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How dark corners collude: a study on an online Chinese alt-right community

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ABSTRACT

The rise of the 'alt-right' (alternative right) and their communications on the Internet are not unique to the West. This study follows a mixed-methods approach combining topic modeling, social network analysis, and discourse analysis to analyze the discursive and network structure of an online Chinese alt-right community on Weibo. We summarize the topics Chinese alt-right influencers discuss and examine how these topics are interrelated. We find that the Chinese alt-right discourse can be deemed as both an extension and localization of the global alt-right: they frequently discuss global alt-right issues and also hold alt-right ideologies on domestic issues. Meanwhile, influencers in the community are densely connected, suggesting a high level of coordination and cooperation. We particularly identify two discursive strategies that alt-right influencers employ to reproduce the transnational alt-right discourse, namely *invented common crisis of majority culture* and *transnational metaphor usage*. These findings provide insights into the transnational aspect of the rise of global alt-right.

The 'alt-right' (short for 'alternative right') movement has attracted significant attention in the 2010s, especially after the 2016 U.S. presidential election. While it is challenging to define the term alt-right, previous studies generally consider it as a radical subculture (Ganesh, 2020) based on the rejection of the liberal paradigm and identity-based rights (Nagle, 2017; Woods & Hahner, 2019). Members of the alt-right movement 'contempt' mainstream conservatism and believe that 'some people are inherently superior to others' (Lyons, 2017, p. 2), a standpoint that is not supported by mainstream conservatives. The alt-right movement rejects the value of marginalized social groups as well as the empowering efforts for their equal rights (Hawley, 2017). It is known for its support for white supremacy and hostility towards immigrants, Muslims, feminism, and political correctness. The Internet has played a crucial role in facilitating the development of the alt-right movement (Heikkilä, 2017; Nagle, 2017), with websites such as Breitbart and Infowars producing and circulating a large number of conspiracy theories, hate speech, and other types of alt-right content (Coll, 2018). Alt-right communities also have their

own social media platforms, such as Gab (Zannettou et al., 2018) and 4chan (Daniels, 2018). Mainstream social media platforms such as YouTube (Lewis, 2018) and Twitter (Berger, 2018) have contributed to the rise of 'microcelebrities' who reproduce alt-right discourse and build alternative communities. Studies of the alt-right in the Western context reveal that although different alt-right communities have different focuses, such as white nationalists, homophobes, Islamophobes, and misogynists, they are networked together on digital media platforms (Lewis, 2018).

Interestingly, although the alt-right seems to be a Western phenomenon, as it boasts about saving 'Western civilization' from the groups and ideas it rejects (Zuckerberg, 2018), similar online communities can also be found in non-Western contexts. The ideologies of Western alt-right can 'travel' to and be localized in other contexts, contributing to the development of a global alt-right (e.g., Thobani, 2019). In this study, we present the case of an alt-right community and discourse on one of China's major social media platforms, Weibo. We find that a group of Chinese Weibo users express ideas very similar to Western alt-rights, i.e., rejecting the value of others and ideas of liberalism and egalitarianism. They borrow (dis)information and conspiracy theories from the West, which are adapted and mixed with discussions on local issues targeting at minority and underprivileged groups in China.

We follow a mixed-methods approach combining topic modeling, social network analysis, and discourse analysis to examine the communication network and discourse structure of this Weibo-based alt-right community. In terms of content, we find that alt-right influencers on the Chinese social media platform discuss both global alt-right issues such as the refugee crisis and domestic issues related to minority groups such as the controversies over halal food regulations. They also connect local ideas such as Han chauvinism (the prejudice that the culture and way of life of the majority ethnic group Han are superior to the 55 ethnic minorities, see Leibold, 2010) to general alt-right ideologies. Islamophobia is a prominent issue in the alt-right discourse. In terms of network structure, the influencers' reposting network is densely connected though they focus on different topical areas, suggesting that the alt-right influencers coordinate and cooperate with each other to propagate alt-right discourse. In terms of discursive strategy, we characterize two strategies Chinese alt-right influencers employ to reproduce the transnational alt-right discourse, namely *invented common crisis of majority culture* and *transnational metaphor usage*. Notably, the discourse of the Chinese alt-right shows nationalistic tendencies by placing disempowered groups with marginalized social identities in confrontational positions against the Chinese state and people, and inviting the state to intervene, which could lead to strengthening the power of the authoritarian regime.

The theoretical contribution of this study is twofold. First, while previous studies on alt-rights primarily focus on Western contexts and single-country cases, we provide a valuable case for understanding the rise of the transnational alt-right. Second, this study complicates our understanding of online communities in China by investigating a largely unexplored dark corner. Scholars have paid heavy attention to how the Internet promotes liberal ideas and empowers activists in China (e.g., Yang, 2009). However, the Chinese Internet is fragmented and heterogeneous (Han, 2018). Digital technologies also enable other communities to recirculate their discourse, which might argue against liberal critics (e.g., Fang & Repnikova, 2018). Our case of a Chinese alt-right community provides an instantiation of this kind of online radical power.

The concept of alt-right in the global context

The term 'alt-right' originated in Western contexts. Ranging from 'extreme speech' (Deem, 2019, p. 3184) to 'a radical right digital culture' (Ganesh, 2020, p. 2), there is no consensus on its definition. It has been used interchangeably with 'far-right' and 'extreme right' in several previous studies (e.g., Crosset et al., 2018; Ganesh, 2020; Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2018) and is seen as connected to right-wing extremism (see Mudde, 1995). The narrowest definition conceptualizes the alt-right as people and culture advocating racism and white supremacy in the US (Berger, 2018; Hawley, 2017). However, this definition cannot be directly applied to non-Western contexts, where white supremacy is embedded in racial and ethnic discourses in a more complicated way (e.g., Cheng, 2011). For example, typical racial discourse in China would place white supremacy at the top, followed by Chinese and 'then the brown, the red, and the black' (Cheng, 2019, p. 164), and is connected to other social hierarchy-based or identity-related discourses in local contexts (Cheng, 2019, p. 241). Some scholars extend the definition to broadly include everything against the liberal movements, thus regarding the alt-right as communities 'based on a suspicion of progress and rejecting the liberal paradigm' (Nagle, 2017, p. 16). This definition could apply to transnational contexts but is challenging to operationalize. Hence, in this study, we follow this idea but adopt a more specific approach. We borrow from Heitmeyer's (2003) definition of extreme right, which is seen as a group with ideologies of inequality and the rejection of the value of others at its core. It should be emphasized that this rejection primarily refers to rejecting equal rights for groups with disadvantaged social identities, ranging from race, religion, and gender groups, which are heavily studied in the Western contexts, to ethnicity and general liberal groups, which are emerging in the Chinese context.

Therefore, we conceptualize the alt-right as a culture and ideology that opposes liberalism and egalitarianism and rejects the value of disadvantaged groups. Informed by both previous studies and data collected for this project, we specifically define the alt-right discourse in China as comprising the ideas of anti-feminism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, racism, and Han chauvinism in the Chinese context (Luqiu & Yang, 2019; Miao, 2020; Zhang, 2020). This definition has two major advantages. First, it aligns with previous Western-based studies and preserves the core ideas including white supremacy and the rejection of the liberal paradigm. Following a similar conceptualization approach, Wendling (2018) suggested that the alt-right is 'held together by what they oppose: feminism, Islam, the Black Lives Matter movement, political correctness, the fuzzy idea they call 'globalism', and establishment politics of both the left and the right' (p. 3). Second, this approach can also easily be applied to non-Western contexts with different emerging identity groups. It is also easier to operationalize than a broader, more general definition.

In addition, unlike the conventional view, which treats the alt-right as a political movement, in this project, we regard the alt-right as 'a site of cultural and subcultural engagement' (Miller-Idriss, 2018, p. 25). It is imperative to look at the cultural manifestation to analyze the alt-right in countries such as China, where alt-right communities are still in the early stages of their development, with discursive and cultural practices functioning as the preparation phase for further political engagement.

Online alt-right communities studies and methodological challenges

As suggested by scholars, the alt-right is primarily an online phenomenon, though it also organizes offline gatherings (Blodgett & Salter, 2018; Nagle, 2017; Wendling, 2018). Therefore, the research on the alt-right is mainly about its online communities. Despite significant public attention on alt-right since 2016, scholarly studies on online alt-right communities are still few in number. There are also obvious difficulties in studying these communities, such as lack of access. In general, there are two major lines of empirical research on online alt-right communities: (a) communication network analysis focusing on the interaction among alt-right actors and (b) content analysis trying to understand the discourse of the alt-right communities.

Network analysis usually looks at the interactions among the alt-right community members and their external relations with actors outside the community. An earlier study by Caiani and Wagemann (2009) compares the network structures of an Italian extreme right online community and a German one. Although their study does not use the term 'alt-right,' we could draw some insights from their approach and findings. They notice that the German network is denser and more centralized than the Italian one. The differences are mainly due to differences in political opportunities. A more recent network analysis reveals that the alt-right community in the U.S. is at the fringe of the overall network on YouTube but only a few clicks away from the mainstream channel clusters (Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2018). Hence, the recommendation algorithms of social media platforms might lead to the radicalization and facilitate the rise of alt-right communities. The role played by algorithms in the emergence of the alt-right is also discussed by Daniels (2018), who argues that the 'networked white rage' is 'algorithmically amplified, sped up, and circulated' among white ethno-nationalist groups and movements (p. 65).

Content and discourse analysis primarily synthesizes the themes of alt-right discourse as well as the discursive practices that alt-right members adopt. In a study on the Twitter alt-right community, Berger (2018) summarizes four themes of their discursive practices: support for Trump, support for white nationalism, opposition to immigration, and uses of trolling and harassment. Furthermore, Zannettou and colleagues (2018) notice that conspiracy theories and hate speech are also used in alt-right expressions. Lewis (2018) finds that the YouTube alt-right microcelebrity community promulgates the distrust of news media and raises concerns about the authenticity of the media. Focusing on the alt-right subreddit r/theredpill, Zuckerberg (2018) explains how this community 'use(s) the literature and history of ancient Greece and Rome to promote patriarchal and white supremacist ideology' (p. 3). Woods and Hahner (2019) note that Internet memes are one major mode of communication used by the alt-right community to promulgate their views. Borrowing from Foucault's arguments, Salazar (2018) summarizes that alt-right discourse is marked by three external procedures: prohibition, division, and will to truth.

Research questions and hypothesis

Most of the previous research on alt-right focuses on cases in Western contexts. Two recent exceptions are one study on how the Hindu nationalist movement in India and the alt-right movement in the US converge and mobilize a group of Hindu supporters of Trump (Thobani, 2019) and another on how Chinese netizens combine the logic of

racial nationalism and anti-Western Eurocentrism to denounce 'white left' in their discussions about refugees, Muslims, and other issues (Zhang, 2020). In this paper, we also focus on China, an authoritarian regime with few formal democratic institutions. Previous studies in Western contexts frequently discuss the interactions among political institutions, mass media, and social media (e.g., Reinemann et al., 2019). The Chinese case enables us to examine the rise of alt-right in a different setting.

We choose to focus on Weibo, a major social media platform in China with 222 million daily active users by the end of 2019.[1] Compared with the general internet users in China, Weibo users tend to be younger (more than half of them are under 25) and more urban (more than 30% are living in major cities in China),[2] which is a favorable condition for hosting discussions on social and transnational issues thanks to more knowledgeable users. Compared with more private platforms such as WeChat, Weibo is found to be more conducive to political expression (Stockmann et al., 2020). Previous research on Weibo suggests that the existence of censorship has not shut down all open debates on the platform, and there is a significant group of users who actively engage in discussions on non-domestic public issues, in part to circumvent the stricter censorship on domestic issues (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer, 2015). In addition, a diverse set of 'fragmented public sphere' and subculture groups have been identified on Weibo (Shao & Wang, 2017). Taken together, these factors make Weibo a likely place on the Chinese internet to facilitate political expressions with transnational perspectives and specific ideological orientations such as alt-right views.

Following the two major areas explored in previous studies, we propose the following research questions.

RQ1: What are the topics discussed by the alt-right community on Weibo?
RQ2: What is the community structure of the alt-right community on Weibo?

It should be noted that there is a lack of quantitative content analysis that provides more generalizability in previous research. The adoption of computational textual analysis techniques in this study may help with this by massively and systematically analyzing texts. In addition, the current exploratory project endeavors to combine both network and discourse perspectives to gain a comprehensive understanding of the Chinese alt-right community on Weibo.

Another focus of our exploratory study is to identify how the Western-originated alt-right discourse travels to the Chinese context. We categorize the topics into two groups: local and global ones. We are also interested in how local and global topics are connected. Therefore, we propose the following research question.

RQ3: How are the global issues reproduced and localized in the Chinse context?

Methods

Data

Our data collection took place in April 2019, and the process is shown in Figure 1. According to our definition of 'alt-right,' the key feature of an alt-right member is that he or she firmly rejects minority groups. Following previous studies (Berger, 2018;

Ferrara, 2017) and based on our pilot observations of alt-right discourse on Weibo since 2016, we generated a list of keywords which the alt-right communities use to refer to the groups they reject. These keywords carry negative connotations. For example, they often use 'feminist bitch (女权婊)' to refer to feminists.[3] We then searched each keyword by using Weibo's search function and identified candidate alt-right accounts. Next, only those with more than 2,000 followers were further considered, as we wanted to investigate influencers who best represent this community and have the greatest audiences. Finally, the two authors independently read the first page of the timeline for each account to check whether they could be classified as alt-right influencers: those with more than 10% of alt-right posts[4] on the first page of the timeline were labeled as alt-right influencers. Finally, 55 accounts that both researchers agreed to recognize as alt-right accounts were selected as influencers of the alt-right community.

A Python script based on the Selenium package[5] was used to gather posts appearing in the timelines of influencer accounts after 1 January 2015. Unlike Twitter, for each reposting post, Weibo displays the complete reposting path. Each post that appeared in the timeline could be decomposed into several reposting links and multiple segments of post.[6] Overall, 360,906 posts, 546,457 reposting links, and 909,520 segments of posts were collected. Five alt-right accounts were suspended or deleted during our data collection process, and their posts were not included in our analysis due to incompleteness.

Analytical procedures

To analyze the discourse of the alt-right communities, only those posts contributed (i.e., posted or reposted) by at least two alt-right influencers[7] were counted as alt-right posts.
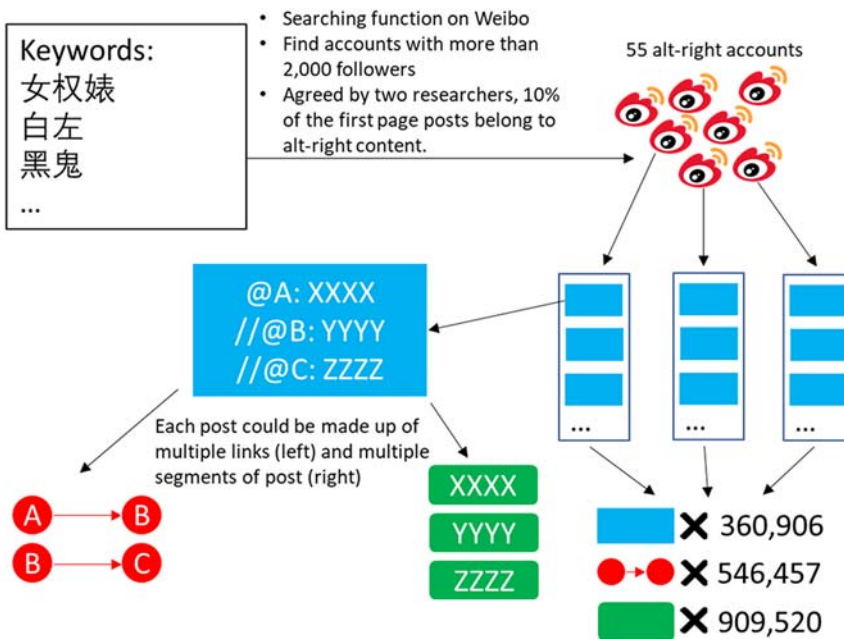

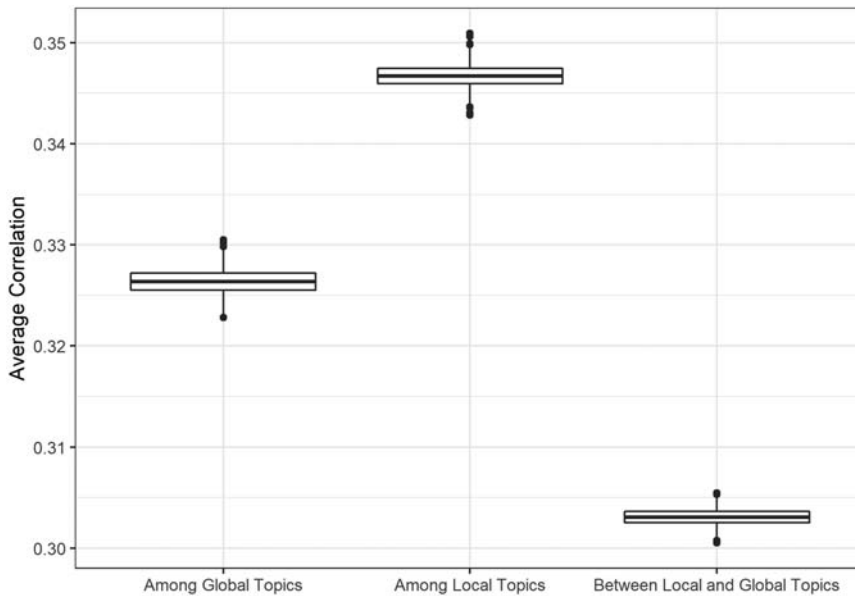**Figure 1.** The process of data collection.

Figure 2. The average topical cosine similarities among global topics, among local topics, and between local and global topics.

28,623 posts, or 7.9% of the total posts, were classified as alt-right posts. There were 97,709 segments in these alt-right posts.

We first used a topic model[8] (LDA, see Blei et al., 2003) on these segments to summarize the topics in Chinese alt-right discourse. We referred to multiple metrics to determine the number of topics and set it to eight (for details and a brief discussion on the amount of topics, see Appendix A.2). To construct the stability of the topics generated from LDA, we generated another five LDA solutions (for more discussion on the stability of LDA, see Koltcov et al., 2014). We then identified six topics that are stable out of the eight topics generated by LDA (see Appendix A for more details on how the six topics were generated).

To gain a deep understanding of the topics generated, for each topic, we picked 200 segments of post with the highest coefficient associated with the topic, which could best represent the content of one topic. By closely reading and interpreting these segments of post and posts that they belong to and checking top words of the topic (generated by LDA), we further synthesized the main themes for each topic.

One notable finding from topic modeling was that alt-right community substantively discussed both domestic alt-right topics and global ones. To understand how alt-right community bridged domestic and global issues to construct the transnational alt-right discourse, two types of practices—*networking* and *discursive* actions—were further examined. Firstly, we studied the coordination and cooperation among alt-right influencers with focuses on different topics by investigating their reposting network. Direct reposting behavior signaled not only the following relationship but also information exchange. Therefore, posts directly reposted from another influencer were included to denote the community network structure. In our dataset, 17,533 posts or 8.3% of the total reposted posts, were aggregated to build this network. Secondly, we analyzed how global and local

alt-right discursive components were bridged. We examined the topical change of each reposting behavior. Reposts that replied to a post discussing a global topic while itself focused on a domestic one (or vice versa) might suggest a discursive practice of connecting distinct discursive components. We further selected the most representative posts that demonstrated topical changes for further qualitative analyses (for details of selecting representative posts, see Appendix C). Specifically, we followed a thematic coding approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify the common strategies shared by the posts.

Findings

A parallel discursive structure: topic modeling and discourse analysis

To answer RQ1, Table 1 illustrates the results of the topic model, with each row showcasing top words of respective topic. We find that alt-right influencers substantively discuss both local (A, B and C) and global (D, E and F) issues.[9]

In the following sections, the topic relevance coefficient indicated in the bracket after the text denotes the extent to which the segment of post belongs to the particular topic. Those segments of post without this number suggest that they belong to a post in which a segment of post has a high coefficient for the particular topic.

Topic A: domestic ethnic and religious policies

The first two of the three local topics were concerning Islamophobia, suggesting that the othering prominently targeted at Muslims. Topic A discussed China's ethnic and religious policies, claiming that they unfairly favored ethnic minorities. For example, one influencer posted a sign 'What is an ethnic minority area? A country within a country? So, Han and dogs cannot enter?' ($\beta_A = .89$), criticizing the policies of ethnic areas that aim to respect the autonomy of ethnic minority groups. By framing the policies as biased, they interpreted the policies as a source of inequality and intended to trigger resentment by presenting Han as victims in their narratives. They portrayed a confrontational relationship between Han and other ethnic minorities, especially the two Muslim minorities—the Hui and the Uyghurs, as suggested by the top words. One post claimed that 'No ethnic policies, no ethnic issues. Fairly treating all citizens will naturally solve all the so-called ethnic issues' ($\beta_A = .93$). Framing their claims under the idea of fairness, they asked the government to intervene and change the status quo.

Table 1. Top words of the LDA topic model.

Topic	Top words	English translation
A. Domestic ethnic and religious policy	宗教, 穆斯林, 民族, 回族, 中国, 伊斯兰教, 国家, 伊斯兰, 文化, 中国	Religion, Muslim, ethnicity, Hui ethnicity, China, Islam, state, Islamic, culture, China
B. Islamic culture and custom	清真, 食品, 年, 工作, 月, 少数民族, 宁夏, 日, 建设, 来稿	Halal, food, year, work, month, minority ethnicity, Ningxia, day, construction, contribution
C. Domestic racism and anti-feminism	说, 没, 中国, 吃, 孩子, 想, 做, 里, 真的, 女人	Say, not, China, eat, kid, want, do, inside, real, woman
D. International immigration	年, 岁, 月, 新闻, 德国, 警方, 日, 英国, 发生, 警察	Year, age, month, news, Germany, police, day, UK, happen, policeman
E. European refugee crisis	难民, 德国, 移民, 穆斯林, 欧洲, 法国, 非法, 国家, 瑞典, 沙特	Refugee, Germany, immigrant, Muslim, Europe, France, illegal, state, Sweden, Saudi Arabia
F. US politics and racism	美国, 视频, 黑人, 拍, 总统, 民主党, 秒, 川普, 希拉里, 说	US, video, black (people), shoot, president, Democrat Party, seconds, Trump, Hillary, say

Topic B: Islamic culture and customs

Another anti-Muslim topic actively called for rejecting Islamic culture and customs. One prominent battlefield was Halal products. For example, an alt-right influencer posted a picture of Halal zone in a supermarket. One repost commented 'we have to fully boycott those markets with Halal zones' ($\beta_B = .82$), which was commented by another alt-right influencer that 'Now extreme Muslim has become increasingly scary. But 1.4 billion Chinese people will say no to them'. The conversation revealed that the alt-right community framed Muslims as threats to 'Chinese people' and appealed for undermining the religious power. Another exemplar post was questioning 'Why has Ningxia Museum's collection highlight changed from The Xixia Gilt Bronze Bull Statue to Ming Dynasty Quran? What's your intention to forget your ancestors?' ($\beta_B = .79$), implying that Islamic cultural artifacts were non-Chinese.

Topic C: domestic racism and anti-feminist idea

Topic C expressed local racism against black people and anti-feminist ideas. One prominent theme that repeatedly showed up and also linked these two together was the opposition against interracial marriage. One post used a detailed narrative:

> #Crying Flight# The man seated next me on the flight flies a lot and has spent five New Year's Eves changing planes in Qatar on his way back home. He said that every time he does this, he meets several Chinese women married to Africans and bringing their children back to China to visit their families. Once they find each other and swap stories, these women soon end up crying loudly in the cabin. Most of them were brought to Africa by blacks who went to Guangzhou on business. Once these women arrived in Africa, they could not go back. They suffered inhuman treatment (for example, one woman 'served' both her husband and his brother together) …

Another influencer commented on this post that 'at least this is better than giving birth to black bastards in China. I respect them!' ($\beta_C = .85$) This narrative was meant to show the ignorance of these women who chose interracial/cross-national marriage and illustrate the brutality of black men, which suggested xenophobia. The author also pointed out the location, Guangzhou, a city in southern China and home to Asia's largest African migrant population, to support the domestic anti-immigration idea. Finally, the representation of the ignorant and naïve women in the narrative coincided with their personal attacks against some feminists who supported freedom of marriage.

Another notable theme discussed in this topic was that some influencers regarded feminists as opponents of China's national interests. One reposted a news article by Chinese official media which claimed India and US to be among top dangerous countries for female, and commented that 'why don't feminists discuss this? Because they cannot criticize China, so they keep silent, right?' ($\beta_C = .87$) They used the strategy of labeling feminists as anti-China to attack them.

Topic D: international immigration issues

Again, two of the three global topics were also about Muslims, further accentuating the prominent role of Islamophobia in the alt-right community. In topic D, the alt-right community spread and discussed international news about terrorist attacks and cases related to immigrants and especially Muslims. For example, one influencer posted, '#Gemany# A Moroccan man raped a 90-year-old woman.' ($\beta_D = .90$). By attributing

violent cases across the globe to Islamic communities, alt-right influencers trigger fear towards this group, which is also a strategy commonly seen in Western alt-right communities.

Topic E: European refugee crisis

A related but slightly different topic was the refugee issue. Posts about this topic heavily cited news on the European refugee crisis and emphasized the negative impacts of the refugees on local societies. For instance, one post claimed that 'along with the end of war, IS terrorist started to travel back to Germany. At least 50 IS bitches with German nationalities have returned to Germany from Syria and Iraq, threatening the local security.' ($\beta_E = .89$) Meanwhile, they highlighted that refugees were the burden for society. One influencer cited a news article claiming that there were 440,000 refugees with mental illness, and another influencer reposted it with the comment 'There were 1.2 million refugees in total (so 1/3 with mental illness)' ($\beta_E = .87$).

Topic F: U.S. politics and racism

This topic directly discussed US politics and adapted several alt-right statements from the U.S. alt-right movements (for example, several top words related to the US presidential election). Notably, they paid close attention to delegitimizing the Western liberal media. One post claimed that '#US# CNN is truly a garbage left-wing media. It should be shut-down ASAP,' which was reposted by another influencer commenting that 'the rating now was just 1/3 of FOX. CNN worked so hard to achieve this … ' ($\beta_F = .91$)

Some posts recirculated conspiracy theories regarding U.S. politics, especially those criticizing the Democratic Party. One claimed that 'without electoral college, Democrats could win all elections by cheating in California' ($\beta_F = .90$). They loathed the Democratic Party's support for diversity. One post attached an image of the Democratic Congresspersons with the comment 'these red and green monsters are now US legislators. Is US really going to perish?' ($\beta_F = .86$). Another exemplar post directly used racist language, 'Black Democratic politicians all have rabies' ($\beta_F = .85$), implying that they were abnormal and incapable compared with others.

Coordination and cooperation among community members: a social network analysis

How often and widely did the alt-right influencers interact with each other, given that alt-right influencers might have diverse topical focuses – particularly some might discuss local issues and others might concentrate on global topics? To answer RQ2, by aggregating the direct reposting relationships among alt-right influencers, a network showcasing the interactions was created and shown in Figure 3. Additionally, to understand the topical focus of each account, we presented the *local-global index* (indicated by the color of nodes in Figure 3) by calculating the mean topical values of all alt-right post segments appearing on the timeline of each account and subtracting the sum of the values for three global topics from the sum of values for three local topics. An account high on the local-global index suggested that it was more likely to focus on local alt-right issues, while one low on the index was more likely to focus on global ones.

There were 697 edges among 50 influencers, with a density of 0.28 in the overall network. Compared with densities of extreme right networks in previous studies (e.g., in Caiani & Wagemann, 2009, two networks with densities of 0.08 and 0.07), the density here was high. The number of weakly connected components[10] was one, and the number of strongly connected components was two (one giant component and one node). These metrics suggested that a path existed between almost any two nodes. The average in-degree (and out-degree) of each node was 13.94, which suggested that each node was reposted by (and reposted) other 14 nodes on average. These measures all suggested that while the influencers might have different topical focuses, they frequently interacted with each other. As suggested by the strongly interconnected network rather than a fragmented one, these influencers formed a community rather than separate collectives focusing on distinct topics. Further statistical analyses (see Appendix B) showed that while the community members somewhat aggregate according to their topical focuses, there was no significant asymmetry on reposting between users with local focuses and those of global ones.

Reproducing a transnational discourse: discourse analysis on posts with topical changes

From the analyses of topic modeling, we see that some posts endeavored to create fusions between local and global issues (e.g., Crying Flight post in Topic C). We believe that the
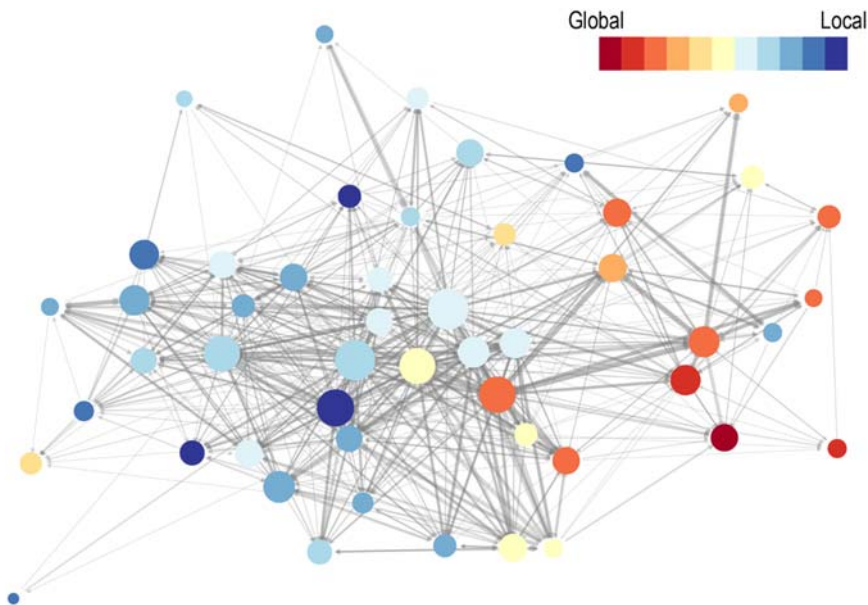

Figure 3. Reposting network among alt-right influencers.

Note: Each node represents an influencer in the alt-right community. The directed edge from A to B denotes that Account A reposted content generated by Account B. The width of the edge illustrates the frequency of this reposting behavior. The size of the node demonstrates the weighted in-degree centrality, which measures the importance of this account as an information source. The color of node refers to local-global index. For ethical reasons, we do not show the usernames of the nodes here.

reposting links that shifted the topic away from that of the original content revealed the most about the discursive trails of reconstructing the transnational alt-right discourse. Relying on measures drawn from the topic modeling results, we identified the posts that may best represent this kind of discursive practice (see Appendix C for details), which were further qualitatively analyzed to answer RQ3. There were two major types of actions identified in posts with considerable topical change.

Invented common crisis of majority culture

Ganesh (2020) argues that members of the alt-right have invented an artificial crisis of white culture and aspire to 'take back' their societies. We find that alt-right posts on Weibo adopt a very similar strategy by claiming that both the majority culture in the West and in China are in crisis due to the threats from minority groups. In the context of our case, the majority culture refers to the culture of Han ethnicity and atheism, and the corresponding major threat regarded by the alt-right community are Muslims and Islam. There were two major sub-themes in this discursive strategy. First, community members attempted to demonstrate that crisis happened in both China and other countries. For example, in 2017, one post discussed the 2017 Silk Road International Expo (held in Shaanxi, China) and highlighted that one county promoted abundant Halal vegetarian food. It used the hashtag 'flooding of Halal items.' One repost added that 'German milk is now Halal as well' with a picture showing a carton of milk made in Germany and with Halal sign ($SHIFTlocalTOglobal$[11] = .41). This statement constructed the image that both countries suffered the same problem at the hands of similar groups of people, which built an image of a shared crisis.

Second, there were posts claiming that local and global minority groups have certain connections and therefore should be labeled as a common target. For instance, one post discussed the news that 'an Irish female tourist was caught and gang-raped by Algerian men In Prague.' One repost commented, 'again, Arabs from North Africa. They are distant relatives of some ethnic groups in China,' referring to the Hui and the Uyghurs ($SHIFTglobalTolocal$ = .51). This post implied that local and global 'enemies' have close relationships and posed a threat to the global society.

Transnational metaphor usage

The second practice found in topical change posts was using metaphors originating from local (global) contexts to refer to subjects in global (local) contexts. The primary purpose of this strategy was to help the audiences unfamiliar with the original contexts to understand the post and be amused by it. For example, a post discussed the news that 'in #UK#, Karam Majdi, an adult Egyptian male, who claimed to be a 'Syrian child', entered the country as a 'minor refugee' and raped a 14-year-old girl. Judge Shani Barnes sentenced him to 3.5 years in prison.' Another user reposted this news and claimed that '[The judge] dared to sentence this foreign lord (洋大人) for 3.5 years in jail. It is already a lot' ($SHIFTglobalTolocal$ = .65). The Chinese term 'foreign lord' was coined during the Qing Dynasty to sarcastically refer to foreign powerful people who enjoyed privileges, especially after China was invaded by Western countries. Using this local metaphor, the comment tried to frame refugees as a privileged population in the UK who enjoyed special treatment in the judicial system. It is a widely known metaphor in China and could implicitly evoke the audiences' resentment toward this court decision. Similar

metaphors were frequently seen in posts that linked local and global topics. They helped Chinese users better understand and relate to the context.

Conclusion and discussion

Combining computational text analysis, network analysis, and discourse analysis, this study investigates the discourse and network structure of the Chinese alt-right community on Weibo. We particularly examine the strategies that reproduce and localize the alt-right transnational discourse, as we believe that a non-Western context such as China provides important insights into the transnational aspect of the global alt-right.

On the one hand, our analyses show similarities and connections between Western and Chinese alt-right discourses. Topic modeling results indicate that alt-right influencers on Weibo heavily discuss issues that also concern the global alt-right, such as the European refugee crisis, terrorist attacks by ISIS, and US politics. The globally prominent problem of Islamophobia is especially at the center of the discourses. On the other hand, Chinese alt-right influencers also localize alt-right discourse and extend it to domestic issues, such as the anti-Hui ideas and China's domestic policies that they believe favor ethnic minorities.

Meanwhile, the community structure and interaction patterns of Chinese alt-right influencers are also different from their Western counterparts. Alt-right accounts on Weibo densely connect with and repost content from each other despite the fact that there is a certain level of topical segregation. While we have compiled our list of alt-right accounts by searching different keywords, surprisingly, the reposting network is not fragmented, which suggests that the alt-right influencers coordinate and cooperate with each other to recirculate alt-right discourse. Chinese alt-right influencers also pursue discursive practices to bridge different discursive components. By closely reading texts on separate topics, we find that alt-right ideas belonging to distinct topics usually interconnect with and support each other. We can see how anti-feminist ideas support racist posts. Different topics share many common claims and ideological grounds. By examining the topical change and discursive strategies in reposting behaviors, we also find that Chinese alt-rights reproduce the transnational alt-right discourse by constructing a shared crisis of majority culture and using local metaphors to explain global issues.

Furthermore, we notice a special feature that warrants our attention – the Chinese alt-right discourse used nationalistic arguments to support their appeals. The alt-right influencers treat those supporting liberal ideologies and domestic minority groups (e.g., the Muslim community, feminists, ethnic minorities) as non-Chinese and threatening China's national identity. They also explicitly call on the state to intervene in relevant fields and undermine the power of these civic groups.

This study answers to the call for more comparative research into far-right ideologies. As argued by Reinemann et al. (2019) in their work on a related topic—populism, differences 'with respect to the historical development … and their electoral outcomes' in various regimes 'constitute the invaluable variance that will enable us to identify the situational and structural factors that contribute to the rise and fall of populism' (p. 2). In the case of China, a country with no democratic electoral system or politicians endorsing alt-right views, we still see the emergence of such ideology. It shows the power

of social media and places these platforms, rather than formal political institutions, at the center of facilitating extreme ideologies.

The alt-right community in China also suggests that the rise of the alt-right is not conditional on one particular culture. Different social and cultural contexts have distinct versions of rejected 'others,' such as Muslims in India (Thobani, 2019) and ethnic minorities in China discussed in our case. These domestic issues related to marginalized and under-privileged groups usually have a long history before the rise of global alt-right (for the issue of ethnic minorities in China, see Leibold, 2010). When the global discourse of the alt-right emerges, these domestic ideologies collude with their global counterparts and produce a transnational alt-right discourse. As the existence of minorities is almost ubiquitous in modern societies, we believe that this logic might also apply to other under-studied contexts. The subculture of alt-right can make use of digital channels to find the audiences who have adopted the positions of Western alt-right on global social issues (such as the European refugee crisis), rejected the value of domestic minorities, and reproduced the linkages between these two discursive components. This helps partly explain the rise of the global alt-right phenomenon.

The findings also bring new insights into Chinese Internet research. By discovering the discursive and network structure of a radical community, we echo the call of treating the Chinese Internet as a heterogeneous contesting sphere rather a homogeneous liberating space (Han, 2018). Our case provides an example of how the Internet offers a site for one particular community to fight against other groups who endeavor to utilize the Internet as an instrument for promoting liberation and democratization. By comparing them with other radical communities in future studies, we can depict a more comprehensive picture of the role played by the Internet in an authoritarian regime.

This study has several limitations, which leave room for future research. First, we start from a concept originating from the Western academic context, which might not reflect the actual identification of these 'alt-right' influencers. The next step would be to investigate how they understand their own identities by further analyzing their backgrounds and interactions with other actors (Crosset et al., 2018). Second, for the convenience of computation, we separated the discourse into distinct topics and dichotomized them into two clusters. We notice that the method of isolating discursive components brings parsimony but conceals the complexity of the discourse. Here, we fix this problem by further conducting qualitative analysis. Future research could develop computational methods that can balance parsimony and complexity. Scholars could also develop more in-depth qualitative analysis to complement what we are not able to do in our mixed-methods approach. Finally, this study showcases the connections between the Western alt-right community and the Chinese one. Although we can observe the influence of the Western alt-right discourse on this Chinese community, any causal relationship of these two is not fully established by the current research design. Future studies could further provide more empirical evidence to substantiate this relationship, which can help us understand the mechanisms and dynamics that account for the rise of global alt-right.

Notes

1. See http://ir.weibo.com/static-files/9537b1c6-da60-4bd4-8c66-9393d72ca7a3.

2. See https://www.jiguang.cn/reports/381 (in Chinese).
3. These keywords include 'feminist bitch' (女权婊), 'feminist fist' (女拳), 'feminist dog' (女犬), 'feminist' (女权分子), 'pastoral feminism' (田园女权), 'Black Lives Are Expensive' (黑命贵), 'n****r' (黑鬼), 'halal' (清真), 'White Left' (白左), and 'Leftard' (左棍), which assign negative connotations to feminists, black people, ethnic minorities, Muslims, and liberals who support the marginalized groups.
4. We used our definition of 'alt-right,' discussed in the literature section, to determine whether a post qualified as alt-right (whether it rejects the value of others). Due to the limited number of accounts we searched, we did not follow a conventional content analysis procedure but used a strict standard: only accounts that both researchers agreed to include were further studied.
5. We did not use Weibo API because it imposed restrictions on data collection. The Selenium package mimicked browsing behaviors of ordinary users. In this study, posts we gathered were public, accessible to any ordinary Weibo user.
6. A post originating from Account A reposted by Account B could also appear on the timeline of Account C who further reposts from Account B (C → B → A). The post on the timeline of C could be decomposed into two reposting links (C → B and B → A) and three segments of post (original post by A, repost by B, and repost by C).
7. While posts engaged by only one influencer might also be alt-right posts, we believe those with two or more influencers engaged should better represent the alt-right discourse in this community.
8. As an exploratory method which summarizes the topics frequently appearing in texts, LDA is a common topic model widely used by computational social scientists. The model generates each topic with a list of words and their coefficients associated with the topic so that this structure of topics conforms to certain statistical distributions. After creating the model, we can calculate the associations of each text with each topic.
9. According to the analyses of topic modeling, Topics A, B, and C were categorized as domestic topics and Topics D, E, and F were categorized as global ones, which met the face values of two clusters. We also conducted a test to further support this categorization: topics within the same group should have a higher level of similarity, which can be characterized by the measure of topical cosine similarity. By generating 1,000 subsets of bootstrapped samples from the overall posts, we found that the average cosine similarities between topics in the same topical cluster were significantly higher than the cosine similarities of two topics from different clusters (similarities among local topics vs. similarities between local and global topics: $p < .001$; similarities among global topics vs. similarities between local and global topics: $p < .001$). This result further provides confidence in our topic models and categorization (see Figure 2).
10. A weakly connected component is a subgraph of the overall graph within which any two nodes have a path between them, ignoring the directions of edges. A strongly connected component is a subgraph of the overall graph within which any two nodes can reach each other, considering the directions of edges.
11. *SHIFTlocalTOglobal* and *SHIFTglobalTOlocal* were measures we used to identify topical transitions (from a local topic to a global one, or from a global topic to a local one), which were built upon results of the topic model. The number here was associated with one segment of the post with a significant topical transition. The whole post including that segment was selected for qualitative analysis. For more details regarding these measures, see Appendix C.

Acknowledgements

and Media in Democracies and Dictatorships", which was sponsored by the Center for Media at Risk at the Annenberg School for Communication.

Disclosure statement

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