Wangbao (Cyberbullying) and *Jubao* (Reporting): Strategic Ambiguity in Collaborative State-Society Influence Operations in China

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Abstract. This study introduces the concept of "strategically ambiguous collaborative influence operations" to examine the phenomena of *wangbao* (cyberbullying) and *jubao* (reporting) in China. These operations involve the intertwined efforts of state and non-state actors to suppress critical voices in the online sphere. They are characterized by the strategic use of ambiguity in the state-society relationship, which enables flexibility, adaptability, and plausible deniability for the state. The study combines an analysis of secondary materials on selected cases, interviews, and a survey to argue that several features of China's political system facilitate the ambiguity associated with these operations. Focusing on the victims' perceptions, this study identifies the strategies they use to make sense of their experiences and discern state vs. non-state activities. It proposes a typology to illustrate the perceived levels of state involvement in these operations. The study highlights the importance of recognizing and examining strategically ambiguous collaborative influence operations as a distinct form of state-society partnership, which has significant implications for individuals, society, and the dynamics of online influence operations.

1 Introduction

In April 2021, journalist and policy analyst Vicky Xiuzhong Xu's name trended on Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo and Douyin for several days after multiple media outlets and online influencers published smear pieces calling her a "race traitor," "female demon," and "West-controlled pawn" (Cockerell 2021; Kuo and Shih 2021). The Chinese state targeted Ms. Xu for her involvement in research reports on Uyghur forced labor in Xinjiang for the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), which played an instrumental role in exposing the scale of Xinjiang's forced labor program. The attackers launched

personal attacks on her in an attempt to discredit her work. This smear campaign was notable for its large scale and high intensity, as well as the diversity of participants: multiple actors ranging from state organs to grassroots individuals condemned Ms. Xu, and the campaign featured clear collaboration between the state and society in pushing the "traitor" and "slut-shaming" narratives.

The Chinese state and society have also collaborated, albeit not explicitly coordinated, to suppress other liberal and critical voices in recent years. Other well-known victims of such *"wangbao* 网暴*"* or *"wangluo baoli* 网络暴力*"* (cyberviolence or cyberbullying) campaigns include Tzu-i Chuang (a Taiwanese American chef, author, and wife of the former US Consul General in Chengdu), Jiayang Fan (a journalist for *The New Yorker*), Fang Fang (the author of *Wuhan Diary*), and UCLA Professor Michael Berry (the translator of *Wuhan Diary*) (Allen-Ebrahimian 2022; Liu and Zhang 2022). Famous individuals as well as ordinary citizens can become victims of state-society collaborated *wangbao*. This paper focuses on cyberbullying of critics of China's party-state.

Those who experience *wangbao* are usually also subject to *"jubao* 举报*"* (reporting). Anyone can report others to the authorities through channels provided by social media platforms and the Cyberspace Administration for allegedly "harmful" expressions. Those reported have typically posted content that is critical of the regime, either in public or private settings. The consequences of being reported may include account bans, "being invited for tea" with state security agents[1], and even job loss.

Both *wangbao* and *jubao* are integral components of China's current online influence operations. They are strategically deployed to exert control over public discourse and stifle dissenting voices. Both practices constitute a collaboration between state and non-state actors: while grassroots individuals usually initiate *wangbao* and *jubao*, the state facilitates such behaviors by either fostering an environment that encourages *wangbao* or providing institutional channels for *jubao*.

State-society collaboration in influence operations is not new in China: paid commentators post cheerleading messages (Han 2015; King, Pan, and Roberts 2017), the state sponsors digital propaganda projects operated by non-state influencers (Ryan, Impiombato, and Pai 2022), and social media companies engage in censorship (Roberts 2018). The state plays a much subtler role in *wangbao* and *jubao*. Instead of directly suppressing critics or delegating tasks, the state creates an environment for non-state actors to proactively engage in these behaviors, driven by their own motivations, such as nationalism, personal grievances, or a desire for social recognition. Therefore, in these operations it is very difficult or impossible to determine actors' connections with the state and to clearly distinguish between state and non-state actions due to the absence of explicit state-society coordination. This paper conceptualizes this characteristic as the strategic ambiguity of collaborative influence operations. This ambiguity gives the

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1. "Being invited for tea" (*qing hecha*) refers to being summoned by the State Security Police for a forced interrogation.

state flexibility, adaptability, and plausible deniability.

I examine these operations from the victims' perspective to better understand how the strategic ambiguity of *wangbao* and *jubao* shapes their effects on the ground, and how victims experience and cope with such ambiguity. I collected data from three sources: 25 cases of online smear and harassment campaigns involving *wangbao* or *jubao*, in-depth interviews with 13 victims of these campaigns (not limited to the 25 selected cases), and a survey of 52 journalists and content creators who experienced politically motivated online harassment.

My qualitative analysis of the data establishes that several features of China's political system facilitate strategic ambiguity in collaborative influence operations. Although it is challenging to discern state and non-state activities in *wangbao* and *jubao*, victims try to do so based on three key dimensions: the timing and duration of the activities, the language used, and the consequences. Victims perceive varying levels of state involvement in the operations and develop coping mechanisms accordingly.

2   Literature Review

2.1   Online Influence Operations

The growing and evolving use of digital media to manipulate public opinion, sentiment, or behavior has garnered global attention over the past decade. While there are various ways to describe such practices, the term "influence operation" has gained prominence, encompassing a wide range of related activities, including disinformation campaigns, propaganda, astroturfing, and cyberattacks. In response to criticism of the rampant disinformation and inauthentic behaviors on its platform, Facebook publishes reports on influence operations, which it defines as "coordinated efforts to manipulate or corrupt public debate for a strategic goal"(Facebook 2021). Bergh (2020) similarly refers to influence operations as concerted efforts "by an actor, such as a state or a terrorist group, to interfere in the process of meaning making by individuals or groups outside its own legal control through tools and facilities on publicly available social media services." The goal of such operations is to "contribute to the generation of opinions and impressions that are favorable to the actor undertaking the influence operation and/or non-favorable to the other side"(Bergh 2020). Martin, Shapiro, and Ilhardt (2020) further differentiate between foreign and domestic influence operations: the former aim to have an impact in another state, while the latter target the domestic politics of the same state. Content produced by foreign influence operations is designed to appear indigenous to the target state, whereas domestic operations generate content seemingly created by regular users in the state. However, this study reveals an overlap between these two types of operations: some domestic operations also involve discrediting foreign sources and curbing transnational influence.

One major feature of influence operations is the coordination among different actors (Alizadeh et al. 2020). Such operations typically require a high level of organization and communication to effectively disseminate targeted messages and manipulate public opinion. The coordinated nature of influence operations makes it difficult to detect and counter these efforts. Wilson, Zhou, and Starbird (2018) argue that influence operations often feature a central node that orchestrates the accounts within the network, including participants motivated by different political, social, financial, or psychological factors. However, they also identify cases in which some participants are not orchestrated through a centralized and coordinated effort but instead converge somewhat organically in the network. I further extend this line of research by demonstrating that there are multiple variations in how the state engages with society without centralized coordination in such operations.

Although influence operations are observed globally, from ISIS in the Middle East (Ingram 2015) to trolls and fake news production in the Philippines (Ong and Cabañes 2018), most published academic papers focus on those targeting Western liberal democracies (e.g., Badawy et al. 2019; Beers, Wilson, and Starbird 2022; Karlsen 2019; Zhang et al. 2021). Significant attention has been devoted to how Russia's Internet Research Agency constructed disinformation campaigns designed to influence the 2016 US presidential election (Dawson and Innes 2019). Since many non-Western authoritarian regimes actively engage in designing and executing influence operations, both domestically and transnationally, expanding the scope of research to non-Western countries and authoritarian regimes is essential for developing a more comprehensive understanding of such operations. This study seeks to help fill this gap by examining the case of China, which has one of the world's most sophisticated information operations systems.

2.2   How the Chinese Party-State Manipulates Information

China's information management system is vast and complex (Shambaugh 2007). With a strong emphasis on "thought work," the party-state has dedicated significant resources to developing and operating influence campaigns. The Communist Party has long recognized the power of controlling information and narratives to shape public perceptions, maintain social stability, and promote its own agenda domestically and internationally (Brady 2009).

This large system has evolved significantly in the digital era, as the party-state has recognized the power and influence of digital platforms and adapted its strategies to leverage their capabilities, though the resulting influence varies. The online censorship system, commonly referred to as the Great Firewall, plays a crucial role in identifying and blocking content that threatens the party-state's legitimacy (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013). The party-state employs a vast network of online commentators, known as the "fifty-cent party," to post pro-government comments and manipulate online discussions (Han 2015). The emergence of social media platforms has enabled the Chinese government to engage in strategic messaging and propaganda campaigns on a massive scale. It has

established a strong presence on platforms like Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin, using them to shape public opinion, disseminate official narratives, and suppress dissenting voices (Fang 2022a; Lu and Pan 2021; Zou 2023).

Moreover, the Chinese state has cultivated a network of online opinion leaders and influencers who can help disseminate its preferred narratives and counter opposition voices (Brockling, Hu, and Fu 2023). These individuals—who may be motivated by a variety of factors, including ideological alignment, financial incentives, or coercion—play a crucial role in shaping public opinion and reinforcing the state's agenda. The state can leverage the reach and credibility of these influencers to amplify its messages and create a sense of consensus around its policies and actions.

2.3   Digital Vigilantism, Collective Reporting and Participatory Censorship

In stark contrast to the mass communication era, user participation is a key feature of the social media era: user-generated content and engagement has transformed the information landscape. Previous research has demonstrated that the Chinese authorities have recognized this feature and developed new tactics such as "participatory persuasion," which involves inviting internet users to contribute to the propaganda process, for example by sharing their happy family photos to demonstrate societal harmony (Repnikova and Fang 2018).

Earlier studies have captured three relevant concepts linked to the participatory nature of China's online influence operations. The first is "digital vigilantism," referring to citizens seeking retaliation through public naming and shaming (Trottier 2017). Huang (2023) uses this concept to examine how misogynistic and nationalistic Weibo users, along with state-run media, collectively attack liberal intellectual women in China. While digital vigilantism clearly indicates collaboration between the state and society, it is not exclusively aimed at state critics: internet users may choose to punish anyone they feel angered by. Therefore, while it can be a useful lens through which to examine *wangbao* and *jubao*, this concept may lack specificity and focus.

The other two concepts are derived from studies on *jubao* within online fandom in China. In their intense competition to generate more data and visibility for their idols, fans frequently adopt state regulations and rhetoric and use the reporting function on social media platforms to censor the fans of rival idols. Wang and Tan (2023) introduce the concept of "participatory censorship" to describe this form of decentralized censorship and argue that it establishes micro rules and delineates the boundaries of discourses that attempt to restrict queer expressions of gender, sexuality, and relationships. Investigating a similar case, Zhai and Wang (2023) employ the framework of digital labor to analyze "collective reporting" among fans, who frame other users' online expressions as a violation of guidelines. While these cases and concepts are important, they primarily revolve around fandom and cultural expressions. In addition, the state's role in these cases is less prominent than in those involving political expressions. Therefore, further

research on politically focused *wangbao* and *jubao* is needed.

Given the inherent difficulty associated with discerning state vs. non-state behaviors in strategically ambiguous collaborative influence operations, I do not seek to reveal the "ground truth" of how such collaboration actually operates or the level of state involvement in specific cases. Instead, I focus on the perspective of the victims of these operations: how the strategic ambiguity shapes the consequences of *wangbao* and *jubao* on the ground, and how the victims understand their experiences. The study investigates the following Research Questions (RQs):

- RQ1: How do victims of *wangbao* and *jubao* make sense of their experiences? Specifically, how do they differentiate between state and non-state activities?

- RQ2: How do victims of *wangbao* and *jubao* perceive the role of the state in these operations?

3   Data and Methods

My qualitative and grounded approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990) detects the emergence of themes and patterns from the data, enabling an in-depth exploration and nuanced explication of the research questions grounded in the realities of the investigated phenomenon. I collected and analyzed three types of data to understand the collaboration between the state and society in *wangbao* and *jubao*. The first is 25 cases of online smear and harassment campaigns in China involving *wangbao* or *jubao* since 2019.[2] I gathered media articles and prominent social media posts related to these incidents. Some of the cases, such as the attacks on Vicky Xiuzhong Xu and Tzu-i Chuang, were high profile and extensively covered by both Chinese and global media outlets. Cases involving ordinary citizens were mostly reported by their acquaintances such as high school classmates and workplace colleagues, either directly to the state regulators or through nationalistic influencers. Although their cases were less well known, there were still social media posts about them. To protect their privacy and prevent secondary victimization of the individuals involved, I chose not to provide a list of the cases.

Second, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 13 victims of harassment and smear campaigns (not limited to the 25 selected cases). Six of the victims reported being subjected to mass reporting as they either observed posts mobilizing people

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2. I followed a purposive sampling strategy involving four selection criteria to choose information-rich cases that can provide in-depth insights into the phenomenon of interest: (1) the case involved an online smear or harassment campaign targeting an individual or group who criticized the Chinese authorities; (2) the case exhibited characteristics of *wangbao* or *jubao*; (3) the case occurred between January 2019 and December 2022; and (4) the case received significant attention on Chinese social media platforms and/or in international media outlets. To identify potential cases, I used a combination of methods, including keyword searches on Chinese social media platforms (Weibo, WeChat, Zhihu, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu) and search engines using relevant Chinese terms, searching on Google News for reports by international news media, and consultation with three experts and researchers studying Chinese politics and media. The resulting 25 cases represent a diverse range of targets, issues, and levels of apparent state involvement.

to report them or received notifications from social media platforms indicating that numerous users had reported them. The interviewees were mostly young (76.9% were under 35), female (69.2%), well educated (100% had bachelor's degrees and 61.5% had postgraduate degrees), living in big cities (100%), and working in white-collar jobs (53.8% in the media and cultural industry). I conducted the interviews between February and July 2022, and learned about the victims' experiences and perceptions, as well as the campaigns' impacts on their work and lives. The interviews were conducted online via Zoom or in person. The interview protocol, which was approved by the relevant research ethics committee, paid special attention to avoiding secondary traumatization of the interviewees. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using a grounded thematic analysis approach—widely used method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun and Clarke 2006). This method involves multiple steps: familiarization with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, and defining and naming the themes. All participants have been anonymized and are referred to as interviewees A to M below to protect their privacy and safety.

Third, I surveyed journalists and content creators who experienced politically motivated online harassment. Participants were recruited through a snowball sampling process and surveyed online from January to March 2022. I collected a total of 52 valid responses. The survey included detailed questions about the nature of the attacks, the respondents' reactions, and their perceptions of such attacks (the Appendices provide respondent demographics and survey questions). This data enriches the analysis by providing additional perspectives and insights into influence operations in *wangbao*.

I analyze the three modes of data and employ triangulation to validate and corroborate my findings. This approach facilitates a holistic and nuanced exploration of how victims of *wangbao* and *jubao* make sense of their experiences and perceive the collaboration between the state and society.

4   Findings

4.1   How the Ambiguity of Collaboration has been Facilitated

The interviewees overwhelmingly suggest that it is very challenging to discern the state's involvement in smear campaigns. They cited four major factors that contribute to the blurred boundary between state and non-state activities.

First, the concept of "state media" is complicated, muddled by the restrained commercialization of Chinese media (Stockmann 2013) and the emergence of new players in the social media era (Fang 2022b). This complexity often results in ambiguous assessments of the state's involvement in *wangbao* campaigns. Figure 1 depicts a *spectrum* rather than a dichotomy of state and non-state actors. Central-level party media including *People's*

Daily, Xinhua News Agency, CCTV, and *China Daily* are state media; their content is highly likely to be associated with the party-state's policy and decisions. However, they are not extensively involved in harassment and smear campaigns, likely because they strive to maintain a formal image and adhere to certain ethical standards (interviewees C and E). Their online versions (such as people.com.cn) and social media accounts tend to be more engaged in such campaigns, although their actions do not necessarily mirror top-down directives (interviewees C and E). The Communist Youth League is another important actor in China's online influence operations landscape. While it may promote top-down orders, it can also propose its own campaigns that do not necessarily represent the top leadership (Liu and Chen (2023); interviewee E).

Figure 1: Different state and non-state actors in the influence operations in China. Source: interviews of *wangbao* and *jubao* victims

One of the most active participants in harassment and smear campaigns is *Global Times*, a nationalistic tabloid and commercial subsidiary of *People's Daily*. While some believe that *Global Times* reflects the will of the top leadership, many interviewees who closely observed and interacted with the system disagree with this characterization. According to interviewees D and E, many of the articles published by *Global Times* are not results of top-down directives, but are instead chosen by its editorial staff to attract monetizable attention. Therefore, although being attacked by *Global Times* could be a serious matter and may indicate further crackdowns, it does not necessarily imply the involvement of party organs and government branches. One step further away from the state is *Global Times*'s subsidiary social media account, Bu Yidao 补壹刀, which frequently targets liberal voices by publishing smear pieces. However, it is possible that a small number of Bu Yidao's articles follow the orders of the party-state or act as trial balloons for possible state involvement (interviewees D, E, and G).

In addition, there is an army of *zimeiti* (self-media) social media accounts operated by local government officials that promote pro-regime content, but they mostly decide on this content independently, hoping to attract attention from both the market and the central government (Lu and Pan 2021). Publishing smear pieces is believed to be one strategy these accounts employ (interviewee D). Another significant actor in influence operations is Guancha.cn, a commercial nationalistic website with connections to Fudan University's China Institute. Guancha.cn gravitates more toward the non-state end than *Global Times*, and its articles are less likely to be directly assigned by the state. Influencers and social media accounts with no state connections are at the furthest end

of the spectrum. Operating within the attention economy ecosystem, they use smear pieces as a business strategy (interviewees E and G).

This complex media ecosystem makes it difficult to discern the nature of influence operations. As interviewee G explained, "Only those with a deep understanding of the Chinese media landscape can swiftly determine the extent of smear campaigns. For example, when encountering an article in the print version of *Global Times* and a post on its subsidiary account, it is crucial to recognize that the former carries more weight and requires greater attention."

The second factor contributing to the blurred boundary between state and non-state operations is the hierarchical and non-monolithic structure of the country's political system. The complex and multi-layered structure of the Chinese state, with various actors at different levels of the hierarchy pursuing their own agendas, makes it difficult to discern a single, coherent "state" position or action (Shue and Thornton 2017). As a result, the consistency and identifiability of state actions is reduced, and the boundary between state and non-state also becomes more difficult to determine. For instance, local and central governments may be driven by different interests and hold differing opinions on whether to target specific individuals. Journalist interviewee K, who worked for a Western media outlet, shared that she received numerous harassment messages via email and social media while covering a major disaster in China. She believed that the messages came from those sponsored by the government of the city where the disaster happened. The attacks seemed relentless until her organization lodged a complaint with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, after which the trolls disappeared. This case exemplifies how a *wangbao* campaign can be initiated by a local government (the city) and terminated by the central government (the ministry). The implication is that state involvement does not necessarily indicate full support from the entire party-state or the top leadership.

Third, due to the opaque and authoritarian nature of China's political system, interviewees suggested that the state even appears to be involved in campaigns that may initially seem non-state in nature. Many expressed concerns that in China, everything is ultimately connected to the state, either directly or indirectly. As interviewee M articulated:

> "You don't know who is behind the malicious messages—AI employed by the government, the fifty-cent party, or ordinary readers who feel unconformable with your articles? It's incredibly difficult to determine if someone is receiving instructions from higher authorities. They all remain anonymous, and the system is like a black box. You know you can't have a definitive answer, but you have to continuously speculate because the stakes are too high."

This sentiment highlights the pervasive uncertainty and ambiguity faced by victims of *wangbao* and *jubao* when attempting to make sense of their experiences. While this mentality may, in some cases, lead to an exaggeration of the state's role in specific instances of online harassment and smear campaigns, it nonetheless reflects a widespread

perception among the victims. This, in turn, demonstrates an important consequence of the strategic ambiguity associated with these state-society collaborative influence operations. Two cases assessed for this study indicate that non-state campaigns may eventually escalate to the state level if they catch the attention of specific officials who wish to amplify them.

Fourth, as indicated above, China's propaganda and censorship system has become quite participatory in recent years (Repnikova and Fang 2018). The party-state has become more adept at crafting messages that can go viral and engage people. Therefore, as the social media posts regarding multiple *wangbao* cases establish, non-state actors often participate in state-initiated campaigns, making the landscape messy and difficult to understand.

In sum, it is very difficult for victims of *wangbao* and *jubao* to distinguish between state and non-state influence operations, primarily due to the distinct characteristics of China's political and media system. The state's role is prominent, as it has significant influence across multiple societal domains and wields considerable mobilization power, but it is also invisible, as its role can be obscured within the intricate structure of China's media landscape and power dynamics.

4.2   Strategies Discerning State and Non-state Operations

Despite the inherent difficulties associated with determining the nature of operations in *wangbao* and *jubao*, victims develop strategies to distinguish state vs. non-state activities. These strategies primarily rely on three key dimensions: the timing and duration of the activities, the language used, and the resulting consequences. By closely examining these aspects, victims attempt to make sense of the ambiguous situation and gain a better understanding of the forces behind the influence operations targeting them.

First, regarding timing, interviewees A, C, and H believe *non-state* influence operations are likely to be more organic, meaning that they emerge as direct responses to victims' recent expressions or behaviors. By contrast, some *state* influence operations respond to recent geopolitical incidents and are based on victims' online posts from a while ago. For example, the Xinjiang forced labor report *Uyghurs for Sale* was published in March 2020, but the major round of cyberbullying targeting one of the authors, Vicky Xiuzhong Xu, did not occur until April 2021. According to interviewee H, this significant time gap suggests it was not an organic trending topic. Rather, it was most likely a state-initiated extension of the Xinjiang cotton campaign in late March 2021, when the state propaganda machine called for a boycott of brands associated with the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI)—a non-profit group that promotes sustainable cotton production; its members include Nike, Adidas, New Balance, H&M, and Burberry. BCI's statement announcing the suspension of activities in Xinjiang and the licensing of the region's cotton due to allegations and "increasing risks" of forced labor was released in August 2020, while H&M's statement expressing concerns about forced labor was published the following month. The state

waited roughly 6 months to launch its campaign against BCI, BCI-associated companies, and one of the report's authors who was originally from China.

Similarly, a Chinese-born journalist working for a US media outlet (interviewee L) shared that she was attacked by state media a couple of days after she published an exposé of China's overseas influence campaign. She interpreted this as a clear warning sent by the Chinese government.

In addition to the start time, there are also differences in the *length* of state vs. non-state operations. Multiple interviewees (B, C, and G) stated that the natural life cycle of an organic online smear campaign lasts only a few days and rarely exceeds 2 weeks. However, campaigns that interviewees believe to have clear state backing can last as long as 2 weeks or even more than a month. For example, Ms. Tzu-i Chuang was attacked during the heightened conflict between China and the US after China ordered the US to shut down the Chengdu Consulate in retaliation for closing the Houston Consulate. Such sustained attention requires state involvement. As interviewee B shared:

> "Once the state apparatus is engaged, it can control the timing, the length, and the intensity. If the state wants the campaign to last a month, it can be a month. If it wants 1,000 accounts to publish smear articles, there will be 1,000 accounts. If it wants you to be a trending topic on Weibo, you will trend. If it doesn't want people to discuss the case, no one will discuss it. With grassroots trolls, if you just ignore them today, ignore them tomorrow, and within three days they are gone. But it's futile to ignore state-backed smear campaigns because they won't disappear so easily. Of course, you will be worse off if you feed state-backed trolls. But ignoring them is also ineffective."

In a second dimension, interviewees noted that state and non-state operations tend to use different language in their public posts during harassment and cyberbullying campaigns. According to interviewees A, C, and L, grassroots attackers are much more likely to use uncivil and profane language, often calling out the victim's name and launching personal attacks; formal and official attackers are more likely to use civil and cautious language. For example, in March 2022, the state-owned Xinhua News Agency published an article accusing Chinese reporters hired by Western media of being a "political tool" to "slander China as an irresponsible player on the international stage" and "pawns to propagate their China-bashing rhetoric."[3] However, no specific names were mentioned. State media often employ grand narratives like the global power struggle to frame liberal voices as being manipulated and used by foreign forces (Zhao 2016). By contrast, non-state accounts almost always get personal and frequently doxx their victims, showing a strong interest in publishing information about their private lives,

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3. See https://english.news.cn/20220315/b56af6c762094aad824426246b02afdb/c.html, accessed November 1, 2023.

particularly using misogynistic framing such as slut shaming (interviewee L). While state media outlets may also be interested in adopting such tactics, they are constrained by their identity and may only do so indirectly (interviewees A and L). For instance, a smear piece against Vicky Xiuzhong Xu in *China Daily* included a screenshot of a video claiming that she "maintain[s] sexual relationships with over 10 men at the same time." However, the text only vaguely mentioned that "someone in Australia picked up on some of her very unorthodox moral behavior."[4]

Third, regarding the consequences of *wangbao* and *jubao*, victims believe they face different situations depending on whether the state is involved. Interviewees A, C, E, and G maintained that state-backed operations are more dangerous in the sense that they are more likely to lead to subsequent physical threats. In Western liberal democracies, the most dangerous scenario associated with cyberbullying is armed trolls showing up at a victim's home. Such incidents rarely occur in China due to strict control over firearms and public security. As a result, grassroots trolling seldom translates into offline harm. But state-backed trolling could serve as a prelude to more serious warnings and crackdowns, such as "tea-drinking" (*hecha*) sessions with state security police, denial of entry or exit at China's borders (depending on the citizenship of the victims), and even detention. Interviewee G, a Chinese national working overseas, chose not to visit China for his grandfather's funeral due to fears he would be detained or unable to leave the country afterwards. These types of physical threats after cyberbullying can also extend to a victim's family members, who may also be "invited to tea." More than half of the survey respondents (53.8%) feared that their parents' pension might be canceled as a collective punishment. If a family member holds a position as a civil servant or is within the system (*tizhi nei*), the threat becomes even more imminent as the family member may lose their job (interviewee F). Therefore, any indication of state involvement in online trolling campaigns can be deeply alarming to the victims, as it may signal further punishments for themselves and their families.

There are few real-life consequences associated with purely grassroots campaigns; the victims generally feel safer (interviewees D, G, and L). Collective reporting (*jubao*) by grassroots trolls causes the most significant damage, and often leads to the suspension of the reported accounts. While multiple interviewees (E, F, G, and L) expressed concerns that a grassroots campaign may attract state attention and result in state involvement, they asserted that most non-state campaigns tend to remain grassroots.

Another interesting perceived difference between state and non-state operations is the extent of their reach. Interviewee M mentioned that if grassroots accounts posted about her, the visibility of the content would be quite limited, possibly due to the political sensitivity of the topic. Only smear pieces posted by state media are widely shared without algorithmic constraints. In this case, the censorship regime unexpectedly limits the spread of pro-government content by non-state actors.

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4. See https://cn.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202104/03/WS6068042ea3101e7ce9747720.html (in Chinese), accessed November 1, 2023.

4.3   A Typology of Perceived State Involvement

Victims recounted different degrees of state involvement in harassment and smear campaigns. Table 1 classifies interviewees' opinions into three categories, ordered from the most to the least state involvement: state initiated, state endorsed, and state tolerated.

Table 1: Three types of collaborative state-society influence operations as perceived by victims.

	State-fostered environment	Participants and order of participation	Censoring dissenting opinions	Length
State initiated	Y	State → non-state	Y	Longer
State endorsed	Y	Non-state → state	Y	Shorter
State tolerated	Y	Non-state	N	Shorter

Note: The table is informed by in-depth interviews with victims who have been targets of politically motivated online harassment in China. It presents the perceived typology of collaborative state-society influence operations. The variables included in the table are defined as follows: *State-fostered environment*: Whether the activities happen in a political and social climate that is shaped by state policies and rhetoric and encourages *wangbao* and *jubao*. *Participants*: State or non-state status of actors involved in the operations. State participants include state officials and state media. *Order of participation*: The sequence in which the actors become active. *Censoring dissenting opinions:* Whether opinions against the harassment are censored on social media platforms. *Length*: The relative duration of *wangbao* and *jubao* campaigns.

State-*initiated* harassment and smear campaigns are perceived to be directly initiated and at least partly coordinated by state actors or institutions. These campaigns feature clear top-down directives and the active involvement of government branches and party media. State-initiated campaigns often exhibit a high level of organization, resources, and coordination, reflecting a deliberate effort by the state to target specific individuals, groups, or ideologies. Almost all such campaigns will lead to the active participation of non-state actors, who receive signals from the authorities and contribute to the campaign in hopes of achieving political or economic gains (interviewees E and F). To enhance the campaigns' impact, the state often employs censorship to suppress dissent, silence opposition, or discredit perceived threats to the regime. State-initiated campaigns can be prolonged, as both the state and other actors involved are motivated to sustain them beyond their organic life cycle. A typical example of state-initiated *wangbao*, as suggested by interviewees A, E, and F, is the attacks on the authors of the Bloomberg COVID-19 resilience ranking. In July 2021, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian criticized the ranking, which placed the US ahead of China, as "nothing but a laughingstock." Immediately following Zhao's comments, state and non-state actors launched a direct smear campaign against the authors. The campaign included a satirical Xinhua Net video mocking them, the *People's Daily* app's commentary labeling the ranking as "fake" and "evil," a Bilibili video describing the authors as "ugly," and countless hateful messages calling them traitors and sluts. The victims believed these actions occurred in response to the agenda and tone set by the Foreign Ministry spokesperson.

In state-*endorsed* campaigns, state actors or institutions indirectly support or condone harassment initiated by non-state actors. Interviewees A, E, F, and L maintain that tacit

state approval encourages such campaigns to operate with impunity. For example, state-controlled media outlets may disseminate or amplify smear content created by non-state actors, or provide additional materials to individuals or groups engaging in harassment, and may censor competing ideas or viewpoints. According to these interviews, state-endorsed campaigns often offer implicit protection from legal repercussions to those involved. The interviewees mentioned the attacks directed at Chloé Zhao, who won the Golden Globe for Best Director in 2021 for her film *Nomadland*. Initially, state media congratulated her and referred to her as "the pride of China." However, when nationalistic social media users identified mild criticism of China in her previous interviews, the state endorsed the online sentiment. Malicious attacks on Zhao by both state and non-state media ensued, and the authorities issued censorship orders to ban *Nomadland*land and related discussions.

In state-*tolerated* campaigns, the state exhibits a degree of tolerance of (or indifference to) harassment. According to interviewees E, F, G, and L, although the state does not actively support or endorse these campaigns, it fosters an environment that facilitates *wangbao* and *jubao*, and allows them to occur without significant intervention or consequences. Non-state actors, such as nationalist groups or online vigilantes, launch harassment and smear efforts against targeted individuals or groups. The state may refrain from intervening for various reasons, such as perceiving the campaign's narratives as serving the regime's interests. Or it may simply lack the capacity or will to address them. As a result, state-tolerated campaigns thrive within a realm of relative freedom, although their exact relationship with the state remains ambiguous. The victims of these campaigns face malicious attacks from non-state actors but are not subject to state repercussions. State-tolerated campaigns typically target non-public figures, such as private citizens who have criticized the government or its policies. They often focus on individuals who would not normally attract widespread attention but have drawn the ire of the state or patriotic citizens by expressing dissenting views. One victim (interviewee F) shared her experience:

> "Under such a strict censorship environment in China, many 'big V' influencers can freely post and amplify personal attacks, even direct defamation, without being censored. I reported the attackers to Weibo, but no action was taken. This indicates that the state is actually content with these attacks. I believe this kind of tolerance sends a message to people that it is acceptable to launch such harassment and smear campaigns."

Victims of *wangbao* and *jubao* employ various coping mechanisms based on their perceived level of state involvement in the attacks. When the state's role is more explicit, victims often resort to self-censorship and withdraw from public discourse (interviewees A, E, and G). They recognize the futility of attempting to counter the state's narrative and the potential risks of further retaliation. In such cases, victims may delete their social media accounts, refrain from expressing critical opinions, or not return to China (if

they are abroad) to ensure their personal safety. If the state's involvement is less direct but still apparent, victims may adopt a more nuanced approach (interviewees D and M). They might seek support from their personal networks to mitigate the emotional and psychological impact of the attacks. When the state's role is more ambiguous, and the attacks appear to be primarily driven by non-state actors, victims may feel more confident in ignoring them (interviewees I and K).

Regardless of the perceived level of state involvement, many victims of *wangbao* and *jubao* experience significant emotional distress (including 80.8% of survey respondents), such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Some victims seek professional help from therapists or counselors, while others turn to small communities of individuals who have faced similar experiences (interviewees B, F, and L).

5   Conclusion and Discussion

This study introduces the concept of "strategically ambiguous collaborative influence operations" to examine the phenomena of *wangbao* and *jubao* in China. These two kinds of influence operations often happen in tandem to suppress state critics. They are also similarly ambiguous regarding the role of the state. This study analyzes secondary materials on selected cases, interviews, and a survey, and reveals that, from the perspective of victims' perceptions, several features of China's political system facilitate the ambiguity associated with these collaborative state-society operations, including a complex media ecosystem, the hierarchical and non-monolithic structure of the state, the opaque and authoritarian nature of the system, and the increasing participation of non-state actors in the propaganda machine.

This strategic ambiguity makes it difficult for victims of *wangbao* and *jubao* to identify state vs. non-state activities. However, they attempt to make sense of their experiences by examining the timing and duration of the attacks, the language used, and the consequences. Furthermore, victims perceive varying levels of state involvement in these operations, ranging from explicit directives to an inherent connection in the backdrop, and develop coping mechanisms accordingly.

The strategically ambiguous collaborative model gives the state more flexibility in these campaigns. By leveraging the participation of non-state actors, the state can maintain a degree of plausible deniability and distance itself from direct involvement and the use of profane language. This flexibility allows the state to adapt its strategies, shift narratives, and target specific individuals or groups more effectively, while minimizing the potential backlash or international scrutiny associated with direct state-led operations. The case of Chloé Zhao demonstrates that incorporating non-state sentiment can cause the state to change its position. Involving non-state actors also adds a layer of authenticity to the campaigns. This may be effective in shaping public opinion and influencing

online discourse, as the participation of seemingly ordinary citizens lends credibility and legitimacy to the state's messaging.

However, the collaborative model is not without risks for the state. The involvement of non-state actors introduces a level of unpredictability and potential loss of control. These actors may deviate from the state's intended messaging or engage in activities that could escalate tensions or provoke unintended consequences. Managing this balance between collaboration and control becomes a crucial challenge for the state.

In the context of China, the collaborative model of smear campaigns has important limits. As multiple interviewees suggested, the narrative amplified by both state and non-state actors is quite monotonous. It often focuses on foreign connections, such as alleged funding from George Soros or other international foundations, and relies on referring to targets as traitors. The smear campaigns seldom examine the actual content published by the victims, as doing so could open up the discussion and have unexpected consequences. In other words, there are important areas in which the state is unwilling to grant autonomy to non-state actors. By relying on a singular, repetitive "traitor" narrative and discouraging any meaningful dialogue or examination of the issues at hand, the state risks creating an echo chamber that is increasingly disconnected from reality. This approach may be effective in the short term, but it fails to address the underlying grievances or concerns that may have motivated the victims to speak out in the first place. Moreover, the state's reliance on a monotonous narrative may backfire by eroding public trust and credibility over time. As more citizens become aware of the state's tactics and the lack of substance behind the attacks, they may begin to question the veracity of the state's claims and the motives behind these influence operations. This erosion of trust can ultimately undermine the state's ability to maintain social stability and legitimacy.

The study's findings advance work on online influence operations by introducing the concept of strategic ambiguity in state-society collaboration. While previous research has identified cases of influence operations involving both centralized coordination and organic convergence (Wilson, Zhou, and Starbird 2018), this study reveals a spectrum of state involvement characterized by ambiguity and opens a new area for further exploration.

Moreover, the study expands the scope of research on influence operations by focusing on victims' experiences. By examining victims' perceptions and sense-making processes, it provides a nuanced understanding of how ambiguity shapes the consequences of these operations on the ground.

This study also has important practical implications and can inform real-world strategies and actions in countering influence operations. Acknowledging the collaborative nature of these operations and the challenges of attributing responsibility highlights that addressing the issue requires multifaceted strategies, including mental health counseling,

creating safe spaces for victims to share their experiences and seek advice, exposing the tactics used in *wangbao* and *jubao*, holding Chinese social media platforms (many of which are listed on the US stock market) accountable, and working with researchers to develop evidence-based interventions. Efforts to mitigate the negative impacts of these operations should consider both state and non-state actors, as well as the underlying socio-political context that enables such activities. An in-depth understanding of the situation on the ground is essential to counter such operations.

The study's implications extend beyond China. They provide a framework for analyzing influence campaigns in other authoritarian settings and shed light on the dynamics of state-society interactions. By recognizing the limitations and power dynamics inherent in strategically ambiguous collaborative operations, researchers and policymakers can develop more nuanced strategies to counter disinformation and safeguard democratic principles.

This study investigates harassment campaigns from the victims' perspective; future studies can use the proposed framework to analyze their content and quantitatively measure their effects. Although the findings are believed to be generalizable to other authoritarian contexts, more comparative studies are needed to determine whether this is the case.

Despite the limitations, this study significantly advances our understanding of the evolving landscape of influence operations and state-society relations in authoritarian contexts, where the boundaries between state and non-state actors are often purposefully blurred. It highlights the importance of recognizing and examining strategically ambiguous collaborative influence operations as a distinct form of state-society partnership, which has significant implications for individuals, society, and the dynamics of online influence operations.

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