

Article

How China Divides the Left: Competing Transnational Left-Wing Alternative Media on Twitter

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Abstract

Twitter has pushed public opinion on foreign policy into partisan bubbles that often value alternative media sources over traditional media or political elites. Public opinion on China is no exception. On the left, some alternative media outlets support China as a socialist ideal, while others criticize it as a key player in global capitalism and neoliberal order. This leads to an important puzzle: How and why do some transnational left media disseminate pro-China messaging while others do not? We focus on two leftist alternative media outlets: the Qiao Collective and Lausan. Both organizations claim to offer a variety of counter-hegemonic-oriented discourses. We first qualitatively analyze the differences in how these two organizations frame key topics in contemporary Chinese politics including Uyghurs in Xinjiang and the Hong Kong protests. We then use quantitative social network analysis to show how their communication efforts lead to different follower audiences. In the last step, we analyze what issues the Qiao Collective is using to achieve its inward- and outward-oriented goals. Our study shows how both outlets focus on the transnational left, but each reaches distinct audiences that do not overlap. We find that the Qiao Collective jumps on traditional left-wing issues in the US to extend its reach while regularly posting positive, often revisionist perspectives about Chinese politics. This specific element conflicts with its claim of supporting anti-imperialist and pro-democracy politics and distinguishes the Qiao Collective from other transnational left outlets.

Keywords

alternative media; China; counterpublic; public opinion; Twitter; transnational

Issue

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1. Introduction

While alternative media and “counterpublics” have often been studied in comparison to the dominant mainstream public, few studies have focused on competing counterpublics (cf. Lien, 2022). This article looks at two contemporary alternative media outlets that focus on East Asian politics: the Qiao Collective (also sometimes referred simply as Qiao) and Lausan. Qiao and especially Lausan focus on contemporary Chinese politics including Chinese labor, the Hong Kong protests, and Uyghur

oppression in Xinjiang. At a time when Twitter increasingly pushes public opinion on foreign policy in partisan directions (Baum & Potter, 2019), this article addresses several key questions related to alternative media on the left and its dissemination of content: How and why do some transnational left media disseminate pro-China messaging while others do not? How do these leftist alternative media’s politics and audiences vary?

Qiao and Lausan have become key alternative media outlets covering contemporary Chinese politics. Their main website for creating and contributing to discourse

is Twitter. Although both organizations self-identify similarly as leftist and anti-imperialist, they each have different and often contradictory views about Chinese politics. Subsequently, alternative media discourse is often divided among leftists based on which of these two organizations you follow. We are interested in several connected questions regarding these organizations: First, how do activists use their alternative media for collective identity formation and influence the broader discourse about Chinese politics? Second, what role does alternative media play in the international space of East Asian politics regarding China from a left-wing perspective? For analysis, we mainly rely on counterpublic and framing theory (Benford & Snow, 2000; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018). While studies have focused mainly on the conflict between counterpublics and dominant publics (e.g., Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018), we are interested in competing counterpublics within the same communication space (Lien, 2022).

We first begin by explaining these various leftist alternative media organizations and how they became relevant to contemporary politics. We then explore the existing literature on counterpublics and what role alternative media play in political discourse. We then begin by exploring how the two organizations vary in their political stances by using qualitative analysis of their communication on Twitter. Using Twitter data, we then show how these leftist alternative media organizations reach different audiences with almost no overlap. Finally, we show the makeup of each organization's audience and conclude by showing with what content Qiao achieves its inward- and outward-oriented goals on Twitter.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. *Alternative Media and the Left*

While alternative media is historically associated with left-wing media (Atton, 2007; Downing, 1984), few studies have analyzed their role in today's information ecosystem (cf. Cushion et al., 2021; Dowling, 2021; Yung & Leung, 2014). In recent years, several new transnational alternative media have been established that position themselves as left-wing. However, as China becomes an increasingly salient global political issue, some transnational leftist media support China while others criticize it. This article focuses on two alternative media that operate in this ideological space.

These two alternative media outlets are rather new. Lausan was formed in 2019 and Qiao followed in 2020. They have similar goals in that they both offer different versions of counter-hegemonic discourse from a leftist perspective. They are counter-hegemonic because they see themselves as challenging hierarchical, established systems of politics and culture (van Leeckwyck, 2019). Lausan was formed in the wake of the anti-extradition bill protests in Hong Kong in June 2019 (Chan et al., 2021). Lausan describes itself as "build[ing] transnational

left solidarity and struggle for ways of life beyond the dictates of capital and the state. To that end, we hold multiple imperialisms to account" (Lausan, 2022). They offer primarily commentary but also some reporting on contemporary political events in Hong Kong. Qiao was also formed in a similar timeframe, seemingly to counter many of the ideas put forth by Lausan. Qiao describes itself as "[aiming to] challenge rising US aggression towards the People's Republic of China and to equip the US anti-war movement with the tools and analysis to better combat the stoking of a New Cold War conflict with China" (Qiao Collective, 2022).

Since their growth over the last years, these two organizations have become key alternative media commentators on contemporary Chinese politics and US–China relations. Ever since their foundation, both outlets have primarily relied on Twitter as their primary means of communication. Both Lausan and Qiao share a diasporic orientation in that content is primarily produced in English and perspectives on Hong Kong or China are sometimes evinced from the outside. Both compete over an English-speaking audience, particularly hoping to shape Western leftists' views of China. In this sense, the journalism and commentary of both outlets are meant as a form of intervention, though both seek to provide alternative perspectives to major English-language media outlets. Both have also sought to politically educate their followers on Hong Kong and China, as observed in webinars or syllabi offered by the two platforms. Although both groups self-identify as leftist and anti-imperialist, how well their actual politics align with these views can vary and is the subject of criticism from both within and outside their readership. Consequently, this is an object of contestation between both groups.

2.2. *Alternative Media and Counterpublics*

Alternative media plays a key role for left-wing activists, who in our case may view mainstream international English-speaking media sources as oppositional to leftist causes (Atton, 2007). In addition, an essential aspect of alternative media is their counter-hegemonic discourse in contrast to mainstream media (Holt et al., 2019). These organizations can range from being run by experienced journalists to amateur hobbyists who desire to present perspectives from protest groups, dissidents, or marginalized communities, and can play an essential role in social movements (Lee, 2018). In the case of alternative media such as Unicorn Riot, which heavily relies on live streams, the boundary between activism and journalism becomes blurred (Dowling, 2021). Such media outlets routinely combine reporting and commentary, sometimes in the same article. For example, their content is focused on promoting critical change (Rauch, 2016) and offers "alternative accounts and interpretations of political and social events" (Holt et al., 2019, p. 862).

Alternative media have a strong conceptual connection with counterpublics. As with many studies, we utilize

Fraser's (1990, p. 68) definition of counterpublics "as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment...[and] as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics" that challenge the political status quo. Different authors have built on Fraser's conception but shifted their focus away from the "subaltern" (Warner, 2010) to the question of what makes a "counter" in counterpublics (Asen, 2000). Asen (2000) highlights the feeling of exclusion as a defining element of counterpublics. Alternative media thus plays an essential role for counterpublics, especially in the networked public sphere, where counterpublics can consist of globally dispersed communities (Flew & Iosifidis, 2020; Heft et al., 2021). The transnational aspect is relevant for our study as Lausan ("our dispersal across the world") and Qiao ("comprised of ethnic Chinese people living across multiple countries") both have transnational elements. Furthermore, as prior research has shown, alternative media take a central position within online counterpublics (Rauchfleisch & Kaiser, 2020; Rucht, 2004).

Alternative media run by activists can play different roles for a counterpublic. Toepfl and Piwoni (2015, 2018) differentiate between inward- and outward-oriented communication goals. A counterpublic's communication can be inward- or outward-oriented, where inward-oriented communication mainly aims to strengthen the collective identity. In contrast, outward-oriented communication aims to influence the broader discourse and reach a wider audience. Alternative media have been both described as mainly inward- (Rucht, 2004) or outward-oriented (Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019) depending on the context. In the context of the internet, the clear distinction between internal and external orientation concerning alternative media is obsolete (Rucht, 2004), as social media platforms with their affordances can also potentially contribute to outward-oriented goals (Poell & van Dijck, 2019; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018).

2.3. *Competing Counterpublics and Their Frames*

Few studies have explicitly focused on competing counterpublics. Most studies focusing on alternative media and counterpublics usually have a stronger focus on the unifying elements of counterpublics (Heft et al., 2021; Rauchfleisch & Kaiser, 2020). Furthermore, regarding the outward-oriented communication of counterpublics, the conflict between the mainstream and the counterpublic is usually highlighted in studies (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018). Lien (2022), however, focuses on his study of Islam-related counterpublic discourse in the comment section of Facebook on competing counterpublics originating from different ideologies. Our study builds on this view by focusing on two potentially competing counterpublics within the same communicative space. However, in our case, they are ideologically adjacent and not, as in Lien's study, at different ends of the political spectrum. Instead, the counterpublics in our

study are competing over the same political space on the same side of the political spectrum. By using competing frames, these two organizations reach two different audiences despite overlapping political views. These organizations compete through their use of frames and the audience reached by these different counterpublic framing discourses.

Framing is a central part of any activist or social movement organization's strategy, and alternative media is no exception. Scholarly literature broadly posits that for an organization to achieve its goals either through discourse, policy, or mobilization, successful framing is paramount. Frames need to resonate culturally and be considered credible by their target audience (Berbrier, 1998; Hipsher, 2007; Snow & Benford, 1988). The goal of an organization's frame is to shape the discourse around a certain identity community and the broader public to promote a particular set of ideas and motivate collective action (Benford & Snow, 2000; McAdam et al., 1996). It is to diagnose the issue and offer some prognosis for its followers to adhere to.

Under certain conditions, framing can drastically change public opinion on certain political issues (Borah, 2011). Elites, whether politicians or media leaders, can change the way the public understands and supports an issue based on the language, metaphors, and imagery used to describe the issue (Rein & Schön, 1996). For example, language such as "estate tax" versus "death tax," or "homosexual marriage" versus "gay civil union," will cause support for connected causes to vary (Price et al., 2005). These framing effects can often be partisan, for example, Republicans are less likely to believe in "global warming" than they are to believe in "climate change" (Schuldt et al., 2011). Different media outlets and politicians often compete to control the narrative of a certain political issue through framing, to "rebut, undermine, or neutralize a person's or group's myths, versions of reality, or interpretive framework" (Benford, 1987, p. 75).

Subsequently, framing is a contested process (Benford & Snow, 2000). The framing and the counter-framing process is a central part of media strategy and media discourse (Benford & Snow, 2000; McCaffrey & Keys, 2000). While the dynamic frame-counter-frame contention between alternative media and mass media is well studied by social movement scholars (Cissel, 2012; Downing, 2008; Rooke, 2021), how alternative media frames compete with each other as opposed to mass media, especially in contemporary Chinese political issues, remains understudied. How do alternative media framings in China vary? How do these effects influence their followers? These are critical initial questions that will allow future research to better study how these framing effects might influence public opinion and discourse on China. This leads us to our first research question: What frames are Qiao Collective and Lausan using in their communication on Twitter and how do they vary? (RQ1)

3. Twitter Communication Frame Analysis

Even though Qiao and Lausan both claim to promote leftist politics, their political stances still vary. We can study and measure these variations in particular by looking at their different stances on Chinese politics. We first downloaded all tweets posted by the Qiao Collective (n = 8,444) and Lausan (n = 4,430) accounts. We then conducted qualitative content analysis to identify and describe the key framing strategies used by each organization. Finally, we paired our initial descriptive frame analysis with quantitative analysis of their audience on Twitter to show how these different frames create different online followings and exclusive, separate online communities. Our combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis gives us a clear and robust understanding of how Qiao and Lausan see themselves. This combination of analyses highlights how they present themselves online and what types of netizens follow each organization.

Since Qiao and Lausan often cover the same contemporary Chinese political topics, comparing how they frame the same issue from two different leftist perspectives highlights the similarities and differences between these two organizations. These organizations compete with each other by framing and counter-framing the same issues to try and control the leftist narrative around these topics. Identifying frames in these tweets does not cover all the topics these organizations cover, but rather helps shape our understanding of how these outlets shape their contributions to political discourse. The tweets selected below are not meant to be representative of all framing strategies or political stances. Rather, they show how these two organizations cover the same topic through contrasting, often contradictory lenses.

Qiao and Lausan share similar stances and theoretical orientations regarding global leftist issues. Topics like labor rights and anti-imperialism are prominent in both organizations. The two organizations even see eye-to-eye on certain leftist political issues, such as support for Palestine:

Israel has just shut down a Palestinian Covid-19 testing site, while the US has shipped 1 million masks to Israel for IDF soldiers. Meanwhile China has just sent 10,000 tests and ventilators to Palestine, and Chinese doctors are sharing COVID19 expertise with Palestinian Doctors. (Qiao Collective, 2020a)

We stand with Palestinians in their decades long resistance to the ongoing colonial violence of the apartheid state of Israel and its partners including the US and Britain. Liberation for Palestine is liberation for all. #SaveSheikhJarrah (Lausan, 2021a)

In these two tweets, both organizations express solidarity with Palestine and condemn the US for its role in contributing to the ongoing suffering of the Palestinian people. Qiao, unlike Lausan, however, adds an additional line about how China is an ally to the Palestinian cause. This is where the key political difference between Qiao and Lausan begins to emerge. The frames described in Table 1 are used in tandem and are by no means exclusive. Both Qiao and Lausan often mix frames, especially regarding specific issues like Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

3.1. Frame No. 1: China and the US as Similar or Different

It is the promotion of China's role as a global ally to leftist causes that differentiates the two organizations. Qiao sees China as a socialist state that internationally leftists ought to support and champion as a leader of their political causes. Lausan meanwhile sees China as authoritarian in nature and just as much part of the global capitalist order as the US. As a result, Qiao is defensive of China and often portrays any commentary or critiques of China, its history, or its politics as inherently orientalist in nature:

It's Orientalism, racism, and chauvinism to project onto China [sic] the U.S. framework of race and empire onto China. China is a real place with millennia [sic] of indigenous cultural, political, and ethnic dynamics. You're not an expert on China just because you understand the U.S. (Qiao Collective, 2020c)

The Western fetishization & weaponization of the Tiananmen protests are an insult to the memory of the Chinese people who were involved, and it has become a weapon to bludgeon China and the Chinese people with and to serve the West's own imperialist interests to attack China. (Qiao Collective, 2020d)

Lausan, however, does not see critiques of Western commentary on China as inherently orientalist. Instead, Lausan often frames critiques of China as necessary for the left as critiques of the US; that these two states are

Table 1. Topical frame differences between Qiao and Lausan.

| Topic | Qiao Frame | Lausan Frame |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| Comparing US and China | Inherently Orientalist | Valid and often necessary for analysis |
| Connections with the US left | The US left should critique the US and stand with China | The US left should critique both the US and China and not be beholden to any state |
| China's character | China is benevolent/socialist | China is repressive/capitalist |

hegemonic in nature and both contribute to the structures that leftists push back against:

Not only is China's economy capitalist, the state now rules in the general interest of capital. The CCP's [Chinese Communist Party] claim that China is socialist is simply not borne out of reality. Its false promise to guide the world into a socialist future must be rejected. (Lausan 2020a)

The Strategic Competition Act has been approved by the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. This bill disingenuously exceptionalizes [sic] Beijing's authoritarian violence and poses the further build-up of the US military-industrial complex as the solution, which we condemn in full. (Lausan, 2021b)

3.2. Frame No. 2: Connections With the US Left

Both organizations fight for authority over leftist understandings of contemporary Chinese political issues. One key way each tries to do so is by connecting events with those in the US, specifically leftist movements. This framing tactic is particularly prevalent when either organization discusses the 2019 Hong Kong protests. Qiao was adamantly against tying the Hong Kong protest to any sort of leftist cause and condemned any attempt to do so. Instead, they try to frame the Hong Kong protests as a far-right cause:

The Hong Kong protests are driven by anti-mainland racism & enforcing US imperialism. To compare them to Black and Indigenous liberation is an insult & an obscuring of their racist, classist, imperialist interests. (Qiao Collective, 2020e)

It is deceptive & dishonest for Westerners to inordinately focus on a very minor handful of "unionists, workers, & leftists" in the HK protests to brand the protests as "having left potential" when the vast majority of the protest is right-wing, racist, & exclusionary of workers. (Qiao Collective, 2020b)

Lausan approached the Hong Kong protests as having the potential to be part of a larger leftist global movement, often writing pieces connecting Hong Kong to other movements around the world, including Black Lives Matter:

Standing in solidarity with Hong Kong is not about deciding which nation-state is worse; it's about rejecting this false binary crafted by the ruling elites, and resisting the adoption of Western colonial frameworks by all states alike, especially China. (Lausan, 2020d)

State repression knows no borders. It's time to amplify and learn from Black liberation and other

anti-establishment struggles—to build power from the bottom up across the world. Solidarity is about fighting for justice together, even if our histories and realities differ. (Lausan, 2020b)

3.3. Frame No. 3: China's Character

The final frame that differentiates the two approaches is how each portrays China in its messaging. Beyond simply seeing China in a sympathetic light, Qiao further argues that the West's perceptions of China as a human rights violator are actually the opposite; China is benevolent in helping marginalized people.

When events involve China as a primary actor, the state is framed as benevolently acting in a way that is caring about its citizens and operates for the well-being of all Chinese people. China is seldom portrayed in a negative or critical light. Instead, it is seen as a sympathetic actor in the international community trying to positively contribute to the global order. In particular, regarding Xinjiang, this is to assert that "re-education camps" in which over one million Uyghurs are thought to be imprisoned do not exist and that the Chinese Communist Party has the interests of Uyghurs in mind with its policies in Xinjiang:

So China built these camps to deradicalize extremists and give them the proper training to thrive on their own. People in these camps are taught Mandarin to better function in the economy, taught technical skills to make it easier for them to enter the workforce, are allowed to go home once or twice a week to visit their families, [are] offered mental guidance to overcome radicalized ways of thinking. (Qiao Collective, 2021a)

So it's "slave labor" if Chinese factories employ Uyghurs and "employment discrimination" if they don't hire Uyghurs? Western media can't keep its story straight, but it is clear that unilateral sanctions will disrupt economic development and poverty alleviation in Xinjiang. (Qiao Collective, 2021b)

Lausan, however, does not see China's treatment of Uyghur Muslims as benevolent. Instead, they see it as an oppressive policy:

The existence of the camps is by now undeniable, with the basic details largely corroborated by the Chinese state itself. But debates over Xinjiang continue to intensify and foster extreme nationalist responses, from anti-China fear mongering to pro-China denialism. (Lausan, 2020c)

We need to adopt an internationalist perspective toward the Xinjiang camps to resist cynical appropriation by the cold warriors and China apologists, and enable a more self-reflective conversation about their truly modern and global causes. (Lausan, 2020c)

The key divide between the organizations, then, is their view of China. Why does it matter that these two organizations portray China and Chinese politics differently if they are both left alternative media? These two sets of frames begin in a similar place, but their conclusions end in fundamental, irreconcilable opposition to each other.

By following Toepfl and Piwoni's (2018) conceptual framework, we conclude that they use the same emphasis frames but have diverging second-level argumentative frames. We assume that this difference on the supply side shapes the audiences that can be reached. Although both of these groups' followers may self-identify as leftist or anti-imperialist, ultimately, what matters is how they perceive China. This variation in approach to China and differences in the framing of contemporary politics potentially leads to two completely different audiences and interactions online. Even though we can identify these qualitative differences, we subsequently want to know whether these framing variations produce quantitative differences in online audiences and communities. We then pose: What kind of audience is the Qiao Collective reaching and how distinct is it from the follower audience reached by Lausan? (RQ2)

For the third research question, we are specifically interested in whether the issues identified in our frame analysis are more inward- or outward-oriented when analyzing who is reached by the communication as both goals can be achieved on social media platforms by alternative media outlets (Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019; Poell & van Dijck, 2019; Rucht, 2004; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018). We pose: What issues communicated by Qiao reach which part of the audience on Twitter? (RQ3)

4. Twitter Communication Audience Analysis

4.1. Data and Methods

To answer our research questions, we rely on different data sets scraped from Twitter. We mainly focus on Qiao but also on Lausan. We downloaded all the information for followers of the two accounts at the end of November 2021 (Qiao = 49,784; Lausan = 19,140). We then collected the follower information for all the 87,569 unique users over the standard Twitter API in the following two weeks. Eventually, we could download the follower relations for 62,304 accounts that are not set to protected and follow at least one other user in our sample.

Additionally, we downloaded all tweets ($n = 8,444$) ever posted by the Qiao account, including replies and retweets of other accounts. Since we are interested in the specific reach of Qiao, we also downloaded over the historical Twitter API all retweets of their tweets ($n = 153,717$).

All statistical analysis and visualizations were conducted in R. Only the network visualizations were created in Gephi. We relied on the location field that Twitter users can identify. We used this information and checked on OpenStreetMap in which country a

user is located: 36,557 (54.3%) users added information to their location field (see the Supplementary File, Appendix 1, for an overview and validation). To identify the differences between the two audiences, we analyzed the "keyness" (Bondi & Scott, 2010) of words used in the account description. We thus combined the descriptions of all users and created a corpus. We then compared the descriptions from users following Qiao with descriptions of the users following Lausan. The keyness is then calculated based on the relative overrepresentation of words within a corpus. To identify different communities in the follower networks, we analyzed how all of the 62,304 accounts follow each other. For community detection, we relied on the Leiden algorithm implemented in Python (Traag et al., 2019). For our third research question, we used a keyword-based approach to identify issues covered in tweets (see the Supplementary File, Appendix 2, for an overview and validation). Furthermore, we used a Bayesian regression analysis with weakly informative priors with the R package *brms*. For the model, we used four chains with 4000 iterations in total and 1000 warmup iterations. All chains converged and Rhat are all 1.

4.2. Results

4.2.1. Follower Audience Analysis (RQ2)

In the first step, we analyzed the overlap between the different follower audiences of the two accounts (Figure 1). Our analysis shows that there is only minimal overlap between the followers of the two accounts.

This first analysis indicates that the two accounts have distinct follower audiences with a slight overlap between Qiao and Lausan. They reach different audiences with their communication. Despite their similar origins as leftist organizations, their contrasting approaches to China separates the left online into different camps that do not overlap or interact with each other.

In a second step, we were interested in what background users have that belong to one of the two distinct follower audiences. As we are interested in the differences between the two audiences, we analyzed the keyness (Bondi & Scott, 2010) of words used in the description field of accounts. The most overrepresented words and emoji in the description of users following Qiao all have a connection to Communism (Figure 2). For example, the "hammer and sickle" emoji is not only the most overrepresented word but also, overall, one of the most used symbols or words in the description of Qiao followers: 1,854 followers of Qiao use the emoji in their description, whereas only 110 Lausan followers added the emoji to their description. Other words such as "communist" or "Marxist-Leninist" (or the short form "ml") also directly refer to Communism as an ideology.

The over-represented words show a strong emphasis on ideology for Qiao. Emphasizing Marxism-Leninism or Communism is important for Qiao's audience.

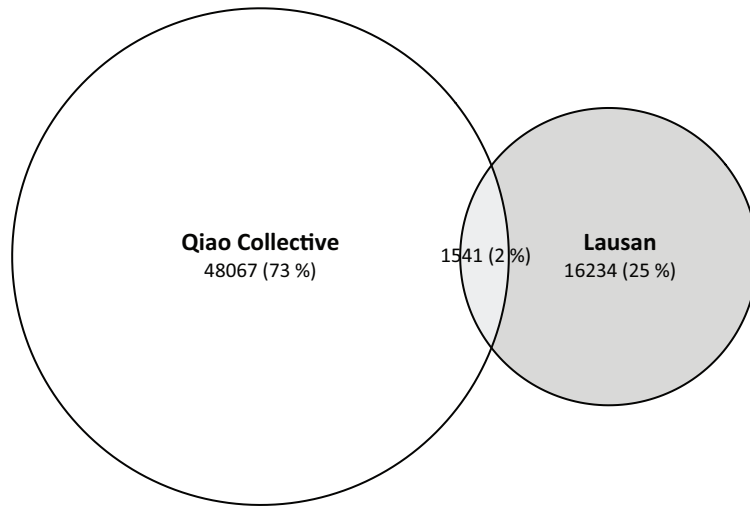


Figure 1. Euler diagram of the follower audiences (n = 67,383 unique users) for Qiao and Lausan.

However, one more commonly sees references to Hong Kong or the prevalence of hashtags such as #standwithhongkong with Lausan. Besides these direct references to Communism, users following Qiao are more likely to add emojis of country flags for China, Palestine, Cuba, Vietnam, or North Korea. Lausan’s followers, in contrast, are more likely to make references to Hong Kong or Taiwan. The black flag emoji and several hashtags refer directly to the HK protests. As a direct ideological reference, only the word “anarchist” is over-represented but only used by 222 followers in absolute terms. The other most overrepresented words indicate the professional background of users. “Reporter,” “journalist,” and “editor” all have a connection with journalism. Words like “PhD” or “research” indicate that aca-

demics have a higher prevalence among the follower audience of Lausan in comparison with that of Qiao.

Although both Lausan and Qiao have a global reach, some geographic differences quickly emerge. Both have the most followers in the US and English-speaking countries, but Lausan has more followers in Hong Kong and Taiwan than Qiao. On the other hand, Qiao has more followers in China and South America. As geographic differences seem to be relevant for both follower audiences, we focused on users’ location in the last step. Although this step can only be used for users who added information to their location field, it still allows us to identify major differences between the different audiences. The results confirm the findings of the prior analyses (Figure 3). Compared to the Qiao follower audience

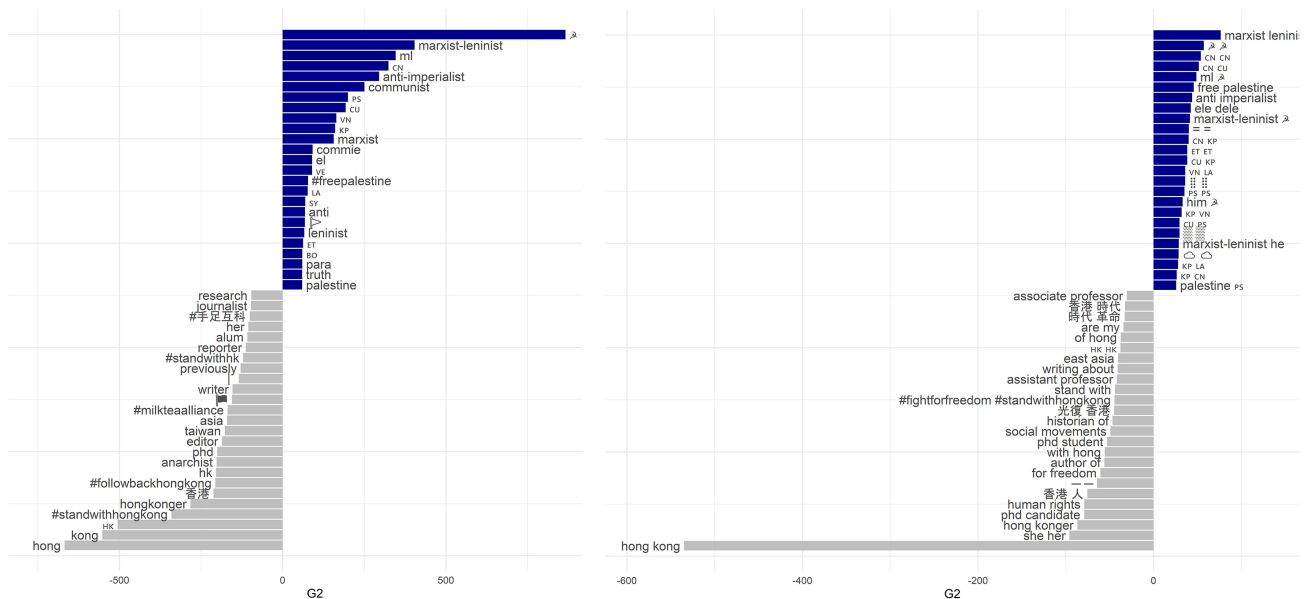
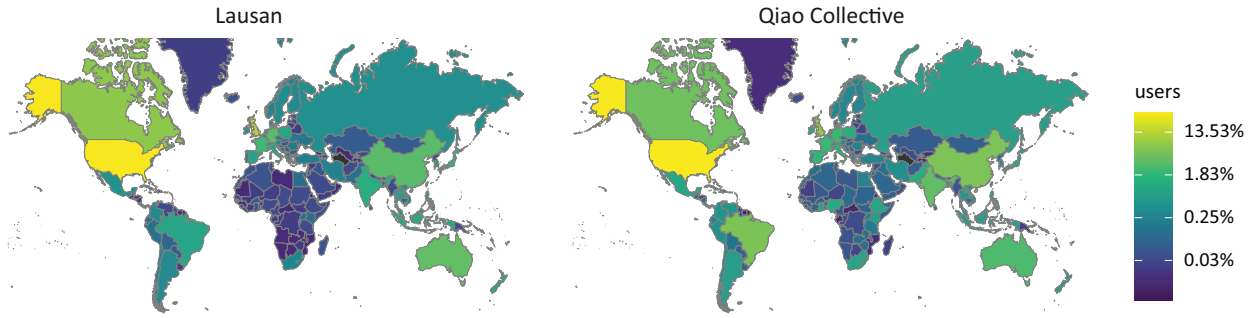


Figure 2. The most over-represented words (keyness—x-axis with likelihood ratio) for the description of users following Lausan (left—negative likelihood ratio) and users following Qiao (right—positive likelihood ratio). Notes: All words $p < .05$; analysis with unigrams are on the left and analysis with bigrams are on the right.

World Map



Hong Kong and Taiwan

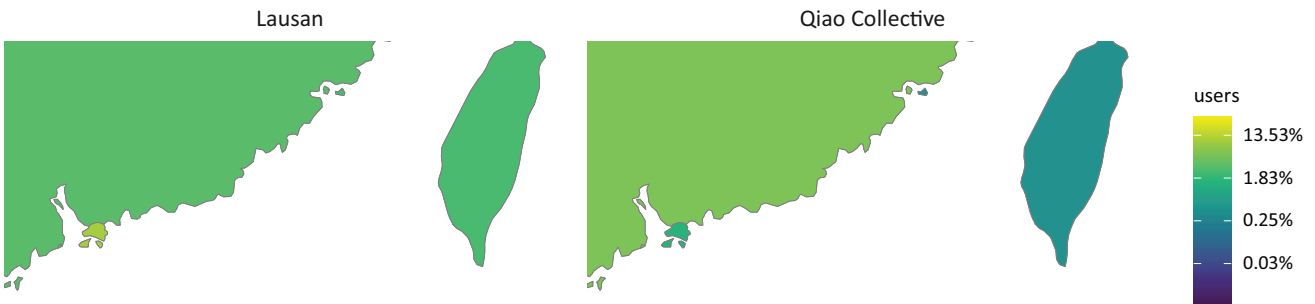


Figure 3. Percentage of users for each account from a specific country. Note: The color scale is log-transformed.

(HK = 1.4%; Taiwan = 0.4%), a larger share of users following Lausan comes from Hong Kong (10.1%) or Taiwan (2.5%). Furthermore, only a few of Qiao’s followers are located in Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore <1%). Noteworthy is also that the share of users from the US (Qiao = 32.2%; Lausan = 32.8%) is the same for both outlets, but there is a striking difference in the percentage of followers from Brazil (Qiao = 5.3%; Lausan <1%).

For the next part of the analysis, we first created a follower network including all users who follow at least one of the two accounts (n = 62,304). Then, we first used the Leiden algorithm to identify communities (Traag et al., 2019). The algorithm identifies communities consisting of users with more follower relations with other users in the same community than with users from other communities. We then manually checked the most prominent accounts within each community and scanned the complete list of users for each community. As a result, we could identify eight distinctive communities (see Table 2 and Figure 4). Qiao’s follower audience mainly consists of users promoting Communism and socialism as ideology in the US (US communism and socialism) but also internationally (International Socialism). Besides these almost purely ideological communities, Qiao also reaches mainly Chinese state-aligned accounts and the business community connected to China. On the other hand, Lausan’s follower audience mainly consists of China’s international expert community members and Southeast Asian users. In this context, the most interesting community is the mainstream left-wing US commu-

nity, which is divided between users following Qiao or Lausan. It is the community in which they are directly competing with each other. Besides this community, there is also a competition within China’s international expert community, but to a lesser extent (only 22.7% follow Qiao).

4.2.2. Retweet Reach of Qiao’s Twitter Communication (RQ3)

To answer our third research question, we first checked with keywords (see Supplementary File, Appendix 2) which issues and topics are covered in tweets that were retweeted at least ten times. We then checked for each tweet how many retweeting users are followers of Qiao and used this as our outcome variable. Our model (see Figure 5) shows that tweets about Covid-19, Black Lives Matter, or the US lead to more retweets by non-followers compared to all other tweets without the issue or topic. On the other hand, tweets focusing on the Tiananmen protests, Uyghurs and Xinjiang, or Communism and socialism lead to more retweets by followers compared to all other tweets without the topic.

5. Discussion

Even though Qiao and Lausan both come from a similar ideological background, each approaches contemporary Chinese politics from two irreconcilable perspectives. Qiao sees the Chinese state as a leader in leftist values and encourages its readers to sympathize and

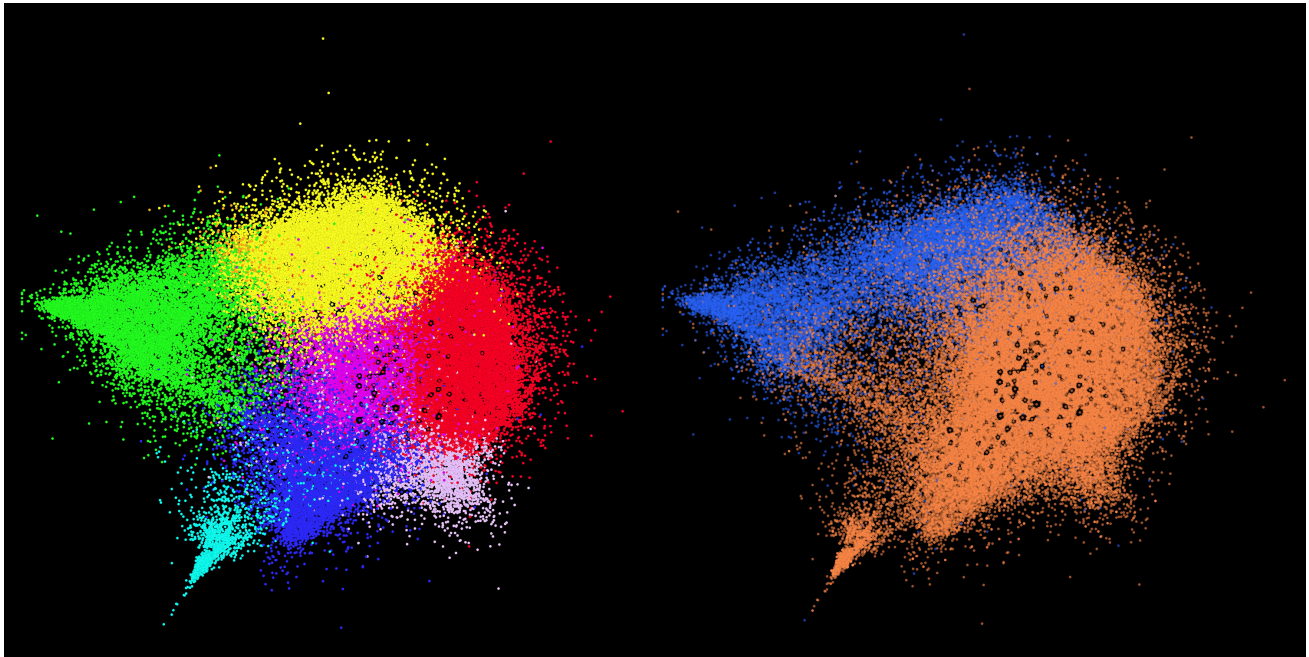


Figure 4. Follower network analysis. Notes: For the layout, the Force Atlas 2 algorithm was used in Gephi; on the left, colors indicate community (see also Table 2); on the right, red nodes follow Qiao, blue nodes do not follow Qiao.

Table 2. Overview of the identified follower communities.

| Name of the Community | No. | Qiao Following | Location | Prominent User |
|--|-------|----------------|---|----------------|
| US communism and socialism (red) | 15309 | 97.6% | USA = 47.1% UK = 7.2% Canada = 4.5% | RevLeftRadio |
| Mainstream left-wing US (yellow) | 14457 | 43.2% | USA = 46.5% UK = 13.6% Canada = 8.4% | NaomiAKlein |
| China state-aligned (blue) | 8564 | 98.5% | China = 21% USA = 19.3% UK = 6.2% | zlj517 |
| China international expert (green) | 8469 | 22.7% | USA = 23.2% Hong Kong = 19.4% UK = 9.6% | ChuBailiang |
| International Socialism (violet) | 8424 | 96.1% | USA = 30% UK = 13.2% Canada = 4.9% | VillegasPoljak |
| International China Business (turquoise) | 3640 | 99.5% | India = 14.1% Nigeria = 13.5% Ghana = 7.5% | Huawei_Europe |
| South America socialist (pink) | 2990 | 95.7% | Brazil = 57% Spain = 14.6% Portugal = 4% | — |
| South East Asia (orange) | 421 | 29.9% | Indonesia = 54.7% USA = 8% Philippines = 5.1% | — |

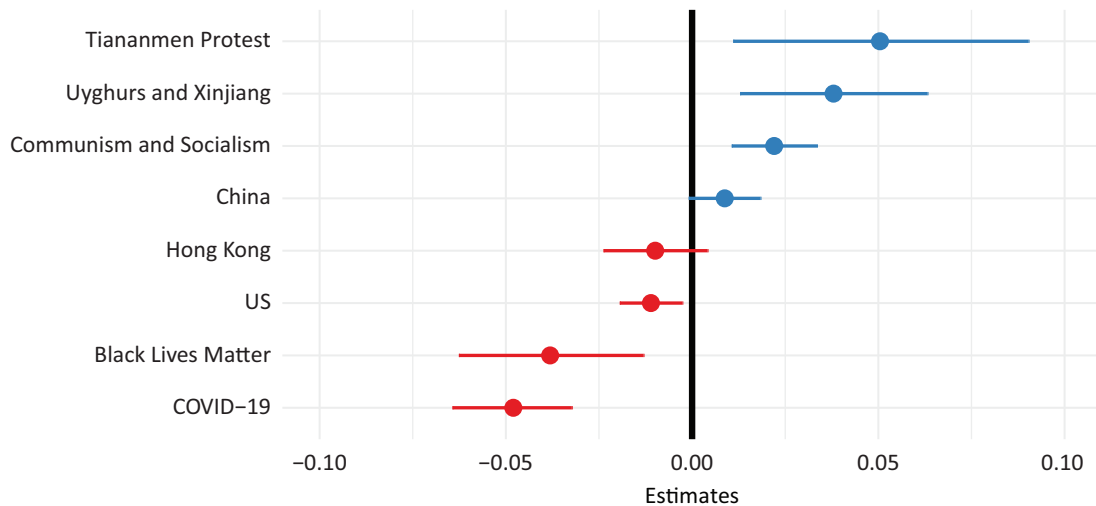


Figure 5. Estimates for Bayesian regression model using topics as a predictor and internal orientation as the outcome variable. Notes: Internal orientation was measured as the percentage of retweeting users who are Qiao followers; the number of retweets was also used as a variable (not shown here); 95% CIs are shown.

stand with China. Lausan, however, sees China as part of the global capitalist neoliberal order that contradicts leftist values. These two organizations constantly frame and counter-frame each other’s political stances to control the dominant leftist narratives over Chinese politics. These two sets of contradictory frames of Chinese politics are not simply a matter of differing opinions but speak more to the effect of leftist audiences and ideologies online.

These varying frames have effects on how leftists follow and consume alternative media on Chinese politics. We see that following one organization leads to not following the other, creating two distinctive online communities of leftists. We also see Qiao’s followers in closer connection with Chinese state media, Lausan tends to connections with dominant Western public figures, including journalists and mainstream news outlets. While Qiao might fail with their outward-oriented communication (Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018) to influence the dominant Western public with their counter-frames, they still have an influence on certain leftist communities. However, within these communities, they compete with Lausan, which also offers counter-frames that are different from frames communicated by the Western mainstream. In conclusion, Qiao is partly followed by an ideologically homogeneous interpretive community that has a shared interpretation of events. However, our analysis also shows that some social communities (e.g., mainstream left-wing) do not completely overlap with the follower audience as an interpretive community (Schrøder, 1994). Future research with ethnographic methods should focus on these contested spaces.

What do our findings say about the role of ideology with these varying leftist alternative media organizations? Both emphasize the same leftist politics of anti-imperialism, labor rights, and socialism. When it comes

to their followers, however, Qiao’s followers are much more inclined to performatively attach their identity online to ideology. Qiao’s followers tend to self-describe on more ideological bases, including key terms in their descriptions like “Marxist-Leninist” or “Communist.” Lausan’s followers, however, emphasize the specific issues within Chinese politics more than ideological standings, including having “StandWithHongKong” or “MilkTeaAlliance” in their bio. Those who emphasize these ideologies in their community identity, therefore, tend to be more apologetic towards China, while those who follow issue-specific subjects tend to be more critical, despite all identifying along the same original leftist political base. Our analysis of the topics covered in Qiao’s tweets shows that they mainly reach their follower audience with strong ideological and China-related issues. In contrast, the tweets with more general topics allow them to achieve their outward-oriented goals (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018) as they reach users that are not following them.

There is also some critical discussion to be had about Qiao’s ability to offer such strong pro-China messaging on Twitter, a platform that is banned in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Qiao’s funding and background is not transparent, which has led to some suspicion about their potential proximity to the PRC government itself. Ever since its launch, it has never stated who its members are or who contributes to their posts. However, there is no conclusive evidence that Qiao is funded by the PRC and its messaging sometimes diverges from state-run media outlets, despite drawing on a number of English-speaking sources from PRC state-run media (Hioe, 2020). There is a real possibility that those running Qiao genuinely feel an unironic level of support for the PRC and its politics regardless of their paradoxical use of Twitter and other banned platforms. For example, Qiao once tried to join the popular Chinese blog website Zhihu,

but because of the “sensitive” nature of their posts, they were banned from the Chinese website and their posts were initially blocked. While their Zhihu account is now active again, this still shows that perhaps Qiao is not necessarily so well connected to the PRC to have free access to post on the Chinese internet, but instead is subject to the censorship apparatus they defend. Lausan on the other hand is more transparent about its membership and who writes for the outlet. Ever since their launch, their key membership has been traceable and interactive on Twitter, though it should be noted that Hong Kong organizations generally face security issues related to national security legislation passed by China. Neither organization is explicit about their funding, where it comes from, and potential conflicts of interest. And while this divergence between the two organizations in terms of their transparency and accessibility to their membership calls into question the legitimacy of each’s status as a bonafide alternative media outlet, they both see themselves as voices that offer counter-hegemonic discourse (Holt et al., 2019; van Leeckwyck, 2019).

As our frame analysis indicates, there is also the open question of whether Qiao can be classified as left-wing just because they are anti-imperialist. At the same time, they promote frames that are contradictory to a left-wing ideology. However, within their world view, it is not contradictory as they see China as a “vanguard of the global socialist revolution” (Robertson & Roberts, 2021). Furthermore, while the whole argumentation resembles the debates in the 1960s when some of the Western left saw China as a viable alternative, the situation today is different as China’s status as a socialist country is challenged by experts (Naughton, 2017). Still, Qiao sees China as a socialist country (Lanza, 2021).

There is also a possibility that the PRC may use Qiao indirectly or discreetly, similar to how WikiLeaks was tied to Russian foreign influence operations in the US (Hosenball, 2020). WikiLeaks was in its early stage, heralded as a new form of journalism (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2014), but is now seen as a platform that advances Russian interests. While perhaps not directly tied or funded by the PRC, by ideologically aligning with the PRC, Qiao provides organizational legitimacy as a US-based organization defending China from the US. How Qiao develops should be closely observed in the future, especially its potential ties to the PRC.

6. Conclusion

Our study is not without limitations. From a data perspective, we accessed the historical Twitter API to get Qiao’s retweets, and thus we might miss deleted retweets. Furthermore, our focus on Twitter leads us to miss out on other forms of social media outreach done by either organization. We also do not look in-depth into the specific content published on each website but instead focus on what is shared on Twitter in the form of concise tweets. Still, Twitter is in this context the most impor-

tant social media platform and reflects available content on its pages. Twitter, being a transnational platform, is a key tool for alternative media focused on global politics to reach an international audience. It is also the space where they directly compete with each other.

Our study also speaks to journalism and political studies more broadly. In an age where misinformation online has become a serious threat to democratic regimes around the world, understanding how media that shines a sympathetic light on authoritarian regimes can grow in popularity and spread is in need of further research within the field. As Baum and Potter (2019) note, Twitter has pushed public opinion on foreign policy into a less informed and more partisan realm. Rather than looking to sources from elites or established journalists, our foreign policy stances can be shaped by anyone on the internet, including people or organizations “sometimes by masquerading as domestic sources, sometimes even without such pretenses” (Baum & Potter, 2019, p. 754). We advance Baum and Potter’s call to better understand how Twitter as a platform shapes partisan foreign policy opinions. Tracking this form of communication requires some of the computational methods we have used in this study. We also hope our mixed-methods approach will serve as a useful framework for other political journalism studies and scholars interested in further investigating questions of misinformation, foreign policy partisanship, and democratic backsliding.

Our research suggests a potential future research subject for those interested in polarization and online communities. For scholars of polarization, our case shows that polarization does not only happen between counterpublics with different ideologies (Lien, 2022). Future studies should focus on possible cleavages between ideologically adjacent counterpublics within the same communication spaces. Even though both of these organizations are on the political left, their variation subsequently leads to distinctive communities at odds with each other. Instead of framing and counter framing from a left-right dynamic, we see this contentious back-and-forth play out within the same spaces on the left. How polarization within the left affects online communities and alternative media may provide more novel research directions for multiple fields. From a framing perspective, we see that the continuous process of framing–counter-framing is not just between mainstream versus alternative media, but that various alternative media fight for the “proper” framing of their political stance (Downing, 2008). Unlike most studies of alternative media framing that focus on alternative media versus mainstream (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2018), our study suggests that more attention ought to be spent looking inward at these various alternative media communities and how they deliberate and navigate their conflicting political frames (Cissel, 2012). Those interested in these questions of alternative media and the left should focus more on competing counterpublics, as Lien (2022) has done. Future research should extend our analysis by

including as many left alternative media as possible to evaluate the level of fragmentation and what different interpretive communities emerge.

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Conflict of Interests

Brian Hioe has contributed several articles to *Lausan* before this study.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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