestic and global harmony through international partnerships to promote greater trade, connectivity, and infrastructure.

This message reinforces the image that the CCP is seeking to portray abroad as expressed in *China Daily*. But the party mouthpiece focuses more soberly on partnership agreements and andydyne announcements about the opening of railways, roads, and ports, whereas r/Sino uses more extremist language and makes fun of the West. The *South China Morning Post*, on the other hand, presents China through a more critical and neutral lens than does the CCP mouthpiece. Its relative

independence from the CCP is evident in its criticisms of China's actions across all five topics. While its stance is not particularly anti-China, it is markedly less supportive of the CCP than is *China Daily*.

In *China Daily* and on r/Sino, a majority of the content is framed around China and China's successes, but content on Reddit tends to be more overtly anti-Western, and sarcasm is often used to underscore perceived Western hypocrisy. Reddit users often share posts with videos, photos, and links to articles and external sources, which appear to be selected, at least in part, to counteract the "China-threat" narrative. But they are selected to provide one-sided arguments. This "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy" has also been promulgated by Chinese officials on Twitter (Repnikova, 2022), but the anonymity of Reddit allows these messages to seemingly come from ordinary users. Traditional agenda-setting pertains to official media channels, but it has yet to catch up with newer media like Reddit, which are increasingly becoming sources of news for many: for example, in the United States, 4% of online news users use Reddit, compared to 7% for Instagram and 11% for Twitter (Newman et al., 2022, p. 113). And while *China Daily* is known to be an official propaganda outlet, Reddit is not regarded as such and may give the false impression that a specific idea has widespread popular support (Zhang et al., 2013).

By linking to news stories, often in reputable traditional media sources that highlight Western failures and shortcomings and are laudatory toward China (even when this distorts the original source), contributors to r/Sino can appear to be legitimate actors making legitimate claims. Reddit is of course only one piece of a propaganda machine that China uses to project an image of itself to the world, which also includes English and other language versions of CCTV (China Central Television) and other outlets. But these outlets are official, and so must be careful in their tone and message. The CCP has deployed Internet trolls to "seize international discourse power" online, strategically used search engines (including Google News, Bing News, and YouTube) to return results produced by Chinese state media, and has inundated social media sites with fake accounts "to advance an authoritarian agenda" (Fedasiuk, 2021; Brandt and Wirtschafter, 2022; Xiao et al., 2021). It is possible that some of the support for the CCP expressed on r/Sino is coming from state-sponsored Internet trolls.

Still, although we have stressed repeatedly that we do not know if the Reddit posts were posted by government employees or directed by the state, this is unlikely to be the case for all posts: as on other Reddit forums, users are likely to be interested members of the public. We also know that not all users are acting on behalf of the Chinese government since r/Sino, as we have seen, has quite mixed messages about China and the Chinese government, including voices with different tones and messages from official diplomatic or government efforts. This type of bottom-up and outward-directed nationalism is therefore novel and goes beyond "soft power" as traditionally conceived. It is a feature of a social world in which traditional theories of the internet or of media generally have to be revised to take into account that media are no longer just dominated by broadcast or one-to-many communication, but also consist of bottom-up or user-generated content that includes shared messages and where traditional media no longer exclusively act as gatekeepers of the public sphere (Jungherr and Schroeder 2021). This source of media content thus goes beyond "soft power" and propaganda or state-directed and top-down efforts. It may bolster official diplomacy by generating support for it, but it may also depart from it, and so complicate government efforts.

Another important context to our conclusions is that Western media systems are relatively open in terms of reach and access, even if many media also have gatekeepers. China, in contrast, exercises control over its media, and while its media are also porous to the outside world, this means that China's use of social media can seek to influence the rest of the world but the reverse direction is far more constrained (see also Kokas 2022). These constraints and possibilities will obviously affect

anti-Western messages. This point also makes it important to examine other channels, which have so far not been examined in terms of “soft power.” Our findings thus point to future directions: how can the views of politically interested digital media users be gauged on anonymous forums, including the strength and diversity of their views, and how they bolster or complicate government efforts to project power abroad?

This study has limitations in examining only one online platform, but it can pave the way for further studies of and comparisons with fora like Twitter, Weibo, and Bilibili, and also examine other languages and topics. And again, we are unable to identify those who post on Reddit, though we can clearly identify the thrust of their message. What we have been able to show is that r/Sino strongly promotes Chinese soft power, and also promotes anti-Westernism with a strident “bottom-up” tone and message. Social media are thus at the sharp edge of the emerging US-Sino great power competition. They may give insightful indications of anti-Westernism among politically interested online users, especially in times when these online populations are becoming more influential and attracting increasing audiences which are overlooked in news headlines.

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