Tell China's Conspiracy Well

Networks and Narratives of Anti-CCP YouTube Conspiracists

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Abstract

Regarding political conspiracy theories as a combination of factually problematic information and populist morality, we draw on Habermas's theory of communicative action to analytically distinguish the factual and moral components of conspiracy theories. We combine social network analysis and discourse analysis to illustrate the networks and narratives of anti-CCP conspiracy theorists on YouTube. Inhabiting a peculiar information ecology and targeting an opaque government, these YouTubers constitute a critical case for understanding the networked dissemination of conspiracy theories and the discursive blend of truth and normative rightness claims in such theories. We first mapped out and compared the anti-CCP conspiratorial networks formed through YouTubers' mutual endorsement and emerged naturally from users' viewing behaviors. Three major segments of anti-CCP conspiracists were identified, namely a strategically coordinated Falun Gong group, a tightly knitted "Whistleblower Movement" block, and a loosely connected residual of political dissidents. Then, we conducted a discourse analysis on seven central channels in the network, illustrating how anti-CCP conspiracists legitimize their extraordinary claims by (1) leaping from basic facts to morally embellished informative fictions and (2) making reassuring doomsday predictions that dissipate revolutionary potential.

Keywords: conspiracy, theory of communicative action, YouTube, China

Combining false or unverifiable information and a populist orientation, conspiracy theories are explanations of events and situations that always invoke evil schemes contrived by a small group of powerful people (Bergmann & Butter, 2020; Uscinski & Parent, 2014). The conflation of truth and normative rightness claims is common in Western conspiracy theories. For example, people who hold normative rightness beliefs (e.g., that Democratic Party elites are evil) engage in motivated reasoning to look for objective evidence (e.g., these elites sexually groom children) (Enders & Smallpage, 2019; Miller et al., 2016; Radnitz, 2022). In such theories, the truth belief still matters as a support for the normative rightness beliefs that engender its "discovery" in the first place. However, in less transparent societies like China, where political truth is often unattainable, truth claims could be trivialized and give way to moral fiction. Either way, online conspiratorial communities should be regarded not as mere groups believing in "alternative facts," but as politically motivated propaganda networks in which fringe influencers strategically connect with each other to amplify their voices and radicalize audiences (Lewis, 2018). In this study, we draw on Habermas's concept of the three worlds to analyze how factual and moral components are manipulated to form conspiracy theories in a non-democratic context. We argue that modern conspiracy theories exemplify reactionary responses to the rationalization of worldviews defined as the differentiation of three validity claims, namely propositional truth, normative rightness, and subjective truthfulness (Habermas, 1984).

Our study focuses on anti-CCP conspiracists on YouTube. CCP, or the Chinese Communist Party, is the sole ruling party of the People's Republic of China. The party exerts tight censorship on both traditional and social media to silence dissents and secure its political authority (Xu, 2014). Extant literature has investigated various resistant practices of political dissidents in China (e.g., Cai, 2010; Deng et al., 2023; Elfstrom, 2021). However, to our knowledge, little study has been done on Chinese conspiracists that promote anti-CCP stories. Anti-CCP conspiracists resemble their Western counterparts in using unverified information and blaming a small group of people (i.e., top CCP officials) for social problems, but they stand out in the information ecology they inhabit and the opaque government they target. They constitute a critical case for understanding the networked dissemination of conspiracy theories and the discursive blend of truth and normative rightness claims in such theories. Drawing on literature on conspiracy theories, social-media-based political mobilization, as well as Habermas's (1984) theory of communicative action, this paper aims to (1) depict the anti-CCP YouTube influencer and commenter networks and (2) analyze core actors in the anti-CCP conspiracy network to understand their discursive strategies. More specifically, we investigate into the respective roles of (a) truth claims and (b) normative rightness claims in their narratives.

Literature Review

Conspiratorial Exchanges as Concealed Strategic Actions

Conspiracy theories are nothing new to human societies. In the Anglo-American context where this phenomenon has been extensively studied, researchers have traced conspiracy theories' history all the way to the early eighteenth century, citing it as one of the ideological origins of the American Revolution (Bailyn, 1992). While "conspiracy theories" and "conspiracists" usually enter media reports and academic articles as pejorative terms, scholars call for a more comprehensive approach to conspiracy by examining more closely how socio-historical contexts breed conspiracy theories (Wood, 1982). Instead of viewing conspiratorial thinking as simply pathological, historians and cultural anthropologists reveal that conspiracy theories are often symptomatic of more fundamental social and political problems (Butter & Knight, 2015).

Conspiracy theories prevail as one of the public's coping mechanisms in increasingly complex societies with covert political systems. People experience modern bureaucracies as a powerful and autonomous system over which they have little influence (Foley, 2020). The states' development of clandestine organizations and mass surveillance machines further exacerbates public skepticism (Zwierlein, 2013). Such insecurity steers groups of people toward conspiracy theories which, like ancient myths, not only render the world plausible through explanations but also make it controllable "in an imaginary way" (Habermas, 1984, p. 48). People who conjure up or buy into conspiracy theories, thus, might not hold malicious intentions. Instead, their speculative project can be driven by the civic

republican ideology that valorizes citizens who safeguard the republic by identifying corruption of power (Butter, 2014). Authoritarian societies with opaque decision-making processes and lack of checks and balances, therefore, become fertile breeding grounds for conspiracy theories (Cordonier et al., 2021). However, not all conspiratorial actions against authoritarian regimes are justified.

Participants in conspiratorial narratives, for example, QAnon activists and the anti-CCP conspiracists in our study, engage in what Habermas (1984) calls “concealed strategic actions” (p.333). Different from communicative actions that strive for mutual understanding, strategic actions aim at instrumental goals, while concealed strategic actions seek to achieve these goals in an opaque or even deceiving way. Instead of openly pursuing their goals, communicators engaging in concealed strategic actions implicitly advance their goals by making up narratives and telling stories, as if their objective was to achieve mutual understandings.

Habermas (1984) further distinguishes between unconscious deception and sheer manipulation in concealed strategic actions. A vivid illustration can be found in Conner and MacMuray’s (2022) categorization of QAnon conspiracists into *believers* who see truth in conspiracy theories, *purveyors* who propagate conspiracy theories to harvest money and influence, and *political actors* who exploit conspiracy theories for political purposes. Most purveyors and political actors are well aware of their perlocutionary goals (to earn money and political influence) and consciously manipulating their

interlocutors to achieve these goals. Believers, however, engage in a more subtle process of self-deception. Believers of QAnon, for example, subconsciously use the conspiracy to rationalize and legitimize their anti-Semitism, misogyny, nativism, and white nationalism (Hughey, 2021).

Habermas's theory of concealed strategic actions and Conner and MacMuray's (2022) categorization provide an entry to examine anti-CCP YouTubers and their audiences. As indicated in our analysis, while the influencers have specific goals of mobilization or monetization, the audience tend to resonate with conspiracy theories because of the unmistakable injustice they experience under the CCP rule and their sincere hope for democracy and freedom.

Anti-CCP Conspiracists and Their Audiences

Western mainstream media rarely pay attention to anti-CCP conspiracists unless they somehow affect American politics. Examples include Falun Gong's influences on Trump's campaign (Roose, 2020) and Guo Wengui's sponsorship for Steve Bannon (Whalen et al., 2021). Similarly, to the authors' knowledge, there is no systematic research on anti-CCP dissident opinion leaders, let alone conspiracists. The current study moves beyond the Western-centrism of conspiracy studies, examining a network of Chinese conspiracists on YouTube who strategically use unverified information and blame top CCP officials for all social problems.

Anti-CCP conspiracy theories inhabit a peculiar information environment. The Chinese government exerts two types of censorship over

information flows (Taneja & Wu, 2014). Domestically, they censor contents on news and social media (Xu, 2014), especially those with potential to incite collective actions (King et al., 2013). Meanwhile, they constructed the “Great Firewall” (GFW) to block mainland Chinese people’s access to overseas websites and social media platforms. Due to domestic censorship, the most prevalent conspiracy theories in China are often-times those led by the authority (Zhai & Yan, 2022). Anti-regime conspiracy theories, with their potential to radicalize audiences and incite collective actions (Gkinopoulos & Mari, 2022; Warner & Neville-Shepard, 2014), fall squarely within the category of speeches that get heavily censored in China. Such conspiracy theories, therefore, find their place on overseas platforms like YouTube and target Chinese diaspora, people from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macau, as well as mainland Chinese who circumvent the GFW. Selling stories that claim to “demystify CCP,” these anti-CCP microcelebrities use YouTube as their main broadcasting channel and steer the audience to alternative discursive-economic cliques.

To delineate the anti-CCP conspiracy sphere, we first map out the networks of conspiratorial YouTube influencers and audiences. Networking with fellow political influencers helps YouTubers attract and radicalize audiences (Lewis, 2018). As we understand anti-CCP conspiracists as mostly purveyors and political actors, network analysis of the YouTubers’ political and economic connections will help us better understand their strategic actions.

RQ1. What is the structure of the anti-CCP influencers' mutual endorsement network on YouTube?

In addition to the mutual connections initiated by YouTubers themselves, the network of anti-CCP conspiracy channels can also be understood from the audience's side. Due to the inaccessibility of YouTube channels' subscriber lists, researchers usually use shared-commenter networks as proxies for shared-audience networks (Rauchfleisch & Kaiser, 2020). While commenters are a very special subset of all viewers, we still believe that shared-commenter networks offer valuable insights into the similarities among different YouTube channels. If a significant number of people who comment on channel A's videos also leave comments under channel B's videos, it is reasonable to expect some connections between the two channels – they may cover related topics, hold similar opinions, or potentially share certain storytelling approaches or design features. While YouTubers' mutual endorsement network may reveal the influencers' personal relationships or business connections, the shared-commenter network can reveal some more substantial similarities among channels that make them appealing to the same group of viewers.

RQ2. What is the structure of the anti-CCP influencers' shared-commenter network on YouTube? To what extent does the shared-commenter network coincide with the influencers' mutual endorsement network?

Anti-CCP conspiracists target an authoritarian regime (i.e. China) where citizens have very limited knowledge and control over the operation of their government. This social context creates both an information vacuum that can be filled by conspiracy theories and a strong moral justification for theories attacking the authoritarian regime. To dissect the narrative strategies of conspiracists in this context, we adopt Habermas's theory of the three worlds as the analytical framework for the qualitative analysis of anti-CCP conspiracies.

Tango between Truth and Normative Rightness

Rationalization of worldviews is a central pillar of modernization. In the historical process of disenchantment, the totalizing mythical worldview "splits itself up into a plurality of value spheres" (Habermas, 1984, p. 247), namely truth, normative rightness, as well as beauty and authenticity. In his phenomenological adaptation of Popper's (1968) three worlds, Habermas (1984) distinguishes an objective world of things and events, a social world of human relationships and interactions, and everyone's own subjective world of feelings to which he/she has privileged access. Each world has its corresponding type of argumentation and validity criterion. One can make a truth claim about the objective world, which is judged by the claim's accuracy in describing the real world. One can also make a moral rightness claim about the social world, which is evaluated against the social norms shared intersubjectively within a social group. Similarly, one can make a subjective

claim expressing his/her inner world, the sincerity of which can be questioned and debated.

While false or unverifiable information constitutes the objective world of conspiracy theories, populism buttresses the social world of such theories. Populism, an elusive term often challenged for lumping together diverse political projects spanning different cultures, times, and ideologies, is fruitfully conceptualized by Brubaker (2017) as a set of loosely bounded discursive and stylistic themes. Conspiracy theories differ from scattered pieces of misinformation in that they always appear as narratives blending populist ideologies (i.e., moral rightfulness claims) and a carefully curated set of suspicious information (i.e., truth claims). Factually dubious stories of evil elites conspiring against the people, conspiracy theories are populist morality told through misinformation and misinformation embedded in highly moralized narratives.

Motivated reasoning underlies the truth-morality conflation of conspiracy stories, where one easily buys into a truth claim because of his/her pre-existing moral judgment or commitment (Cusimano & Lombrozo, 2021). Despite their fallacy of deriving an “is” from an “ought”, people who engage in motivated reasoning still use truth claims (regardless of their truthfulness) to support their moral reasoning. In some scenarios, truth can be even more marginalized, as demonstrated by Margolin’s (2021) theory of informative fictions (TIF).

Margolin (2021) distinguishes two types of information that people gather and exchange, namely property information that reports objects' attributes (truth claims that can be judged as true or false), and character information that describes agents' intentions, often taking the form of a normative rightness judgment of good or evil. When the agent in question is prominent and mysterious enough and when the decision at stake pertains to a relationship instead of the execution of an action, people tend to trade off factual accuracy in favor of more character information. The high stakes and low transparency of China's politics make such tradeoffs very likely. A study of conspiracy in the Chinese context provides an unique opportunity to examine the respective roles played by truth claims and normative rightness claims in conspiracy narratives, extending the current Western-centric approach to conspiracy theories.

Although YouTubers are the main anti-CCP storytellers, they are not the only actors in the conspiratorial information sphere. Scholars have repeatedly highlighted the important role played by ordinary people in co-constructing and spreading conspiracy narratives (Reinhard et al., 2022; Tanner & Campana, 2022; Zeng & Schäfer, 2021). Therefore, in this study we consider both videos and user comments in our analysis of anti-CCP conspiracy narratives.

RQ3. What is the role of truth claims in anti-CCP conspiracy narratives co-constructed by YouTubers and their audiences?

RQ4. What is the role of normative rightness claims in anti-CCP conspiracy narratives co-constructed by YouTubers and their audiences?

Methods

We first identified relevant conspiratorial YouTube channels through a search on Synthesio Dashboard for YouTube videos whose topic consists of both a keyword referring to the CCP or its higher officials (CCP, Zhongnanhai, Xi, etc.) and another keyword indicating inside stories (inside stories, scandals, forbidden news, etc.). We then checked the resulting channels and filtered out 30 channels that had less than 10,000 followers, focused on Taiwan/Hong Kong politics, used Cantonese, or did not propagate false or unverifiable information. To check whether a channel propagates false/unverifiable information, we scrutinized each channel's video titles and descriptions, and watched at least five videos to check whether problematic information is presented in the content. Those do not propagate false or unverifiable information were further removed from the sample. We then use the resulting sample as seed accounts to snowball other qualified channels by going through their subscription lists, featured channels, and featured playlists. The final sample contains 89 anti-CCP conspiracy channels. We then collected *all comments* under *all videos* in these channels as of the data collection period (November 21-28, 2021) through YouTube API v2.

We created two networks to answer RQ1 and RQ2 respectively. The first network aims at mapping out the connections *established by these influencers* among one another, while the second is a *share-commenter*

network of these influencers, which is not decided by influencers but *emerges naturally* from digital traces of channel audiences. For the first network, the researchers qualitatively walked through all the channels, and for each pair of channels, coded for its *displayed closeness* – how easy it is to encounter channel B while viewing channel A, since the influencer network is formed to direct audience's attention (Lewis, 2018). The link between two channels was coded as 1 if there was a unidirectional following relationship, 2 if the following was mutual or if one channel was featured in the other channel as a playlist, 3 if the two channels belonged to or featured the same person. We composed a weighted undirected network graph of these conspiracy theorists. Leiden's method (Traag et al., 2019) was performed to study the community structure within these influencers.

For RQ2, we created a directed network with *relative* commenter overlap as edge weight. For example, channel A's relative commenter overlap with channel B is the proportion of channel A's commenters who have also commented on channel B's videos. Taking the channels' commenter size into consideration, relative commenter overlap helps avoid overstating large channels' user overlap with small channels or underestimating small channels' user overlap with large channels (Mukerjee et al., 2018). After using backbone extraction (Serrano et al., 2009) to filter out insignificant ties, we used Leiden's method (Traag et al., 2019) to detect commenter communities.

RQ3 and RQ4 focus on narratives of anti-CCP conspiracy videos and comments. We selected central channels in the shared-commenter network for an in-depth qualitative examination. More details about channel selection will be discussed alongside the shared-commenter network results. For each selected channel, we adopted interval sampling and analyzed the first video they posted every month (n = 375). In addition, we read through the transcripts for all videos posted by Wenzhao (the most central node in the shared-commenter network and the most subscribed channel in our samples) in 2020 (N = 179). We also browsed the comment section under each selected video. We used discourse analysis to investigate the roles of truth and normative rightness claims in the conspiratorial narratives co-constructed by YouTubers and their active audiences.

Findings

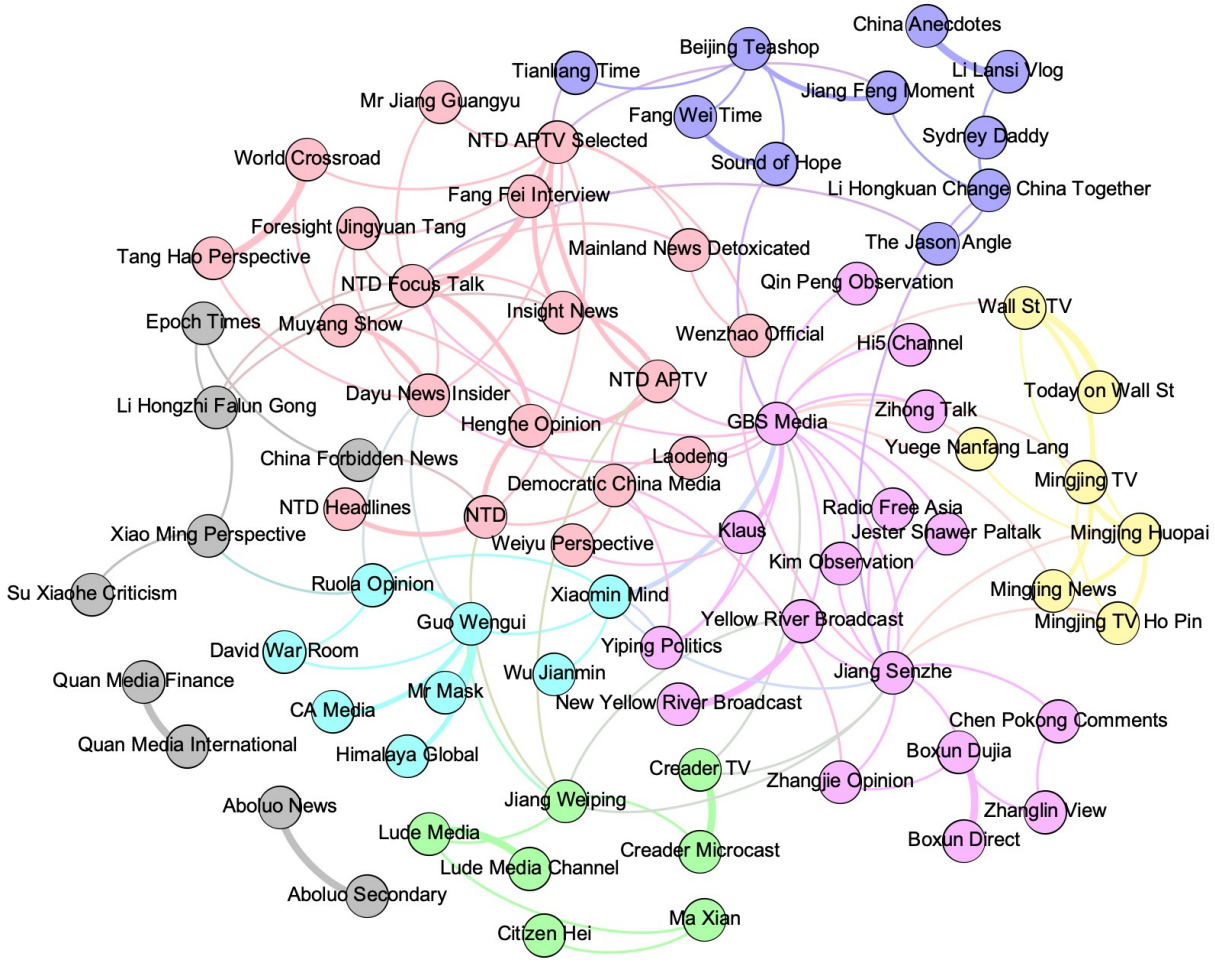
Anti-CCP Conspiratorial Influencer Networks

Endorsement Network

Our analysis reveals a loosely connected anti-CCP influencer network (density = 2.4) on YouTube. Leiden cluster analysis (Figure 1) reveals three major components of this network – two tightly knitted 'Whistleblower Movement' blocks (most channels in the teal and green clusters), a strategically coordinated Falun Gong network (the red cluster and some adjacent channels in the gray and purple clusters), and a weakly connected residual of political dissidents.

Figure 1

Endorsement Network of Anti-CCP Conspiracy Theorists on YouTube



The 'Whistleblower Movement' (WBM) blocks were originally one unified block consisting of channels owned by Guo Wengui (Guo Wengui, CA Media, Himalaya Global) and his core followers who borrowed his influence to establish their own channels (Ruola Opinion, David War Room, Mr. Mask, Lude Media, and Lude Media Channel) while keeping in close contact with Guo through mutual endorsement, guest appearances, and co-streaming. Originally a Chinese billionaire, Guo fled to the U.S. during the 2014 anti-

corruption campaign, started to share sensational stories of CCP's high officials on YouTube, and self-acclaimed as a "whistleblower". He also engaged in political collaboration and economic transactions with Steve Bannon (c.f. Whalen et al., 2021). Later, his key disciple Lude (Hui & Cohen, 2020) severed ties with him in 2021, leading to the formation of the small green block at the bottom.

As an insider with a lot of exclusive information about the CCP's high-level politics, Guo was an influential dissident at the beginning. His main target has always been Wang Qishan, the former Vice President of China, who previously served as the chief of the party's anti-corruption campaign. He accused Wang's family of concealing their overseas assets[i] and stockholding in HNA, the parent company of Hainan Airlines[ii]. As HNA went bankrupt (Stevenson, 2021) and one of Wang's top assistants got imprisoned (Zheng, 2021), the rough correspondence between Guo's videos and real-world events earned him a lot of attention and some credibility (Osnos, 2022). However, as time goes by, Guo seems to have run out of stories. His channel (and those of his disciples) is gradually overcome by blatant conspiracy theories[iii], empty moral rhetoric[iv], and flame wars with other YouTubers[v]. To monetize his influence, he runs an organization called "The New Federal State of China (NFSC)[vi]" with Steve Bannon, an important purpose of which is to promote his own cryptocurrency - Himalaya Coin[vii].

Falun Gong is a controversial spiritual movement prosecuted by the Chinese government in the 1990s. Its YouTube network strategically

incorporates different types of channels – television-station-like channels (e.g., New Tang Dynasty Television NTD), political talk shows (e.g., Dayu News Insider), opinion leaders (e.g., Tianliang Time), and a large network of foreign language channels beyond the scope of our research (Roose, 2020). These channels also have different levels of connection with each other. Counterintuitively, though belonging to the same spiritual movement, Falun Gong channels have not realized all possible connections among themselves. In the same vein, not all Falun Gong channels are equally explicit in expressing their religious affiliation. While channels like NTD include some Falun Gong elements in most of their videos, stand-alone opinion leaders like Zhang Tianliang rarely talk about the spiritual movement in their everyday shows. As Falun Gong is heavily stigmatized in China, such strategic ambiguity of some Falun Gong-related influencers could be beneficial for the spiritual movement to reach a broader audience. Falun Gong channels also use their sizable YouTube audience base for greater profits. They developed a new platform named Ganjing World (which translates to "clean world")[viii] where they provide member-only contents, offer a 100 USD online course on CCP's evil deeds, and sell Falun Gong books. Falun Gong influencers use their YouTube channels as both centers for anti-CCP storytelling and gateways to a niche platform tailored for monetization.

Finally, the remaining network is composed of weakly connected *political dissidents*. Some of them were part of the 1989 student movement, including movement leaders and participants (e.g., Chen Pokong, Li Yiping,

and Zhang Lin in the pink cluster as well as Li Hongkuan in the purple cluster) and prosecuted journalists (e.g., Ho Pin and his Mingjing Media Group that occupy the yellow cluster). Instead of a tightly connected cluster, these channels constitute more of a residual that belongs to neither Falun Gong nor the WBM. But, like YouTubers in the other two networks, these political dissidents also utilize various platform affordances to profit from their YouTube content. Paypal and Patreon links are the most direct and commonly used way for soliciting funds. Some also provide paywalled content to members of their YouTube channels (e.g., Citizen Hei) or personal websites (e.g., Chen Pokong).

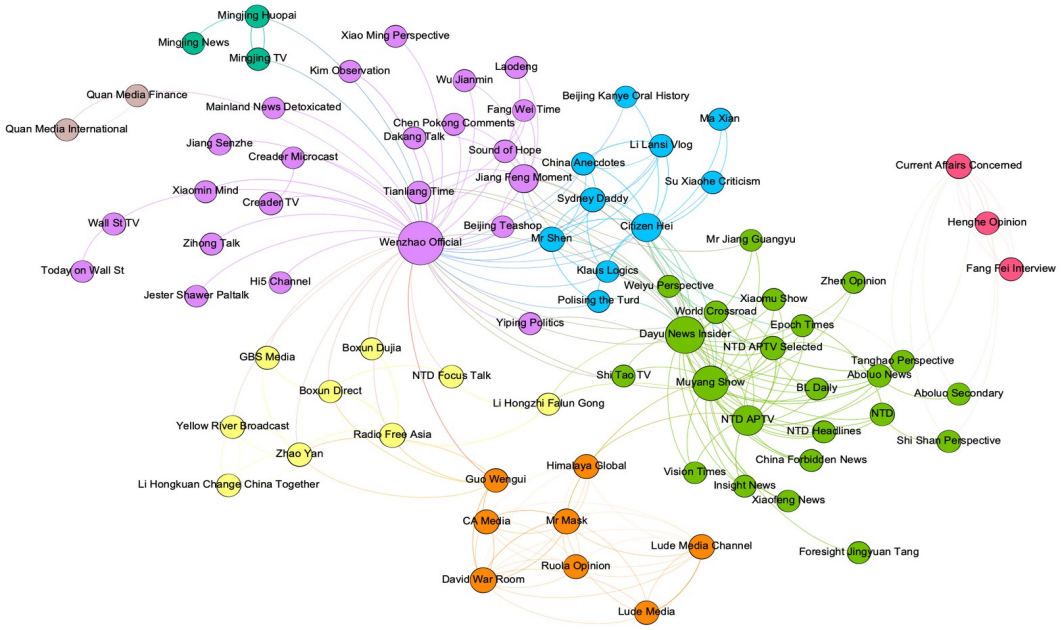
Shared-Commenter Network

The backbone-extracted shared-commenter network (Figure 2) has a moderate density of 3.6, which is lower than a similar study of the German far-right audience network (Rauchfleisch & Kaiser, 2020), indicating that vocal anti-CCP conspiracy YouTube audience forms a relatively loose community. To check the exclusivity of the conspiratorial network, we include Wuyue Sanren (251K subscribers) and Wang Dan (68.3K subscribers), two anti-CCP political opinion leaders whose videos do *not* involve unverifiable information, to compose another backbone network. The two channels' audiences display little overlap with conspiratorial channels (except an overlap between Wuyue Sanren and Laodeng, a marginal channel in the pink cluster), indicating that conspiratorial and non-conspiratorial anti-CCP communities on YouTube are two distinguishable groups. The conspiratorial

anti-CCP commenter network, though sparser than its German counterpart, is quite siloed.

Figure 2

Backbone Shared-Commenter Network of Anti-CCP Conspiracy Theorists on YouTube



Note. Nodes are sized based on in-degree centralities.

Different from the influencer network formed through YouTubers' mutual endorsement, the WBM audience communities (orange) are tightly and exclusively connected to each other. Other channels which are clustered with WBM in the influencer endorsement network do not share many commenters with WBM channels. While most Falun Gong channels fall into the green cluster, some YouTubers with Falun Gong connections (e.g., Tianliang Time, Sound of Hope) share more audience with outsider channels in the pink cluster. Apparently, YouTubers' mutual endorsement is not the

only mechanism driving shared commenters. The exclusive shared-commenter cluster of WBM channels may result from a niche audience base interested in a unique topical focus or narrative structure shared only among the WBM channels, while the penetration of some Falun Gong YouTubers into another audience sphere may imply some inclusiveness in their topics or narratives that appeals to a broader audience.

Compared with the YouTuber endorsement network which depends heavily on influencers' personal, organizational, and business relationships, we expect the shared-commenter network to reflect some narrative similarities among channels that make them appealing to the same group of viewers. Within the two major shared-commenter clusters, we each selected two channels with the highest in-degree centrality, namely Wen Zhao and Jiang Feng from the pink cluster, as well as Muyang Show and Dayu News Insider from the green cluster. Within the three medium-sized clusters, we each selected one channel. Based on in-degree centrality, we chose Yellow River Broadcast from the yellow cluster and Citizen Hei from the blue cluster. All channels in the orange cluster are associated with the WBM started by Guo Wengui. As Guo turned off the comment section for most of his videos, his central role within the cluster is not adequately reflected by the shared-commenter network graph. Therefore, we still chose Guo instead of other high-centrality channels from the orange cluster. The seven chosen channels also cover five of the six sizable clusters identified in the influencer endorsement network.

Table 1

Information of Videos Used in Thematic Analysis

YouTuber	Start Date	End Date	Number of Videos Analyzed
Wenzhao	Jan 7 2017	Oct 3 2022	70
Guo Wengui	Feb 13 2017	Oct 1 2022	68
Li Muyang	Nov 7 2018	Oct 1 2022	48
Dayu News Insider	Mar 21 2019	Oct 1 2022	29
Jiang Feng	Jun 1 2018	Oct 1 2022	53
Citizen Hei	Apr 7 2019	Oct 1 2022	43
Yellow River Broadcast	Jul 7 2017	Oct 6 2022	64

Note. The authors analyzed data beginning at each channel's commencement date and ending in early October, 2022.

We adopted Habermas's theory of three worlds to guide our discourse analysis of conspiratorial narratives of the seven selected channels. Despite these channels' differences in organizational structures, topical focuses, and narratives, they share a similar narrative structure which strategically conflates truth and moral rightfulness claims. These anti-CCP conspiracist lend credibility to their extraordinary claims by moralizing current affairs in China and depicting a doomed destiny of evil CCP politicians. Detailed narrative strategies of anti-CCP conspiracists are discussed in the section below.

The Making of An Anti-CCP Conspiracy Narrative

Extrapolating Informative Fiction from Basic Facts

The making of an anti-CCP conspiracy theory usually starts from motivated reasoning, where the influencer selectively seeks and presents information unfavorable to the CCP. Such information ranges from clues about the CCP's high-level politics (e.g., fractional struggles within the party leadership) to trendy social news in China (e.g., the Xuzhou chained mother incident, controversies over COVID measures, and various civil rights infringements). Notably, most of these basic facts are truthful and verifiable. To establish the validity of their claims, the YouTubers not only provide video footage and recordings but also widely cite and triangulate secondary sources.

Here, things begin to break down. To support a basic factual claim, anti-CCP influencers often juxtapose authoritative sources, such as the New York Times (NYT) and the Washington Post, with suspicious Falun Gong news outlets (e.g., NTD, the Epoch Times, and Minghui), other fellow anti-CCP YouTubers, or fringe Western politicians and commentators (e.g., Steve Bannon, Gary Bauer, and Kevin Roberts). The authoritative sources not only speak for the factual claim but also lend legitimacy to the accompanying unreliable sources which serve as bridges between basic facts and informative fictions. For example, in a video about the U.S. human rights sanctions on China[ix], Li Muyang uses an NYT article to set the scene, but proceeds to cite Minghui and interpret the sanctions as a punishment for China's persecution of Falun Gong. In this case, the NYT article and the Minghui one share the basic factual claim that the U.S. is sanctioning China

for human rights concerns, but the latter goes one step further to extrapolate a connection between the sanctions and the tussle between the CCP and Falun Gong. In this way, Li Muyang creates an informative fiction that uses inaccurate factual claims to reinforce the portrayal of a victimized Falun Gong group and an evil CCP.

The leap from facts to fictions, however, were largely well received by the audience. Some users simply accept the YouTuber's claim. For example, a top comment that has received 245 likes (the average number of likes received by comments in the dataset is 5.317), translated into English, reads: "Finally, I am witnessing the punishment of those who persecuted Falun Gong believers and harvested their organs. I broke into tears. Thank you, the U.S." Most people, however, pick up from the video the novel-like contrast between the evil CCP and a heroic U.S. government, while ignoring the YouTuber's problematic factual claims about Falun Gong. A representative comment reads: "Thumb up for Uncle Trump! God destroys the CCP. You'll win people's hearts if you follow the God!" We will further unpack the nuanced moral judgments and action orientations embedded in such comments in later sections, but the prevalence of comments of this sort under a factually dubious video already illustrates the effectiveness of coherent character information in distracting people from factual details, in line with Margolin's (2021) theory.

Mapping Facts onto Fairytales

To portray vivid characters with distinguishable and consistent images, anti-CCP conspiracists also resort to established plotlines in popular culture and history. Invoking the fascist birth control program aimed at increasing the proportion of "racially pure" Aryans, Jiang Feng compares the CCP to the Nazi Party in WWII Germany while commenting on a Chinese researcher's controversial experiment of genetically modified babies[x]. By mapping characters in current affairs onto archetypes in well-established storylines, anti-CCP YouTubers reduce complicated moral paradoxes like gene editing to simple dichotomies of good and evil. They take advantage of people's shared moral evaluations regarding historical events and popular cultural products to sell their anti-CCP informative fictions. Through such cumulative efforts of mapping concurrent events and situations onto household stories and comparing the CCP to various infamous figures, the YouTubers have managed to build a convincing metanarrative about the fundamental conflict between an evil CCP and the innocent and miserable Chinese people. This metanarrative derived from and reinforced by discrete stories, in turn, enhances the credibility of each individual story that aligns with it.

In the comment sections of such videos, viewers rarely point out the YouTubers' moral reductionism. Instead, they take on such morally loaded narratives and spin them even further. A telling quote under Jiang Feng's video about gene editing reads: "[…] Is there any information on the bizarre phenomenon of the one-child policy which slaughtered lives and sterilized a whole generation? […] Contemporary ways [of discriminating and repressing

people] in China are no less than those adopted in the Hitler era." This comment echoes Jiang Feng's Hitler metaphor and co-constructs the "evil CCP vs. miserable Chinese people" metanarrative shared by anti-CCP conspiracists. It also resonates among other viewers, as demonstrated by the high number of likes (60) it has received.

Religions and spirituality constitute another source of legitimacy for anti-CCP YouTubers. Many influencers we studied are religious – Dayu and Li Muyang are followers of Falun Gong; Jiang Feng is a Christian; Wenzhao is ambiguous about his religious affiliation yet openly spiritual (he also follows and features many Falun Gong channels); while Guo Wengui ends a lot of his videos with a long prayer to multiple gods including Buddha and Jesus. Religions can be viewed as another established theme for these influencers to anchor anti-CCP narratives. They have established a dichotomy where believers of God are good-natured human beings who always tell the truth, while the CCP, an atheist party, is evil and full of lies. Religiosity and spirituality are framed as necessary conditions for personal integrity and societal justice, as illustrated by the following quote from Guo Wengui[xi]: *"China doesn't have any '-isms'. It only has pragmatism, fraud-ism, and unscrupulous success-ism. They don't care whether things are true or false, good or evil. They only care about their momentary gain and loss."*

Overall, in anti-CCP conspiracists' narratives, religions and cultural aesthetics are used not only to *interpret* socio-political facts but also to *validate* factual claims. In the cumulative process of using established

storylines to interpret the CCP's various deeds, the influencers have gradually built up a morally loaded metanarrative that lends credibility to any future news that is unfavorable to the CCP. Moreover, for many of them, the CCP's wrongdoings can be explained by its atheism. The way they connect politics and religions demonstrates what Weber (1993) would call a "re-enchantment of worldview", whereby the realm of objective facts carved out by scientific methods and enlightenment reasoning is reclaimed by mythologies.

Demobilizing through Reassurance

So far, we have discussed most components of an anti-CCP conspiratorial narrative (see Table 2 for a summary alongside examples from one of Guo Wengui's videos[xii]). The conspiracists usually start with a well-corroborated basic fact that the CCP has done something bad, exaggerate the fact or add baseless details to it to produce an informative fiction, and then make a moral judgment on the informative fiction, usually through mapping the characters onto established plotlines. The last but equally important component is a doomsday prediction.

Table 2

Structure of An Anti-CCP Conspiratorial Narrative

Component	Formula	Example
Basic fact	The CCP did a bad thing.	Hong Kong police seized Guo's assets.
Informative	Exaggerate the basic	The CCP has stolen China's

fiction	fact or add baseless details	financial system.
Moral judgement	The CCP is evil.	This is the punishment for the 1.4 billion Chinese people who tolerated the CCP who contaminated the environment, damaged people's morality, printed money and stole the economic fruit of Western capitalism.
Doomsday prediction	The CCP is doomed.	The value of HKD and RMB will plunge. All the wealth accumulated by Chinese people will evaporate.

There are three paths to the CCP's doomsday. An anti-CCP influencer usually endorses some or all the potential paths in his/her videos. First, tensions within the CCP's top leadership constitute a recurring theme of many conspiracists. They believe internal power struggles will eventually lead to the CCP's collapse. Second, some YouTubers believe that the West, especially the U.S., will dismantle the CCP through their foreign policies. Such sentiment was particularly strong during the Trump era when the U.S. government persisted in the trade war with China and stayed vocal on China's human rights issues. The third path to the CCP's doomsday is metaphysical. In addition to a map of good and evil, the aforementioned "believer of God vs. atheist CCP" dichotomy also comes in handy as a doomsday prophecy – because the CCP is sinful and God is all-knowing and omnipotent, God will punish the CCP[xiii].

As scholarships on Western conspiracy theories have repeatedly pointed out, conspiracy theories can be regarded as a public coping mechanism against overwhelming state power and bureaucratic lack of transparency (Zwierlein, 2013). Information, informative fictions, and their interpretation alone do not generate a sense of control or hope for a better future given the CCP's enormous power. Thus, anti-CCP conspiracists use doomsday predictions to bestow meaning onto their production and the audience's consumption of the conspiracy videos. Doomsday predictions reassure people that they are standing on the right side of history, and that their cause will eventually prevail. See a telling user comment below:

"*Hi Mr. Wenzhao, thank you. We cannot see any light in the darkness before dawn, but we can nurture the goodness in our heart. Never give up, Trump. Add oil [Good luck], Trump. Stay away from evilness. Stay away from the plague. God will destroy the CCP. Quit the CCP*[xiv] *for safety and peace. Wish every good person safe and sound in 2021* □"[xv]

This user combines the second and third doomsday predictions in her comment. She wishes Trump wins the presidential election and continues to target China with his foreign policies, while also believing that God will destroy the CCP. However, for her, she and other believers of conspiracy videos do not have much to contribute to this process apart from staying away from the CCP, "nurturing the goodness in our heart", and waiting for the dawn.

As illustrated by the user comment above, anti-CCP conspiracy videos, while generating resonance among their audiences, do not mobilize people into taking actions. Piven and Cloward (1978) have identified three important stages of social movement mobilization: (1) the status quo loses legitimacy, (2) previously fatalistic people begin to assert their rights and demand changes, and (3) people start to believe they have capacity to change things. Anti-CCP conspiracists have accomplished the first two mobilization goals by revealing the CCP's crimes and telling people they deserve truths and rights. However, in conspiratorial narratives, the CCP can be doomed by God, destroyed by Americans, or wrecked by its own internal fractions, but rarely overthrown by the people. Instead of mobilizing people to take actions, such videos exempt audiences and the YouTubers themselves from physical participation in politics or revolution. God will destroy the CCP, we just need to wait, believe, and see.

Discussion and Conclusion

Recognizing conspiracy theories' tendency to conflate truth and moral rightness claims, we selected the case of anti-CCP conspiracy videos to illustrate the creation and dissemination of factually problematic yet morally sympathetic conspiratorial narratives. First, trivializing truth and emphasizing moral advocacy, anti-CCP conspiracists resemble alt-right influencers more than conspiracists in Western countries. While Lewis (2018) demonstrates a densely connected alt-right influencer network in the U.S. context, we find that anti-CCP conspiracists form a fragmented propaganda

network with a tightly connected Whistleblower Movement cluster, a strategically connected Falun Gong cluster, and a residual of political dissidents. Next, through the shared-commenter network, we've illustrated how these channels are linked to each other from the audience's perspective.

Finally, upon closer inspection of the videos themselves, we illustrate the skillful blend of truth and moral rightness claims in conspiracy narratives. Anti-CCP YouTubers usually use verifiable basic facts to lead people into their narrative, stretch the facts to tell fictions that serve their own political agenda, reduce complex real-world issues into moral dichotomies established in popular cultural and historical storylines, and punctuate the narrative with doomsday predictions saying that the CCP will eventually collapse. This formula does not make much sense in the objective world where things and events are supposed to be causally connected, but it is coherent from a social world perspective. The CCP is always evil while believers of God are always good. Each major character has a unique and consistent personality portrayed by influencers and agreed upon by most viewers. This metanarrative co-constructed by anti-CCP videos and comments forms a social world where moral judgments shared by conspiracists and their audiences become the "logic" that glues together the materially inconsistent facts and informative fictions pervading the conspiratorial sphere.

Having delegitimized the CCP's rule and showed people some hope for change, anti-CCP conspiracists, however, fail to mobilize people into taking actions. It is indeed dangerous to participate in collective actions

against the powerful Chinese government. However, resistance can take on various forms other than large-scale social movements. Similarly, people can deliberate online in more fruitful ways. For example, Wang's (2022) ethnographic work illustrates how Chinese Muslims strategically stay lowkey online while still communicating with each other to preserve their community. Facing repressive regimes like China, self-care, mutual aid, and community preservation all constitute prudent resistant tactics. Anti-CCP conspiracists, nonetheless, are not sending such messages. Instead, they monetize politics at the expense of misleading their audiences. They produce an outrage-centered discourse (Berry & Sobieraj, 2016) which capitalizes on emotion to attract and retain audience attention.

Our research contributes to existing literature in multiple ways. Empirically, we are the first to map out a comprehensive network of anti-CCP conspiracists, remedying the lack of research on Chinese dissident opinion leaders. Theoretically, we draw on Habermas's theory to analytically distinguish the factual and moral components of conspiracy theories and illustrate how they are woven together to construct credibility for conspiratorial narratives. Furthermore, we answer the call for research on conspiracy theories in diverse cultural contexts (Zeng et al., 2022) and contribute to the scholarly understanding of conspiracy theories against repressive regimes. We illustrate three features of such conspiracy theories: (1) the trivialization of truth due to a lack of government transparency and credible news sources, (2) the prioritization of moral claims taking advantage

of the widespread resentment against their rivals, and (3) a unique element of demobilizing reassurance given the limited room for collective actions. We believe our findings can, to some extent, travel to societies with similar socio-political characteristics.

This study has several limitations. First, we used the shared-commenter network as an indicator of substantial similarities and differences among anti-CCP conspiracy channels and decided the subjects for our in-depth qualitative analysis accordingly. Another useful reference would be a topic resemblance network based on video transcripts. We did not pursue this approach as most channels we analyzed do not provide transcripts, and YouTube does not offer automatically generated captions for Chinese-language videos. Second, we analyzed comments in line with videos, mainly looking for evidence of people agreeing or challenging YouTubers' arguments. Future research should further disentangle the nuances within user comments under anti-CCP YouTube conspiracy videos.

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[i] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1qgZnEZd3Zk

[ii] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uoMlhusFIkY

[iii] Covid conspiracy theories: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XusGkbsnw1g; Conspiracy theories about the CCP's high-level politics: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vijVWYnL15w; Conspiracy theories about international politics: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cJY27zX4QQ0

[iv] Such rhetoric can be found in almost all his videos and will be discussed in-depth in the following sections. But here is an example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6uBbPaO6BWY

[v] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M8GY7JTly_A, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFibdGL0i04, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4tw04EmS7GY

[vi] https://nfsc.global/

[vii] Promotion on the NFSC website: https://himalaya.exchange/; Promotion in YouTube videos: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zroweZqbR98, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=psZtVM1wHWQ, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7A89IMBVZ5k

[viii] https://www.ganjing.com/zh-CN

[ix] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sznsgu9SV1o

[x] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tulVpGxjclQ

[xi] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_fG6BjfnT6E

[xii] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N3VLi6mbLa8

[xiii] An example can be found at around 25:00 of this video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3Pob0sqd_A

[xiv] This is a Falun Gong slang standing for "renouncing your affiliation to the CCP".

[xv] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUmymsDm0_Y