Disinformation

Q3 Report

Piyaoba.org

CAA

Chinese for Affirmative Action

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INTRODUCTION

Piyaoba is the first centralized fact-checking website to combat right-wing disinformation in the Chinese American community.

“Piyaoba” means “let’s fact-check it” in Mandarin Chinese.

Launched in early 2022, Piyaoba offers in-language resources and tools to help Chinese Americans dispel misinformation and disinformation effectively, such as real-time alerts, reports, and in-depth fact-checking articles. Readers can also suggest topics for fact-checking.

Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA) began our pioneering Chinese Digital Engagement program in 2019 to provide accurate information to the Chinese American community about issues related to social justice. We’ve created channels on Chinese-language social media (e.g. WeChat), along with the websites JusticePatch.org and piyaoba.org to provide fact-checking and original and curated articles.

Piyaoba expands on our existing fact-checking efforts by systematically researching and documenting the misinformation and disinformation ecosystem within the Chinese American community. Misinformation is false information that someone spreads because they believe it to be true, whereas disinformation is false information that someone knows is false and spreads.
INTRODUCTION

Piyaoba is the first centralized fact-checking website to combat right-wing disinformation in the Chinese American community.

“Piyaoba” means “let's fact-check it” in Mandarin Chinese.

This quarterly report shares the latest features and trends of Chinese-language right-wing misinformation and disinformation.

We hope to provide insight and guidance for our subsequent efforts, as well as to give a reference for Chinese-language media, community leaders, and researchers who are concerned about the issues.

This report comprises the following:

01 Executive Summary
which provides an overview of the scale of Chinese-language mis/disinformation and the methodology and fact-checking efforts from Piyaoba

02 Data Analysis
A detailed data analysis of the scale, platforms, and topics of Chinese-language disinformation

03 Latest Features and Trends

04 Main Narratives of Chinese-language Disinformation
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview of Findings

From July 1, 2022 to September 15, 2022 (Q3), Piyaoba detected and recorded a total of 133 major disinformation articles on Chinese-language social media networks (including WeChat, Chinese Twitter, Chinese YouTube, etc.).

The most concentrated topics of Chinese mis/disinformation were:

- Attacks on Democrats and “the left”
- Rumors and dis/misinformation about Trump and his ally
- Election and legislation
- COVID-19
- Community Safety
- Social Justice: Race, gender, education

Among all the dis/misinformation detected by Piyaoba in the third quarter of 2022, we found that 53.6% of the mis/disinformation circulated on WeChat, while two other platforms with a large amount of dis/misinformation were Twitter (35.5%) and YouTube (6.5%).

We monitored a total of 138 active dis/misinformation accounts in Q3, including a total of 51 WeChat public accounts, 37 Chinese-language Twitter accounts, 31 YouTube channels, and 9 Telegram groups/channels. Compared with the first and second quarters, WeChat still has the dominant position but the growing of users on other platforms also deserves attention.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Types of Accounts

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

01

Most accounts are run by individuals holding conservative positions. Some of these accounts are active on multiple social media platforms and usually have close ties to Chinese American right-wing conservative activists. These accounts have coordinated and collaborated on important social justice issues such as affirmative action. We do not rule out the possibility that these individual accounts are operated by or involved with Chinese American conservative organizations.

02

Around 10-12 accounts are run by media companies. These Chinese new media companies often manage WeChat public accounts and WeChat groups in multiple cities in the U.S. These accounts tend to be conservative, or operate only for commercial interests, publishing right-wing disinformation content for income.

03

We found a more deceptive type of conservative Chinese WeChat operator: individual-run WeChat public accounts and WeChat groups that most of time focus on “life, travel, food, or neighborhood support,” but when conservatives launch political campaigns, they transform overnight to use their large audience to serve the conservative agenda. (For example, WeChat public account “Apollo Life” with its Falun Gong background, and the “Bay Area Yellow Pages” WeChat groups where we find that many Chinese conservative leaders are active.)
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our Methodology

Similar to the previous two quarters of 2022, we monitored and counted fake news through the following research methods:

1. Manually monitor and record mis/disinformation related to social justice on WeChat, YouTube, Twitter, and Chinese-language websites; record active accounts; and record keywords to locate Key Opinion Leaders (KOL).
2. Manually search each social media platform using keyword methods.
3. Evaluate the need for fact-checking based on the degree of dissemination, influence, and time sensitivities.
4. Review and cross-check with the English search tool Critical Mention.

For a single identical event, we collected and recorded widely spread dis/misinformation of different versions, different platforms, and. This change in recording method aims to assist us in more clearly sorting out the time span and context of the spread of widely-spread dis/misinformation, and to assist us in more comprehensively using data as support to understand the spread characteristics of different platforms.

Our Output

Piyaoba published a total of 13 in-depth fact-checking articles and 28 Disinformation Alerts between July 1, 2022, and September 15, 2022.
As in the previous quarter, the active accounts spreading fake news in Chinese in the third quarter of 2022 remained concentrated on WeChat. In the third quarter, we detected a total of 138 accounts spreading false information, 51 of which were WeChat public accounts.

Compared with Q2, the overall percentage of WeChat public numbers decreased from 39% to 37%. Chinese Twitter (37 accounts, 26.8%) and Chinese-language YouTube channel (31 accounts, 22.5%) increased.

**Disinformation Accounts by Platform**

*“微信 WeChat” represents WeChat public accounts. “电报群 Telegram” refers to Telegram group chats of at least 1,000 users. “其他中文平台 Other” includes Weibo accounts and Chinese websites that actively share disinformation focusing on issues within the U.S.*
Of the 133 dis/misinformation pieces we monitored in Q3, more than half came from WeChat (53.6%), followed by Twitter (35.5%).
The hottest topics during Q3 were the following: Biden and the Democratic Party; community safety; Trump and his allies; social justice: race, gender, education; legislation and elections; COVID-19 and vaccines; conspiracy theories.

Disinformation by Topic

*Each detected narrative may be placed under more than one topic. For example, a disinformation piece about the Democratic Party’s immigration policy would be placed under both “Biden and the Democrats” and “Community Safety”.*
DATA ANALYSIS

Disinformation by Topic

In the graphic on page 08, the specific topics under each category are:

Biden and the Democrats

This includes the complete conflation of "Biden" and "Democrats" and basically blames Biden/Democrats for all existing problems in American society such as inflation, crime, etc. Also common in this category are interpretations of various legislation, such as claims that the Democrats want to destroy America through various "evil" and "politically correct" legislations.

Community Safety

Includes topics on immigration, crime, gun violence, and abortion. Since there was little focus on "abortion" this quarter, and the only cases were related to "immigration", the former are included here. This category received a lot of attention in the run-up to the midterm elections, with immigration and border security issues repeatedly used by Republicans as a political showcase. The visibility of crime issues is as high as ever.

Trump

Includes incidents involving Trump and his allies. In this category, "election fraud" is a regular topic, and basically whenever Trump is mentioned, "2020 election fraud" is mentioned. Trump himself has also contributed to this topic, and many of his false statements posted on Truth Social have been translated into Chinese and distributed on various platforms.

Social Justice

Includes topics about race, gender, and education. The reason for putting these topics together this quarter is that we have observed that right-wing accounts intentionally bundle these topics to a certain extent when talking about them. In particular, they promote a "white-centric" and "anti-diversity" conservative narrative based on the popular topic of "education".
DATA ANALYSIS

Disinformation by Topic

In the graphic on page 08, the specific topics under each category are:

05 Legislation and Election

Trump himself and his sectoral Republican allies have repeatedly promoted the conspiracy narrative of "election fraud," a tactic that has been flexibly applied to various legislative and electoral discussions. In addition, right-wing accounts have focused on local legislation promoted by Democrats, often with disinformation such as "California has introduced xx evil legislation".

06 COVID-19

Includes topics on COVID-19 and vaccines. The "anti-vaccine" narrative remains one of the core narratives of right-wing accounts. Videos and images of "fainting" and "death" are constantly being circulated to prove that the vaccine is "harmful". The corresponding narratives have also been changing in response to changes in U.S. epidemic policy, such as constantly downplaying the severity of COVID-19 and claiming that COVID-19 is actually a flu virus.

07 Conspiracy Theory

Refers to classic conspiracy theories about Deep State (DS) and QAnon.
The collective trauma of overseas Chinese may become a tool for conservatives to pull in allies.

In early August, the FBI raided Trump’s Florida home, Mar-a-Lago. Many accounts relayed the story with the term "raid" and some called it a Biden/Democrat "political witch hunt" against Trump. In fact, the FBI raid had been foreshadowed and was far from being a "home invasion" in terms of its extent or nature. But these two words managed to trigger a collective trauma for some overseas Chinese - the Cultural Revolution. As a result, even audiences with no previously established position on Trump and Biden are more likely to form a negative impression of the matter after seeing this type of narrative.

Whether intentional or not, this tactic is a relatively common way for conservatives to woo their allies and intimidate their readers. Similarly, they may distort some of the Democratic Party’s legislation and policies, or even distort the facts, and then say that the Democratic Party is promoting "communism" and "Democratic Party = Communist Party". As we mentioned in our previous report, in the overseas Chinese community, "pursuing democracy and opposing totalitarianism" is a more mainstream voice. Or rather, it is a consensus that transcends the realm of American politics. If such arguments, which do not consider facts and evidence, proliferate, they will cause severe pollution to the ecology of the Chinese community.

One of the more interesting examples is the visit of Speaker Pelosi to Taiwan in early August. The right-wing accounts that normally describe Pelosi as an "old witch" and a "vicious woman" began to praise her for doing something that was in the face of the Chinese administration, but of course, there was no shortage of Trump fans who wanted to see how the Biden administration would handle the China-Taiwan issue.

We urge readers here to be wary of such practices that exploit the collective trauma of overseas Chinese to draw in conservative allies; healing the trauma is not so easy, but at least make fact-based judgments.
The power of right-wing grass-roots political engagement is in the spotlight ahead of the midterm elections.

In addition to constantly blaming Biden/Democrats for all social problems, right-wing grass-roots activists are not shy about directly stating provocative positions and canvassing for a particular candidate. At the same time, the right-wing is well aware that the Chinese voter base is a potential force to be mobilized - especially since many Chinese are not politically active due to their cultural background - and that for some voters, if previously unknown issues are narrated by conservatives, then it is easy for conservative views to settle in voters’ minds on a "first come, first served" basis.

Right-wing grassroots activists are also relentless in occupying the ground of public opinion, keeping up with almost all current events, more interested in expressing their personal views and bringing in allies who share similar values than in recounting facts (or facts that don’t matter to them) - no doubt mobilizing votes for the conservative vote bank - and in the run-up to the election, right-wing grassroots activists will directly and link candidates to previously discussed issues, using relatively simple and straightforward logic to introduce their positions to their audience (such as the posters listing the advantages and disadvantages of the Democratic and Republican parties, see below) in a sharp, targeted marketing campaign.
The power of right-wing grass-roots political engagement is in the spotlight ahead of the midterm elections.

There are various versions of similar posters with similar content. They use simple and clear words to describe the Republicans as “saints” while describing the Democrats as “sinners”. Obviously, political engagement takes time and effort, and in a situation where some voters are not equipped to understand the actual policies of the two parties and read the relevant news, such posters serve to pull people in with keywords - even though they distort the facts and denigrate the Democrats in a one-sided manner.

The power of right-wing grassroots to plow deep into local communities should not be underestimated. For example, certain accounts will directly canvass for the school board member of a particular ward in a particular city in a particular state and know the candidates in each local ward like the back of their hand. This level of interest in local political participation is a relatively common state of affairs among right-wing grassroots activists. To use a common phrase, right-wing grassroots activists are willing to be “shameless”: a post or a tweet may not mobilize a single vote, but what if it does? --There is nothing to lose.
As Chinese government censorship tightens and the "red line" becomes unclear, right-wing accounts are gradually expanding to other platforms.

As the Chinese government tightens its censorship, there are more and more "red lines". While "self-censorship" has been integrated into Chinese platforms, no one knows exactly what will be censored, and nothing is “perfectly safe”. At the end of August, Shanghai-based international news fact-checking platform "China Fact-check" was banned from WeChat, and since then, neither their WeChat public page nor their website has been updated. We are gradually discovering that even if the content is not related to Chinese politics, it may still cross the "red line".

In this regard, right-wing accounts too have been hit hard by censorship. Several right-wing accounts with long-standing daily updates have been banned. The more active conservative "Moshang USA" has publicly tweeted several times about censorship on WeChat, and has gradually given up updating WeChat and switched to Telegram groups/channels.

In addition to the "equal treatment" of Chinese censorship, some right-wing accounts have also encountered content censorship by YouTube. For example, the well-known anti-vaccine channel "Wenjie Broadcast" was banned by YouTube after being given several warnings about the anti-vaccine content it posted. We noticed that the right-wing account moved the video content to Rumble and the text content to Telegram, and built a fan base on Telegram.

Of course, WeChat is still a very conducive platform for spreading the word. However, we have observed that the gradual expansion of other platforms is also a trend for right-wing accounts.
In mid-August, the FBI raided Trump’s Florida home, Mar-a-Lago, causing widespread concern in the Chinese community. The term "home raid" was the term applied to a large number of accounts talking about the incident. The right wing has continued to denigrate the DOJ and FBI, shifting the focus of the incident towards Democrats and the Democratic Party, calling it a long-planned "political battle" against Trump. In addition, the "election fraud" conspiracy theory continues to spread and solidify. The conversation around the January 6 capitol hill riots and the 2020 presidential election is still hot. As the midterm elections are approaching, right-wing accounts are talking about these issues with a call to action. During this quarter, inaccurate information surrounding the topic included the following:

**KEY NARRATIVES**

**Keyword 1: Trump, FBI search, Democrats, Election**

01 The FBI raid on Trump’s residence is a political persecution by the Democratic Party against Trump. For example, Trump’s home was raided, new charges were found to obstruct Trump’s return to the White House, and the U.S. judicial system popularity hit rock bottom.

02 Trump wrote his own letter waiving executive privilege to allow Bannon to testify.

03 Trump knew about the 9/11 attacks in advance and is planning to take power in 2024 to end the deep state.
KEY NARRATIVES

Keyword 1: Trump, FBI search, Democrats, Election

Screenshot from WeChat Public Account “萧参客”

Screenshot from WeChat Public Account “星系花园秘境”

Screenshot from WeChat Public Account “大洛杉矶LA”

Screenshot from Youtube Channel “US News Express”

Screenshot from Youtube Channel “American Liberty”

Screenshot from Twitter Account @letusparytoGod

Screenshot from Twitter Account @wenjiebc

Screenshot from Twitter Account @CaoChangqing
Every move made by Biden and the Democratic Party is a topic of great interest to the Chinese community. Right-wing accounts have long denigrated Biden’s ability to govern, his health, and even the number of days he has worked. Some of the more high-profile legislative initiatives of the Biden administration have also been the focus of right-wing accounts. In mid-August, the Inflation Reduction Act was passed; in late August, the Biden administration announced the relief of student loan debt, which generated a lot of buzz. In addition, rumors of legislation in Democratic-run states were spreading one after another. Dis/misinformation surrounding the topic during the quarter included the following:

**01**
Biden’s ability to govern is in doubt and his health is in crisis. For example: Biden does not extract oil in the United States, but begs Saudi Arabia to increase oil production; Biden has Alzheimer’s disease.

**02**
The Inflation Reduction Act raises taxes across the board and doesn’t work at all.

**03**
The Democrats have passed all kinds of "evil legislation". For example: California legislation allowing the killing of 28-day-old babies, California legislation forcing hotels to accept homeless people, Pelosi leaking confidential information to her family.
KEY NARRATIVES

Keyword 2: Biden, Democrats, Legislation
KEY NARRATIVES

Keyword 3: Community safety, Drugs, Immigration

Community safety has always been a topic of great interest to readers. Due to the high news content and wide distribution of crime events, quick coverage of crime events is the "highway to attention" for many media outlets. In particular, focusing on the identity of suspects and linking crime to the ruling party are common narratives in Chinese communities. In this quarter, dis/misinformation around this topic included the following:

01 Crime rates are higher where Democrats are in power than where Republicans are in power.

02 The Democrats use welfare to attract undocumented immigrants into the United States (note: the underlying logic behind this narrative is that "undocumented immigrants = criminals"), and as a result there is a high incidence of crime in the United States.

03 The Democrats have allowed drug use. For example, the state of California has financed legal drug rooms (note: this refers to the Overdose Prevention Center) that feed a large number of drug users every day.

04 Democrats release criminals. For example, California’s law and order is imploding, but the new law by the Chinese-American legislator Phil Ting wants to release more criminals.
KEY NARRATIVES

Keyword 3: Community safety, Drugs, Immigration

Screenshot from WeChat Public Account “大洛杉矶LA”

Screenshot from Twitter Account @CaoChangqing

Screenshot from Twitter Account @stupidwz

Screenshot from Twitter Account @wenjieebc
As we approach the midterm elections, "border security" is one of the topics used by the Republicans to attack the Democrats. Accordingly, the topic has received a lot of attention in the Chinese community. And it has set up "straw men" (set up targets) that are different from those in the English-speaking community. For example, it provokes the Chinese community to compare the so-called "preferential treatment" of undocumented immigrants with the trauma of immigration (the hard and long experience). On one hand, it condemns the Democrats for "opening the borders", and, on the other hand, it condemns the Democrats for constantly introducing preferential policies to attract undocumented immigrants to cross the border. Although it is not new for individual Republican states to bus or fly undocumented immigrants to Democratic states, when, in mid-September, Florida Governor DeSantis again transported undocumented immigrants by plane, and this time to Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts, the event garnered widespread attention. Dis/misinformation surrounding the topic during the quarter included the following:

01 The Democratic Party gives preferential treatment to undocumented immigrants. For example, “illegal” immigrants can get a green card after staying 7 years in the U.S.; undocumented immigrants are entitled to housing, medical and transportation benefits; New York has chartered five-star hotels for undocumented immigrants and provides free schools and health insurance; and undocumented immigrants are given priority in job placement.

02 Democrats disregarded border security in order to expand the vote to attract undocumented immigrants.

03 Florida and Texas ship undocumented immigrants to Democrats and they don’t take them.
KEY NARRATIVES

Keyword 4: Undocumented immigrants, Border security
Gender diversity is an area that is relatively new to readers in the Chinese community. Many people view the issue of “gender minorities” with a “none of your business” attitude. Some right-wing accounts subtly link “gender minorities” to “education,” claiming, for example, that the passage of a such-and-such bill will allow schools to teach “transgender education” in an open manner. The keyword “race” is included because we observe a deeper connection between “race” and “education”. During this quarter, dis/misinformation on this topic included the following:

01 African-Americans and Hispanics are given preferential treatment in policy (note: the underlying logic is “anti-black sentiment”). For example, affirmative action is biased towards African-Americans, and banks are piloting programs that do not require a down payment for home purchase from African-Americans.

02 Public schools are constantly indoctrinated with racial theory, and “wokeism” is prevalent.

03 The Democratic Party promotes “transgender” ideology-related legislation that harms children and endangers future generations.

04 The promotion in schools of gender pluralism is “grooming” white kids into transgenderism.
KEY NARRATIVES

Keyword 5: Racial Justice & Gender Diversity & Education
KEY NARRATIVES

Keyword 6: COVID-19, COVID-19 vaccines, Fauci

COVID-19 continues to be a topic that comes up very frequently in the Chinese community. Especially with the emergence of new variants and changes in vaccination policies, the discussion around COVID-19 has continued to heat up. Right-wing accounts have cleverly shifted the focus towards children, such as the government and schools are going to use the COVID-19 vaccine to poison children. Dis/misinformation surrounding the topic during this quarter included the following:

01 The COVID-19 pandemic is a fabrication. For example, going into the midterm elections, the Biden administration is going all out to push the COVID-19 narrative.

02 Fauci is about to retire and is rumored to be "liquidated". For example, Fauci has created COVID-19, which is a scourge to Americans, and Fauci’s reputation has been tarnished and he is facing a congressional investigation.

03 The COVID-19 vaccine is harmful, has deadly side effects, disrupts immune functions, and even tampers with DNA.

04 COVID-19 vaccine’s side effects are widespread and affect people’s lives on a large scale. For example, so-and-so public figures fainted on such-and-such occasion (note: usually such rumors are accompanied by pictures or videos), and the rate of a certain disease has spiked since the introduction of the COVID-19 vaccine.
KEY NARRATIVES

Keyword 6: COVID-19, COVID-19 vaccines, Fauci
Piyaoba.org is managed by the Chinese Digital Engagement Team from Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA), a nonprofit organization based in California. Our team is led by Chinese-language journalists and media experts. We also work with many independent writers, fact-checkers, and data scientists.

If you have any questions, please contact us through contact@piyaoba.org