



STATE OF THE GAME

BUILDING PACAF'S COMPETITIVE MINDSET

SEPTEMBER 2020

A GRASS MUD HORSE AND A RICE BUNNY JUMP OVER THE GREAT CHINESE FIREWALL

Chinese citizens use creative means to skirt Chinese censorship.

Censorship and control of discourse is a hallmark of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) approach to controlling its populace. One of the most prominent examples, the People's Republic of China's (PRC) "Great Firewall" has supported the CCP's approach to filtering the internet since China first gained access to the World Wide Web. The PRC's avowed justification for censorship is to block a nebulous array of thoughts and information it believes can negatively affect the populace.

This censorship would make any discussion within the Great Firewall difficult. However, Chinese citizens' creativity knows no bounds. They [actively use](#) symbols, homonyms, and other ingenious ways to navigate and communicate within the oppressive environment of the PRC. Through these imaginative means, Netizens criticize CCP leadership and its propaganda, join international movements, and discuss domestic problems.

One of these methods includes using Chinese words that sound very similar to other, banned phrases or ideas to get around automated censorship; in one humorous example, Chinese citizens used the phrase "Grass Mud Horse", which in Chinese sounds very similar to an obscene slur, to register their displeasure with official censors. The "Grass Mud Horse", a mythical creature similar to an alpaca, became an unofficial mascot for freedom of expression, inspiring memes, artwork, and videos.

In the PRC, the #MeToo movement [was quickly censored](#) in "fear of the spread of Western sentiments." Since "Rice Bunny" (mǐ tù) in Chinese sounds very similar to "Me too", the Netizens loaded Chinese social media with #RiceBunny and the corresponding emoji to join the global movement.

Regional activists will continue to use creative ways to fight censorship, and even the famous image of Winnie the Pooh (banned due to its resemblance to President Xi) is probably floating around on the Chinese net in a form known only to Chinese Netizens.

Why It Matters: Understanding symbolism in the Indo-Pacific enables PACAF Airmen to be better allies and partners.



ABOVE: An example of the symbols used to join the #MeToo conversation.

BELOW: The below Grass Mud Horse symbol is a combination of three characters, satirizing Chinese internet censorship.



THE PRC'S UFWD: POLITICAL WARFARE AND COMPREHENSIVE COERCION

One of the most worrisome security trends is the way our competitors wage political warfare.

Imagine a foreign government executing a systematic influence operation against not only its own internal populace, but also their diaspora (culturally and ethnically related overseas populations) to shape views of its political system; to improve that government's image; and to highlight the dangers of Western values. In one-party China, the PRC's United Front Work Department (UFWD) serves this exact purpose. [Focused on influencing the world's perceptions of the PRC](#), its methods go beyond formal instruments of state power and include a variety of commercial and academic organizations. They attempt to recruit anyone overseas that could speak favorably about the CCP or promote ideas that are in line with the PRC's foreign policy. The CCP understands public opinion plays a major part in shaping democratic countries' policies.

“The bottom line of the United Front is to increase as many people that support us and reduce as many people that oppose us.”

- Official United Front document

Under President Xi's regime, the primary objectives of the UFWD are to keep the CCP in power, help fulfill the PRC ambition of national rejuvenation, and work to maintain a favorable international opinion of PRC policies and projects such as “one country, two systems” and the One Belt-One Road initiative. The minimal global reaction to the PRC's recent absorption of Hong Kong's political process highlights the subversive nature of political warfare. The UFWD, a permanent function of the PRC, will continue to work to shape global opinions favorable to the PRC's objectives.

Why It Matters: To compete effectively, PACAF must enhance partners' defenses against CCP propaganda as well as go on the information offensive by shedding light on the PRC's subversive activities. PACAF supports this not only through strategic messaging but through credible demonstrations of combat power that back a whole-of-government approach.

THE SPARK

Information to grow knowledge of China and spark curiosity about the Indo-Pacific region

The US has pointed out another avenue that the PRC is using to spread its views into foreign universities. [According to the US Department of State](#), “Confucius Institutes are organizations primarily located on U.S. college and university campuses that push out skewed Chinese language and cultural training for U.S. students as part of Beijing's multifaceted propaganda efforts.” The PRC government partially funds these programs, which fall under the purview of the CCP's UFWD. As part of a larger review of the scope of Beijing's influence over higher education institutions globally, universities are beginning to take a closer look at the programming of Confucius Institutes.

COMPETE DAILY

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- [Listen](#) to Defense Secretary Mark Esper's speech about the moves needed to counter China's malign strategy.
- [Gain](#) a deeper understanding of political warfare by reading the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment's study on countering comprehensive coercion.
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