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Mengyang Zhao & Kecheng Fang

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Extending the research on digital China: the transnational lens

Mengyang Zhao [a] and Kecheng Fang [b]

aUniversity of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA; bThe Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China

ABSTRACT

The goal of this article is to reflect on and challenge some key presumptions in the existing research on digital China, and to critically extend this line of inquiry by engaging with the transnational perspective. We argue that the transnational lens, while acknowledging the vital role of the state, can reveal a more diverse set of actors and their dynamics. Theoretically, we borrow from critical studies that conceptualize and repackage Chineseness as Sinophone communities and expression, a more progressive, inclusive, and grounded perspective. To substantiate our arguments, we introduce two cases derived from our own empirical studies: the multi-faceted border transgression of platform game workers, as well as the transnational production and boomerang diffusion of disinformation to undergird the less visible service and content supply chain. We propose that future research should recenter the fluid and intersectional identities of actors involved in the digital presumption, and utilize a multi-platform and relational approach to shed light on the dynamic evolution of transnationalism.

Introduction

In this article, we discuss the caveats, challenges, and potentials of digital China research, and call for more theoretical and empirical exploration of the transnational dimension of digital China, with a particular emphasis on the modes of inquiries that are bottom-up, fluid, intersectional, and multi-platform, which could enrich and supplement the currently dominating state-centered approach gravitating toward identifying China's global digital strategy. In the past decade, the emerging field of global China studies that situates China in the global political economy has already begun to approach 'China' as a form of Sinophone, or Sinitic language speaking sociality that is imbricated in cultural and political life and imaginaries beyond predetermined national borders (Coates, 2017; Lee, 2018, 2022; Wang, 2022; Zhang, 2021). Inspired by this approach, we argue that digital China can no longer be simply identified as a bounded object of analysis standing in antithetical opposition to the digital politics of the West. Even seemingly idiosyncratic, Chinese-specific digital practices have a complex transnational generative process behind

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them. As platform capitalism matures and the supply chain crisis deepens in the back-drop of the pandemic and war, those previously hidden transnational economic and social nexuses surface more thoroughly, providing an opportunity to reimagine and rein-terpret the terrain of digital China.

To advance this ongoing dialogue, we present two empirical examples drawn from our own studies on platform digital labor (Zhao, 2021a) and the transnational flow of disin-formation and conspiracy theories (Yang & Fang, 2021) to highlight the relevance and urgency of a renewed transnational approach. The two examples respectively entail the supply and consumption of digital service and content, tangibly speaking to the multi-plicity and intersectionality of actors' identities in transnational interactions, as well as the bottom-up and decentered nature of communicative patterns. While the coercive power of the state remains strong and cannot be dismissed, we seek to give equal promi-nence to the preferences and behaviors of ordinary individuals and organizations based on a shared linguistic culture and argue that these grassroots efforts are equally important mechanisms for shaping and sustaining transnational inequalities. In fact, rather than hiding the power of the state in the background, the new perspective makes it more vis-ible, as we can analyze how grassroots actors' function under and interact with the authoritarian state. We conclude our article by suggesting some theoretical and meth-odological strategies amid dissolving and reconfigured digital boundaries, and the poten-tial of our approaches to foster interdisciplinary dialogues with disinformation studies, critical algorithm studies and digital labor debates.

What is being transgressed in transnational digital China

Before offering a critique of the current studies on digital China, we first differentiate three concepts: international, transnational, and global. As Mato (1997) suggests, *inter-national* focuses on relations maintained between governments or their agencies, while *transnational* highlights relations 'between two or more social subjects from two or more state-nations when at least one of these subjects is not an agent of a government or intergovernmental organization' (p. 171). Similarly, historians argue that the term *transnational* 'took root in the study of migration, business, crime, and the dissemination of scientific knowledge' (Clavin, 2010, p. 625), all of which transcend the intergovern-mental dimension implied by *international*. Global is closely associated with the globa-lization paradigm, which emphasizes the world's growing interconnectedness, often in terms of trade (Kiely, 2005). In this study, we advocate for the *transnational* lens because it considers a diverse set of actors and potentialities for multidirectional reverberations, rather than being confined to the study of the unidirectional impact of China's state-sponsored initiatives, most notably the export of China's digital infrastructure to other developing nations, which is key to the ambitious Digital Silk Road initiative, as well as the cultural and political challenges it encounters (Keane & Yu, 2019; Shen, 2018). Another related strand of literature concerns the Chinese government's 'soft power' cam-paigns, including the purchase of Western media outlets and advertising space (Lim & Bergin, 2018), the establishment of official social media accounts (Huang & Wang, 2019) and the possible deployment of propaganda automation (Bolsover & Howard, 2019). That is, these digital dynamics have been interpreted primarily as a state-driven and state-defined global threat external to liberal democratic institutions.

For the lens of bottom-up non-state actions, earlier studies have adopted guerilla methods to analyze the grassroots-led transnational public sphere facilitated by the internet (Yang, 2003), and have analyzed the local-global dynamic that influenced participation and activism, though often following a single platform approach (e.g., Chapters 8–11 in Chen & Reese, 2015). However, such a strand of literature gradually waned as Chinese cyberspace got increasingly scrutinized and censored. Consequently, the dominant body of literature is contextualized in the consolidation of China's 'Great Firewall' and examines Chinese citizens' negotiation with the censorship regime.

In the last few years, the tide began to turn around, as a handful of interdisciplinary China studies have spearheaded an investigation of the transnational digital interactions and resistance of grassroots communities. For example, Bao (2020) documents the courageous processes through which Chinese and African filmmakers and activists collaborate transnationally in queer video activism. Zhao's (2021b) study explores Chinese international students' labor practices in *Daigou* as transnational trading activity, delineating their careful boundary work navigating the WeChat platform. Lin's (2021) work examines the opposite circuits of work and control, whose main protagonist includes American contract workers hired by Chinese online educational firms. Wang (2022) offers a detailed foray into the creative digital practices of Chinese-speaking Muslims during the pandemic, including the use of transnational connections to construct the Islamic counterpublic.

In this conceptual piece, we build on this nascent line of scholarship to examine and extend the scope and narrative of digital China research. First, we argue that digital China research too often conceptualizes China's digital space as a well-defined political and economic field with clear boundaries, tightly delineated by the Great Firewall. This tendency is also closely tied to trends in China's digital capitalism over the last decade, as the authoritarian state has gradually blocked the Silicon Valley-dominated international platform universe. Simultaneously, the Chinese digital sphere seems to have metamorphosed into a self-contained parallel universe with novel models of data extractivism (Craig et al., 2021). The most salient case of transborder digital participation in the English language sphere is multiple waves of pro-state trolling campaigns that are emblematic of the rising tide of cyber nationalism (Fang & Repnikova, 2018). These empirical analyses deepen our understanding of the idiosyncratic topology, reformation, and user subjectivity of the digital space in China, but also unwittingly reinforce the 'Chinese internet vs. the rest of the world' dichotomy. We try to unsettle such binary in this paper by borrowing from critical and comparative literature studies that conceptualize and repackage Chinese-ness as Sinophone, or Sinitic-language-speaking communities and cultures where Sinitic languages are either forcefully imposed or willingly adopted (Chiang, 2014; Coates, 2017; Shi, 2021; Shih et al., 2013). Sinophone emphasizes the dominant language involved in social interactions regardless of interlocutors' citizenship, geolocation, political values, or ethnicity, which distinguishes itself from earlier conservative notions such as Cultural China advocating the preservation of Confucius values within the Chinese diaspora. Sinophone sheds light on marginality, intersectionality, and non-conformity (Shih, 2010), forming a much more progressive, inclusive, and fluid approach that offers unique interpretations of what it means to be transnational and transborder in the digital age. More specifically, this approach uncovers the inequalities, exploitation, and other enduring power dynamics in the transnational field from a

liberal and critical perspective. It also represents a more balanced viewpoint incorporating both the political and cultural, macro and micro dimensions of digital interaction. Transnational, in this sense, includes not only the transgression of the Chinese censorship machine, which itself is more localized than previously imagined (Wu & Li, 2021), but also the dual process of constructing and deconstructing the boundary of the Chinese digital sphere. While the boundaries of state and citizenship are blurred and transgressed, what is simultaneously accentuated are the cultural contexts, especially the linguistic modes of communication, shared by communities that ostensibly belong to different political entities.

Secondly, digital China studies readily undergird Chinese nationality as a master framework in analyzing digital interactions, a perspective that risks trivializing the construction and impact of unsettled and intersectional identities. Massive international migration is one major factor to disturb the citizenship framework, as the vast majority of the world's more than 60 million overseas Chinese live outside of China's censorship regime. Previous communication studies have examined the Chinese diaspora's digital practices, which impact their local placemaking, social network, and entrepreneurship (Chen & Wellman, 2009; Zhao, 2021). Sinophone and diaspora studies have also long noted that diasporas are simultaneously immigrants or racial minorities within other political entities (Shih, 2010), whose processes of non/assimilation and local socio-political participation in turn complicated their intersectional and unsettled identities. To take the example of anti-violence mobilization by Chinese international students in Chicago in 2021 (Dosani, 2022), the organizing, which uses many digital means, ought to be contextualized in the dual identity of being international students and Asian minorities mired in the enduring racial triangle of American politics. A burgeoning line of scholarship has revealed the complex intertwining between Chinese diaspora identities and political practices such as voting, protesting and the consumption of ethnic news (Huang, 2021; Zhang, 2021; Zhao, 2021b), and it is necessary to expand such investigation into the realm of digital behaviors that benefit tremendously from the affordance of smartphones and digital platforms. Conversely, there are non-Chinese nationals and ethnic minorities who are subject to the operating logics of Chinese digital politics, either due to physical presence in the country or entanglement with its digital infrastructure and policy regime. For instance, Beijing's crackdown on private tutoring in the summer of 2021 has a profound spillover effect on international platform tutors, who were often marginalized in their local labor market due to discriminatory hiring and care work responsibilities (Lin, 2021). Overall, the network of interactions and transactions woven by these people's social and economic ties is already highly transnational in nature.

Third, previous studies depict a unidirectional and linear flow of infrastructure and soft power, without delving deeper into the possible interplay and mutual permeation between the Chinese and the global digital space. The rise of TikTok and the political controversy it stirred masks the fact that platform behemoths and venture capitalists manage financial risks by mutual investment and acquisition across national borders. For instance, public sentiments greatly downplay the extent to which Chinese firms are invested in American venture capital and vice versa, a defining theme that contributed to the success of China's internet giants. Additionally, despite the rising tide of tech nationalism, the structure of platform capitalism increasingly resembles each

other across countries in terms of algorithms, monopolies, surveillance, supply chain structure, and modes of exploitation during the past decade, paving ways for more cross border and comparative studies (Jones, 2021; Van Doorn & Chen, 2021; Yang, 2021). The online 'Anti-996 campaign,' named after the 9 am – 9 pm shifts six days a week commonly seen in many of China's tech giants, and its transnational reverberation constitutes one of the most archetypical cases of stirring domestic public opinion and gaining support from international counterparts (Lin, 2020). The detention of delivery workers' advocate Mengzhu in early 2021 also triggered an international solidarity campaign by precarious workers from a dozen countries.[1] Behind such solidarity movements are the converging working conditions of digital laborers, which makes it easier to interact and unite across political and ethnic cleavages and gives new theoretical and practical significance to the study of transnational digital China.

Lastly, studies of digital China skew toward a few leading platforms, from middle-class and intellectual-leaning Weibo and Zhihu to grassroots-leaning Kuaishou and Douyin. We argue in this piece that to delineate the transnational dynamics of digital interactions, it is necessary to transcend the single platform approach (Ibert et al., 2021) to collectively include other virtual sites that are lesser known in the English-speaking academia but are essential in unveiling the digital ecology in which people are embedded. The need for a multi-sited, relational strategy intensifies as the digital domain evolves on a global scale.

Therefore, while it is true that China's all-encompassing censorship regime greatly impedes the flow of information across borders, there are other virtual, physical, and spatial-geographical connections behind the gulf of digital space. In this article, we contest the above-mentioned premises of a unidirectional, unifying, and flat digital China by unveiling the less visible players and mechanisms in transnational dynamics. We define transnational digital China as the digitally mediated trans-territorial interactions among two or more social subjects, at least one of which is non-governmental, and at least one of which is from the Sinitic language speaking communities and cultures.

In the following sections, we use two examples drawn from our own field research to illustrate the nuances of transnational and transborder digital chains. We choose these two cases because they testify to the diverse channels, types, and potential of digital transnational interactions from different sides, and also complicate the positive connotation of civic engagement by highlighting its entanglement with economic extraction and political authority. The first case depicts the lived experiences of video game workers who conduct transnational transactions with both domestic and diaspora gamers to shed light on the vagueness of 'China' and 'Chineseness' in the realm of digital gaming. Video gaming is one of the most border-spanning mediums in digital culture, and the transnational interactions between game workers and customers can further facilitate our imagination of the bonding possibilities through other mediums. In the second example, we delineate the transnational production and dissemination of disinformation, which reveals its boomerang effect on the Chinese diaspora and broader Western politics, as well as the need to recognize the fluid and intersectional identities of actors involved in the process. Furthermore, both the examples of game workers and disinformation demonstrate the inescapable transnational properties of the service supply chain, underpinned and stitched together by the resilient Sinophone sociality. Our emphasis on economic dimensions validates the structural underpinnings of Sinophone sociality and the patterns of class inequality that fuel its unabated growth and dissemination. They also reveal

important transnational connections through economic mechanisms. We identified these issues through our own observations as a gamer and as a social media content creator, and recruited subjects in respective communities and platforms, such as gaming service platforms, cybercafes, group chats, and offline gatherings of content creators.

Multi-faceted border transgression of platform game workers

This section employs the example of Chinese on-demand video game workers, whose labor interrogates and complicates the landscape of networked China. For at least two decades, transgressing various network infrastructures and policy restrictions to play on overseas gaming platforms constitutes a daily gaming practice for Chinese-speaking players. For example, *League of Legends* has many Chinese players on its Japanese servers, at one point far exceeding the number of ethnically Japanese players. The governmental crackdown on minor gaming since mid-2021 further encouraged the use of boosters and VPNs to connect with foreign servers. These gaming practices that cut through and blur digital borders have also influenced the forms of organization and development of productive gameplay. In particular, workers who depend on gaming for a living would stand a good chance of connecting with international gaming servers and clients.

Previous studies and public discourses of Chinese game workers tend to revolve around digital laborers engaged in gaming currency trading for real money, a.k.a. gold farmers, emphasizing their racialized image of being exploited by Chinese studios and Western players, a typical portrait of the reterritorization of global capital (Liboriussen, 2016). Yet, scant attention has been paid to the subsequent increase of service-oriented work in the video game industry (Dubois & Weststar, 2021), under which in-game equipment trading gradually expands and evolves into the deep extraction of emotional and cognitive labor through gameplay, absorbing more women into the online workforce. The global rise of game live streaming, for example, is archetypical of this commodification of in-game interactions (Taylor, 2018).

One of the authors' field research focuses on the history and revitalization of the Chinese platform gaming economy, which involves workers who make a living by playing online games for or with customers on various platforms. The author conducted virtual and onsite fieldwork from 2019 to 2022, revealing the prevalence of transnational ties and interactions. To be more specific, many of today's game workers serve the Chinese-speaking population living abroad, or players who are in China but play on non-mainland China game servers.

Take the story of May, an undergraduate student from Guangzhou as an example. To supplement her university expenses, May provides game-boosting services at *Idle Fish* and *Zhuanzhuan*, the two leading online marketplaces for used and virtual items in China. Her main work involves bulk creating, enhancing, and transferring non-Chinese gaming accounts to middle-class clients who pay to outsource the monotonous labor of progression in online games, often termed as leveling up. Navigating through multiple digital borders on a daily basis, May has a good understanding of the unique features of each gaming server, as well as the relevant policies and regulations that might impact her income.

> Most of my clients are domestic and diaspora Chinese. There are so many Chinese players on the Japanese and Korean servers. If the gamer resides in mainland China, then a VPN is

required. Many Chinese living in Korea buy my accounts. The Korean server has stricter regulations, requiring everyone to register their ID and phone number. Failing to comply with the regulation would result in the account being frozen. Since the likelihood of account suspension is high, I lowered my price to 60–100 yuan per account. (Interview, October 2021)

May decided to sell game accounts on foreign servers because, in general, regulations on overseas servers are much more relaxed than on Chinese ones and the same game is often available on overseas servers much earlier. For example, for *Teamfight Tactics*, the overseas server went live more than a year before the launch in China, and the former's data could not be synchronized back to the latter, forcing many Chinese gamers to remain on a foreign server even after the domestic launch. Players also 'migrate' to servers in other countries for strategic purposes. With fewer players on the Japanese and Korean servers, the competition is not as fierce as it is in China, motivating players to create additional avatars to get a better ranking for the same level of gaming skill. This also constitutes a major reason why May sells Japanese and Korean accounts, as it is less time-consuming for her to get high-ranking accounts.

Many free tutorials for registering and using foreign game servers can be spotted on various Chinese social media outlets, which greatly reduces the knowledge cost of crossing virtual borders for gamers, especially those with language barriers. The fieldwork also exposed at least a dozen Chinese language trading platforms that specialize in foreign servers, confirming the platform affordance and resilient social demands for cross-border gaming.

May's example indicates that transnational interactions lie not only in the crossing and blurring of players' cultural identities in virtual terrain, but also in the economic transactions between Chinese game workers and transnational customers. Such transnational dynamics are even more evident for game companions, workers who play team-based online games with one or more clients and get paid for helping clients level up quickly, providing gaming skill training, or simply offering emotional support throughout the course of the game.

Compared to game boosters whose income purely hinges upon the results of gameplay, companions have deeper emotional interactions with their clients throughout the gameplay and are more likely to build long-term relationships. Thus, for an average companion worker, the benefits of venturing into transnational gameplay outweigh that of the mechanized and standardized boosting labor. Differences in in-game supply and demand equilibrium and cross-country purchasing power have led to the same online game being two to three times more lucrative for companion services on European and North American servers than within China. Sensing the huge price difference, many Chinese game workers would go to great lengths to earn a higher hourly wage by nurturing game accounts in multiple servers, purchasing additional tech equipment, or taking overnight orders from overseas Chinese-speaking clients.

Xiaofei, another game companion and booster, registers accounts on three different servers to maximize his earnings. He uses US servers most often because the price is at least twice as high as in the mainland China server. He has been playing games overnight with Chinese-speaking customers from the US and Canada (Interview, April 2021). In addition to seeking a higher base rate, workers also prefer overseas clients as they are perceived as richer than domestic clients, who constantly haggle over prices listed on

platforms. To chase more profitable overseas orders, Sally worked until 5–6 am at four gig platforms for two years, which severely affected her health condition:

> After the pandemic began, game companionship is no easy business. Many people order the cheapest service category but make all kinds of requests. Overseas clients like international students are much better. Many of them come from rich families, so they won't dispute my 49–59-yuan hourly rate. (Interview, December 2020)

In line with Sally's recount, Xiaofei also added that although he has become friends with a few overseas clients, they never underpaid him using the veneer of 'friendship,' which is often the case for domestic clients. In the author's fieldwork, almost all game workers have come to recognize and take advantage of cross-border economic inequality more frequently. Due to the pandemic, some workers use every trick in the book, including some illegal ones, to boost their chances of receiving orders from abroad. For example, one companion purchased a number of overseas black-market accounts through undisclosed channels. These game accounts are bulk stolen by hacking tools, resold on various social media, and are therefore quite inexpensive. Directly buying these low-priced black accounts can save the workers the initial cost and energy of leveling up and maintaining overseas accounts. Although beyond the scope of this article, the supply chain of gaming black accounts has itself involved interested parties from different countries that reaffirm the transnational nature of digital gaming.

These game workers' variegated circuits of border transgression echo the 'play to earn' economy that has emerged in Southeast Asia and Latin America since the beginning of the pandemic. From the Philippines to Venezuela, unemployed workers are acquiring virtual in-game tokens to exchange for cryptocurrencies and dollars, through which process laborers are absorbed into the accumulation mechanism of global gaming finance. But unlike these new gold farmers whose livelihood is tied to transnational venture capital with which they only have minimal direct interaction, Chinese platform game workers help construct a Sinophone virtual space with Chinese-speaking clients around the world, who are arguably more economically privileged than the average Chinese population. To these middle-class clients, the high accessibility of this Sinophone space provides a quick and affordable way to relieve the social isolation they experience as racial minorities and immigrants, a reigning condition aggravated by the pandemic. Meanwhile, game workers, especially full-time workers, take overseas orders more for economic than social reasons. But nonetheless, they have become active upholders of this burgeoning space by purchasing online equipment, nurturing accounts, adapting to foreign language interfaces, and going out of their way to change their work routines. Some workers acknowledged providing game services to overseas clients could also provide a unique peek into the foreign culture and Chinese immigrant experiences that they would not otherwise have.

This emerging space testifies to the internal class division that has just lately gained attention in the research of Chinese internet users. In this sense, transnationality does not necessarily transgress players' nationalities and physical territories – it can also imply a solidified power relationship between the global Sinophone communities and the rising domestic proletariat in China, or even just a transnational projection of domestic class politics that have been gravely intensified during the past decade.

This Sinophone virtual space has also been expanded transnationally and given birth to new forms of extraction since the pandemic, which exerts a polarizing impact on low-income laborers and highly skilled employees in and beyond China. For instance, Silicon Valley-powered game companion platforms such as E-Pal, which let gamers make friends through playing video games, have gained traction following the huge success of the same revenue model in the Chinese market. Often spearheaded by Asian diaspora entrepreneurs, these on-demand platforms mimic the language, design, and functionality of their Chinese counterparts. As a result, they have drawn game workers from the Global South, who overwhelmingly emphasize their language skills in the profile to maximize incomes. In this sense, Sinophone sociality is not just a specific cultural generation, it is also a transportable language-based template that reflects a more universal mode of social interaction and value accumulation under digital capitalism. We thus challenge digital China scholars to further explicate the spillover dynamics of the Sinophone spaces prompted by non-state actors.

The transnational production, dissemination and consumption of disinformation

We now turn to the second case of disinformation production and flow to illustrate how transnational digital China should be understood as a continuous boomerang rather than a unidirectional influence, and how fluid and intersectional identities complicate this process. The upsurge of disinformation research since the 2016 US presidential election contains a transnational perspective as Russia's Internet Research Agency has been revealed as running disinformation campaigns on social media platforms, impersonating US citizens and inserting false information in public discourse. In addition to political interference, financial imperative was also found in the transnational flow of disinformation. The 'fake news industry' in Macedonia demonstrated how economic hardship in one country drove a group of young people to exploit a global social media platform and promote disinformation in another country (Hughes & Waismel-Manor, 2021).

The cases of Russia and Macedonia, though clearly important, portray a US-centered image where the ultimate concern is about the damage to US democracy alone and there is a clear divide between the US as consumers and other countries as producers. However, the actual situation could be much more complicated, with countries being producers, disseminators, and consumers at the same time, with multiple rounds of interplay, and with political, economic and cultural factors all at work. This is demonstrated in the case of the transnational disinformation flow between China and the West in recent years.

In one authors' work on the content and network analysis of disinformation and conspiracy theories in China (Yang & Fang, 2021), we identify a clear pattern of 'importing' narratives from the West and localizing them by connecting them to salient issues in the Chinese context. For example, Donald Trump and his supporters have promoted anti-Muslim rhetoric with false and misleading statements. We found on Chinese Weibo fake stories such as fabricated rape cases allegedly committed by Muslim immigrants in Europe and North America. The disinformation, often translated from far-right influencers on Twitter and media outlets such as Breitbart, is frequently accompanied by false accusations of misbehavior and crimes by the Muslim population in China,

including the Hui and the Uighurs. The religious minority has become one of the groups that are blamed for causing social instability and threatening the majority population in both Western and Chinese societies. The shared mentality of demonizing and blaming minorities has traveled fast across borders and across the Great Firewall.

On Chinese social media sites, disinformation is also motivated by financial incentives, much like the Macedonian fake news industry. The business model and the fundamental logic of news feed algorithms of Weibo, Douyin, and other Chinese platforms are almost identical to Facebook and Twitter – to maximize engagement and monetize user data (de Kloet et al., 2019). We found that the influencers who transported Western disinformation were overwhelmingly monetizing followers' attention by posting advertisements. However, there is a major distinction between the money-driven fake news industry in China and that in the West – the government's political control of information plays an indispensable role in shaping the algorithms and platform design, leading to specific types of disinformation being produced and amplified on a massive scale. In general, disinformation promoting the narrative of a chaotic and declining Western world is encouraged by propaganda directives from the Chinese government, whereas those on domestic political and social issues are often heavily censored (Interview, March 2022). Algorithmic recommendations of the platforms are programed to increase the reach of fake news that promotes pro-government sentiment and restrict the visibility of those threatening the government's image to meet the requirement of the state.

It is noteworthy that the influence of such ostensibly domestic digital production of disinformation travels outside China's border and back to the West. An interesting example was how Fox News's Tucker Carlson appreciated Chinese internet users' attacks on the so-called 'White Left,' a derogatory term to describe those who support progressive values (Zhang, 2020). In our research, we noticed that the anti-White Left narrative in China was largely driven by a series of fake news about minority groups imported from the US and Europe. Carlson's citation of this narrative to attack multiculturalism among US liberals shows a boomerang trajectory, in which US conservatives consume content that is derived overseas but is essentially based on their own production. Both China and the US become each other's producers and consumers of misleading content in a mutually reinforcing circuit.

Another example showing a more direct impact on politics was how Chinese-language fake news on WeChat influenced the federal elections in Australia, where at least 20 federal electorates have voters of Chinese ancestry ranging from 9% to 21% (E. Huang & Lahiri, 2019). In both the 2016 and 2019 elections, disinformation campaigns around the issues of refugee and same-sex marriage were seen on WeChat and credited with influencing the election results (Zhuang & Tomazin, 2019). In this case, WeChat is not simply a platform that has users in Australia. It has created a Sinophone community connecting overseas Chinese and their family, friends, colleagues, and business partners in China. The disinformation during the elections was circulating not only among Chinese Australian voters but also between them and domestic Chinese users. In addition, WeChat as a company complies with Chinese regulations, which basically means no content moderation on false information about social issues in foreign countries, and even deliberate amplification of such information as ordered by the Chinese government. This not only poses important questions on law and regulation but also challenges the existing framework of understanding disinformation and politics in the nation-state container, as

the creation, dissemination, and consumption of fake news in one country are influenced by public opinion and regulations in another country in previously unexpected ways.

Our research also emphasizes the need to recognize the fluid and intersectional identities of actors involved in the transnational production processes of disinformation. Many producers and instigators of questionable content on Chinese social media platforms are racial minorities that are subject to structural inequality and daily violence in the residence country. In the case of disinformation produced by Chinese Americans, previous research argues that right-wing political discourse can appeal to the experience of unfairness and invisibility that could find wider resonance among immigrant Chinese, who are often 'overlooked and disempowered, even vis-à-vis other racial minorities, in the social and political agenda' (Zhang, 2018).

However, we should also note that the relative technical and economic affluence of the disinformation producers and instigators versus domestic Chinese users allows them to occupy a dominant and upstream position in the digital communication and production chain, an advantage that defined their unsettled identities. We found that many of them are immigrant tech workers in the Bay Area or Chinese students in the US and Europe, both of whom are politically marginalized yet culturally resourceful and technologically sophisticated (Interview, November 2016). Therefore, they have emerged as some of the strongest voices when it comes to spreading misinformation on forums like Wenxuecity and MIT BBS as well as on websites like Zhihu, which are popular among highly educated overseas Chinese, who use disinformation to rally and establish alliances around shared issues. Another example is that the major translator and promoter of the alt-right figurehead Jordan Peterson in China is a Chinese student in Germany (King, 2018). These diaspora groups gain an advantage over their Chinese audiences through selective exposure to information in the Anglophone. Although the diaspora experience could induce feelings of being caught in between opposing stances, especially for justice-oriented activists and amid social and geopolitical tensions, the unique positionality of the diaspora versus the domestic Chinese audience is not to be glossed over. Overall, the progressive nature of the Sinophone approach helps illuminate the dual identities of being victims of racism and disseminators of disinformation. These diverse and sometimes contradicting identities in two or more geographies challenge the inquiry into the motives and implications of actors in the disinformation ecosystem.

Some tactics and implications of studying transnational digital China

Through the two empirical cases presented, we summarize a few lessons for extending the lens and methods of studying transnational digital China.

First, it is imperative to dissociate transnationality from citizenship and geolocations. Digital China studies require a more comprehensive and malleable framework that integrates hardware, platforms, nationalities, ethnicities, languages, ownership and the regulatory regime to accommodate the ever-complex transnational spaces. We suggest developing new conceptual and empirical lenses based on the critical engagement of Sinophone, as a language-oriented perspective is more inclusive and can accommodate a plurality of identities and practices. In fact, what bonds the workers/producers and clients/users in our examples is indeed Chinese as a daily social language, rather than common citizenship, locality, or digital infrastructure.

Second, we argue that blurring and intersectional identities, which long constitute key elements in studies of race, gender, and immigration, could enrich our understanding of the often invisible yet resilient transborder interactions. An ethnically Han Chinese gamer on a European server using the country flag of a third place poses an analytical threat to the continuous reliability and applicability of Chineseness in digital gameplay. Similarly, a convoluted chain of disinformation creation and dissemination can be observed in how a Chinese student studying in the US captures and profits from public attention by translating misinformation from Breitbart to Weibo, which then becomes viral among Chinese immigrants in the US. The urgency of adopting intersectionality is even more evident in this example, as identity marginality in the host country which promotes ethnic information enclaves is a major driver behind Chinese diasporas' affinity with disinformation.

Third, our examples also showcase the necessity of utilizing a multi-platform and relational approach, as user behaviors are much more fragmented and interlinked with different forms of technological affordance on a global scale. A game worker might buy a non-Chinese server account in an online marketplace from an overseas gamer that no longer plays the game, use this account to accept an on-demand platform order from a domestic client that plays on overseas servers, play the game with the client using a network booster along with voice chatting apps such as Discord, and finish the transaction via another dominant payment method, says Alipay, to save on platform fees. The game worker then screenshots the conversations with the client as proof of their service quality and advertises them on their social media channels to boost the chance of future overseas orders. Few or even none of the platforms involved in this service supply chain are succinctly studied by the extant literature on digital China, let alone their interwovenness. In the context of transnational disinformation flow, it is imperative to study both public and private platforms, because an important missing link is how the false information in one language finds its way to another language – the translation and processing are often out of sight from public platforms and rely on private chats and organizing tools. We propose that transnational digital studies require scholarly research to shed light on the structure and evolution of the service/content supply chain. The 'scavenge' approach suggested by critical algorithm studies, meaning gathering data sources from a wide range of dispersed sites from formal trace data to informal alley conversation, might aid in this daunting exploration (Christin, 2020). This inevitably encounters the dilemma of balancing the breadth and depth of research projects, as multi-sited digital methods risk diluting the depth of a single virtual site, but the nature of transborder interaction necessitates the embrace of this unique uncertainty.

Concluding remarks

There are multiple, sometimes paradoxical imaginaries of transnational digital China with contrasting political underpinnings. With its ambitious infrastructural export and soft power campaigns, the Chinese government has put forward a vision that not only expands its political influence through digital projects but also undergirds the mission of reviving Chinese civilization as a totality. Related to this vision is neo-Confucianist scholars' promotion of the concept of 'tianxia' (Zhao, 2006), which they claim to be inclusive of every cultural or spiritual system and seeks to maximize cooperation and

minimize conflict. Nevertheless, *tianxia* as a vision evinces Chinese exceptionalism and implies the domination of the Chinese empire (Zhang, 2013).

What we propose in this article is in sharp contrast to these exclusionary imaginaries. We highlight the strengths of the transnational perspective as compared with international and global ones. Our two empirical examples demonstrate that much of the transnational orientation of digital China contains generalizable mechanisms when examined in terms of Sinophone sociality and economic interactions. For example, the transnational economic behavior and labor conditions of Chinese gig game workers are akin to that of Kenyan ghostwriters, precarious 'shadow scholars' who produced assignments and publications for students in the West (Kingori, 2021). Despite serving different groups, they both use their specific cultural capital to break out of the limited labor markets in their home countries and are exploited by wealthier international clients, which is typical of the contradictory impact of a 'planetary labor market' (Graham & Anwar, 2019) under platform capitalism. Similarly, we observe how the attention economy of social media platforms enhances the fake news industry in countries like China, the US, Macedonia, and elsewhere. Investigating the specificities of transnational digital China does not, therefore, involve an inward tendency to magnify essentialism but rather an outward effort to expose the intricate systems of control and agency that surpass the Sinophone sphere.

Additionally, in keeping with the theme of this special issue, we believe that the transnational perspective both elevates civic engagement by emphasizing grassroots actors and complicates it by emphasizing fluid and intersectional identities. Notably, our cases and discussion point to a variety of pathways by which civic actions can implode and backfire. The case of game workers illustrates that in the current hyper-platformized digital life, where immaterial labor occupies a very high proportion, viewing digital interactions as civic engagement alone may not be sufficient to dissect the relations of economic extraction, and global inequalities mired in the service supply chain. In other words, even seemingly one-dimensional civic actions may need to be discussed in conjunction with other economic and cultural motivations. Our example of disinformation, on the other hand, implies that against the backdrop of fluid, intersectional, and multi-platform interactions among a variety of actors, bottom-up participation can work with repressive forces, including authoritarian state power, to deepen social polarization and division. When incentivized by a mix of political and financial factors to mobilize the intolerant forces, civic engagement may morph into 'dark participation' (Quandt, 2018) and contribute to political extremism (Sloam, 2014), which becomes more manifest when we combine the state-centered and bottom-up approaches as in this study. This article thus provides an update on the overwhelmingly positive appraisal of civic engagement in previous literature (e.g., Chen & Reese, 2015). We argue that civic engagement may not necessarily be liberal democratic in its orientation and caution against the potential marriage between civic engagement and repressive forces.

This article unveils the diversity, complexity, and contradictory elements of the global interactive patterns with just two examples, while more academic exploration is needed. For example, this article has not yet considered the interactions of racial and ethnic groups beyond Han Chinese in China's digital politics, such as the new media production and consumption behaviors of the African community in Guangzhou; nor has it explored the ways in which Chinese-speaking laborers communicate digitally in non-Western

countries and ambiguous sovereignties, such as the collective actions by casino workers in Southeast Asia and Chinese seafarers moving between international ports, which have already taken place as digitally mediated transnational resistance. In a nutshell, transnational digital China needs more such studies that enrich Sinophone and Chineseness through the elucidation of uncertain identities, borders, and social connections.

Note

1. This GitHub site summarizes news coverage of various global solidarity campaigns: https://deliveryworkers.github.io/

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Notes on contributors

Mengyang Zhao is a doctoral candidate in sociology at the University of Pennsylvania. Their research interests include digital labor, precarious work, and social movements.

Kecheng Fang is an Assistant Professor at the School of Journalism and Communication, The Chinese University of Hong Kong. His research interests include journalism, political communication, and digital media.

ORCID

Mengyang Zhao 🔘 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8677-8272
Kecheng Fang 🔘 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1674-1543

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