

# 09

## Patterns and Trends in Chinese Propaganda on Facebook in Sri Lanka

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### Abstract

As the coronavirus pandemic emerged in Wuhan and swept across the world in early 2020, a few Twitter and Facebook accounts managed by Chinese nationals and entities affiliated with the Communist Party of China surfaced, seeking to shape and control the narrative, channel propaganda, and contain criticism. Since then, Chinese social media entities have amplified the official Chinese version of narratives surrounding Covid-19 and related issues in addition to propagating information on broader Chinese interests such as the Belt and Road Initiative. Senior Chinese diplomats have responded strongly to criticisms about ‘wolf-warrior’ content and commentary, though by some accounts in 2022, there appears to be a slow shift away from aggressive assertions on social media. What is global in nature, looks different domestically in nurture. This chapter looks at the emergence and evolution of key social media accounts aligned with, and within Sri Lanka, amplifying the policies of the Communist Party. It helps demonstrate the pivotal role played by social media in intensifying pro-China narratives in a world where Beijing has ambitions of shaping global norms to secure its interests. A quantitative study of domestic propaganda production, along with qualitative research, reveals the Chinese government’s long-term ideological goals as well as shorter-term objectives in this regard. The online operations, which mirror earlier offline initiatives to disseminate the Party’s propaganda, show high levels of coordination, strategic planning, and execution. The sustained dissemination of pro-China narratives, and the existing and proposed investments in Sri Lanka’s telecommunications infrastructure, including 5G, warrant extensive scrutiny and urgent policy review.

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## Introduction

Noting that while some aspects of Chinese media campaigns “are in line with traditional public diplomacy”, a Freedom House report released in 2020 cautioned that “many others are covert, coercive, and potentially corrupt” (Cook, 2020). The report went on to state that “the strategies being pursued have long-term implications, particularly as the Communist Party of China (CPC) and its international affiliates gain greater influence over key portions of the information infrastructure in developing countries.” In Sri Lanka, for instance, a comprehensive media report by journalist Bhavna Mohan (2020) revealed the hydra-headed nature of China’s influence operations. Among other initiatives, Mohan observed that the grooming of Sri Lankan journalists had gone on for well over a decade. Offline platforms such as the Sri Lanka-China Journalists’ Forum have existed since the early 2000s (Sri Lanka-China Journalists’ Forum, n.d.). The forum’s president, Nalin Aponso, stated that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) would facilitate media development in Sri Lanka (Ping, 2018). More recently, the forum, along with other organisations in Sri Lanka affiliated with China, have endorsed (*Xinhua*, 2020) the controversial national security legislation in Hong Kong (*BBC*, 2022).

‘I’m Sheng Li’, a Facebook account established in 2020 and studied in this chapter, was a featured author in the *Sunday Observer* newspaper as early as 2014 (Li, 2014). Li’s review of a book by Chandana Thilakarathna complemented Thilakarathna’s review of a book by Li a year prior (Li, 2013). Both articles spoke exceedingly favourably of the role, reach, and relevance of China Radio International (CRI) in Sri Lanka, which is the Chinese state media associated with propaganda (Lin, 2015).

I study propaganda directed at Sri Lankan social media users in the context of a growing body of research looking at China’s disinformation campaigns (Twigg & Allen, 2021). In 2012, almost a decade before “wolf-warrior” diplomacy came to be recognised as a weapon China employed widely in pursuit of

its strategic objectives, an article published on the online civic media platform, *Groundviews*, flagged concerns regarding Beijing’s pervasive telecommunications investments in Sri Lanka (Hattotuwa, 2012). These campaigns need to be understood against the backdrop of highly problematic Chinese cybersecurity laws (Harris Bricken, 2019). Chinese disinformation, beyond social media (Elliott & Christopher, 2021), increasingly targets audiences in the United States (Timberg & Dou, 2021). In addition to similar initiatives by Russia (Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2020), Chinese propaganda is considered a growing threat to democracies (Cave & Wallis, 2021).

Concerns over disinformation aside, in 2020, there emerged a unique argot known as “wolf warrior diplomacy” among Chinese diplomats on social media (Westcott & Jiang, (2020). Examples include referring to the Canadian prime minister as a “running dog” (Rae, 2021) and other more egregious tweets (Zeng, 2020). Echoing this pugilism, the Chinese Embassy in Sri Lanka also tweeted exceptional comments (and imagery) against the former US secretary of state soon after an official visit to the country (Farzan, 2020). However, a focus on the appropriation of social media as a bully-pulpit to subvert diplomatic norms only distracts from China’s more sustained propaganda operations on social media, including those in Sri Lanka.

## Chinese propaganda in Sri Lanka

Concerns around Chinese propaganda in Sri Lanka are not unwarranted. But they must be considered in the larger context of certain developments since October 2014, when *The Sunday Times* reported that former President Mahinda Rajapaksa’s government had imported surveillance technologies from Huawei (Hattotuwa, 2020d). At the speaker’s request in 2017, China gifted laptops for all members of parliament to use (*Daily FT*, 2017). Then, after the Easter Sunday terrorist attacks in April 2019, former President Maithripala Sirisena requested his Chinese counterpart to provide social media surveillance technology to the country (M. Fernando, 2019). Media reports also recorded

“over Rs 5 billion worth of military support in terms of software and other surveillance equipment” (S. Fernando, 2019). All of Sri Lanka’s police communications began to increasingly rely on Chinese infrastructure (News Wire, 2021). Prior to this, in 2018, a Chinese digital forensics company trained Sri Lankan intelligence officials and others in surveillance technologies (Australian Strategic Policy Institute, n.d.), pitched as integral to the implementation of the BRI (Wayback Machine, 2019). Sri Lanka is among the countries that have accepted vital communications infrastructure gifted by China (Thomas, 2018). However, the lack of domestic privacy and data protection legislation at present raises legitimate fears around surveillance targeting of citizens by the state and third parties, including foreign governments ((Senaratne, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020).

These considerations aside, in April 2021, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa stated that the country “has prioritised developing relations with China and ‘firmly supports’ China’s positions on issues concerning its core interests” (Srinivasan, 2021). Before the president’s assurances, Sri Lanka’s foreign secretary Admiral Jayanath Colombage flatly denied any evidence of genocide or detention camps in Xinjiang (*Xinhua*, 2021). China considered Mahinda Rajapaksa an “old friend” (PTI, 2020). The Chinese ambassador publicly congratulated Mahinda Rajapaksa and conveyed greetings from Xi Jinping after a major constitutional crisis in late 2018 (Rajapaksa, 2018; Pillalamarri, 2018). China was one of a handful of countries that accepted Mahinda Rajapaksa’s unconstitutional appointment (Hattotuwa, 2018a), which was eventually rejected by Sri Lanka’s Supreme Court (United Nations, 2003).

For well over a decade, Sri Lanka’s clear political and policy orientation towards China, which has continuously accelerated since the Covid-19 pandemic (Imran, 2021) and the general election in August 2020 (Fernando & Shah, 2020), has provided the background for studying the social media content in this chapter. The data for this chapter was gathered using Facebook’s Crowd Tangle tool (Crowd Tangle, n.d.). The engagement data is accurate

as of May 5, 2021. China’s offline engagements with select journalists pre-date, by decades, its online and social media initiatives. The grooming of journalists informs the production of content in traditional media, which through partial focus or strategic erasure, deflects a critical gaze and shifts public perceptions. However, the strategic cross-pollination of online and offline initiatives is complicated and beyond the scope of this brief study.

## Facebook accounts of interest

Eight Facebook accounts were selected for this study, building on the initial research frameworks that I had published on Twitter (Hattotuwa, 2021b). Though active offline, Sri Lanka-China Journalists’ Forum does not have an official Facebook or Twitter account. Among several other accounts active on the platform in Sri Lanka, including those ostensibly linked to the Confucius Institute, the Association for Sri Lanka-China Social and Cultural Cooperation, Cheena Sinhala Handa, Seda Mali, Youyou Zhang, Waruni JZ, I’m Sheng Li, Sunimali, and Rasika Liu were chosen for the study. These accounts were chosen after an initial tweet thread looking into coordinated posts on Facebook (Hattotuwa, 2021c), as well as accounts running sponsored campaigns (Hattotuwa, 2021a). Facebook profiles linked to these seed profiles, through the related accounts feature of Facebook, or through the cross-publication of posts, were also studied.

At the time of writing not a single personal profile studied in this chapter were labelled as ‘China state-controlled media’ by Meta (Facebook, n.d.a). All of the personal profiles in this study are now labelled by Meta as “partially or wholly under the editorial control” of the Chinese government, based on Meta’s “own research and assessment against a set of criteria developed for this purpose”. Meta’s policy goes on to note that the platform holds “these Pages to a higher standard of transparency because we believe they combine the influence of a media organisation with the backing of a state.” That Meta, subsequent to and independent of this research, flagged these accounts as state-controlled, reaffirms the validity of their selection for study.

**Table 1: Profile of Selected Facebook Accounts**

Account	Followers	Created	Admin	Running ads in Sri Lanka <sup>1</sup>	Page type
Association for Sri Lanka-China Social and Cultural Cooperation	1,502	March 2, 2012	N/A	No	Public figure
Cheena Sinhala Handa	1,290,857	March 12, 2012	China (17) Not available (1)	Yes	Media/news company
Seda Mali	68,535	August 5, 2020	China (12) Not available (1)	Yes	Local business
Youyou Zhang	3,152	August 7, 2020	China (2) Australia (1)	Yes	Entertainment website
Waruni JZ	108,454	August 11, 2020	China (10) Not available (1)	Yes	Entertainment website
I'm Sheng Li	46,632	August 11, 2020	China (10) Not available (1)	Yes	Personal blog
Sunimali	4,409	August 17, 2020	China (2)	Yes	Personal blog
Rasika Liu	31,192	September 2, 2020	China (10) Not available (1)	Yes	Non-governmental organization (NGO)

Source: Data compiled by author using Crowd Tangle and is accurate as of May 5, 2021.

There are significant contradictions between the content posted, the ostensible account holder, and the page classification on Facebook. For example, the categorisations of Rasika Liu as an NGO, Seda Mali as a local business, and two accounts as entertainment websites bear no relation whatsoever to the content published or the respective account holder's profile. The individual accounts are tailored to Sri Lankan audiences, including their naming conventions and identity. The content and commentary are almost exclusively in Sinhala, with no statistically significant amount of information present in either English or Tamil, indicating a sophisticated media strategy around end-states linked to the capture, and retention of attention and engagement by Sinhalese audiences, who constitute the majority ethnic group in the country.

Seven of the eight accounts studied were created in the second half of 2020. Of those seven, five were created in August that year. Two accounts, Waruni JZ and I'm Sheng Li, were created on the same day. These accounts feature the same number of page administrators based in China and another undisclosed location. Given that Facebook (and Twitter) are blocked in mainland China, the location of so many administrators in that country calls for scrutiny. Unfettered access to the platform is unavailable to Chinese citizens. This raises the question of how these accounts (without any disclosure of ties to the Chinese government at the time, through state-controlled media labels (Facebook, n.d.a) can post freely and publicly, including from Beijing and other locations in China.

<sup>1</sup> Based on Meta's Ad Library Report data, at the time of writing.

In under five months, from August 2020 to January 2021 (Hattotuwa, 2021b), the accounts studied showed a significant increase in followers (Hattotuwa, 2021b). This can be attributed in part to the paid page and post promotions (boosts) active on Facebook, first detected in Sri Lanka by journalist Maneshka Borham (Hattotuwa, 2021a) in late January 2021. All the individual accounts examined primarily feature profiles of women who are young and conversant in Sinhala. Unfortunately, however, Facebook does not provide independent researchers with an accurate understanding of an account's reach (Facebook, n.d.b). In the absence of this data, available only to those within the company, the number of followers provides a proxy indicator of an account's potential audience and, thus, influence. Since January 2021, Facebook has focused on the number of followers as the primary metric for page engagement (Awan, 2021).

The significant increase in followers is evidence of an expanding audience on Facebook for these eight accounts, growing at pace. By engaging with the content published by these accounts (independent of paid promotions), the followers organically promote pro-China content to their own friends, extended family, colleagues, fans, and followers.

In all, the eight accounts have a total of over 1.5 million followers. As one of the older accounts and given the nature of its output, Cheena Sinhala Handa unsurprisingly accounts for around 1.2 million followers of the total figure. The six accounts created after August

2020 account for over 262,000 followers.

When the growth of followers is visualised as time-series data, Seda Mali shows consistent growth from early August 2020. However, the rest of the accounts show significant growth only after January 2021, around the time paid promotions for these pages (and posts featured on them) started in Sri Lanka.

The growth trajectory of Waruni JZ is highly unusual and warrants emphasis. In the week of September 13–19, 2020, this account lost 75% of its followers, then regained some during the last week of December 2020, which resulted in a noticeable growth. However, all gains were wiped out in the first week of January 2021, and the number of followers dropped to zero. Just a week after that, the account gained around 46,800 followers. This rapid, pendulum-like swing in the number of followers is highly unusual, both in the sudden loss and rapid, significant gain. Available data is insufficient to determine the reason for these dramatic shifts but raises questions around the authenticity of followers and how they are generated (Winters, 2021; Hatmaker, 2020). The sustained output of the accounts has resulted in significant engagement with followers. From August 2020 to early May 2021, an average of two posts a day were published by all the accounts, driven by Cheena Sinhala Handa's average of over 10 posts a day. During the study period — just over nine months (August 1, 2020 to May 2, 2021) — there was an average of 3,400 weekly interactions across all pages. This engagement included the sharing of content and comments.



Table 2: Activities of Selected Facebook Accounts

Account	Total posts	Total interactions	Average posts per day	Likes	Comments	Shares
Association for Sri Lanka-China Social and Cultural Cooperation	325	692	1.19	500	22	117
Cheena Sinhala Handa	2,900	411,708	10.61	278,867	50,705	38,205
Seda Mali	179	74,452	0.65	35,734	19,971	7,286
Youyou Zhang	92	5,639	0.34	2,947	1,594	295
Waruni JZ	109	272,031	0.40	143,545	61,122	13,953
I'm Sheng Li	159	112,024	0.58	56,485	26,323	14,096
Sunimali	78	10,902	0.28	5,793	3,386	274
Rasika Liu	158	62,701	0.58	33,531	18,474	1,890
Total	4,000	950,149	1.80	557,402	181,597	76,116

Source: Data compiled by author using Crowd Tangle and is accurate as of May 5, 2021.

Disaggregated by type, the content across accounts heavily favours photos. Out of over 4,000 posts studied, nearly 3,100 include photos. About 475 posts feature native videos on Facebook, and over 200 have live videos, streamed and archived on the platform. Videos and photos are the most popular content on Facebook in Sri Lanka (Hattotuwa, 2018b). The media strategically selected by all the Chinese accounts is geared to organically generate maximum virality, independent of paid promotions and boosts. What is present and promoted is as revealing as what is absent. Human rights, democracy, privacy, debt servicing, and censorship, for example, are issues and perspectives that are absent from these accounts. If these issues are even as much as hinted at, it is through a lens that promotes the Chinese government's partisan and critical perspectives.

The videos across accounts regularly promote issues related to:

1. The Covid-19 vaccination (and China's advances and gifts to other countries in this regard)
2. Knowledge of Sinhala or attempts to learn the language
3. Travel around mainland China
4. Ordinary life in Chinese cities, including Beijing

5. Technology (including AI) initiatives and parks
6. Agriculture in China
7. Infrastructure including model villages and other large-scale development initiatives related to housing and transportation
8. Buddhism and Sinhalese cultural events
9. Youth perspectives that are partial to China
10. Fashion (including the draping and selection of saris)
11. Dance and music videos in Sinhalese
12. Sampling various food from China and Sri Lanka
13. Lifestyle videos highlighting China's commerce, industry, and commercial spaces like shopping malls.

In comparison, although the Indian High Commission's official Facebook page also features several videos (India in Sri Lanka [High Commission of India, Colombo], n.d.), poor production quality, paltry engagement, and sporadic uploading indicate significantly different motives from the Chinese accounts. Over nine months, 476 videos published across the Chinese accounts generated 11.47 million views and 1.58 million shares. In the same time, the Indian High Commission's official Facebook page published 13 videos, prompting just 6,000 views and 2,600 shares.

Similarly, the US Embassy in Sri Lanka's official account posted 16 videos in the same months, garnering around 25,800 views and 2,100 shares. Official accounts of the Canadian, Australian, and British High Commissions on Facebook, combined, produced just 111 videos, eliciting a total of 34,700 views and 14,200 shares. Evidently, the number of accounts employed, production value, paid promotions, sustained volume of content production, and significant engagement generated by Chinese Facebook accounts are unmatched by any other diplomatic account in Sri Lanka.

### A look at the top five posts

The Association for Sri Lanka-China Social and Cultural Cooperation, Cheena Sinhala Handa, Seda Mali, Youyou Zhang, Waruni JZ, I'm Sheng Li, Sunimali, and Rasika Liu altogether generated just under 1 million interactions in the period of study. The top five posts (in terms of engagement) were made by two accounts, Cheena Sinhala Handa and Waruni JZ.

Table 3: Top Posts by Selected Facebook Accounts

Account	Date	Sinhala caption/English translation	Type	Reactions	Comments	Shares
Cheena Sinhala Handa (2021)	January 28, 2021	උපියල් 3000කින් චීනයේ මොනවා ද මිලදී ගන්න පුළුවන්??? (What can you buy for 3,000 rupees in China?)	Facebook video	49,000	2,800	6,900
Waruni JZ (2021b)	March 2, 2021	චීන අයට සිංහල කතා කිරීමේ අභියෝගය (The challenge for the Chinese to speak Sinhala)	Facebook video	46,000	15,000	4,600
Cheena Sinhala Handa (2020a)	August 30, 2020	N/A	Facebook live video	27,000	10,000	4,800
Waruni JZ (2021a)	January 13, 2021	චීනයේ ගෘහ විදුලි උපකරණවල මිල දැන ගමු ද? (Shall we find out the prices of kitchen appliances in China?)	Facebook video	31,000	8,700	3,400
Cheena Sinhala Handa (2020b)	September 25, 2020	පලතුරු අස්වැන්න නලො ගනිමු! (Let's harvest the fruit!)	Facebook video	13,000	2,300	2,800

Source: Data compiled by author using Crowd Tangle and is accurate as of May 5, 2021.

In addition to the significant engagement on the original post and content producer's Facebook account, these posts — all videos — were shared by nearly 130 other accounts on Facebook. A study of the nomenclatures of accounts sharing the videos surfaces names invoking the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna

(SLPP) which was the ruling party at the time and linked to the Rajapaksas, Sinhalese culture, and Buddhism. Many pages are a part of the junk news and gossip page ecology on Facebook, which is highly influential in shaping perspectives in Sri Lanka (Hattotuwa, 2019a). The total number of followers across

pages that share original posts are in the millions. Reposting aids the amplification of content originally posted to the Chinese accounts in addition to paid promotions on Facebook that boost the reach of pages to existing followers and those that the platform determines may be interested.

To this end, it is instructive to compare the engagement figures of just the top five posts from two accounts with engagement data from the official Facebook accounts of the Indian, Australian, British, Canadian, American, and European Union diplomatic missions in Sri Lanka during the same time. Combined, these six accounts posted 148 videos, prompting just 205,900 views,<sup>2</sup> which is less than the reach of a single video posted by Cheena Sinhala Handa. Altogether, the accounts generated just 12,300 shares, which is less than a single video by Waruni JZ. Furthermore, the total of 12,666 comments and 144,600 reactions across these six diplomatic mission accounts clearly indicates that the appeal of, and engagement with, content from Chinese accounts is, by order of magnitude, far greater.

## Hidden patterns

The activity of Chinese accounts on Facebook shows distinct signs of coordination and editorial oversight by a single, central authority. Disaggregating around 4,000 posts from the 9 accounts, a pattern emerges. Each day, three distinct peaks appear, showing when the highest number of posts are published on Facebook—one around 8 am and the other between around 12 and 1 pm. The third peak is around 5 pm. This unerringly rhythmic, sustained content production, geared to coincide with rush-hour commuters and lunch breaks, is a strategic choice. “The media day”, a term crafted by French sociologist Henri Lefebvre in 1984, speaks to how media

content, published in an intentional and sustained rhythm, results in specific modes of engagement by consumers.

What can be studied as a new circadian rhythm is present elsewhere in Sri Lanka’s Facebook ecology and is strongly associated with the instrumentalisation of the platform.<sup>3</sup> In “The Permanent Campaign & Its Future”, Norman J. Ornstein and Thomas E. Mann (Brown, 2002) speak about political technologies that manipulate public opinion. Written 20 years ago, Ornstein and Mann’s thesis finds new relevance in the study of social media’s potential for propaganda. The sustained and systemic production of online propaganda echoes what Raymond Williams called, in the 1970s, a “planned flow” (Johnson, 2013). Williams noted that the conflation of independent journalism and advertising would ultimately result in greater engagement with content among a captive audience. Consumers would eventually stop caring about what they read, and consumption would become an end in itself. This uncritical approach to media engagement is now instrumentalised (by Chinese and other political entrepreneurs) on Facebook to promote propaganda under the guise of light entertainment or informative videos.

When studied across several accounts over time, Facebook recognises this pattern as a strong indication of coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB) (Facebook, n.d.c), which is disallowed on the platform. However, from the data studied for this chapter, this pattern is true for just one page — Cheena Sinhala Handa — which is the most prolific of the accounts reviewed. Adding to what was highlighted earlier in this chapter, the significant use of photos at specific times suggests the intentional production of content that is geared toward generating maximum engagement.

<sup>2</sup> Of this total number of views, 139,400 views have been generated by a single video posted in August 2021 by the European Union (European Union in Sri Lanka and the Maldives, n.d.).

<sup>3</sup> For example, coordinated posts across multiple and seemingly unrelated Facebook pages partial to the incumbent president, studied during the peak of the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic in Sri Lanka (Hattotuwa, 2020a). Further, in the lead up to the consequential November 2019 presidential election (Hattotuwa, 2019b), a large group of very influential junk news pages on Facebook during the first wave of the pandemic (Hattotuwa, 2020b), which was mirrored a month later (Hattotuwa, 2020c).



**Figure 1: Word Clouds Based on Text in Posts by Selected Facebook Accounts**

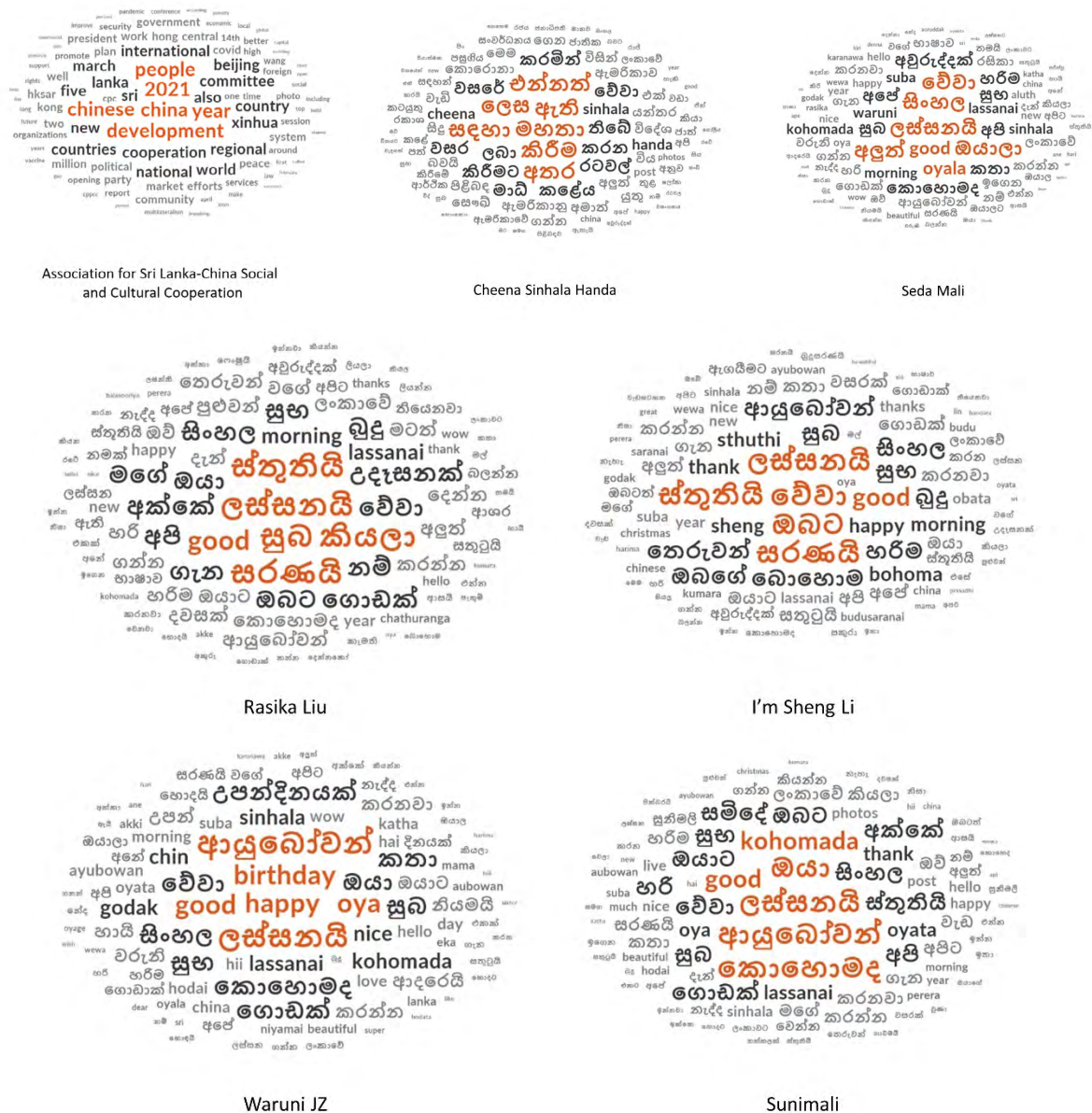


Figure 1 presents word clouds based on the text in each account's posts. The Association for Sri Lanka-China Social and Cultural Cooperation and Cheena Sinhala Handa accounts have distinct word cloud patterns, pegged to each account's focus and mandate. For example, Cheena Sinhala Handa, of late, emphasises vaccinations (in the context of the pandemic). Meanwhile, Seda Mali, Rasika Liu, I'm Sheng Li, Waruni JZ, and Sunimali all feature almost exactly the same words, which is highly unusual because these accounts do not explicitly or overtly show any inter-relationship, or subscription to a

shared editorial framework. The emphasis (in Sinhala) on beautiful things, events, followers, ordinary people, daily and birthday greetings, ascertaining how followers are doing, and a uniformly deferential, polite turn of phrase overwhelmingly distinguishes the text used in all the posts. The resulting lack of significant diversity in discourse or individuality, coupled with the near pitch-perfect symmetry in Sinhala phrases used, strongly suggests strict editorial control and a high degree of coordination in framing strategic issues across accounts that do not show robust offline or online relationships with each other.

## Conclusion

The eight Facebook accounts studied for this chapter highlight the degree to which Beijing instrumentalises the platform to promote propaganda in Sri Lanka in a highly sophisticated manner, with output and followers increasing at pace. Unlike Twitter, Facebook<sup>4</sup> provides Beijing with a direct vector, with significant potential to both attract and retain the engagement of young Sinhala Buddhists in Sri Lanka. Significant tropes featured in the Chinese accounts indicate Beijing's propaganda model of "strategic patience" (Vilmer & Charon, 2020), where the goal is to shape public perceptions over the long term, not necessarily through coercion or censorship, but via a menu of native content designed to attract, entertain, inspire, or distract from critical questioning. The potential of this persuasive strategy is evident in the data signatures studied, where output is crafted with exceptional attention to tone, time, substance, engagement patterns, viral frames, and a grounded, conversational Sinhala expression that appeals to mainstream Buddhist sensibilities. A high degree of coordination between accounts, entirely hidden unless studied at scale, along with the large number of page administrators located in China, suggests that individual profiles mask a sophisticated propaganda machinery that determines what is posted, through which account, when, and how.

This research recommends urgent domestic policy review and parliamentary oversight of significant Chinese investments and initiatives. It also suggests sustained regional dialogue around the implications of online propaganda for national security, democratic potential, and electoral integrity. Finally, the design, execution, and impact of Beijing's multi-platform, multi-media, vernacular, and country-specific propaganda model should be more closely studied, including by the diplomatic community. Much of the existing research looks at how Chinese disinformation impacts the West or at issues around cybersecurity.<sup>5</sup> This is vital and valid for those in Europe or the US, but it is less useful for understanding propaganda vectors in countries integral to China's BRI in South and Southeast Asia. Amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic, this region, characterised by the complex interplay of demagoguery, domestic politics, encroaching Chinese interests, and propaganda increasingly being spread via social media, is ripe with authoritarian entrenchment (Khalil, 2020).

As an archetype of this geo-political and socio-technological landscape, Sri Lanka presents an interesting case study in how, over the short term, policies favourable to China, and, in the long term, public perspectives partial to Beijing, can be influenced through well-disguised propaganda disseminated over social media.

<sup>4</sup> And other application-based surfaces beyond the scope of this chapter, including WhatsApp.

<sup>5</sup> "Through the Digital Silk Road (DSR), Beijing aims to boost the overseas expansion of Chinese tech companies that build telecommunications infrastructure and compete in the digital market. Already, the DSR is under intensified scrutiny for concerns over cyber-security risks, the standard-setting process for 5G technology and China's promotion of 'cyber sovereignty' as an alternative to a free and open digital domain" (Gordon, Tong, & Anderson, 2020).

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