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Outsourcing Influence

For-profit firms help the Chinese Communist Party to influence global public opinion through social media.

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The New York Times reported in August 2025 that internal documents of GoLaxy (Zhongke Tianji), a Beijing-based technology company affiliated with the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), revealed extensive artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled information operations targeting Western social media. The documents, discovered and archived by Vanderbilt University's Institute of National Security, provide an unusually detailed view into a Chinese company focused on social media monitoring and manipulation.

This is not the only time that China's bot networks have drawn public attention. X's head of product recently alleged that the country controls 5 to 10 million accounts on the platform. Whether or not those figures are accurate, Chinese bot networks such as Spamouflage Dragon have been trying to discredit Hong Kong protesters on Western social media and drown out news on about protests in China. The networks have also engaged in targeted harassment of Chinese dissidents and attempted to manipulate Taiwanese elections.

Drawing on Chinese-language opensource materials, including company websites, media reporting, procurement records, and GoLaxy's leaked documents, this essay examines the industry structure behind these campaigns that are based on influencing public opinion. It traces the industry's domestic origins, integration into the party-state, ties to military and intelligence units, global expansion, and the incorporation of generative AI and related technologies.

This analysis shows that public opinion monitoring and management, including inauthentic social-media engagement, constitutes a large and structurally embedded for-profit market in China. As such, GoLaxy is best understood not as an outlier but as an example of a broader category of firms operating in China's "public sentiment" industry. These entities combine large-scale data analysis, AI, and information manipulation to serve the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) security priorities.

Companies in this ecosystem are focused on managing domestic Chinese public opinion to maintain "social stability", but some of them are increasingly extending their reach into Western social media. Understanding these firms and their capabilities is essential for exposing and disrupting online influence operations. Their impact, however, should be neither exaggerated nor underestimated.

Public Sentiment as a Threat to the CCP

The origins of China's public opinion monitoring and manipulation industry, now increasingly visible on Western social media platforms, lie in the CCP's longstanding view of public opinion as a potential political threat. In the party's framing, negative public sentiment or "public opinion incidents" are not merely communication challenges but, if left unmanaged, systemic risks that can undermine the CCP's hold on power.

Negative public opinion incidents that spiral out of control are treated as governance failures and have direct consequences for officials' careers. Public opinion management is consequently treated not as a nice-to-have function but as a core priority. Over the past 15 years, this has given rise to a large, for-profit public sentiment-management sector that supports the CCP and government agencies in monitoring, shaping, and suppressing online discourse in the name of "maintaining social stability".

The industry developed from the CCP's belief that effective control of online discourse required scalable, technologically mediated solutions beyond the capacity of the party and state institutions. Information control in China has subsequently evolved into a hybrid system in which for-profit firms are structurally embedded in censorship, surveillance, and propaganda functions. These companies provide tools, platforms, and services that have become integral to governance, transforming public opinion management from an ad hoc bureaucratic task into a marketized and technologically sophisticated pillar of regime control.

GoLaxy has long catered to the CCP's anxieties about unchecked public opinion. As early as 2009, the company marketed its Public Opinion Monitoring System as a solution for government and corporate clients to identify and manage public opinion crises. Promotional materials at the time referenced the 2008 Sanlu Milk Powder scandal as an illustrative case, highlighting the system's intended role in detecting and containing politically sensitive incidents.

The public sentiment industry got a boost in 2016, when a central government directive made government units at all levels responsible for responding to public opinion incidents in a timely manner. That led propaganda departments and public security bureaus—and universities, courts, hospitals, tax bureaus, procuratorates, and other CCP and government bodies—to routinely purchase services to monitor online discussions of their institutions, policies, and performance. The demand created a large market for firms providing real-time tracking of content across social media platforms and automated early-warning systems that are supposed to flag trending criticism before it escalates into a public opinion incident.

The Public Sentiment Industry

These domestic pressures explain the market's size and dynamism. Demand is continuous from thousands of administrative units at different levels of government. This has supported the growth of a dense ecosystem of vendors large and small, including publicly listed companies such as Beijing TRS Information Technology and firms affiliated with research institutions such as GoLaxy or Eversmart. A large share of companies, though certainly not all, are spin-offs of or otherwise affiliated with official local or national Chinese media organizations including People's Daily, Xinhua, China Radio International, and the Communist Youth League's China Youth Daily.

One likely explanation for this concentration is that all Chinese outlets must expand into new media under the policy of "media convergence" to ensure official party-controlled outlets remain dominant as new media become more popular. Monitoring and being able to respond to online sentiment is considered a core part of the media convergence mandate. For this purpose, products offered by national media may be preferable. These outlets maintain a closeness to central authorities, which may be an advantage for buyers reporting public opinion incidents.

Another notable feature of China's public opinion monitoring and management industry is the absence of monopolization. Rather than being dominated by a single national provider, the sector has so far been characterized by a fragmented and competitive market structure. For basic domestic public sentiment monitoring services, a wide range of companies offer overlapping products, services, and apps. Public procurement records show that government agencies routinely contract with different vendors, many of them local or local branches of companies, rather than relying on a few centralized providers.

Understanding the domestic governance environment from which these companies and technologies emerge helps explain the strengths of public opinion products and services, such as their scalability and institutional uptake that have allowed industry growth, and their weaknesses, including design assumptions shaped by domestic priorities that may limit their effectiveness when deployed abroad.

"Smart" Online Commenting Systems

Services offered go beyond monitoring and often include active intervention. On Chinese social media, this typically takes two forms: censorship and online commentator deployment to flood discussions and steer them by shaping, distracting, or redirecting the narrative. Both methods are widely used domestically. Censorship is generally unavailable abroad.

Chinese party and government departments have long employed personnel to post comments on domestic social media. These online commentators are colloquially known as the "50-Cent Party", a moniker referring to the alleged per-post remuneration. In practice, compensation models vary widely, and much organized online commenting also relies on government employees and volunteers, including a 20-million strong part-time volunteer network organized through the Communist Youth League.

Commenting, however, has become increasingly semiautomated. Companies now offer dedicated platforms and mobile apps to manage online commentators at scale. The "Army Dog" Smart Online Commenter Management System, part of a suite of public sentiment products developed by Beijing-based tech company Zhongke Dianji, is one platform that allows administrators to assign tasks, distribute talking points, coordinate the timing and placement of comments, and track activity across multiple outlets. Countless similar apps exist, some of which even remain available through the Apple store.

While there is much overlap among the products on offer, some are more specialized and built for specific propaganda campaigns and goals. The Xinjiang Positive Energy app, for example, was designed to enable one-click sharing of curated "positive" content about Xinjiang province, where the Chinese government has engaged in mass internment of ethnic minorities, forced labor, and other human rights violations. The app is part of the party-state investment in narrative shaping, including by mobilizing real human influencers.

Such systems are marketed as "smart" and include elements of automated content generation and distribution, but they are not fully autonomous. They still rely heavily on human operators. Beijing Wisdom Star's Smart Online Commenting System's three main features are monitoring staff, simplifying task execution, and evaluating performance. All underscore the central role of human labor.

Enter Generative AI

But this may be changing as AI is being touted as the solution to the CCP's various governance problems. China's "AI+" initiative seeks to integrate the technology into areas including grassroots mass surveillance of China's population. Unsurprisingly, Chinese analysts have also written about AI's usefulness for propaganda and public opinion work related to domestic security, the military, and efforts to expand global influence.

Accordingly, firms in the public sentiment sector have pursued further automation of their various public opinion monitoring and manipulation activities. AI is seen as a way to help Chinese actors increase the granularity of their international campaigns. Companies including GoLaxy already claim that integrating AI products from DeepSeek has helped make public opinion monitoring systems more effective. As the leaked documents showed, GoLaxy is experimenting with autonomous systems that use AI to produce and disseminate comments, reposts, likes, and other engagement.

Researchers have found that the inauthentic accounts identified in the company's files are in an early stage of development and do not yet appear to be engaged in sophisticated campaigns. Fully autonomous systems seem to be still largely in a testing phase. In practice, semiautonomous models remain predominant, with most

systems continuing to depend on human operators supported by digital management tools.

However, companies are now profiting from integrating large language models, such as DeepSeek's R1, into their products either directly or by using them as the basis for developing their proprietary models. This is especially significant for global social media manipulation because, unlike domestic operations, skilled personnel with sufficient foreign language skills are in limited supply. The emergence of generative AI, which reduces reliance on human language skills, may help alleviate this problem.

In addition, generative AI, even if it does not eliminate all technical constraints or the need for oversight, helps to quickly create and disseminate content in many languages. This overcomes another challenge that had limited efforts to manipulate international public opinion.

Going Global

Although China's public sentiment industry remains primarily domestically focused, Western and other international social media platforms have come into view for two main reasons. First, they are used by Chinese citizens and the Chinese diaspora. Second, Beijing sees them as a key arena in its information competition with the West, including more targeted "information warfare" or "cognitive warfare" campaigns run by military or state security units.

The first reason reflects an extension of domestic monitoring and manipulation practices carried out across China. Because public opinion incidents can also originate abroad, Chinese government departments see monitoring Western social media platforms as essential. This explains the desire of an increasing number of authorities, including those in fifth-tier cities that have little international exposure, to have their service providers cover domestic and Western social media, and have the ability to control thousands of inauthentic accounts.

The second reason reflects the broader ambition of shaping discourse outside China and strengthening national power. Companies adopt party-state language to align themselves with global CCP priorities. As one GoLaxy internal analysis put it, in the context of intensifying greatpower competition "intelligent propaganda is becoming a new tool of international political struggle ... and a new model for future military operations".

Military and Intelligence Ties

The public sentiment industry is dominated by many firms serving universities, hospitals, and local government bodies. But a subset of companies aims to move up the value and authority chains by marketing their products to top-level party-state actors, including military organizations that have been researching and likely deploying social media manipulation systems for years.

Little is known about the services and products purchased by military and intelligence units since these actors, unlike lower-level and less sensitive government agencies, typically do not disclose detailed procurement information. Nevertheless, many companies in this sector, including GoLaxy, have publicly listed security and military entities among their clients.

This group also includes Beijing TRS Information Technology, one of the few firms that has drawn the attention of Western observers. TRS identifies the Ministry of State Security and several defenserelated units and universities among its customers. Like many of its competitors, TRS also offers an intelligent online

commentator system, though it is unclear whether military and intelligence units use this particular product.

Some companies cooperate with military research institutions or civilian institutions, such as the Seven Sons, with well-established roles in defense research. These firms include Hunan-based Eefung, which has established a joint data processing research center with the School of Computer Science at the National University of Defense Technology. Similarly, Heilongjiang-based Anting maintains "close cooperation" with the School of Cyberspace Security at the Harbin Institute of Technology, a Seven Son university, on research on autonomous intelligent systems to intervene on social media, including X.

Spin-offs of Research Institutions

Such collaboration highlights a tendency for companies engaged in advanced product development to partner with research institutions or for these research institutions to commercialize their work through dedicated spin-offs. The CAS Institute of Computing Technology maintains an extensive network of commercial spin-offs designed to monetize new products emanating from their research and translate scientific advances into applied technologies. Several of these spin-offs, particularly those specializing in big data analytics and AI, are active in public opinion monitoring and management. GoLaxy itself traces its origins to the institute's Software Research Laboratory, which was established in 1998.

The company appears to function as the commercial interface for the "Tianji Team", a group of researchers embedded in the institute's Network Data Party Branch. The group is described in institutional materials as comprising CCP members with "high political awareness, indifference to fame and fortune, and strong professional skills". GoLaxy Chairman Cheng Xueqi is also the institute's deputy director and director of the Key Laboratory of Network Data Science and Technology.

Zhongke Wenge, another CAS spin-off, is affiliated with the academy's Institute of Automation. The company's chairman acknowledged in an interview that researchers at that institute hold shares in the firm "to maximize the entrepreneurial enthusiasm of front-line scientific researchers". Other CAS spin-offs with roles in the public sentiment industry include Eversmart (Zhongke Hengzhi), which is affiliated with the Institute of Automation's Internet Big Data Research Center, and Zhongke Ruijian, which GoLaxy lists as a partner for creating virtual personas.

CAS's involvement in research on social media manipulation and largescale persuasion matters. It should inform due diligence decisions by Western universities considering Chinese partnerships since such collaboration carries clear dualuse and governance risks. Products developed from the research conducted or the technical expertise of the individuals involved can be repurposed for information control or influence operations. From strategic and normative perspectives, the United States, Europe, and their allies should not contribute knowledge, funding, or technology to this effort.

Partnerships and Cooperation

The significant cooperation and partnership can lead to faster product development as companies operate within a broader ecosystem of specialized providers. They can partner with media and other sectors in the party-state, or with other Chinese firms offering niche capabilities such as data collection, analysis, visualization, or content operations.

TRS partners with Huawei to expand digital intelligence services and "leverag[e] the advantages of Huawei's overseas channels". TRS specializes in predicting election results and providing services to Chinese companies expanding abroad in line with the Belt and Road Initiative. TRS claims its cooperation with Huawei strengthens its ability to do both.

In another example, the Institute of Automation established in 2012 a collaboration with China Daily (which also engages in monitoring and analysis of public opinion outside China) to create a New Media Lab to advance media convergence. The initiative was designed to explore new-media audience behavior, develop early-warning systems for negative public opinion across media formats, and research technologies for guiding public opinion.

The GoLaxy files themselves include a list of partner companies, illustrating the role of multiple vendors in providing a service. Such cooperation, if done well, allows participants to scale more quickly, combine complementary technologies and skills, and deliver more comprehensive solutions.

Lingering Challenges

Despite technological advances and synergies that come from collaborations, important limitations remain. The GoLaxy documents delve into problems that companies face, especially when operating globally.

One persistent challenge is the capacity of Western social media platforms to detect coordinated inauthentic behavior. This has forced companies such as GoLaxy to move away from bulk automation and toward behavioral mimicry. That firm's personas post consistently from a single device associated with a stable IP address, operate within a fixed time zone, and display other markers that align with expected human usage patterns. These design choices make coordination harder to detect, but they also increase the effort required to scale operations.

The GoLaxy documents suggest that the company has struggled to create fake personas on platforms such as Facebook and faced resource constraints, including limited funding. These challenges indicate enduring technical, organizational, and platform-level barriers that limit its operations.

GoLaxy's characterization of Western platforms as "uncontrolled overseas environments" captures the tension. Although these environments remain attractive targets, operating in them is far more difficult than in China's tightly managed domestic ecosystem.

Increasingly Capable but Not Unstoppable

China's public sentiment industry is large and well established, driven primarily by domestic governance needs such as social stability. International monitoring and influence activities have developed from similar domestic efforts but confront firms with challenges largely absent from their operations in China, including stricter detection of inauthentic behavior and the need to communicate with a broad spectrum of audiences.

Influence operations are becoming more sophisticated, but they are neither perfect nor impossible to counter. The capabilities of AI-enabled systems should not be exaggerated. They remain flawed and constrained in practice for now. At the same time, advances in generative AI have lowered barriers to creating credible personas and producing content at scale. This will likely help China's party-state actors overcome long-standing limitations, especially those encountered abroad.

Even in their current, relatively simple forms, bot networks and coordinated inauthentic accounts can function as tools of de facto censorship by, for example, mass reporting content or flooding discussion forums at sensitive moments. Such campaigns can also draw on multiple parts of the party-state ecosystem for support. As these digital capabilities to influence public opinion improve, failing to disrupt or constrain them risks increasing harm to democratic societies.

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