

China's Diasporic Public Diplomacy in the UK: Mobilisation through Diaspora Associations and Diasporic Media, and the Paradox of Social Media Use

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Diasporic public diplomacy that covers diplomatic efforts aiming to mobilise members of the Chinese diaspora overseas, since its proposal in 2011, has gained central spotlight in China's quest for soft power. Academia has, however, yet to explore the role that two important strategies, namely diasporic associations, and the diasporic media, play in the process of mobilisation. This article, through a case study of the Chinese diaspora in the UK which analyses news and WeChat articles qualitatively, argues that the strength of economic, political, and emotional ties with China and pro-China narratives has a positive correlation to the effectiveness of mobilisation through diaspora associations and diasporic media with the help of social media. It also argues that the Chinese government's lack of information control over overseas social media platforms has rendered this social media a double-edged sword and countered part of the effect of Chinese diasporic public diplomacy efforts.

1. INTRODUCTION

Defined as Chinese living outside mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan (Tan & Wong 2018), thereby designating both 'overseas Chinese' (海外華人) who are usually first-generation migrants and 'Chinese with non-China nationalities' (華僑) which more commonly refers to descendants of Chinese migrants who do not have Chinese citizenship, the 'Chinese diaspora' consists of more than 60 million people (Zhang 2015). China's diasporic policies date back to the 1980s, the very beginning of the country's 'Reform and Opening-up' period. However, since the last decade, China has shifted away from engaging the diaspora primarily for domestic economic development and highly skilled resources to 'serve the country', to claiming them as 'public diplomats' as part of her quest for soft power (Thuno 2018).

The concept of 'diasporic public diplomacy' (僑務公共外交) was first proposed at the National Overseas Chinese Affairs Work Conference in 2011, where State Councillor and top diplomat of the Hu Jintao administration, Dai Bingguo, emphasised the need to encourage the diaspora to act as 'friendly ambassadors' in promoting cooperation and interaction between China and their host countries amidst 'complicated external circumstances'. In the same conference, Li Haifeng, the then-Director of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO), succinctly summarised the aim of diaspora engagement as recruiting the diaspora to act as a 'bridge' between China and their host countries (以僑為橋) (Xie 2011). He Yafei, upon being appointed as the OCAO's Deputy Director in 2012, reiterated the importance of diasporic public diplomacy in advancing China's 'international image' and 'soft power' (He 2012). In other words, China's public diplomacy does not aim at the diaspora solely as targets to rally support from, but also as potential actors to be mobilised to improve foreign perceptions of China.

As shall be seen in Section 2, a wide array of strategies was formulated subsequent to the proposal of diasporic public diplomacy. Such diaspora engagement policies have been a popular topic in recent

years, appearing frequently in news, commentaries, and literature. Yet, literature on China's diasporic public diplomacy remains relatively sparse. Current research almost invariably focuses on cultural-oriented strategies like language education and exchanges, paying little attention to those that mobilise the Chinese diaspora through diaspora associations and diasporic media. This article, therefore, wishes to contribute to this strand of literature by studying these neglected strategies through a case study of the United Kingdom.

The UK is selected as the case study for four reasons. First, the UK hosts the largest number of members of the Chinese diaspora in Europe. As of 2011, more than 433,000 people of Chinese ethnicity resided in the UK, making up 0.7% of the total population and the largest immigrant group (Office for National Statistics 2011). Second, due to unique political ties and tension with China, the UK hosts a vibrant body of Chinese diaspora associations and diasporic media. With Chinese migration traceable to as early as the Opium Wars in the 19th century, the UK has also become a popular destination for Chinese students and merchants (Benton & Gomez 2008). More recently, a new wave of migration from Hong Kong, China's Special Administrative Region and once a British colony, was sparked by Beijing's (perceived) increasingly tightened political grip since 2019 and the UK's introduction of a new immigration route for British National (Overseas) status holders from Hong Kong in 2021, with which more than 97,000 applications were approved (Gilchrist 2022). Thus, there are diaspora associations based on various common identities, as well as diasporic media both in Chinese and English languages, making the UK a case study with interesting new perspectives to look at. Third, as this article is being written, major political events and clashes have recently been occurring among the diasporic community in the UK, like the alleged attack by China's consulate general on an anti-China protestor who is a member of the diaspora from Hong Kong in October 2022. In these events, social media were heavily relied on as a tool for physical mobilisation. The UK thereby offers unique contemporary events for

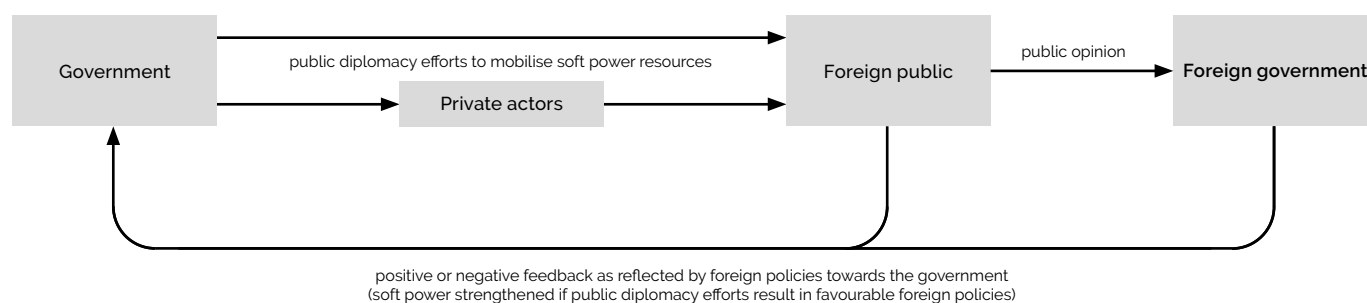


Figure 1 | Relationship between public diplomacy and soft power in Nye's theory.

the analysis of how China's state activities aimed at the diaspora abroad may influence political development in their host countries. Finally, most current research efforts choose Southeast Asian countries as the focus of study and this case study of the UK therefore contributes to existing research by enabling a more comprehensive understanding of how China's diasporic public diplomacy efforts are implemented and received outside of Southeast Asia.

In the following, Section 2 reviews literature on China's diasporic public diplomacy and that on diasporic mobilisation through diaspora associations and diasporic media. Section 3 studies China's engagement with diaspora associations and diasporic media in the UK by analysing news and WeChat articles. I argue that the stronger the economic, political, and emotional ties with China and pro-China narratives, the more effective the mobilisation through diaspora associations and diasporic media, though social media, acting as a double-edged sword, has countered part of the effect. Section 4 concludes by discussing the implications of China's diasporic public diplomacy.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 DIASPORIC PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Despite being coined by Edmund Gullion in 1965 as a term dealing with the influence of domestic and foreign public opinion on the formulation and implementation of foreign policies (as cited in [Cull 2006](#)), the term 'public diplomacy' is now more commonly associated with 'soft power', which refers to 'the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment' ([Nye 2008](#)). [Nye \(2008\)](#) describes public diplomacy as policy efforts to mobilise a country's soft power resources of culture, political values, and foreign policies to attract the foreign public and thereby influence foreign public opinion and subsequently foreign policies in their host countries. These policy efforts often involve broadcasting, subsidising cultural exports and arranging exchanges, which may be done both directly or indirectly, where the governments 'keep in the background' and private actors like non-governmental organisations, inter-governmental organisations, and companies take the lead. Where a country successfully converts these efforts into positive or even supportive foreign public opinion that brings favourable foreign policy outcomes, soft power is strengthened (see [Figure 1](#)). Therefore, what distinguishes the concept of public diplomacy from 'traditional diplomacy' is implementation targets:

traditional diplomacy targets foreign governments, while public diplomacy targets the foreign public ([Cull 2006](#)).

As observed from the official discourse, Nye's concept of soft power was extremely influential to the proposal of diasporic public diplomacy in 2011. As well as He Yafei, who directly linked diasporic public diplomacy with the concept, President Xi Jinping, at the National Propaganda and Ideology Work Conference in 2013, stressed the need for China to establish a Chinese discourse and to 'tell the Chinese story well' (講好中國故事) to international society ([Yu et al. 2020](#)). Scholars therefore mainly analysed the proposal as a kind of public diplomacy under Nye's theoretical framework.

Literature on China's diasporic public diplomacy generally addresses two questions: what the policies are, and how effective are they. The former strand focuses on shifts in both the diaspora's role in contemporary Chinese diplomacy (for example, [Liu 2011](#)) and the diasporic institutions' approaches to diasporic diplomacy (for example, [Yan & Li 2021](#)); while the latter strand is concerned with the effectiveness on foreign targets, i.e., whether the policies change foreign public opinion towards China (for example, [Wei 2016](#); [Mattingly & Sundquist 2021](#)).

Scholars generally agree that, in China's diasporic public diplomacy, the diaspora are both targets and actors: the Chinese government targets and engages them in order to mobilise them as 'public diplomats', who in turn influence foreign public opinion ([Hartig 2016](#); [Sun, Fitzgerald & Gao 2018](#)). Underlying this is the desire for more personal and thus more trustworthy narratives told by the diaspora, rather than the Chinese government, as [Liu \(2022\)](#) finds out in his interviews with officials, which corresponds with [Nye's \(2008\)](#) theoretical explanation of engaging in indirect public diplomacy to overcome the problem of public scepticism and mistrust towards foreign governments. This model is, therefore, a form of indirect public diplomacy deploying a non-conventional consideration of the diaspora as private actors, instead of the examples of non-governmental organisations, inter-governmental organisations, and companies, which are envisaged by Nye.

Since this article focuses on the effectiveness of China's diasporic public diplomacy efforts on the diaspora, the Chinese government's efforts or strategies in engaging them should also be given ample consideration. In terms of state apparatus, main central institutions that institutionalise relationships with the diaspora include the United Front Work Department

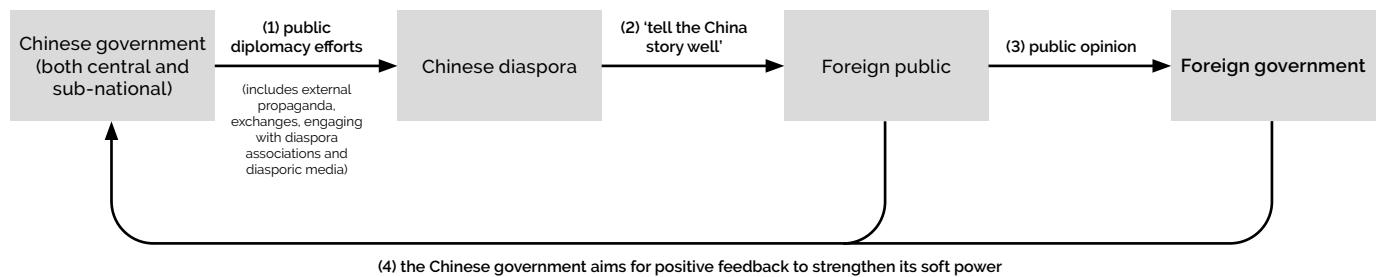


Figure 2 | China's diasporic public diplomacy.

(UFWD) under the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) structure, which had absorbed the OCAO since 2018, and the CCP-affiliated Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (FROC). Ministries and government agencies were also established at provincial and local levels, with structures and responsibilities corresponding with those at the central level. In terms of strategies, in the official discourse, these include external propaganda targeting the diaspora, Chinese language education, protecting the diaspora's rights overseas, cultural exchanges, and engaging with the diasporic media (Xie 2011; He 2012), which commonly refers to overseas Chinese language media controlled by the diaspora (Sun, Fitzgerald & Gao 2018). Ho and McConnell (2019) helpfully identified another crucial strategy: engaging with diaspora associations that have ties with China. These strategies do carry strong resemblances with Nye's public diplomacy efforts. Figure 2 summarises China's diasporic public diplomacy model, where step (1) refers to this article's focus: the process of adopting strategies to convert the diaspora into actors.

2.2 CHINA'S ENGAGEMENT WITH DIASPORA ASSOCIATIONS AND DIASPORIC MEDIA

Shangguan (2018) describes diaspora associations as the main points of contact between diasporic communities at the grassroots level and official institutions. The types of connection and underlying motivations vary: associations may promote economic ties and be driven by mutual needs (for the diaspora to open investment opportunities in China, and for Chinese institutions to attract foreign investments from the diaspora); they may also be simply driven by a sense of belonging, for instance, for the betterment of their ancestral homes. Whilst some diaspora associations are established through the diaspora's own initiatives, evidence suggests that the Chinese government is in frequent contact with, or even in actual control of many of them. Though the degree of connection with the Chinese government varies, it is found that most diaspora associations are dominated by CCP-affiliated individuals (Wong 2022). In researching the effectiveness in mobilising the diaspora, the general conclusion is that the stronger the ties with China, the more effective the diaspora associations in mobilisation (Liu 2011; Ho & McConnell 2019).

With regards to the diasporic media, Sun and colleagues' (2018) Australian case study found that, over the past three decades, the diasporic media owned and operated by Chinese from Hong Kong and Taiwan have been gradually replaced by those from mainland China. Virtually all diasporic media are now owned by the Chinese government or CCP-affiliated individuals.

As a result, Australia's diasporic media landscape has changed in two ways: the content caters more for the Mandarin-speaking audience from mainland China and displays stronger pro-China nationalism, which by extension, perpetuates Chinese propaganda externally.

For both diaspora associations and diasporic media, social media is an important tool to engage with their audience. Current research almost invariably focuses on WeChat, China's dominant instant messaging application with over 1.2 billion monthly active users, including 100 million overseas users (Ryan, Fritz & Impiombato 2020). On one hand, Sun, Fitzgerald & Gao (2018) observes WeChat's role in circulating pro-China sentiment in Australia; similarly, Ceccagno and Thunø (2022) study how WeChat was used to circulate pro-China sentiment during the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy. On the other hand, scholars have noted opposite effects. Ding (2021) argues that, whilst WeChat has created a virtual community connecting the diaspora with China, it increases the likelihood of disseminating criticisms against the CCP internationally. Wong (2022), in her case study of diasporic media in the United States, contends that pro-China sentiment is disseminated by wedge narratives that highlight discrimination and racism against the Chinese. Similar to Ding, she also argues that the availability of social media has reduced the effectiveness of diasporic public diplomacy efforts, as the CCP cannot censor or control opposing narratives that the diaspora has access to more freely overseas. She further proposes that these efforts are more effective in mobilising the diaspora who are less integrated into their host countries, which contradictorily limit the effectiveness in convincing the foreign public of 'the China story'.

3. CHINA'S DIASPORIC PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN THE UK

3.1 DIASPORA ASSOCIATIONS

The network of diaspora associations in the UK is one of the largest and strongest among host countries of the Chinese diaspora. Diaspora associations are established to connect different identity groups, ranging from merchants, students, to those of common ancestry. They are also established at national and sub-national levels. Consistent with research findings, they are dominated by CCP-affiliated individuals (if not already controlled by the CCP) at corresponding central or sub-national institutional levels. For example, the Chinese Students and Scholars Association in the UK (CSSAUK), the largest diaspora association in the UK connecting students across the whole of the UK, is funded by the Chinese Embassy's Education Section (CSSAUK

2022), a central government agency; whilst sub-national diaspora associations like the Shunde Friendship Association of the UK (SFAUK) targeting diaspora with Shunde ancestry is supported by the Shunde District Foreign Affairs Bureau (Liu 2015) and works closely with the Society for the Promotion of China Re-Unification in the UK (UKPCRS), an organisation controlled by the central UFWD (UKPCRS 2017).

Diaspora associations in the UK do confirm the positive correlation between the strength of ties, whether economic, emotional, or political, with their effectiveness to mobilise the diaspora. To exemplify, during the 9th World Shunde People Convention held in Newcastle in 2014, the SFAUK's Honorary President, Wu Shanxiang, through his ties with the Shunde General Chambers of Commerce (which is supervised by the Shunde District Government), facilitated the signature of a memorandum of friendship between the Shunde district and Newcastle city (Tan 2015). It is not hard to understand why the SFAUK is willing to facilitate Sino-British sub-national collaboration through its economic and ancestral ties. Apart from promoting development of their ancestral home which they have emotional bonding with, maintaining friendly ties with the Shunde District Government ensures the diaspora can continually reap material benefits from their ancestral home. This example also demonstrates the role of political ties: in addition to ties with agencies of the Shunde District Government, Wu himself is CCP-affiliated. Indeed, his role in the SFAUK led to political endorsement by the CCP, as reflected by his recognition by the China Central Television, the State Council Information Office and the OCAO as one of the ten '2015 Annual Persons in Spreading Chinese Culture' (Liu 2014). Particularly because of his strong political ties with China, he is more willing to act as the 'bridge' to expand the reach of China's diasporic public diplomacy.

Another example more directly relevant to the mobilisation of Chinese diaspora in the UK concerns political ties. Since the outbreak of anti-China protests in Hong Kong in 2019, CCP-affiliated diaspora associations, including the CSSAUK, the London Chinatown Chinese Association and the UK Fujianese Association (UKFA), have co-organised events to counter efforts by members of the diaspora from Hong Kong in rallying international support. One example of such an event is the demonstration in London's Chinatown against 'Asian discrimination' in 2021, which was one of the largest-scale demonstrations organised by diaspora associations since 2019 (Cheung 2021). The effectiveness of this demonstration in actually countering anti-China narratives aside, it did, through using wedge narratives to highlight discrimination which Wong (2022) contends, effectively mobilise nearly one-hundred members of the pro-China fraction of the diaspora to defend China.

Despite having strong ties that connect the diaspora, diaspora associations still rely on social media for communication. In areas with strong diaspora associations, WeChat presents an effective tool for mobilising the diaspora and coordinating such mobilisation. By way of illustration, in March and April 2020 when COVID-19 first became a global pandemic, the UKFA organised WeChat groups to gather and distribute personal protective equipment (PPE) for the Fujianese Chinese diaspora. Notably, in its WeChat articles (Table

1; next page) on supplies distribution, the UKFA reiterated concepts relevant to emotional ties like 'family' and 'the motherland' (see excerpt of Article 1 in Table 1), and stressed the role of Chinese government institutions, namely the Fujian Provincial FROC and Changle District UFWD in donating those supplies, as well as the Provincial Health Commission in offering free medical consultation services to the diaspora (see excerpt of Article 2 in Table 1). Reciprocally, the UKFA organised WeChat groups for donations for Fujian. A total of around 40,000 pieces of disposable medical supplies were donated to the Changle District. In response, the District UFWD issued a letter of gratitude towards the diaspora's 'deep love and affection towards [their] ancestral home', again reiterating concepts of emotional ties. This letter was subsequently circulated to the diaspora, regardless of whether they participated in the donation, through an article posted on the UKFA's WeChat account (see excerpt of Article 3 in Table 1).

The UKFA illustrates how the virtual community created via WeChat aids diaspora associations by strengthening emotional ties between the diaspora and their ancestral homes. Moreover, social media use proves effective in mobilising members of the diaspora to act for both their ancestral homes and the wider diasporic communities in their host countries, which, especially the latter, may enhance the Chinese image abroad.

3.2 DIASPORIC MEDIA

Turning to the Chinese diasporic media in the UK, one feature of the diasporic media landscape distinguishes it from that of many other host countries that have been studied academically: there is no dominating diasporic media. Even if the diaspora seeks information in Chinese language, their main sources are often the Chinese editions of mainstream British media like the *BBC* and *Financial Times* (Wei 2013). With a smaller audience reach *vis-à-vis* competitive mainstream media, and a lack of ties as strong as diaspora associations to bind readers, the diasporic media in the UK is inherently less able to mobilise the diaspora.

Yet, the pro-China sentiment among the diasporic media is still evident. A recent example is the clash at the Chinese Consulate in Manchester during a protest organised by pro-democracy members of the diaspora from Hong Kong on the 16th of October, 2022. In the incident, the Consul-General, Zheng Xiyuan, was alleged to have dragged a protestor into the Consulate and attacked him. Though covered at length by both Chinese- and English-language mainstream and diasporic media in the UK, Chinese and English editions of the *BBC* presented the story with a more factual and objective tone (see Table 2; p. 44), laying out responses from British and Chinese government officials and the protestor allegedly being attacked; while CCP-affiliated diasporic media *European Times* and its English edition, *China Minutes* recorded only China's official discourse, focusing on the righteousness of Zheng's act and condemnation of the protestors' 'malicious instigation and illegal entry' into the Consulate (see Table 3, p. 45). This suggests that Sun and colleagues' (2018) observation that the diasporic media generally displays a pro-China stance may apply beyond Australia—at least also to the UK, even though the diasporic media landscape is vastly different.

Original excerpt	Translation	Features
<p>Article 1 (UKFA 2020a)</p> <p>英伦福建一家亲，风雨同舟共抗疫</p> <p>英国福建同乡联谊会 2020-04-25 10:06</p> <p>庚子年初，新冠肺炎疫情在全球蔓延，给海外侨胞带来严峻挑战，福建家乡人民感同身受，万般牵挂。面对海外疫情的肆虐，祖国是永远的坚强后盾。福建省侨联和长乐区统战部等各级领导高度重视海外闽籍华人的安全健康，福建省政府组织采购了大批物资，支援海外乡亲抗击疫情。同时，福建省多个政府部门和世界福建青年联合会、台州市福建商会、等也都慷慨解囊。所有物资将分批次陆续抵达英国，再由英国的各个社团进行分配，派发给需要的福建乡亲们。英国福建同乡联谊会总会的成为其中一个友爱接力社团，尽其所能不漏掉任何一个需要帮忙的福建乡亲。</p>	<p>The UK and Fujian are like family, weathering the pandemic together</p> <p>UKFA, 25 April 2020</p> <p>In the beginning of the lunar Gengzi year, the COVID-19 pandemic has spread across the world, posing severe challenges to fellow overseas Chinese, which the people in their Fujian ancestral home empathise with and worry about a lot. <u>Facing the havoc wrought by the pandemic overseas, the motherland is your eternal stronghold.</u> Leaders of the Fujian Provincial FROC, Changle District UFWD, etc. are highly concerned with the safety and health of overseas Fujianese Chinese; <u>the Fujian Provincial government has purchased large amounts of supplies, to support fellow Fujianese overseas in fighting the pandemic.</u> At the same time, multiple government departments of the Fujian Province and the World Fujian Youth United Federation, Taizhou City Fujian Chamber of Commerce, etc., have contributed generously. All the supplies will arrive in the UK in batches, and will then be distributed by various associations in the UK to the our fellow Fujianese who are in need. The UKFA is honoured to be one of the associations to relay the love and care, and will do the best in not missing out any fellow Fujianese who need help.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reiterated the emotional ties between the Fujianese Chinese diaspora and mainland China Emphasised the role of sub-national government institutions in supporting the UKFA's distribution of PPE to members of the diaspora
<p>Article 2 (UKFA 2020b)</p> <p>英国福建同乡联谊会总会免费发放10万口罩给旅英闽籍乡亲</p> <p>英福联 英国福建同乡联谊会 2020-04-05 00:26</p> <p>咨询通道已开启</p> <p>可能会有人担心，我的英语不好，如果出现什么情况我没有办法很好的沟通应该怎么办？别担心，福建12320卫生健康热线服务平台海外闽籍侨胞专属通道开通，16日0时起，海外闽籍侨胞可拨打008659112320，在线与福建医疗专家咨询有关新冠肺炎内容。</p> <p>该通道由省卫健委，省侨联及中国电信福建分公司等单位联手筹建，平台接线人员已在省卫健委完成相关培训，105位来自省立及省属医院的呼吸、重症、感染、护理等科室的专家到位，将24小时不间断为海外乡亲提供新冠肺炎咨询服务。</p>	<p>UKFA distributes 100 thousand masks for free to fellow Fujianese residing in the UK</p> <p>UKFA, 5 April 2020</p> <p><i>The consultation channel has opened.</i></p> <p>Some of you may worry: my English is poor, what should I do if there are circumstances that I cannot communicate well to others? Don't worry, <u>the Fujian 12320 Health Hotline Services Platform Exclusive Channel has opened.</u> Starting from 00:00 on the 16th of April, fellow Fujianese overseas may call 008659112320 to consult medical experts in Fujian online on anything about COVID-19.</p> <p><u>The Channel is co-established by help from the Provincial Health Commission, Provincial FROC, China Telecom Fujian Sub-Company, etc.</u> The staff listening to calls has already undergone relevant training by the Provincial Health Commission. 105 experts from the departments of respiratory, critical illness, infection and nursing of hospitals established by or belonging to the province are in place, and they will provide COVID-19 consultation services to their fellow overseas Fujianese 24/7 without pause.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emphasised the role of sub-national government institutions in supporting the diaspora in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic by setting up an exclusive channel to provide them with free medical consultation services Highlights solidarity and concern towards the Fujianese Chinese diaspora, even though they are currently living abroad
<p>Article 3 (UKFA 2020c)</p> <p>英国福建同乡联谊会总会与长乐公会公布为国内疫情捐赠物资者名单</p> <p>英国福建同乡联谊会 2020-03-16 06:54</p> <p>中共福州市长乐区委统战部</p> <p>感谢信</p> <p>英国福建同乡联谊会：</p> <p>这段时间以来，新型冠状病毒肺炎疫情影响人民群众的身心健康和生命安全带来了严重的威胁。广大长乐人民按照区委、区政府决策部署，万众一心、众志成城、众志成城、迎难而上，全力打赢这场攻坚战。</p> <p>为了解防疫物资紧缺的困难，你们捐赠的一次性工作帽19700个、一次性手套18950只、防护眼镜1000个已于2月20日下午运抵长乐区委区政府工作应急指挥部入库，并已在第一时间发放使用。当前这些防疫物资对我们来说不仅是物质上的支持和帮助，更是精神上的安慰和鼓励。在此，谨向你们致以崇高的敬意和衷心的感谢！</p> <p>我们知道，一件件防疫物资凝结着你们的一片关爱之情；我们完全了解，当前世界各地的防疫物资都很紧缺，你们为购买以上捐赠物资付出了极大的心血，我们为你们爱国爱乡的慷慨而深感自豪和欣慰，长乐因你们会更加有力！</p>	<p>The UKFA and the UK Changle Association announce list of donors of supplies for the domestic epidemic response</p> <p>UKFA, 16 March, 2020</p> <p><i>UFWD of the CCP Fuzhou City Changle District Committee Letter of Acknowledgement</i></p> <p>To the UKFA:</p> <p>Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought serious threats to public health and safety. The people of Changle District, in accordance with the decisions and planning of the District Committee and District Government, have faced this tough battle in unity and with strong determination.</p> <p>To ease the difficulty of PPE shortages, the 19,700 pieces of disposable work caps, 18,950 pieces of disposable shoe covers, 1,000 pairs of protective goggles you have donated have arrived at the Changle District and have been sent to the Pandemic Prevention Work Emergency Command Department to put them in use immediately. These PPE supplies are not merely material forms of support, but also mental support and encouragement. Here, we would like to sincerely extend our highest respect and heartfelt gratitude to you!</p> <p>We know that <u>each piece of PPE is a crystallisation of your deep love and affection towards your ancestral home</u>; we totally understand that currently PPE supplies are in short supply all across the world, so you must have spent a lot time and effort to buy these donated supplies. <u>We are deeply proud of and grateful for your love towards your country and ancestral home, Changle will be more empowered because of you all!</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Official recognition of the Fujianese Chinese diaspora's contribution to their ancestral home Reiterated the emotional ties between Fujianese Chinese diaspora and mainland China

Table 1 | Excerpts, translations and analysis of articles published by the UKFA on its official WeChat account.

Original excerpt of the Chinese language report (Lam 2022)

Translation

BBC NEWS 中文

中共二十大：居英港人曼城示威風波 英國首相稱「令人深感憂慮」

林子晴
BBC中文特約撰稿人

2022年10月18日

中共二十大開幕之際，在英港人組織周日（10月16日）下午在中國駐曼徹斯特總領事館門外舉行集會；其間，有從總領事館走出來的人與示威者發生肢體衝突，引起英國傳媒和政府關注，使事件升級至外交層面。

英國首相特拉斯（Liz Truss）發言人回應事件指，「這些報道顯然令人深感憂慮」（obviously deeply concerning），「我了解到曼徹斯特警方已立即回應事件，並正作調查，因此我不宜評論」。

多名跨黨派英國國會議員促請英國外交部傳召中國駐英大使解釋，並指將最快於周二在下議院就此提出「緊急質詢」，詢問政府如何回應事件。

中國外交部發言人汪文斌星期二（10月18日）在例行記者會上回答媒體提問時回應說，「滋擾分子非法進入中國駐曼徹斯特總領事館，危及中國外交官舍安全」，「中國駐外使領館的安寧和尊嚴不容侵犯」。

是次的示威集會是由在英香港人組織「捍衛港人陣線」（Hong Kong Indigenous Defence Force）舉辦。

「捍衛港人陣線」發言人蒂姆（Tim）稱當天是希望藉著中共二十大召開，「以和平集會方式，包括展示標語和畫像」，表達對中共的反對聲音；襲擊事件令他們覺得「在英國的人權被侵犯，希望英國政府作出應變」措施回應。

20th National Congress of the CCP: Row over Manchester protest by Hongkongers residing in the UK; 'deeply concerning', British Prime Minister states

Lam Tsz-ching, 18 October, 2022

At the eve of the 20th National Congress of the CCP, associations of Hongkongers residing in the UK organised a demonstration at the Consulate-General of China in Manchester on Sunday (16th of October) afternoon; during the demonstration, someone walked out from the Consulate and physically clashed with the protestors, causing concerns among British media and politicians, which escalated the incident to diplomatic levels.

The Spokesperson for British Prime Minister Liz Truss responded by stating that 'these reports were obviously deeply concerning', and that '[she] understood that the Manchester police had immediately responded to it and is investigating, so it is inappropriate for [her] to comment'.

MPs across multiple parties urged the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office to summon the Chinese Ambassador for an explanation, and said that they will raise an emergency question in the House of Commons earliest next Tuesday, enquiring the government on its response.

The spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Wang Wenbin, responded to media enquiries at the regular press conference this Tuesday (18th of October) and said, 'instigators illegally entered the Manchester Consulate, threatening the safety of Chinese diplomats', and that 'the peace and dignity of Chinese Consulates shall not be infringed'.

This demonstration was organised by the 'Hong Kong Indigenous Defence Force', an organisation of Hongkongers in the UK.

'Hong Kong Indigenous Defence Force' spokesperson Tim said, that day they hoped to, on the occasion of the commencement of the 20th National Congress, present voices opposing the CCP 'through peaceful demonstration, including displaying slogans and pictures'; the attack makes them feel that 'their human rights in the UK were infringed, and that they hope the British government will take measures' to respond.

Original excerpt of the English language report (Tan & Fraser 2022)

BBC Your account Home News Sport Reel Worklife

NEWS

Chinese diplomat involved in protester attack, says UK MP

19 October

By Yvette Tan & Simon Fraser

BBC News

One of China's most senior UK diplomats was involved in violence against protesters at the Manchester consulate on Sunday, a British MP says.

"What we saw was the Chinese consul-general then ripping down posters and peaceful protest," Alicia Kearns told MPs in the House of Commons.

MPs in Parliament have privilege, allowing them to speak freely without fear of legal action.

China has not commented on Zheng Xiyuan's alleged involvement.

But the foreign ministry in Beijing defended the actions of consulate staff.

Spokesman Wang Wenbin said on Tuesday that people had "illegally entered" the grounds and any country's diplomats would have taken "necessary measures" to protect their premises.

Table 2 | Excerpts of news reports on the Manchester Consulate incident by the British mainstream media (BBC).

Every form of diasporic media relies on a platform to reach members of the diaspora, hence shifting their major circulation platform to the social media helped the diasporic media overcome their limited audience reach. *UK Chinese Times*, the UK's largest Chinese-language print weekly newspaper (Li 2013), aptly illustrates this trend. This was the first UK diasporic media to

establish its own website (Wei 2013), enabling online circulation. It subsequently developed a mobile application and created an official WeChat account. However, as of January 2023, its website domain has expired, its mobile application was last updated in 2019 (Google Play 2022), and its print edition was last published in January 2020 (UK Chinese Times 2020). Only its

Original excerpt of the Chinese language report (Li 2022)



Translation

19 October, 2022, China News Agency Spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Wang Wenbin, said at the regular press conference on October 19 that the Chinese government has made a formal complaint to the British government with regards to the instigations that occurred at the Manchester Consulate.

The China News Agency has reported that, Wang also emphasised that due to the malicious instigation and illegal entry into the Consulate General, Chinese officials were injured and the institution's safety was threatened. 'The peace and dignity of Chinese Consulates shall not be infringed. We hope that the British government performs its duty and takes effective measures and strengthens its protection towards the personnel and the property of Chinese Consulates, Wang said.

Original excerpts of the English language reports (Yu, Tian & Yan 2022; Yan 2022)

Ashley Yu, Tian Haoxuezi, Chris Yan / 26 October 2022 / Categories: News

China claims right to protect consulate after diplomatic staff hurt during protest

Chinese diplomatic staff suffered injuries, including one hit unconscious, during a violent protest at the country's consulate general in Manchester on Oct 16. Police failure to protect staff from the attack left them no choice but to act in "self-defence". Chinese official said at online media briefing on 24th Oct.

Yang Xiaoguang, Chargé d'affaires at the Chinese Embassy in the UK pointed out that the incident was "not about peaceful demonstration or freedom of speech, but violent harassment by Hong Kong independence advocates and their illegal assault on the premises and members of the Chinese Consulate."

Chris Yan / 21 October 2022 / Categories: News

CCTV footage of Manchester consulate shows staff member grabbed by protestors

On Sunday October 16th, a group of Hong Kong independence activists staged a protest in front of the General Consulate in Manchester. A video emerged that appeared to show a brawl between protesters and staff during a demonstration. On October 18th, the Chinese consulate in Manchester gave the CCTV footage to the Manchester Evening News regarding the incident. The consul-general Zheng Xiyuan also revealed the contents of a letter he has written to the Greater Manchester Police. He said he was waiting to hear back from the force over a proposed meeting and confirmed the footage would be handed over to officers.

Table 3 | Excerpts of news reports on the Manchester Consulate incident by the diasporic media (*European Times* and *China Minutes*).

WeChat account remains active, publishing an average of one to three news articles daily. Whilst shifting to WeChat assists *UK Chinese Times* in overcoming its inherent disadvantage, the fact that other platforms to reach the audience were shut down draws attention to another concern: the shift may instead have been driven by financial difficulties. It may therefore be inappropriate to jump from the diasporic media's use of social media to the conclusion that China can now engage with them to expose more members of the diaspora in the UK to pro-China narratives more effectively, let alone to an evaluation of their effectiveness in mobilising the diaspora.

3.3 SOCIAL MEDIA: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

The previous two subsections have noted the importance of social media, particularly WeChat, in building a virtual community to connect members of the diaspora in the UK with the larger diasporic community as well as China. As discussed in Section 2, one of the motivations of the Chinese government in relying on diaspora associations and the diasporic media to disseminate pro-China narratives through social media is the need for more personal and trustworthy narratives. This mode of indirect engagement also confirms another motivation: to avoid foreign scepticism towards the Chinese government. Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, the world's most popular social media platforms, had introduced a labelling policy to accounts operated by state-controlled or -affiliated media since 2020 (Gleicher 2020; Twitter 2020), mainly targeted at Chinese, Russian and Iranian media and widely understood as a move to contain foreign political influences by the named governments (Paul 2020). Twitter has gone even further

to stop recommending the content posted by these labelled accounts on home timelines, notifications, and search results (Twitter 2020), reducing the audience reach of Chinese state-affiliated media accounts by 30% (Schoenmakers & Liu 2021). It is simply unrealistic for the Chinese government to engage with and mobilise the diaspora using social media directly, not only because foreign backlash may come more easily, but also because the reduced audience reach further limits the effectiveness of such efforts in mobilising the diaspora.

Yet, whilst this virtual community built on social media aids diaspora associations and the diasporic media in cultivating their nationalism and mobilising them, the UK case study has showcased how it also has a potential to counter or even destroy China's diaspora public diplomacy efforts. Right before the opening of the CCP's 20th National Congress in October 2022, a lone protestor hanged banners calling for the removal of President Xi outside Beijing's Sitong Bridge. Like the fate of many other protestors in China, he was soon arrested and the CCP swiftly censored the protest by banning relevant keywords on Chinese social media (Mao 2022). Still, domestic Chinese people managed to post images of the protest onto overseas social media, which the CCP has no information control over. Those images were not only widely circulated internationally, but, more importantly, sparked members of the diaspora in voicing support towards the protestor. Signs were posted in over 350 universities worldwide (Citizens-DailyCN 2022), including University College London and Central Saint Martins College in the UK (Tang 2022); in London, a group was created on Telegram, an overseas instant messaging application, to organise

the diaspora in posting signs over the city, gathering over 400 members of the diaspora in just four days (Yuan 2022). Notably, many of these members were recently emigrated students and professionals, who are more likely to have maintained strong emotional and political ties with China and, according to Wong's (2022) argument, should be less easily mobilised to act against China. For instance, the protestor inspired students to join a demonstration at the Chinese Embassy in London, for many the first demonstration in their lifetime, when some of them had only been in the UK for a month (Yuan 2022).

Most recently in November 2022, nationwide protests in mainland China against the 'zero-COVID' policies have, like the Sitong Bridge protest, gained widespread publicity over social media platforms overseas and mobilised members of the diaspora to act against the Chinese government (Tung 2022). Though the local protests were soon pacified by the Chinese government's swift response to lift the strict lockdown restrictions that had been in place for two years, leading to the pacification of international protests by members of the diaspora as well, this is again an example of how social media connects members of the diaspora with the local Chinese and mobilises them in acting against the Chinese government.

The main cause of such diaspora mobilisation against the Chinese government is the free flow of information on overseas social media platforms. The CCP is known for constantly monitoring, censoring and banning sensitive content on Chinese social media platforms like WeChat and Weibo to prevent social unrest, but even with such powerful information control tools accompanied with digital surveillance technologies, local Chinese people have found ways to evade the censorship in order to express their discontent and organise mass demonstrations. This was seen in protests against the 'zero-COVID' policies, where protestors successfully voiced their disobedience with blank sheets of paper and communicated on social media platforms using oral Cantonese in written form (instead of the standard written Chinese) that the artificial intelligence censoring systems failed to understand and remove (Yeung 2022). Outside of China, information control by the CCP is even more ineffective. This is therefore why the CCP faces increasing difficulties in managing and suppressing the diaspora overseas: ties with China alone are no longer sufficient to tame their criticisms. By extension, the CCP cannot effectively mobilise the diaspora to work obediently for China's diasporic public diplomacy, confirming Ding's (2021) argument but partly refuting Wong's (2022) proposition that members of the diaspora who maintain stronger ties with China are more likely to be mobilised as China's 'public diplomats'.

4. CONCLUSION

The case study of the UK proves that China has, by engaging with diasporic associations and the diasporic

media, mobilised members of the diaspora to act as her public diplomacy actors. Mobilisation is particularly effective for diaspora associations organised based on ancestry and/or affiliation with the Chinese government, which has stronger economic, political and emotional ties with China. It is also effective where diaspora associations and diasporic media employ pro-China narratives, but the narratives propagated by the diasporic media are inherently weaker due to audience constraints.

Though this article places much emphasis on the roles of government institutions, it also demonstrates how such top-down mobilisation for China is increasingly tainted by bottom-up mobilisation against her in the social media era. Though the availability of social media platforms has facilitated communication with the Chinese diaspora and enabled the dissemination of pro-China narratives to a larger diasporic community, it has also facilitated the dissemination of anti-China narratives in the same way. The transnational nature of social media also means that the Chinese government cannot apply its powerful information control tools over those platforms as effectively as in domestic China. Consequentially, even with more effective dissemination of pro-China narratives, diaspora mobilisation may not be as effective, or in the worst cases, be ineffective. As diaspora associations and diasporic media continue to employ social media to engage with the diaspora, they require different strategies to manage downsides of this double-edged sword if China is to realise her goal of converting diasporic public diplomacy efforts into soft power.

Despite so, this article does shed some light on China's way forward. Examples of effective mobilisation in Section 3 are, interestingly, all driven by sub-national diasporic associations and Chinese government institutions at corresponding levels. Indeed, even though more central strategies and agencies like the FROC have been doing much to connect with the diaspora, scholars like Tan (2015) and Shangguan (2018) have rather focused on sub-national government institutions in studying the diaspora mobilisation. Given the heterogeneity among the diaspora, a common set of strategies formulated at the central level and implemented universally to different diasporic communities are less effective than those that pinpoint each community's characteristics. It is therefore suggested that China may accordingly consider shifting the main state actor of diasporic public diplomacy to sub-national level actors, focusing on each region's unique needs regarding economic opportunities and ties with ancestral homes. This warrants further research to confirm this suggestion that is drawn based on the UK, because historic and cultural contexts of host countries and their governments' public diplomacy efforts also influence the effectiveness of China's diasporic public diplomacy, and to explore more direct responses to the disruptive countereffects of social media use.

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