

RRM CANADA OPEN DATA ANALYSIS  
OCTOBER 08, 2021

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## Chinese state media and Canadian WeChat News Accounts Spread False Narrative about the Conservative Party and Former Candidate Kenny Chiu

### Key Findings

- RRM Canada has identified what may be a Peoples Republic of China (PRC) influence operation aimed at discouraging Canadians of Chinese heritage from supporting the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC), party leader Erin O'Toole, and particularly former Richmond-Steveston candidate Kenny Chiu in Canada's 44<sup>th</sup> General Election (GE44).
- We do not have clear evidence of a PRC-directed operation, but we have observed strong indicators of a coordinated campaign as well as links between the campaign and the PRC.
- The campaign took place on multiple platforms and mediums including WeChat, Douyin, Chinese-language news sites, and potentially radio:
  - The campaign primarily used WeChat's group chat and news account features to spread false narratives about Chiu, the CPC, and the party leader.
- Three of the Chinese-language news accounts that first circulated a false narrative about Chiu are members of a media partnership with the Chinese state-run media agency, *China News Service* CNS, which may be under the direct control of the United Front Work Department (UFWD), China's main department for gathering intelligence and influencing diaspora Chinese communities overseas.
- Although we did not observe direct Chinese state media participation in spreading the narrative about Chiu, RRM Canada identified several Chinese-language news sites and WeChat accounts that maintain close ties with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) – including state media agencies like *The People's Daily* – spreading the narrative widely.
- competing hypotheses explaining the chain of events described in this report
- If this was a PRC-directed operation, the loss of CPC candidates in ridings with large numbers of Canadians of Chinese heritage may lead the PRC to conclude the operation was a success and may result in their attempt to conduct similar operations in forthcoming provincial and federal elections. It may also have a chilling effect on candidates' perceived ability to critically discuss China-Canada relations.
- It is possible that this was not a PRC-directed operation and that the false information and coordination we observed is attributable to misinformation and organic activity.

### Purpose

This Open Data Analysis<sup>1</sup> is part of Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) Canada's efforts to monitor the digital information environment for signs of foreign state sponsored information manipulation. The purpose of this report is to present a timeline of all evidence available to RRM Canada supporting our low-moderate confidence assessment that CPC Leader Erin

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<sup>1</sup> Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) Canada produces Open Data Analysis to chart trends, strategies, and tactics in foreign interference. This analysis supports the G7 RRM, an initiative agreed by the G7 in 2018, to strengthen coordination to identify and respond to diverse and evolving threats to G7 democracies, including through sharing information and analysis, and identifying opportunities for coordinated response.

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O'Toole, former CPC MP Kenny Chiu, and the CPC in general were the target of a Chinese state-sponsored disinformation campaign to discourage Canadian electors of Chinese heritage from supporting them.

### Methodology

RRM Canada used a combination of methods to analyze this influence operation, primarily manual review of Chinese social media platforms including WeChat, Douyin, Weibo, Chinese-language BBS websites, as well as open-source forensic digital analysis through using website archives, social listening tools, and cross-platform social media ranking tools. We also received information from the CPC, the MacDonald-Laurier Institute, DisinfoWatch, and the Media Ecosystem Observatory.

### Observations

Following a deep dive into Canada's Sinophone media ecosystem, RRM Canada has identified what appears to be a coordinated campaign among Chinese-language news websites in Canada and WeChat news accounts in Canada to spread a false claim about former CPC candidate for Richmond-Steveston Kenny Chiu and his Private Members' Bill C-282 (*An Act to establish the Foreign Influence Registry*). The campaign claims that, if elected, Chiu would pass a "foreign power registry act" that would designate "any individual or group connected with China as a spokesperson of the Chinese government."

The campaign portrayed Chiu and Bill C-282 in a false or misleading way, and the narrative appeared embedded or alongside other news stories that claimed Conservative Party leader Erin O'Toole "almost wanted to break diplomatic relations with China" with his GE44 platform.

In some cases, RRM Canada was able to track down web or WeChat news articles that made the specious claims; however, in more transient forms of media, such as radio broadcasts and private messages in group chats, we were not able to observe the campaign, and relied on the testimony of others who did see or hear it.

### Timeline of events

- **Mid-Aug to late-Aug:** Reporting from Chinese-language media on GE44 is relatively light and presented in a non-partisan manner.
- **Late-Aug to early Sep:** Chinese-language media notes that the CPC is pulling ahead in the polls and LPC support is dipping.
  - Three (or more) messages that present false narratives about the CPC and Kenny Chiu begin to circulate among WeChat and WhatsApp group chats.
- **Aug 28:** The popular *York BBS* WeChat news account shares an anonymous post that CPC leader would "ban WeChat, if elected" and is the "Canadian version of Trump"
- **Aug 29:** Popular WeChat news accounts in the Vancouver area also share the anonymous post from *York BBS*.

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- **Sept 6:** Markham-based *105.9 Yes My Radio* publishes an anonymous Chinese-language blog calling on readers to “pay attention to Kenny Chiu’s ‘Foreign Interference Registry.’” The author writes “any individual or group with ties to China may be considered a spokesperson” and would need to register.
- **Sept 8:** Markham-based news site *CGCTV* shares a slightly revised blog post from *105.9 Yes My Radio*. The author claims Chiu’s “anti-China” stance comes from his Hong Kong background.
- **Sept 9:** Two separate influence operations begin on WeChat:
  - Toronto-based news sites *Today Commercial News* and *CouponKing* share the *CGCTV* article on their WeChat news accounts, along with a call to action: “if you care about the well-being of the Chinese community, please spread this message...!!”.
  - Chinese state media tabloid *The Global Times* publishes three pieces on WeChat that claim the CPC “almost wants to break diplomatic relations with China.” The piece draws quotes from a *Hill Times* piece that discusses the LPC, CPC and NDP’s China-Canada relations policies.
- **Sept 10 to 16:** As advance polls open, the influence operation continues:
  - At least eight popular WeChat news accounts in Canada share the *Global Times* story that the CPC would “break ties” with China, but do not credit the state tabloid as the original author.
  - More than a dozen Chinese provincial and state-level media outlets also publish the story.
  - On Sept 11, Burnaby-based Road to Canada Consulting shares the false narrative about Chiu and Bill C-282.
- **Sept 16 to 20:** RRM Canada does not detect any new Chinese-language stories from Canadian or Chinese state media about Chiu, Bill C-282, the CPC, or the party leader.

For an extended review of the timeline of this influence operation, data analysis on the levels of engagement each post received, please see **Annex A**.

## Analysis

### Target audience

There appear to be different target audiences for this operation:

1. Canadian electors of Chinese heritage who live in Canada, especially those in the greater Toronto or greater Vancouver areas.
2. Canadian electors of Chinese heritage who live in the electoral district of Richmond-Steveston (the former riding of MP Kenny Chiu).
3. The public in mainland China who has not heard of Conservative Party leader Erin O’Toole or formed an opinion of him.

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Possible link to PRC

Following the election, RRM Canada performed analysis on the WeChat accounts and websites involved in the influence operation. In particular, the three news sites who first shared the false narrative about Chiu and C-282 – *105.9 Yes My Radio*, *CGC TV*, and *Today Commercial News* – all appear to have entered into a partnership with China News Service (CNS), a Chinese state-run news wire service, similar to *Xinhua*. While *Xinhua* mostly provides copy for domestic state-run media, CNS is supervised by the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO) a state-run agency responsible for liaising with overseas Chinese abroad.<sup>2</sup>

In April 2021, Carolyn Bartholomew, Chairperson of the United States-China Economic and Security Review Commission, spoke at a meeting of Parliament's Canada-China Relations Committee, that CNS "covertly runs other overseas media agencies, is officially part of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, which is controlled by the United Front." Analysts at the respected Australian Strategy Policy Institute (ASPI) and at the Department of Sinology at Charles University in Prague report that the OCAO was absorbed into the United Front Work Department (UFWD) in 2018.<sup>3 4</sup>

According to published attendee list provided by CNS, the editors-in-chief of all three media outlets attended the most recent CNS conference in October 2019. All three share CNS content on their respective websites. A CNS website also lists *105.9 Yes My Radio*, *Xinflux TV (CGC TV's parent company)* and *Today Commercial News* as CNS partner organizations. When media organizations enter into partnership agreements with CNS, they are given access to free content published by the news wire and can take all-expenses paid trips to a bi-annual conference held by CNS. ASPI reports that partner organizations are also given access to a members-only "content-sharing platform so they can freely syndicate CNS reports as well as articles uploaded by other members."<sup>5</sup>

It is possible that the three news sites used the CNS-provided platform to upload and then re-share the negative narrative about Chiu and Bill C-282 to their respective websites. However, RRM Canada does not have access to this platform and cannot verify whether stories about Chiu, the CPC or the CPC leader circulated there.

It is also possible that the three news sites copied the content from each other, or from a separate unknown source. However, *105.9 Yes My Radio*, the first outlet to publish the false narrative, is not a popular site for online news.

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<sup>2</sup> "Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council". The Chinese Government's Official Web Portal. Archived from the original 2007 site.

<sup>3</sup> Joske, Alex. "Reorganizing the United Front Work Department: New Structures for a New Era of Diaspora and Religious Affairs Work". *Jamestown Foundation*, 19 May, 2019. <https://jamestown.org/program/reorganizing-the-united-front-work-department-new-structures-for-a-new-era-of-diaspora-and-religious-affairs-work/>.

<sup>4</sup> Jirouš, Filip; Ševčíková, Petra. "Covert propaganda operations in plain sight: The CCP united front system's media network in Europe." *Sinopsis*, July, 2020. <https://sinopsis.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/cns0.pdf> (pp. 2)

<sup>5</sup> Joske, Alex, et al. "The Influence Environment | A Survey of Chinese-Language Media in Australia." *ASPI*, 17 Dec. 2020, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/influence-environment>.

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Scholars Larry Diamond and Orville Schell write that diaspora news outlets that have taken part in CNS partnership agreements or attend CNS events often change their editorial stance and “become more positive about the PRC.”<sup>6</sup> In 2018, the *Financial Times* reported CNS was involved in an “aggressive push” to “establish agreements with overseas publications, which allow them to publish party-approved content under the masthead of other news outlets.”<sup>7</sup>

Possible effects of the campaign

RRM Canada cannot determine the impact of information operations on voting intentions and elections results.

If this was a PRC-directed operation, the loss of CPC candidates, including Chiu, in ridings with large numbers of Chinese-speaking Canadians may lead the PRC to conclude the operation was a success. This may result in their attempt to conduct similar operations in forthcoming provincial and federal elections including tacitly encouraging WeChat news account owners in Canada to attempt similar tactics.

This incident, fairly widely reported in mainstream Canadian media, may also have a chilling effect on candidates’ perceived ability to critically discuss China-Canada relations.

### Next Steps

RRM Canada will:

- Catalogue and map the Chinese-language media ecosystem in Canada, and potentially the U.S.;
- Continue to monitor Chinese social media platforms to better understand how the PRC leverages these platforms to influence Canadians; and
- Research new, privacy-respecting methods to track and monitor false information on closed social media platforms and messaging apps.

### Annex A: Extended timeline

Aug 28: WeChat News groups share narrative that CPC leader would “ban WeChat” During GE44, RRM Canada observed very high levels of engagement with content on WeChat’s “news accounts” or “subscriptions” feature and made the platform the primary focus for its Chinese-language monitoring activities. We also believe that if a state actor wanted to propagate a narrative about a political party or candidate to Canadians of Chinese heritage at scale, the most favorable place to do so would be through WeChat news accounts.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Diamond, L., & Schell, O. (2018). *China's Influence & American Interests*. Hoover Institution, pp. 111-112

<sup>7</sup> Feng, Emily. “China and the World: How Beijing Spreads the Message.” *Financial Times*, 12 July 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/f5d00a86-3296-11e8-b5bf-23cb17fd1498>.

<sup>8</sup> WeChat is China’s most popular app and was estimated to have passed over a billion monthly active users in 2018. According to a report from Columbia Journalism Review, WeChat is also the primary method for the Chinese diaspora in North America to read the news. Tencent, the creators of WeChat, do not break down their user

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RRM Canada believes the influence operation against the Conservative Party, party leader Erin O'Toole, and former MP Kenny Chiu first appeared on WeChat in late August or early September. Up until that time, discussion about the Conservative Party and its candidates was relatively minimal on Chinese social media platforms and Chinese-language news sites.

However, on August 28, a popular nationalistic WeChat news account in the Greater Toronto Area called *York BBS* (195K subscribers), posted an anonymous article claiming Conservative leader Erin O'Toole would "ban WeChat, if elected." The author also claimed that O'Toole is the "Canadian version of Trump" and that he is "significantly more radical and tougher on China" than his predecessor, Andrew Scheer.

The article received high engagement (over 27K views), and soon spawned more articles from nationalistic WeChat news accounts that made the same claim, such as *VanPeople* (155K subscribers) and *VanSky* (89K subscribers). The spurious claims against O'Toole coincided with a rise in the polls for the Conservatives in the first half of the writ period, a phenomenon that the *People's Daily Overseas Edition*, the official publication that represents the views of the Chinese Communist Party, also noted in a September 7 report.

Late Aug to Sept 10: WeChat group chats share Kenny Chiu and C-282 narrative

On September 7 and 8, Chiu gave two separate interviews with local English-language Greater Vancouver Area publications that there was a "concerted effort to spread misinformation about him" and that he had "not anticipated the smears and level of falsehood" circulating about him on WeChat and WhatsApp. A reporter for *Glacier Media*, a local Vancouver area publication, reviewed three of the WeChat group messages for the September 8 interview with Chiu, including:

1. A message that levied criticism at the Conservatives, and urged the Chinese community to "use their power" and vote for the Liberal Party of Canada (LPC) "so that we can have a chance to influence the future of Canada"
2. A message that urged "ethnic Chinese to unite" and "resolutely oppose the crazy Sino-phobic Conservative candidates" and to cast their vote for the LPC
3. A message that claimed Bill C-282 would deem anyone who attended an event hosted by the Chinese consulate as under the influence of the Chinese government; it also suggested that if China is targeted by the Bill, then America should be too.

However, on September 4, a web user on the popular Chinese-language BBS site *iAsk* posted that they "heard Kenny Chiu's recently proposed Bill C-282, also known as the 'foreign power registration act', would have a negative effect on mainland Chinese immigrants, is that true? Is anyone able to analyze this situation?" It is unusual that C-282 would suddenly become a focal

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numbers by country, however, some marketing firms believe the number is likely around 1 million WeChat users in Canada.

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point; prior to September 2021, no WeChat news accounts had published widely about Chiu's proposed bill.

On September 6, *105.9 Yes My Radio*, a Greater Toronto Area radio station that broadcasts in Mandarin, published an anonymous blog post on the open web titled "please pay attention to Kenny Chiu's 'foreign power registration act.'" The post claimed:

*"If Kenny Chiu is re-elected, this "Foreign Power Registry Act" may become law. Mainland immigrants in Canada need to pay attention, because once it becomes law, any individual or group with ties to China may be considered a spokesperson for the Chinese government and be required to register, which will have a very negative impact on the freedom of expression of mainland immigrants... failure to register or inaccurate information is punishable by a fine of up to \$200,000 and two years in prison."*

*"If the purpose of the bill is to prevent foreign governments and political organizations from interfering in Canadian politics, then all foreign governments (e.g., the United States) should be treated equally... given that Sino-Canadian relations are at an all-time low, and given the "anti-Chinese" background of the bill's sponsor, it is easy to guess that this is a bill that targets mainland Chinese groups and individuals in Canada, with the aim of curbing any pro-China speech in Canada and controlling and monitoring mainland groups and individuals."*

The content of the *105.9 Yes My Radio* post bear some similarities to the content of the third WeChat group message reported by *Glacier Media*, and they are likely one in the same.

Sept 8-17: Canadian News Accounts Pile On, Chinese State Media Jumps In

Following the publication of the *105.9 Yes My Radio* piece, others followed suit. On September 8, Chinese-language news site *Global Chinese Convergence Media* (CGC TV) published a piece by author Yanshan Xiaoge (燕山小哥) comparing "Trudeau's China policy and Kenny Chiu's "foreign power registration act." The author writes approvingly of the PM's approach, then suggests Chiu's bill seeks to "suppress the Chinese community." The author then repeats many of the claims asserted in the *105.9 Yes My Radio* piece, but adds an additional section that explores Chiu's background:

*Speaking of Kenny Chiu's anti-Chinese-ness, what is his background? He was born in Hong Kong, immigrated to Canada in the 1980s... After his election win in 2019, he was invited to Hong Kong as a Canadian MP by the Hong Kong's "Anti-China Movement" to monitor the city's district council elections. He subsequently criticized China and Hong Kong authorities in Canadian Parliament. As a result, Chiu was sanctioned by China, and banned from entering Chinese territory."*

The article appeared to receive some attention from web users. According to the news site's page read counter, the piece received over 7K page views. However, web analytic tools like BuzzSumo show that the piece was not widely shared on U.S. social media platforms. RRM Canada is unable to determine the identity of the author; Yanshan Xiaoge is likely a pseudonym.

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At the same time, Chinese state media outlets began paying close attention to GE44 and the Conservative Party campaign. One X DATE, the state tabloid *Global Times* published a Chinese-language piece on WeChat with the headline “[They] mentioned China 31 times,” and ‘almost want to break diplomatic relations with China.’ The piece draws most of its content from a September 8 piece from the *Hill Times*. Although the *Hill Times* speaks with more than half a dozen foreign policy experts for the piece – some who spoke approvingly of the Conservatives’ proposed China policies – the *Global Times* zeroed in on quotes from former political advisor Jocelyn Coulon only. One of Coulon’s quotes appears in the *Global Times* headline: “almost wants to break diplomatic relations with China.” *The Global Times* also picks out quotes that the Conservative Party’s China policies were “too excessive” and that O’Toole needs to propose “much more responsible” policies, especially when it pertains to Taiwan.

A similar version of the article also appeared in the English edition of the *Global Times* with the headline “Canadian Tories ‘hostile China blueprint’ caters to toxic atmosphere against Beijing amid sour ties.”

Shortly after its publication, other state media outlets re-published versions of the *Global Times* piece on their WeChat and Douyin accounts. State-media *Xinhua* published a short video on Douyin – the Chinese version of TikTok – that repeated the *Global Times* headline and received considerable user attention (over 297K views). *Xinhua* is China’s official state-run press agency, plays an equivalent role to AP or *Reuters*, and is the highest-ranking state-media organ next to the *People’s Daily*.

Over the course of seven days, from September 9 to 16, state media and state-controlled provincial media outlets published continuously on the Conservatives’ China platform, with most pieces featuring the headline “Canada almost wants to break diplomatic relations with China.” Media outlets in Fujian, a coastal province that borders the Taiwan Strait, paid particular attention to the story, likely because the Conservatives’ China policy plank proposes greater participation for Taiwan in international fora.

WeChat news accounts in Canada also shared articles that made the claim but, crucially, did not share that they received the article content from the *Global Times*. From September 10 to 13, YorkBBS (195K subscribers), GTALife (74K subscribers), Winnipeg Express (98K subscribers), Canada News Today (96K subscribers), Really Canada (28K subscribers) and Dawa News (26K subscribers) all shared a variation of the *Global Times* headline with similar content. Some publications added color commentary that urged WeChat users not to cast their ballot for a Conservative Party candidate:

*“As a Chinese, how do you feel when you read comments [made by O’Toole]. As a former hardcore Conservative supporter, and after this pandemic, I have to say I’m shaken. Please move your little hands to see how polling is going and which way the election will go this week. Does [O’Toole] not care about Chinese voters and the feelings of the Chinese people?” – Really Canada*

*There are many items in the Conservative Party’s election platform that Chinese people find unacceptable. These include identifying China as carrying out cultural genocide*

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*against Uyghurs, greater international cooperation with Taiwan, and showing support for “pro-democracy” activists in Hong Kong. Is he trying to challenge Chinese people’s bottom line?? ...my fellow countrymen, seeing this, will you still support the Conservatives? – Canada News Today*

Many of these articles received strong user interest, between 1.5K to 10K page views each. Unless otherwise credited, WeChat users would not know that the narrative about the Conservatives and O’Toole originated from the *Global Times* and would assume the articles were original reporting from the Canadian WeChat accounts.

While this may appear to be a coordinated campaign controlled by Beijing, RRM Canada notes that Chinese-Canadian outlets may have published this content for alternative reasons such as cost savings in content production or because they perceived high interest in this content from their audiences. Whether by intent or by accident, false or misleading anti-CPC content produced by Chinese Communist Party outlets spread widely among Chinese-Canadian news outlets.

Sept 8-14: WeChat News accounts in Canada share Kenny Chiu and C-282 narrative  
On the same day as the *Global Times* publication, the negative narrative about Chiu and Bill C-282 carried over to WeChat’s news accounts feature. On September 9, the WeChat account for *Today Commercial News* (40K subscribers) carried a nearly identical article about Chiu and C-282 that appeared on September 8 on news site *Global Chinese Convergence Media*. The publisher, however, added important details to encourage WeChat users to share the article with others. First, it altered the headline to become a call for action: “Please spread the word! Conservative MP Kenny Chiu’s proposed ‘Foreign Interference Registry’ bill will suppress the Chinese community.” Second, it ended the article with:

*“If you care about the well-being of the Chinese community, please spread this message so that more people will know about this matter that is of personal concern to them!”*

The article received considerable engagement from WeChat users (about 11.5K page views, and 67 shares to their personal WeChat profiles). *Today Commercial News* also shared the article through their website but received minimal attention from users (855 page views).

Also on September 9, a WeChat account called “CouponKing51ca” (60K subscribers) shared an anonymous article titled “Why should Chinese oppose Conservative MP Kenny Chiu”? The content of the article is nearly identical to the one published by *Today Commercial News*, and included the same conclusion to “spread the message so that more people will know...”. It is unclear what relation the *CouponKing51ca* account has with the more popular *51.ca* news site and WeChat account (602K subscribers). The following day, WeChat news account *CCVoice.ca* (12K followers) also shared the *Today Commercial News* article. On September 12, a WeChat account for Road to Canada Consulting (3.6K subscribers) shared the *Today Commercial News* again.

Based on RRM Canada’s observation, there were no other WeChat news accounts posting the false narrative about Chiu and C-282 after September 12.

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In a post-election interview, Chiu claimed that GVA talk radio jockeys who broadcast in Cantonese also helped to spread negative narratives about his campaign and Bill C-282. RRM Canada could not locate any saved recordings of this broadcast. However, a Twitter user on September 13 claimed they heard a broadcast from Thomas Leung In-Sing on *AM1320* that “urged voters not to cast their ballot for Chiu because of his proposed bill C-282.”

From September 15 to 19, RRM Canada did not detect any influence operations or false narratives about the Conservative Party, party leader Erin O’Toole, or Kenny Chiu’s candidacy. RRM Canada notes that the decline in interest by Chinese state, and other outlets tracked closely with a decline in the polling numbers for the CPC.

Released: 08 October 2021

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