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Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Amber Ziye Wang for her help researching this paper. He’d also like to thank Richard McGregor, Peter Cai and Alex Juske for their comments, which greatly improved the final product. He’s also immensely grateful to my colleagues at ASPI, Danielle Cave, Fergus Hanson and Michael Shoebridge, for their crucial assistance.

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First published May 2018.

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What’s the problem?

As the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)-led state extends its reach into other nations, it’s actively limiting the ability of other countries to do the same in the People’s Republic of China. Seeing itself in an ideological confrontation with ‘the West’, the CCP under Xi Jinping is determined to ensure ideological conformity in its own information space. A key battleground is Weibo, the Chinese micro-blogging service most closely analogous to Twitter. Since Weibo’s inception, embassies have maintained a presence on it—a rare foothold for foreign governments in China’s tightly controlled information space.

While some governments, particularly those of Western countries, have occasionally spoken outside the CCP’s frame of acceptable public discourse, most do not. As Weibo continues to introduce new and subtle methods of direct censorship, foreign embassies are both self-censoring their messaging and failing to speak up when their content is being censored. In Australia’s case, this lack of transparency and cycle of self-censorship sits oddly with the description of Australia as ‘a determined advocate of liberal institutions, universal values and human rights’ in the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper.

What’s the solution?

To not be seen as agreeing to the CCP’s ideological agenda, like-minded governments, in coordination with each other, should commit to publishing transparency reports to reveal the extent to which their legitimate online public diplomacy efforts are being curtailed in China. Foreign governments should establish and publish clear terms of use for their social media accounts in China so that they don’t fall into the trap of self-censoring their policy messages and advocacy. They should use uncensored social media platforms such as Twitter—which, despite being blocked in China, still has an estimated 10 million active users in the country. Embassies could cross-post all of their content there so that audiences are both aware of any incidences of censorship and have alternative avenues to access their full content. The Australian Government should establish Weibo accounts for the positions of Prime Minister and Foreign Minister.
‘Orwellian nonsense’

In early May 2018, the US Embassy in China put Weibo censors in a delicate bind when it issued a provocative slapdown of Beijing’s censorship overreach.

‘President Donald J Trump ran against political correctness in the United States’, read the White House statement, which had been translated into Mandarin. ‘He will stand up for Americans resisting efforts by the Chinese Communist Party to impose Chinese political correctness on American companies and citizens.’

The statement was put out in response to the Chinese Civil Aviation Administration’s call on 36 foreign airlines, asking them to come into line with Beijing’s preferred terms of reference for Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau as ‘Chinese territories’.

The statement continued: ‘This is Orwellian nonsense and part of a growing trend by the Chinese Communist Party to impose its political views on American citizens and private companies.’ It went further still: ‘China’s internal Internet repression is world-famous. China’s efforts to export its censorship and political correctness to Americans and the rest of the free world will be resisted.’

The post, most likely penned by White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders, was a deliberate poke in the eye for Beijing and it promptly caused a firestorm on the platform.

In the short history of Weibo diplomacy, sometimes referred to as ‘Weiplomacy’, it was the most direct challenge to China’s censorship regime yet. Having shone a mirror on their own activities, Sina Weibo’s censors were put on the spot.

‘Only folks with strong connections (like you) can avoid getting censored’ read the most upvoted comment in the hour immediately after the post went out (Figure 1). ‘I can imagine the censorship department scratching their heads over this,’ read another comment.

Notably, Hu Xijin, the chief editor of Global Times, the nationalist newspaper owned by the CCP, took to his own Weibo account to call on ‘Weibo management’ to refrain from intervening.

Instead, in the ensuing few hours, Sina Weibo’s censors used every tool at their disposal short of deleting the post to ensure that the missive had as little impact as possible. Not only was the sharing function for the post switched off, but the comments section under the post was carefully manicured to remove liberal voices and replace them with CCP-approved sentiment (Figure 2).
Figure 1: The comments section under the US Embassy post less than an hour after it was published included users directly challenging the censorship regime.

Translations

Only folks with strong connections (like you) can avoid getting censored. [2,656 Likes]

I’m also against political correctness or imposing your ideology on others but respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other countries should not be mixed up with ideology. [2,077 Likes]

If we were exercising extreme oppression on the domestic Internet, do you think you’d still be talking shit here? [1,277 Likes]

Hahahahaha seeing in my living years the US opposing China’s political correctness.. [1,027 Likes]

How does our press freedom rank in the world again, one hundred and something right? [634 Likes]

I sincerely hope the Indians can claim back their land and establish their own country, while Hawaii could become an independent country. [814 Likes]

If you don’t want to do business here, then f&#% off. If you do want to do business here, respect our laws. [497 Likes]

[I] support President Trump’s thinking, the world belongs to the people, not a certain party. [378 Likes]

Leave your name here before the post gets deleted. [321 Likes]
Figure 2: The comments section under the US Embassy post (now seen in mobile view) around 2 hours after it was published and after censors removed posts that didn’t toe the party line.

Translation

If you don’t want to do business here, then f&#% off. If you do want to do business here, respect our laws. [110,000 Likes]

When China and the US established diplomatic relations in 1972, Nixon openly accepted China’s political correctness during his trip here. Are you now denying the establishment of diplomatic relations? [7,854 Likes]

Independence for Hawaii
Independence for Alaska
Independence for California
Independence for Texas
Independence for New Mexico [7,108 Likes]

1. This is not political correctness, this is the one-China principle.
2. Please abide by the terms of the Sino-US joint communique, if you choose to unilaterally go against them, it will be seen as a violation of the agreement. [6,560 Likes]

The incident was an object lesson in how sophisticated the PRC censorship apparatus has become and how precisely it can be deployed. It may be ‘Orwellian nonsense’, but it does largely work. While some Western media reports’ took care to note that more varied opinions were expressed by Weibo users under the post before the censors swooped in, most reports didn’t. 8
What remained after the censors had done their work was nothing more than a Potemkin post, with the comments under it carefully selected to give the impression of a uniformly nationalistic online Chinese public. Such an impression has led previous scholarship on ‘Weiplomacy’ to conclude that the power of Weibo to further the goals of public diplomacy might have been overestimated.\(^9\)

But a closer examination of the comment section under the post revealed a plethora of viewpoints that the censors failed to expunge. Even though the censors had cherrypicked CCP-approved comments to feature as the most upvoted comments, many of the comments under those comments weren’t toeing the party line (Figure 3). Peeling back the curtain on the Potemkin post reveals the raucous marketplace of ideas that still exists on Weibo, if one takes the time to seek it out.

Figure 3: The comments under the cherrypicked nationalist comments reveal sentiment from opposing ideological clusters.

Translation

If you don’t want to do business here, then f&#% off. If you do want to do business here, respect our laws. [12,076 Likes]

‘Little pink’ maggots [a derogatory term for young nationalists] are really disgusting [4,879 Likes]

So ZTE deserved to be prosecuted in the US because it didn’t obey their laws. [3,319 Likes]

‘War Wolves’ [a reference to patriotic hit Chinese film Wolf Warrior] always think the rest of the world couldn’t survive without China. [3,302 Likes]

Saying it like this is a bit extreme. China and the US affect each other mutually. Chinese airlines need to fly to the US and US airlines need to fly to China. It’s not possible for only one side to depend on the other for business. [3,091 Likes]

[The commenter] is obviously a slave but one who talks with the tone of a master. [1,970 Likes]
Weibo and foreign governments: a history of censorship and self-censorship

Three years after the UK Embassy became the first foreign embassy to open an account on Sina Weibo, Jonas Parello-Plesner warned that diplomats should be wary of creeping self-censorship.

‘Embassies shouldn’t accept self-censorship by only posting innocuous tweet[s] that can pass through the censors,’ Parello-Plesner wrote in The Diplomat in 2012. ‘Instead they should give the full spectrum of views including on values—even if it means more deleted postings.’

In the intervening years, some foreign embassies took up the challenge, showing a willingness to push the envelope even at the risk of having their content censored. At times, the envelope pushing has been inspired. Doing this required them to be quite creative, because being predictable means being easily blocked.

On 30 May 2012, the US Embassy tapped into Michael Jackson’s popularity in China to give a boost to a politically sensitive interview with then ambassador Gary Locke.

‘Michael Jackson has an album called Thriller, one of the best selling records in the history of music. The story we’re telling today is also a Thriller. Click to read,’ read the post, which also included a picture of the famous album (Figure 4).

The link led to a Newsweek interview titled ‘Ambassador to China Gary Locke talks Chen, Drama in China’, which included details about the attempt by former Chongqing police chief Wang Lijun to get political asylum from the US, as well as the dramatic story of activist Chen Guangcheng’s successful bid for political asylum.

Figure 4: The censored 2012 Weibo post from the US Embassy, which used Michael Jackson’s celebrity as a smokescreen for a politically sensitive interview with then ambassador Gary Locke. The post was archived on FreeWeibo.com.
In 2014, the UK Embassy posted a 2013 human rights report to Weibo using ‘Martian’, a coded language based on Chinese characters (Figure 5).13

Figure 5: The 2014 Weibo post from the UK Embassy, which used coded language in an attempt to evade censorship.

If the post had gone out using standard Chinese, keywords deemed sensitive by the party-state, such as ‘human rights’, would have been flagged automatically. But by using the ‘Martian’ coded language, the longevity of the post was prolonged before the censors became aware of it.14

In other instances, embassies have posted ‘sensitive’ content on Weibo in order to address what they have perceived as unfair treatment by China’s state-controlled media.

On 3 August 2011, the Canadian Embassy was censored for the first time after it posted about Chinese fugitive Lai Changxing. The post included a full federal court decision that resulted in his deportation to China. It included mentions of Liu Xiaobo and Falun Gong and was deleted almost immediately.15

At other times, foreign embassies have tested the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable discourse by Beijing’s censors. In 2016, the US consulate in Shanghai sent out a Weibo post asking for virtual private network (VPN) supplier recommendations. The post was deleted within an hour of its appearance.16

On 1 February 2017, the British Embassy posted an EU statement calling for the investigation of allegations of torture of detained human rights lawyers.17 According to Citizen Lab, Weibo users weren’t able to forward or comment on the post.18 The post was subsequently deleted. And on 3 June 2014, a day before the 25th anniversary of the massacre at Tiananmen Square, the Canadian Embassy posted a photo of Ambassador Guy Saint-Jacques posing with his wife at the site (Figure 6). The low comments-to-shares ratio on the provocative post would suggest some form of censorship, with comments either being deleted or not allowed at all.
On June 1, ambassador Guy Saint-Jacques and wife Sylvie Cameron took a tour around the Chairman Mao Memorial on their bikes. A visit to the place they once saw reminded of various past events associated with the square, including the once more cordial and relaxed atmosphere there.

Despite being shared 917 times, the post only displays a few comments—a telltale sign that censors had throttled engagement with it.

One share of the post added the comment: ‘There are only a few comments on this post, and you can’t see any of the shares of it.’

At times, the act of censorship happens not because an embassy has made a decision to push the envelope, but because it’s made a diplomatic faux pas. On 26 March 2014, the Russian Embassy Weibo account made what Foreign Policy called a ‘large digital diplomacy gaffe’ when it made mention of the Tiananmen incident. The embassy argued that ‘Russia’s current situation’, following Western sanctions after Russia’s annexation of Crimea, ‘somewhat resembles what China suffered after the Tiananmen incident.’

More recently, however, the instances of blatant censorship—in which posts and even the accounts themselves are deleted—appear to have dropped off. Instead, as this report shows, the invisible hand of Beijing’s censors is, for the most part, eschewing heavy-handed censorship for more surreptitious forms. At the same time, it appears that foreign embassies on Weibo are pulling their punches and accepting ‘the sliding slope of red lines and self-censorship inside the Chinese system’ that Parello-Plesner warned about. The combination results in the suppression of ideas that are different from the CCP’s ‘correct line’.

Websites FreeWeibo and Weiboscope have been extremely useful for uncovering examples of blatant censorship, including deletions of posts and keyword blocking. However, less obvious forms of censorship are more difficult to detect. Some of those methods include disabling the comments section under posts and switching off their sharing functionality.
The disabling of comments has been one of many levers that Sina Weibo’s censors have been able to pull from as early as 2012, when, rather heavy-handedly, all comments on all posts were switched off after rumours of a coup spread on the platform. Similar forms of surreptitious censorship include ‘shadow-banning’, in which users are under the impression that their posts are being seen when in fact they’re being hidden from other users. The practice is known to be used, if only anecdotally, on Sina Weibo, but has been proven to be in use on China’s dominant chat application, WeChat.

These stealthier forms of censorship are less noticeable to the user and therefore less likely to provoke any unwanted backlash. As Lawrence Lessig observed in 1999, it’s the underlying code that determines ‘whether access to information is general or whether information is zoned’. Or to rework the old aphorism, ‘If a message is posted on social media, but the algorithm doesn’t prioritise it, does it really make a sound?’

**How censorship on Weibo works**

An analysis of three months’ worth of Weibo posts between November 2017 and January 2018 from the top 10 foreign embassies in China (measured by follower numbers) found 51 instances of censored posts, mostly on the US Embassy account (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Three months of Weibo posts from November 2017 to January 2018 resulted in 51 instances of censorship.**

The US Embassy account had 28 instances of censorship in total, and a variety of methods were used to reduce or erase the impact of its posts. Those methods ranged from the blunt to the subtle:

- Six posts were deleted—some immediately, some weeks after the fact.
- Fifteen posts had their comments sections disabled immediately.
- Three posts had comments sections disabled immediately and then re-enabled weeks later.
• Two posts had their comments sections allowed, then disabled and hidden at some later stage.
• In two posts, Weibo notified users that comments were being accepted but asked that they wait patiently for a 'server synchronisation'. The user comments never made it through.

A range of censorship methods were used on US Embassy posts, ranging from the blunt to the subtle (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Censorship methods used on the US Embassy Weibo account

In a blatant act of censorship, a post sent out by the US Embassy on 7 November 2017 showing the first leg of President Trump’s Asian tour, in Japan, was immediately deleted. The deleted post—captured and archived by FreeWeibo.com—was also tweeted from the US Embassy Twitter account, helping to make its absence on Weibo more noticeable (Figure 9).
Two days later, on 9 November 2017—the second day of President Trump’s first state visit to the PRC—a post sent out by the US Embassy linking to a transcript of a press briefing by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson (Figure 10) had its comments section immediately disabled.

The post contained a statement from Secretary Tillerson that presented President Trump and President Xi as being on a joint ticket in regard to denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula, and quickly became that week’s most shared post from the embassy, with 523 shares and 441 ‘Likes’.

Translation

President Trump and President Xi confirmed their determination in realising the complete, verifiable and ever lasting denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula. President Trump and President Xi won’t accept a North Korea that is armed with nuclear weapons. We thank China’s cooperation. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson at Beijing Press Conference. Read the brief.
On 17 November, another post quoted a different part of Secretary Tillerson’s earlier press briefing:

The key topic of discussion was our continued joint effort to increase pressure on North Korea, to convince them to abandon their nuclear and missile program. President Trump and President Xi affirmed their commitment to achieve a complete, verifiable, and permanent denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. President Trump and President Xi will not accept a nuclear-armed North Korea.

On 24 November, another post quoted President Trump from his joint press conference with President Xi two weeks earlier:

All responsible nations must join together to stop arming and financing, and even trading with the murderous North Korean regime. Together we have in our power to finally liberate this region and the world from this very serious nuclear menace. But it will require collective action, collective strength, and collective devotion to winning the peace.

And on 30 November 2017, a US Embassy Weibo post announced a call between President Trump and President Xi after Pyongyang tested a missile reportedly capable of reaching the US mainland (Figure 11). A copy of the post remains on the US mission’s Twitter account.

Figure 11: The tweet about Trump’s phone call with Xi, the Weibo equivalent of which was deleted by Chinese censors on Weibo.

Translation

President Trump spoke with President Xi to discuss North Korea’s latest missile test. President Trump stressed America’s determination to defend itself and its allies from the growing threat posed by the North Korean regime. November 29, 2017, the White House President Trump and President Xi call briefing.
Six months after these four posts were published, they no longer exist. It’s unclear when exactly the censors deleted them. This method of delayed censorship avoids detection on FreeWeibo.com, where there are no records of the posts being censored. With the North Korea nuclear crisis still a live issue, the deletions suggest that Beijing is trying to regain control of the narrative inside its own information space.

On 27 December 2017, the US Embassy was censored again after it sent out a post linking to a US–German embassy joint statement about the sentencing of activist Wu Gan and his lawyer, Xie Yang:

> We see lawyers and defenders of rights as aiding the strengthening of the Chinese society via developing governance by law. Click the link here to view the recent cases.

The post was captured on FreeWeibo.com after being censored on Weibo.32

Aside from these six instances of deleted posts, all other instances of censorship captured in this report involved the disabling of the comments section under posts. This softer, less noticeable form of censorship is what’s more generally applied to posts from foreign embassies, resulting in suspiciously low levels of reported engagement from users. Engagement levels are artificially deflated when comments are disabled.

In a response to a list of questions asked by ASPI’s International Cyber Policy Centre (ICPC), three governments—the US, Australian and Japanese—confirmed that their embassies in Beijing never disable the comment sections under their Weibo posts.33

‘We don’t delete our own posts,’ a US Embassy spokesperson told ASPI ICPC via email. ‘The US Embassy faces regular and routine blocking of social media posts in China.’34

‘We don’t disable the comments section ourselves,’ a Japanese Embassy spokesperson told an ASPI ICPC researcher over the phone. ‘When comments are closed for posts it’s always done by Sina. They will always disable comments for posts mentioning the names of Chinese political leaders, for example.’

In fact, in the data covered in this report, 75% of the time censorship appears to have been meted out because a top Chinese official (living or dead) was mentioned by name or was in a photo in the post.

The sensitivity around senior Chinese officials isn’t surprising. In his 2013 book, Blocked on Weibo, Jason Q Ng found that the largest share of blocked words he discovered through his research were names of people, mostly CCP members.

‘[P]rotection from criticism on Weibo seems to be a perk for rising up the ranks—while dissidents and people caught up in scandals or crimes make up the rest of the names,’ Ng wrote.35
A post by the Cuban Embassy on 25 January 2018 mentions Song Tao (宋涛), the head of the CCP’s International Department. The post described Song as ‘Secretary Xi Jinping’s Special Envoy’, which was probably the reason for the censorship that followed (Figure 12).

Even when posts mentioning Xi Jinping are positive, they still attract the attention of censors. In October 2017, former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd posted a photo of himself ‘studying’ Xi’s report to the 19th CPC National Congress (Figure 13). ‘China has entered a new age,’ he wrote. According to Rudd, comments under the post were disabled by Weibo.36

Figure 12: A Cuban Embassy post runs into trouble

Translation of error message
Sorry, you cannot proceed with your attempt as the content contains information that has violated relevant laws and regulations or Weibo community guidelines.

Figure 13: Comments were disabled after Kevin Rudd posted on Weibo
A Sina spokesperson confirmed to ASPI’s ICPC that government-affiliated Weibo accounts with a blue verified badge have the ability to disable the comment sections on their own posts. However, in the dataset collected for this report, only one instance of a foreign embassy disabling its own comments was found, on the South Korean embassy’s Weibo account (Figure 14).

Figure 14: The error message reads ‘Due to this user’s settings, you’re unable to comment.’ The South Korean embassy did not respond to ASPI ICPC’s enquiries.

Occasionally, there are exceptions to the censorship rules. An uncensored post from Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau sent on 6 December 2017 included Chinese Premier Li Keqiang’s name in the text, as well as Li’s image in a photo.

The outsized success of a selfie taken by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and posted to Weibo in July 2015 is another exception to the rule (Figure 15). The virality of the post was due not only to the rare inclusion of a top Chinese leader, but also due to the content, in which Modi wishes Li a happy birthday. Premier Li’s exact birthday hadn’t been publicly disclosed before.
In a rare case during the 2017 G20 summit in Germany, any mention of Russian President Vladimir Putin was blocked on Weibo, according to the Financial Times. The move was interpreted by the paper as ‘giving Russia’s president an immunity from public criticism usually reserved for China’s Communist Party elite.’ In that instance, any mention of Putin on the accounts of Weibo users with more than 1,000 followers triggered the message: ‘This post does not allow commenting.’

Out of 51 instances of suspected censorship over the three-month study period, only 13 were posts that didn’t mention any top Chinese leaders.

One particularly notable instance of censorship was of a 13 November 2017 post from the US Embassy Weibo account, which included a video of President Donald Trump emphasising the US as a country whose ‘home’ is ‘on the Pacific’ (Figure 16).
Other, more personal, attempts at cross-cultural communication were also hamstrung by the censors. On the final day of President Trump’s state visit to the PRC, a video of Trump’s 6-year-old granddaughter Arabella Kushner that Trump had personally shown President Xi and his wife Peng Liyuan was published on the US Embassy account and immediately had the comments section on it disabled (Figure 17).
On the same day, a Weibo post written in the first person by President Trump at the end of his state visit to the PRC appeared:

I’m now leaving China for Vietnam for the APEC meeting #APEC2017#. First Lady Melania will stay here to visit the zoo, and of course, the Great Wall of China. Then she will go to Alaska to greet our amazing troops.

The post prompted some users to ask in comments whether Trump had taken over control of the US Embassy account.

After 39 comments were made, any subsequent attempt to comment resulted in an error message reading: ‘Posted successfully. Please be patient about 1–2 minutes delay due to server synchronization, thank you’ (Figure 18).
Two other posts by the US Embassy probably drew the ire of Weibo’s censors by providing an opportunity for Chinese netizens to draw comparisons between conditions in the US and China.

One such post answered a question posed to the US Embassy Weibo account about whether American officials were provided with special food supplies (Figure 19). Chinese news reports in 2011 revealed that Chinese Government officials have exclusive suppliers of organic food. Given that the post didn’t include any sensitive words that might cross a censorship fault line, it managed to garner at least 88 comments before commenting was disabled by the censors.
Weibo accounts run by the US Government have been suspended and even completely deleted in the past. The US Shanghai consulate’s Weibo account was shut down on 14 July 2012, while the US Embassy account was suspended briefly on 5 May 2016, according to China Digital Times, which is a website following social and political developments in China and run by the University of California.44

At times, it’s less clear why a decision to disable comments was made. When the US Embassy posted that it wouldn’t be able to continue posting to Weibo and WeChat during a government shutdown on 22 January 2018, the post went viral (Figure 20).45 It was the second most shared of all posts gathered during the three-month reporting period for this report.
Figure 20: A post by the US Embassy, explaining that it wouldn’t be posting during a government shutdown, was picked up by the Chinese media.

Translation

Due to an unresolved issue with funding, the US embassy’s social media account will cease its regular updates. While the funding issue remains unresolved, all regular and emergency consular, citizen and immigration services will continue as usual. Those seeking visa or citizen services who have secured an appointment in advance should attend as scheduled. In the exception of emergency security and safety information, the embassy website will not continue its regular updates before full resumption of operations.

However, after the post garnered 1,893 comments, further comments were disabled, despite the *Global Times*’ gleeful reporting on the incident.46

For China’s overzealous censors, even posts that could be used to show the apparent weaknesses of liberal democracies, such as the US Embassy’s government shutdown post, need to be censored—presumably for fear that discussion of the US Government will prompt users to draw comparisons to their own government. Clearly, the censors, of which Sina Weibo employs an estimated 13,000,47 are highly sensitive to any content that falls outside the boundaries of acceptable CCP-approved discourse.

It follows that a country such as Australia, which claims to be ‘a determined advocate of liberal institutions, universal values and human rights’,48 should expect such advocacy to attract the attention of China’s censors. If it didn’t, something would be odd. However, the Australian Embassy Weibo account doesn’t appear to be attracting much CCP censorship. In the three months of data collected for this report, the embassy’s Weibo account was censored only three times, all for mentioning Xi Jinping. Whether this lack of censorship reflects savvy account management, the CCP’s disinterest in the embassy Weibo account or self-censorship by the Australian Government is the important question.
**Rising nationalism**

Rising Chinese nationalism online has been allowed to foment amid recent social media campaigns against companies such as South Korean conglomerate Lotte Group, German carmaker Daimler’s Mercedes-Benz brand and Marriott International. The campaigns have received support from both state-run media and the Chinese Government.49

On 17 November 2017, an innocuous post by the German Embassy explaining the meaning of the German word Lückenbüßer (stopgap)50, became a place for nationalists to congregate and protest after pro-Tibetan independence flags were sighted at a soccer match in Germany involving Chinese players (Figure 21).

*Figure 21: The German Embassy Weibo post and angry responses from nationalists.*

Translation

Luther invented the word Lückenbüßer while translating the Old Testament. The word is about holes and cracks needing to be mended in the Holy Wall in Jerusalem. This is the origin of the word. Today, it refers to a person who acts as a replacement for the one missing from the original plan, although the plan does not work out in the end. No one wants to be a measure of expediency, but we often cannot do without one. During a period of transition when changes are about to happen, or when a final choice has yet to be made, it usually connects the world together.

Translation of comments

You want freedom of speech? Sure! Next time you Germans want to come to China for any games, we will bombard with swastika flags and photos of Hitler, and salute and chant the name of Hitler throughout, and
belt out Nazi songs! Then you’d be happy, be content! A nation that cannot retain its roots is really pathetic, of course, they will treat the territorial integrity of other nations as bullshit!

You deserve terrorist attacks in Europe, it’s all your own making!

Can we perform Nazi rituals and bear Nazi flags when the German team comes to China?

Since some people purposely provoked aggression with flags for Tibetan independence during a China–Germany soccer match, while you brushed it aside with the excuse of freedom of speech, I think it would not be an issue to paste around your embassy all with flags of east Germany!

What is freedom of speech? If the separation of China can be counted as freedom of speech, then we sincerely hope that you would again divide Germany into two countries.

The prevalence of such deep nationalism, both real and manufactured, has prompted some, like Adelaide University scholar Ying Jiang, in her pioneering research into ‘Weiplomacy’ efforts, to suggest that the power of Weibo to further the goals of public diplomacy might have been overestimated. It’s easy to see how that could be the case. While liberal voices face extra scrutiny from the censors, nationalist voices are allowed to flourish. Even foreigners on Weibo have been tapping into Chinese nationalism as a fast track to viral fame on the platform.

David Gulasi, a China-based Australian English teacher, attracted attention on the platform with funny videos, but saw it skyrocket when he started aping nationalistic views. State media outlet Xinhua has noted that videos uploaded by Gulasi include one in which he ‘professed his love for China and denounced foreigners who did not share his passion for the country’.

In 2016, when thousands of China-based trolls attacked Australian Olympic swimmer Mack Horton and his supporters after Horton called his Chinese rival Sun Yang a ‘drug cheat’, Gulasi joined in on Weibo (Figure 22).

Figure 22: Joining a Chinese nationalist pile-on on Australian Olympian Mack Horton helped David Gulasi achieve viral fame on Weibo.
In another video, Gulasi complains about the slow pace of life in Australia and tells his audience he has come to China to pursue his ‘Chinese Dream’—a populist slogan introduced by Xi Jinping in 2013. Astoundingly, Gulasi was chosen by the Australian Embassy to feature in its 45 Years, 45 Stories campaign to commemorate the 45th anniversary of Australia–China diplomatic relations.55

Foreign embassies and even national leaders such as India’s Narendra Modi have had their Weibo accounts deluged with angry nationalistic messages.56 But in an increasingly censored and controlled online media environment, foreign embassy accounts can also be a channel for netizens to protest about their own government. In early February 2018, the comments section on posts sent out by multiple foreign embassies, including the US, Japanese and UK embassies, as well as the United Nations, spontaneously became a space for Weibo users to protest the China Securities Regulatory Commission and its head, Liu Shiyu (Figure 23).57

![Figure 23: A screenshot of the US embassy Weibo account from 9 February 2018. The screenshot was censored on Weibo but retrieved by FreeWeibo.com, a censorship monitoring site. Source: 科学自然科学自然：激动的中国股民涌到美国驻…, FreeWeibo.com, 10 February 2018, online](image)

**Translation**

Since the China Securities Regulatory Commission Weibo has banned hundreds of millions of investors from protesting, all we can do is voice our fury here and strongly demand Liu Shiyu to step down.

Please have your American reporters go to the CSRC to interview Liu Shiyu, and ask him why is the Chinese stock market so unable to take a hit?

As our official platform has been censored, I just want to borrow this space to call for Liu Shiyu to step down. The stock market has crashed five times in two years, slaughtering hundreds of millions of investors.

‘641’ (a homonym for Liu Shiyu) must step down immediately, you’ve already seriously hurt hundreds of millions of families.

In April 2018, Weibo reversed a ban on content ‘related to’ homosexuality after an unusually fierce backlash from internet users.58

Both incidents reveal the diversity of views and ideological groupings that continue to exist online in China despite the party-state’s efforts to promote nationalism. Research by the Mercator
Institute for China Studies (MERICS) demonstrates how those widely differing views coexist on Chinese social media, even after extensive efforts by the CCP to repress liberal voices on the platform. Its research shows that, while party-state propaganda plays a dominant role, a number of other distinct ideological clusters exist on Chinese social media sites such as Sina Weibo. Among the groupings they identify are ‘Market Lovers’, ‘Democratizers’, ‘Humanists’ and ‘US Lovers’.

Furthermore, a survey conducted by MERICS for the report shows that Chinese nationalism isn’t necessarily anti-Western. While 62% of respondents in the online survey said China should be more assertive internationally, 75% also supported the ‘spread of Western values’. As the paper points out, ‘the CCP’s strategy of denouncing so-called Western values has repeatedly backfired when netizens pointed out the lack of better Chinese alternatives.’ Western embassies’ public diplomacy efforts seem to have some fertile ground, despite the censorship.

Israel, the Weibo stand-out

The ICPC’s analysis of three months of posts from the top 10 foreign embassies on Weibo shows that a failure to cut through can’t be blamed only on censorship. Many foreign embassies simply aren’t putting enough resources into ensuring that their content is engaging enough to succeed in a highly competitive online media environment, or creative enough to not be easily spotted by censors.

The Israeli Embassy is a stand-out exception: it has a highly successful content strategy that has proved highly popular on the platform.

In her own research into ‘Weiplomacy’ efforts, Adelaide University scholar Ying Jiang captured 2015 data from the top 10 embassies on Weibo, and Israel didn’t make the list. Just a year later, research by Manya Koetse, editor-in-chief of the Chinese social trend tracking website What’s on Weibo, showed that the Israeli Embassy had come out of nowhere to take the top spot (Table 1).

Table 1: The top 10 foreign embassies on Weibo, 2015 to 2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2015a Followers</th>
<th>2016b Followers</th>
<th>2017c Followers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Canada 1,120,000</td>
<td>Israel 1,913,384</td>
<td>Israel 1,909,473</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>USA 900,000</td>
<td>Canada (-1) 1,131,700</td>
<td>USA (+1) 1,237,604</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Cuba 360,000</td>
<td>US (-1) 1,035,300</td>
<td>Canada (-1) 1,140,980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>UK 360,000</td>
<td>Brazil 522,310</td>
<td>Japan (+1) 701,918</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>South Korea 330,000</td>
<td>Japan (+1) 480,500</td>
<td>Brazil (-1) 500,159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Japan 290,000</td>
<td>South Korea (-1) 396,960</td>
<td>UK (+2) 476,430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>France 230,000</td>
<td>Cuba (-4) 358,950</td>
<td>South Korea (-1) 396,960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Russia 140,000</td>
<td>UK (-4) 289,280</td>
<td>Cuba (-1) 359,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Denmark 130,000</td>
<td>France (-2) 255,240</td>
<td>France 270,471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Australia 110,000</td>
<td>Russia (-2) 167,539</td>
<td>Australia (+1) 205,796</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources:
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- b Manya Koetse, ‘Digital diplomacy: these foreign embassies are most (un)popular on Weibo’, What’s on Weibo, 20 December 2016, online.
- c Data collected by Fergus Ryan, December 2017.
Of course, a successful digital public diplomacy effort on Weibo should not only be judged by how many posts are censored; it should also be pragmatic. Above all, any digital diplomacy, or ‘e-diplomacy’, effort is fundamentally about the use of the internet and new information and communications technologies to help achieve diplomatic objectives.  

Drawing on data from late 2017, this report has Israel maintaining its lead at number 1 (despite losing followers), while the US and Canada continue to vie for second and third place. The UK has recovered from its loss of two places to regain the number 6 slot, while Australia has managed to re-enter the top 10.

However, follower counts can be a somewhat crude metric, as they can be easily gamed. A 2014 investigation by *The Globe and Mail* found that large chunks of those followers were fake. According to the online tool used by the paper, 45.8% of the US Embassy’s followers, 39.9% of the UK’s and 51.2% of Japan’s were real. Only 12.9% of the Canadian Embassy’s 1.1 million followers were determined to be real.

Another more meaningful metric is to examine the number of shares, likes and comments that each post gets on average to arrive at an idea of how ‘influential’ each embassy is (Figure 24).
Using these engagement metrics, the Japanese, UK, US, Israeli and Canadian embassies are the top 5 leading the pack.

Central to the success of the top 5 accounts is a tendency to not just promote the image of their own countries, but to engage with and leverage Chinese culture, particularly pop culture. Weibo’s audience skews young (88% of Weibo users are under 33 years of age) and, after its most vocal liberal voices were purged, is now largely dominated by entertainment.62

If the aim of foreign embassies on Weibo is to enhance soft power and to shift public opinion around to supporting their foreign policy positions, the Israeli Embassy Weibo account is exemplary. Shimi Azar, who worked as social media manager at the embassy from late 2014 to early 2016, says the country received a lot of exposure through state visits by Israel’s leaders to China.

‘The first visit of Israel’s Prime Minister Netanyahu to China in 2013 and the visit of the late president Shimon Peres in 2014 created a big buzz in the media,’ Azar told the Global Times. ‘So the embassy took advantage of this buzz and created a Sina Weibo account for Shimon Peres, which was very successful and soon attracted half a million followers.’63

But the outsized success of the Israeli Embassy Weibo account also occurred in the context of a number of deadly terrorist attacks by jihadist-inspired separatist groups in Xinjiang Province.64 As Peter Cai noted in 2014, the majority of comments under an Israeli Embassy Weibo post that likened Hamas to the Islamic State terrorist group were supportive of Israeli attacks on Hamas.

‘Israel, you must control the population in Gaza, otherwise it’s impossible for you to win. You should ditch your humanitarian principles and the only hope for you is to fight evil with evil,’ read one representative comment under the post.

Chinese netizen support for Israeli foreign policy, which goes against the official Beijing position, is still ongoing. Nine sentences sent out by the Israeli Embassy following US President Trump’s decision to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel was the most shared piece of embassy content (the item was shared 2,298 times) in the three-month period covered in this report (Figure 25).65
The post, which outlines the official Israeli view of the history of Jerusalem, was positively received by Weibo users. ‘The world will rest assured and the people will be satisfied when Jerusalem is given to you,’ reads the most liked comment underneath the post.

‘Put the boot into the cancer of humanity’, the second most liked comment reads—a sentiment typical of a growing anti-Muslim sentiment online that has gone unchecked by Beijing’s censors. Islamophobia has been given a wide berth online in China as authorities continue to crack down in its restive region of Xinjiang. Frequent anti-Muslim comments under many Israeli embassy posts suggest that there’s a perception in their audience that the Israeli Embassy Weibo account is itself anti-Muslim.

A lack of coordination and transparency

But the efficacy of even the most well-resourced and strategic use of Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo is ultimately limited by the party-state. On his second official visit to China in December 2017, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau sought to parlay his image as a ‘Weibo addict’ into a public diplomacy coup when he made his first stop a visit to Sina Weibo headquarters in Beijing.

Promotional material released before Trudeau’s visit to Weibo claimed the Q&A with the Canadian Prime Minister would be broadcast live, via video stream onto Weibo (Figure 16). But instead of seeing a live-stream of the proceedings, Weibo users at first saw only a delayed 36-second clip of the PM. It was only hours later that more of his appearance was made available.66 As the Canadian Government intended the event to be live-streamed, a reasonable conclusion is that the abrupt cancellation was due to Weibo censors.
Chinese officials, when questioned about the practice of censoring the comments section on foreign embassy Weibo accounts, pass the buck back to Sina Weibo. An exchange between a foreign journalist and an official at a recent Foreign Ministry press conference provides an illustrative example:

Q: Some Chinese investors were angry about the decline in the domestic stock market last week, and they used the US Embassy’s Weibo account to vent, posting comments to that account. On Saturday, we saw these comments have been blocked. Can you tell us your understanding as to what happened there? Does China see that the US is doing anything incorrect in this matter?

A: You might as well ask the US Embassy in China, whose staff is responsible for the maintenance of their own account.

Follow-up: It appears from our report that they did not take actions to block anything. That may have been the Weibo that blocked them.

A: I have not heard about what you mentioned. As I understand, you need to ask them if there are problems with their Weibo account. If the problem cannot be solved, they may contact relevant competent authorities.67
Conclusion and policy recommendations

It’s estimated that Beijing spends US$10 billion a year on external propaganda, an order of magnitude higher than the US, which spent US$666 million on public diplomacy in 2014.\(^68\) Content from Chinese state media has featured in major Western outlets such as *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Washington Post*, the UK’s *Daily Telegraph* and *Le Figaro* as well as on the social media platforms Twitter and Facebook.

The reverse would be unthinkable in the PRC’s tightly controlled media environment. This is despite the fact that the PRC backed a landmark resolution in July 2012 at the UN Human Rights Council, which affirmed that ‘the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online, in particular freedom of expression, which is applicable regardless of frontiers and through any media of one’s choice.’\(^69\)

Insisting that the PRC uphold the rights of its citizens to engage freely with the legitimate online public diplomacy efforts of foreign embassies isn’t a boutique concern. It’s a parallel issue to seeking reciprocity from the Chinese state for numerous other things, such as intellectual property regimes and market access. The PRC’s online censorship regime cloisters its netizens in an information environment that’s cut off from the rest of the world and primed with a nationalistic ideology. The more the Chinese party-state controls the media to promote its own narrative, the more it limits its own options for how it can resolve international conflicts.\(^70\)

While CCP statements at the UN are reassuring, the trendlines for censorship in China are moving in the opposite direction. Under Xi’s rule, China has increasingly tightened its grip on the internet, concerned about the erosion of its ideology and policy by a vibrant online culture and the spectre of so-called ‘hostile foreign forces’. As this paper shows, Beijing’s censors aim to use almost imperceptible amounts of censorship to throttle discussion on Weibo that they deem falls outside the frame of discourse acceptable to the CCP party-state. For foreign governments, the temptation to self-censor is increasing.

Foreign governments should demand that Beijing refrain from censoring their legitimate and overt digital diplomacy efforts. Short of that, and probably more powerful for the netizen community, like-minded governments, in coordination with each other, should commit to publishing transparency reports, both to reveal the level of censorship that they’re receiving on Weibo and to demonstrate their commitment to presenting Western political norms and values to Chinese civil society. This can be very influential public diplomacy. It’s important that embassy Weibo accounts speak to China’s diverse netizen groups. Publishing a transparency report about CCP censorship will also inform those groups of their own government’s actions.

The continued meaningful presence of foreign embassy accounts—which occasionally speak outside the bounds of the CCP’s frame of acceptable discourse—will demonstrate those countries’ commitment to presenting Western political norms and values to Chinese civil society.
These accounts can also help reduce misunderstandings between foreign governments and the population of one of the world’s most powerful countries.

Changes need to be made to the way governments engage online in China. Those changes need to include preventive measures to stop governments falling into a cycle of self-censorship. This paper makes the following recommendations:

1. Governments need to become more assertive and more creative in their messaging on Chinese social media platforms. Of course, some content should be tailored for local audiences. But foreign governments must ensure that they’re communicating the same policy and political messages to the Chinese public as they are to other publics around the world. They are likely to be censored for this.

2. Foreign governments should use uncensored social media platforms such as Twitter—which, despite being blocked in China, still has an estimated 10 million active users in the country—to cross-post all of their content. That way, incidences of censorship will be transparent and available to global audiences. Cross-posting content elsewhere also gives Chinese netizens an alternative avenue to access and engage with uncensored content. The US Embassy’s Twitter account—which as 738,000 followers—provides other countries with a good model.

3. When governments have their official content censored on Chinese online platforms, they should raise this censorship directly with their Chinese Government counterparts. Those countries which allow the Chinese Communist Party an open media and cyber environment to communicate all of its official messages should request reciprocity.

4. The Australian Government needs more avenues to engage the Chinese public and to put different messages forward. Dedicated official accounts for the positions of Prime Minister and Foreign Minister should be established immediately.
Policy Brief: Weibo diplomacy and censorship in China

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72 See US MissionCN, online.

73 For example Australia, the US, the UK, Germany, New Zealand and Canada.

Acronyms and abbreviations

CCP Chinese Communist Party
EU European Union
MERICS Mercator Institute for China Studies
PRC People’s Republic of China
UN United Nations
VPN virtual private network
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