

Public Diplomacy, Propaganda, or What? China's Communication Practices in the South China Sea Dispute on Twitter

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Received: 01 August 2021 | Accepted: 05 February 2022

Abstract

Multiple modes of communication on social media can contribute to public diplomacy in informing, conversing, and networking with members of foreign publics. However, manipulative behaviours on social media, prevalent especially in high tension contexts, create disruptions to authentic communication in what could be grey/black propaganda or information warfare. This study reviews existing literature about models of public diplomacy to guide an empirical study of China's communication in the #SouthChinaSea conversation on Twitter. It uses computational methods to identify, record, and analyze one-way, two-way, and network communication of China's actors. It employs manual qualitative research to determine the nature of China's actors. On that basis, it assesses China's Twitter communication in the issue against various models of public diplomacy.

Keywords: Chinese news media, political communication, propaganda, public diplomacy, new public diplomacy, social media, South China Sea, Twitter

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In late 2019, China's diplomats opened new accounts on Twitter in droves, in time to respond to accusations from Western countries about China being the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic, violating the human rights of the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang, and cracking down on freedoms in Hong Kong. However, the tweets of at least some of China's diplomats have achieved the opposite of the desired improvement in national image with the diplomats being called "wolf warriors," following the title of a Chinese-made film in which a Chinese special force soldier combated foreign mercenaries (Ji, 2021). Whether this is a case of Twiplomacy worsening—instead of improving—diplomatic relationships (Brown, 2013), remains to be decided. What it makes clear are the challenges China faces in communicating with foreign publics on American social media platforms. Given the importance of social media as channels of news and sites of public opinion formation, how China communicates on these platforms has direct implications for its relationship with foreign nations, especially Western countries. Accompanying China's rise, much has been written about its efforts of soft power expansion, but studies on China's communication on international social media are far fewer. This paper enriches the understanding on this topic by empirically examining the actors and mode of communication of China's accounts (i.e. accounts that originate from China) on Twitter. This provides evidence for conceptually assessing the model of public diplomacy (PD) China practises.

The study focuses on an internationally contentious issue—the South China Sea dispute—in which PD is much needed. Diplomatic relations between China and the West, which create the environment for PD (Brown, 2013), have deteriorated since July 2018 when the US started imposing tariffs on Chinese products, so much so that some describe the relations between the two most powerful countries as a new cold war. This study covers the period before the recent downturn in diplomatic relations, and hence sets the benchmark for comparison with the present high-tension environment. The primary research question of the study is: What model of PD best describes China's communication in the #SouthChinaSea hashtag on Twitter? The question is answered through the following sub-research questions:

- 1) Who are China's key actors in the issue, and to what extent are non-state actors involved?
- 2) To what extent do China's actors conduct monologic, dialogic, and network communication with other users?
- 3) How sustained is Chinese actors' dialogic and network communication with the same users over time?

The article makes two main contributions: (1) It provides an empirical understanding of the communication of China, which sits at the centre of concern of a significant diplomatic issue, on Twitter, a significant space of PD, and (2) offers a conceptual assessment of China's communication in the issue on Twitter with reference to models of PD.

Defining Public Diplomacy

Many activities now considered as PD date back to ancient times around the world, long before the term was used (Melissen, 2005). The English term “public diplomacy” dates back to at least the late nineteenth century, but was revived in the US in 1965 with a new meaning as a euphemism in place of “propaganda” to refer to the efforts of the US to exert global influence within the Cold War framework (Brown, 2003; Cull, 2020; Pamment, 2015). In the 1990s, the term entered foreign policy circles beyond the US (Cull, 2020). Pamment’s (2018) encyclopedic definition of PD is broad: “efforts of an international actor to understand, inform, and influence foreign audiences in support of desired policy goals” (p. 1), but it does not cover domestic audiences, which some consider as legitimate targets of PD (Potter, 2003). There is no agreement on who the international actors (Ayhan, 2019) or what the means of influence are either. The ambiguity is because the conceptualization, practice, and organization of PD varies from country to country, depending on the political context, diplomatic culture, national interest, and available resources (Pamment, 2013, 2018), which also evolve and develop. Where PD targets foreign publics, it is predicated on the belief that “government-to-government relations in a given foreign policy area may be influenced by engagement with foreign citizens and groups outside of government whose opinions, values, activities, and interests may help to sway a government’s position” (Pamment, 2018, p. 1).

A key dimension of the political context that impacts PD practices as competitive or cooperative (Leonard, Stead, & Smewing, 2002) is whether PD takes place between antagonistic actors during war-type situations or between friendly actors in peacetime (Pamment, 2013). A significant resource consideration of PD practices is the type of communication technologies the actors can access (Manor, 2019). These conditions also influence scholarly conceptualization of PD. Recently, Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election in the US (Mueller, 2019) has aroused much concern about computationally driven (dis)information operation using artificial intelligence and fake social media accounts, casting doubt on the authenticity of communication, validity of observed connection, and the future of PD on the Internet (Powers & Kounalakis, 2017).

Public Diplomacy of the US

The first phase of PD that was practised in the US occurred in the mass media era in which the US government had access to an international radio network capable of reaching countries across the globe. The PD practised by the US during the Cold War was government-led, involving multiple components notably one-way communication in international broadcasting via *The Voice of America* and *Radio Free Europe*, cultural exhibitions and performances, resource centers, and publications, as well as educational and cultural exchanges including the Fulbright program (Cull, 2008a). These activities consisted mainly of telling, while advocating the US position to elites of foreign countries as potential influencers of their governments (Pamment, 2013, 2018). The goal was to contain communism and even change regimes in the

Soviet bloc and worldwide (Brown, 2013).

In the post-9/11 attacks, a “paradigm shift” in the conceptualization of PD occurred in the US, moving it to “new public diplomacy” (NPD) (Melissen, 2005; Pamment, 2013). Driving the shift was enablement by digital communication technologies, the need to better engage the Muslim publics, and academic ideas of international public relations (Pamment, 2018). In the new PD, emphasis is on two-way communication, dialogue, engagement (the last of which forms part of Pamment’s definition given above), and relationship building and management (Pamment, 2018), although these terms are often not clearly defined (Manor, 2019). The target publics are no longer only the foreign elites, but also foreign citizens (Pamment, 2018). Apart from being readily reachable targets, they can become (non-state) actors themselves thanks to digital communication (Pamment, 2013). The boundary between (external) PD and (domestic) public affairs (Potter, 2003) also becomes blurred. The new PD has also been called “public diplomacy 2.0” (Cull, 2013), “digital diplomacy” (Bjola & Holmes, 2015), “relational PD” (Fitzpatrick, 2007; Zaharna, 2008), “collaborative PD” (Fisher, 2013), and “network PD” (Hocking, 2005). Despite these various conceptualizations, American PD has failed to live up to the idealistic norm (Comor & Bean, 2012; Pamment, 2013) by remaining largely monologic (Kampf, Manor, & Segev, 2015).

China’s Public Diplomacy

Despite its Cold War origin, the term PD was officially adopted in China in 2004, when a low-level Public Diplomacy Division (*gong zhong wai jiao chu*) was established within China’s Foreign Ministry one year after the SARS epidemic, which originated in China and killed over 700 people worldwide. But then China’s PD, more akin to public affairs, targeted domestic, not foreign audiences (Li, 2009). Top-level endorsement of PD as an externally directed activity came in 2009, the year when Facebook and Twitter were blocked in China. The then General Secretary of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Hu Jintao, commented that PD formed an important component of foreign policy, while the PD Division was upgraded to the Public Diplomacy Office (*gong gong wai jiao ban gong shi*) of the Foreign Ministry (Yang, 2011). Director of the Office of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission of the CCP, Yang Jiechi, wrote in 2011 as China’s Foreign Minister that the country’s foreign-directed PD was “*led by* [author’s emphasis] the national government using various means of communication and exchanges to...achieve understanding, identification, and support from foreign publics to...build a good image of the country and government” in which the role of the government is to organize and promote activities of “media, civilian organisations, think tanks, academic institutions, celebrities and ordinary citizens” (Yang, 2011). At the same time, Yang (2011) emphasized coordination of PD that targeted foreign and domestic publics.

Long before the term PD was adopted, the CCP had started related activities as external propaganda (*dui wai xuan chuan*) in 1938 (the term “propaganda” was used more in the meaning of propagation without the pejorative meaning it later acquired) (Fellows, 1959).

External propaganda then became the forerunner of what later came as “people’s diplomacy” (ren min wai jiao), initiated after the establishment of the PRC in 1949 (Keith, 1989; Li, 2009). In the decades before the PRC gained widespread diplomatic recognition, people’s diplomacy was conducted as a surrogate and facilitator of diplomatic relations by the CCP using politically reliable civilian organizations or individuals as fronts to connect with foreign citizens and NGOs (Li, 2009). At the same time, guided tours and training of foreign elites, delegations, and performances, and print publications were used to strengthen anti-Americanism in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and consolidate the socialist camp (Keith, 1989; Ratliff, 1969, 1972).

After the PRC gained international recognition, people’s diplomacy evolved into “civil diplomacy” (Zhao, 2019) (min jian wai jiao), which prioritized economic rather than political goals (Li, 2009). Since 2009, China’s PD has emphasized cultural diplomacy (Zhao, 2019). However, China’s cultural diplomacy activities in the form of “people-to-people exchanges” and “cultural exchanges” feature one-directional telling and display heavily and lack organic links with civil societies (Zhuang, 2020). China’s global media networks, such as Xinhua News Agency and China Global Television Network (CGTN), are, likewise, infrastructures of one-way message spreading (Lai & Lu, 2012; Shambaugh, 2013). The Confucius Institute has often been cited as a shining example of China’s new PD (Hartig, 2015), but its prospect has become uncertain amid the recent downturn of diplomatic relations between China and the West.

As in the West, digital communication technologies have aroused great interest in China for their potential in PD. Chinese officials consider the “interactivity, instantaneity, abundance, shareability, personalization, and socialization” of new media as providing opportunities of engagement with foreign citizens but also to meet challenges from Western infiltration and spillover effects of political turmoil in developing countries (Yang, 2013). The recent expansion of Chinese diplomatic accounts on Twitter is an indication of the perceived value promised by the platform.

China’s PD on International Social Media

Available relevant studies have found that China’s state news media, which started having a presence on Twitter from at least 2009, are the core actors of China’s PD network on Twitter (Huang & Wang, 2019; Jia & Li, 2020). China’s diplomats started publishing on Twitter in 2010, but by late 2018, there were fewer than 20 active Twitter accounts of China’s diplomats (Huang & Wang, 2019). However, it is not clear to what extent non-state actors are involved in China’s PD. China’s diplomatic and state news media Twitter accounts rarely reply to other Twitter accounts (Huang & Wang, 2019; Nip & Sun, 2018), and when China’s diplomatic accounts network, they do so much more frequently with China’s state news media by mentioning them than with foreign diplomatic accounts (Huang & Wang, 2019). However, it is not known whether other China accounts behave in similar ways. Twitter accounts of China’s state news media publish actively to promote China’s top leadership, the country’s

achievements, and culture, but tweets about soft items receive more likes than those about top leader, Xi Jinping (Nip & Sun, 2018). Even soft news items such as those about giant pandas published by China's state news media are highly politicized for strengthening the official voice (Huang & Wang, 2020). Voices disagreeing with official Chinese messages from Chinese citizens, presumably from those who reside outside China or scale the Great Firewall of blockage (Song, Faris, & Kelly, 2015), and from foreign accounts have been found to be rather influential on Twitter networks of political events about China (Guo, Mays, & Wang, 2010; Jia & Li, 2020). This suggests that China's PD indeed faces both foreign and domestic publics. In the US-China trade war, tweets of Chinese diplomats synthesized and repackaged posts published on the domestic microblogging platform, Weibo, revealing a coordinated PD targeting domestic and foreign publics (Huang & Wang, 2021).

Beyond PD, evidence has surfaced that China uses international social media for information operations. In August 2019, Twitter identified 200,000 fake accounts based in China that tried to "sow discord about the protest movement in Hong Kong" (Twitter Safety, 2019). In 2020, Facebook and Instagram removed dozens of fake accounts originating from China that published, amplified their own content, and engaged other posts "particularly about naval activity in the South China Sea, including US Navy ships" in disguise as locals in the targeted countries (Gleicher, 2020). This study aims to enrich empirical understanding about China's PD, and on such a basis, assess it against models of PD in the relatively low-tension period before relations between China and the West deteriorated.

Theoretical framework

Many attempts have been made to capture the amorphous forms of PD in models and taxonomies (Ayhan, 2019; Cull, 2008b; Gilboa, 2008). While we do not claim to capture the essence of all these previous efforts, we take reference from the informational versus relational frameworks to highlight the mode of communication as our primary interest and the involvement of non-state actors as our secondary interest. We reckon that communication on Twitter is mainly open, since around 94 percent of Twitter accounts are public and can be followed by anyone (Bruns, 2018). However, we are aware of the possibility of grey and "black [*sic!*] propaganda" (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2011, p. 18) and manipulative information operations (Arceneaux, 2021; Zaharna, 2008) in the broader context. Specifically, we seek evidence of three broad models of PD:

- 1) Basic PD/white propaganda, characterized by one-way overt communication and most often conducted by state agencies. Premised on persuasion effects of mass communication studies since WWI (Lasswell, 1971), it relies on the transmission of information, which emphasizes one's superiority or advocates one's ideology, but nevertheless is open and fairly accurate (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2011). It is an essential layer of PD (Cowan & Arsenault, 2008).

- 2) Relational PD, characterized by two-way overt communication over a sustained period and initiated by state and/or non-state (elite or non-elite) actors (Huijgh, 2016). Influenced by the notion of symmetrical public relations (Grunig & Grunig, 1992), this model of PD relies on interaction between the actor and target recipients in what is often called engagement (see Napoli 2011 for an explication of the broad concept in communication studies), and is premised on listening (Cull, 2008b; Di Martino, 2020, Melissen, 2005). It is considered a normative ideal difficult to achieve (Pamment, 2013).
- 3) Network/collaborative PD, characterized by network overt communication involving multiple parties, often state and supranational agencies, as well as corporations and NGOs, that are interdependent in a network of relationships. Building on theories of network society (Castells, 1996, 2007), this model of PD believes in effective informational flow, synergy formation, and co-creation of knowledge in network communication. Network structures are fairly easy to form on social media, but collaboration, which requires shared interests and goals, and exchange of resources, are far less common (Zaharna, 2013).

Data and methods

This study focuses on tweets that include the #SouthChinaSea hashtag on Twitter for studying China's communication on the platform. Overlapping territorial claims from seven countries in the South China Sea—and navigational interests of many more—necessitates competition for supportive public opinion around the globe. On 12 July 2016, the long-standing competition caught increased attention when the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague, in response to an application from the Philippines, ruled against China's claim to historical territorial rights within the "nine-dash line." In response, China refused to accept the ruling and continued its military drills and constructions in the area. The Hague ruling inspired the selection of the South China Sea dispute as the issue for this study. The #SouthChinaSea was selected as we observed its high relevance in the tweeting of China's accounts, which was confirmed by Huang and Wang's (2019) study, which found that the hashtag ranked as the 10th most used hashtag of China's diplomatic accounts. We acknowledge that the #SouthChinaSea hashtag does not collect a comprehensive set of tweets about the South China Sea, but we consider it appropriate for the purpose of this study.

Twitter was chosen as the research site because it is predominantly used for news (Andi, 2021; Kwak, Park, & Moon, 2010), and the public nature of communication on the platform makes it appropriate for conducting PD. Data access on Twitter is also less restrictive than Facebook or Instagram. We collected our data using an open-source tool developed by the University of Amsterdam, DMI-TCAT, from Twitter's REST API for 19 months between 4 November 2016 - 7 June 2018. This covered China's seizure of a US drone, its installation of weapons in the area, starting of daily passenger flights to one of the disputed islands, the finalization of a draft framework among ASEAN countries about conduct in the South China

Sea, and China's military challenge to Australian warships that travelled through the South China Sea. Additional data about and related to the collected tweets were collected between 9 August and 14 September 2018. A total of 154,542 tweets published by 48,670 unique accounts were collected. The overwhelming majority (95.78%) of the tweets were in English (indicated by the language tag 'en').

Of the engagement features provided by Twitter (Bucher & Helmond, 2017), "like" is the most frequently used; however, the response carries diverse meanings (Meier, Elswiler, & Wilson, 2014). Although, it is fair to say that "like" is associated with the reader's positive response to the tweet/tweeter. "Reply" and "mention," on the other hand, are features of social interaction with the tweeter. Retweets amplify messages through networks and have been found to indicate interest, trust, and agreement (Boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010; Metaxas et al., 2015), but it is common to see Twitter accounts that declare retweet \neq endorsement. Quote tweets (retweets with added comment), introduced by Twitter in 2015 and which form a small portion of retweets, sometimes contain oppositional content to the original tweet on politically contentious topics (Stewart et al., 2017). The use of the "reply" functionality to inject oppositional content is even more common (Stewart et al., 2017). Since the count of quote tweets is subsumed within the retweet count, the retweet count cannot be used as a measure of endorsement to the same extent as the like count. Unfortunately, the Twitter platform has only started supporting collection of liker IDs since May 2021 and with a low rate-limit (Garson, 2021); hence, we rely on retweeter IDs to identify actors in the social networks of accounts. While "share" also has the effect of spreading the message as retweets via the reader's social networks, it disseminates onto platforms beyond Twitter and related data cannot be recorded. Share counts are not collectible from Twitter either.

To answer the research question about the mode of communication conducted by China's accounts, we rely on the count of published tweets of individual accounts provided by the Twitter platform as the measure of the level of one-way monologic communication. The level of two-way dialogic communication is measured primarily by the number of replies and mentions received by and made by the tweets of China's accounts. The number of repliers and mentioners involved are also considered. The level of network communication is measured by the retweet counts of the original tweets of China's accounts and retweets made by the China accounts of the posts of other accounts. The existence of sustained dialogue and networking communication, forming the foundation of relationships, is indicated by the frequency of replies, mentions, and retweets between pairs of accounts in the data period.

Since Twitter's REST API restricts data collection to a maximum of one percent of the entire Twitter data stream at the time of collection, we checked the comprehensiveness of the dataset before starting any analysis. We took the most retweeted 20 messages in the dataset as a sample. Based on the retweet counts of these messages, we used the "advanced search" functionality on the Twitter interface manually on 7 July 2020 to identify original messages with similar retweet counts in the data period. The manual search results returned two tweets not captured in the dataset, giving us confidence about the coverage of the dataset as 90% of the most retweeted 20 messages are in the dataset. Aware of the prevalence of fake accounts

on social media (Confessore et al., 2018), which are suspended by the platform upon discovery of their coordinated inauthentic behaviour, we conducted three checks about the validity of the dataset in two stages based on Twitter's retweet metrics. In stage one, we used the most retweeted 20 messages as a sample and checked if the messages still exist. We also compared the retweet count of these messages recorded in the dataset with what was displayed on the Twitter user interface more recently. In stage two, after we mapped the retweeting networks of China's accounts, we checked if the retweeting accounts still existed three years after the data were collected.

To understand the context within which results of our analyses are to be interpreted, we first conducted an analysis of "modularity groups" (Blondel et al., 2008) based on retweeting to get an overview of the network structure in the #SouthChinaSea conversation. To focus on key actors in the dense networking, we filtered out accounts that received fewer than one retweet on average a month as unimportant actors in the network, and only included accounts that received a minimum of 20 retweets in the 19 months in the network analysis.

To identify China's accounts in the remaining retweeting network, the first author manually inspected the account name and time zone location of the accounts that remained after filtering and checked on the Twitter interface the account's self-description and linked website where needed. This process also helped to determine the nature of the China accounts. Modularity group analysis was then performed on the China accounts for analyzing their social networks. Three years after the data was collected, on 30 July 2021, we again used Tweepy to look up the profiles of all the accounts that retweeted China's accounts to check their continued existence. Further manual checking of accounts and reading of tweets that interacted with China accounts was used to provide qualitative materials to help interpretation.

Results

Ranking the tweets in the dataset by the retweet count and the manual search found that the most retweeted 20 tweets were published by Indian, Chinese and US accounts, and most fetched several hundred retweets each (Table 1). The manual search of these tweets on the Twitter interface found that two years after the data were collected, the retweet count of most of these tweets had decreased (rather than increased as it should) and two of the publishing accounts no longer existed. To investigate the anomaly, we used a python-based Twitter API wrapper package, Tweepy, to look up the user profiles of the retweeting accounts of 10 of the tweets (marked with an * in Table 1) on 11 July 2020. We discovered that many retweeting accounts of each of the 10 popular messages were labelled as "suspended" and a smaller number of others no longer existed. The discontinuation could have resulted from deletion by the account holder, or by Twitter for spamming or inauthentic behaviour. Whatever the cause, the prevalence of discontinuation among retweeting accounts suggests that many retweeters do not have long termed relationships with the user that they retweet. This also means they are not reliable partners for advancing one's position in the #SouthChinaSea conversation. It is also likely that some of the discontinued accounts were fake accounts created to inflate the

retweet count. The content of the most retweeted messages (Table 1) demonstrates the divergent agenda and conflicting interests in information dissemination from the Indian, Chinese, and US accounts.

Table 1. The most retweeted original messages containing #SouthChinaSea in 4 November 2016 - 7 June 2018

Location of account	Created by	Text	Retweet count on Twitter interface on 7 Jul 2020	Retweet count in dataset
India	NewDelhiTimesIN	*Vietnam needs to defend its honor in South China Sea newdelhitimes.com/vietnam-needs-to-defends-its-honour-in-south-china-sea/ #VietnamChina #Vietnam #SouthChinaSea	1.7k	1788
India	NewDelhiTimesIN	US acts at last in South China Sea newdelhitimes.com/us-acts-at-last-in-south-china-sea123/ #USChina #SouthChinaSea	880	887
China	globaltimesnews	A Chinese manufacturer conducted a collaborative test with 56 unmanned vessels near the Wanshan islands of the #SouthChinaSea, showing the potential of unmanned vehicles for naval operations.	576	NA (Tweet not in dataset)
US	INDOPACOM	*The @USNavy Nimitz-class supercarrier USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN 71) is on patrol in the #SouthChinaSea, supporting theater security cooperation efforts with #IndoPacific partners and allies	447	446
US	marcorubio	*In 2015 Xi Jinping's pledged not to militarize islands in #SouthChinaSea. Then he went ahead & did exactly that. It is part of #China govt pattern of deception, deceit & total disregard of the law.	441	490
China	XHNews	*Chasing sunrise in #SouthChinaSea and exploring an uninhabited island @periscopetv	441	510
US	jimsciutto	*New: US has quietly suspended freedom of navigation operations in #SouthChinaSea, none since Jan 20 as admin seeks not to antagonize #China	356	307
US	FoxNews	*WARNING SIGN? #China's 1st aircraft carrier enters #SouthChinaSea #FOXNewsWorld fxn.ws/2i0BE9T	312	278
China	XHNews	Chinese naval formation consisting of aircraft carrier #Liaoning conducts take-off, landing drills in #SouthChinaSea	298	290
US	jimsciutto	Don't miss this - #China certainly didn't: @PressSec said "We will defend" islands in international waters. #SouthChinaSea	267	262
US	mkopNY	*RED lines being crossed by #China, #SouthChinaSea, seizing #USA underwater drone, watch out, escalation reut.rs/2hP1Bdu via @Reuters	266	293
US	jimsciutto	Trump called Obama weak on #SouthChinaSea patrols. 100 days in, he seems to have halted them entirely.	253	268

Location of account	Created by	Text	Retweet count on Twitter interface on 7 Jul 2020	Retweet count in dataset
China	CGTNOfficial	*Chinese naval formation involving aircraft carrier Liaoning conducts drill in #SouthChinaSea on New Year's Day 2017	245	242
China	yicaichina	* #China finishing #SouthChinaSea buildings that could house missiles - US officials #US-China http://sta.cr/2HRW1	233	238
US	DanEberhart	*@realDonaldTrump send a clear message to China. #SouthChinaSea is world-important energy trade route. #briertart breitbart.com/politics/2017/10/11/eberhart-south-china-sea-is-the-sudetenland-of-asia/	206	522
China	XHNews	China's aircraft carrier formation passes through Taiwan Strait en route to #SouthChinaSea for drills and tests http://xhne.ws/JeFVb	205	228
China	XHNews	EXCLUSIVE: Hunting ancient and modern treasures of #SouthChinaSea ! Xinhua's Wang Jingzhong tells his own story http://xhne.ws/6HbH5	203	217
US	INDOPACOM	USS Carl Vinson (@CVN70) launches F/A-18 sorties in the #SouthChinaSea, projecting U.S. airpower on a routine #3rdFleetForward deployment.	202	Tweet not in dataset
US	INDOPACOM	After a visit to #Vietnam, the Carl Vinson Strike Group is back on patrol in the #SouthChinaSea	197	208
China	XHNews	China succeeds in collecting flammable ice samples in #SouthChinaSea, which may lead to global energy revolution http://xhne.ws/GNmaL	141	213
NA	hu61xyq	#SouthChinaSea God's plan is bigger than your mistakes.	NA (a/c suspended)	206
NA	jm32cco	#SouthChinaSea It's better to give than receive.	NA (a/c suspended)	206

Retweet network structure of #SouthChinaSea

The filtering left us with 344 accounts each receiving at least 20 retweets in the data period and connected to each other in 10,654 edges. In conducting the modularity group analysis, we experimented with three levels of resolutions (1, 0.5, and 0.3) using the visualization tool, Gephi. When resolution was set at 0.3, the selected 344 accounts (0.71% of the total number of accounts in the dataset) were seen to form one dense and one sparse sub-network including 32 groups. In the visualization in Figure 1, in which accounts that received 150 or more retweets are labelled, China (in pink) and US (in orange) accounts can be identified in the dense sub-network.

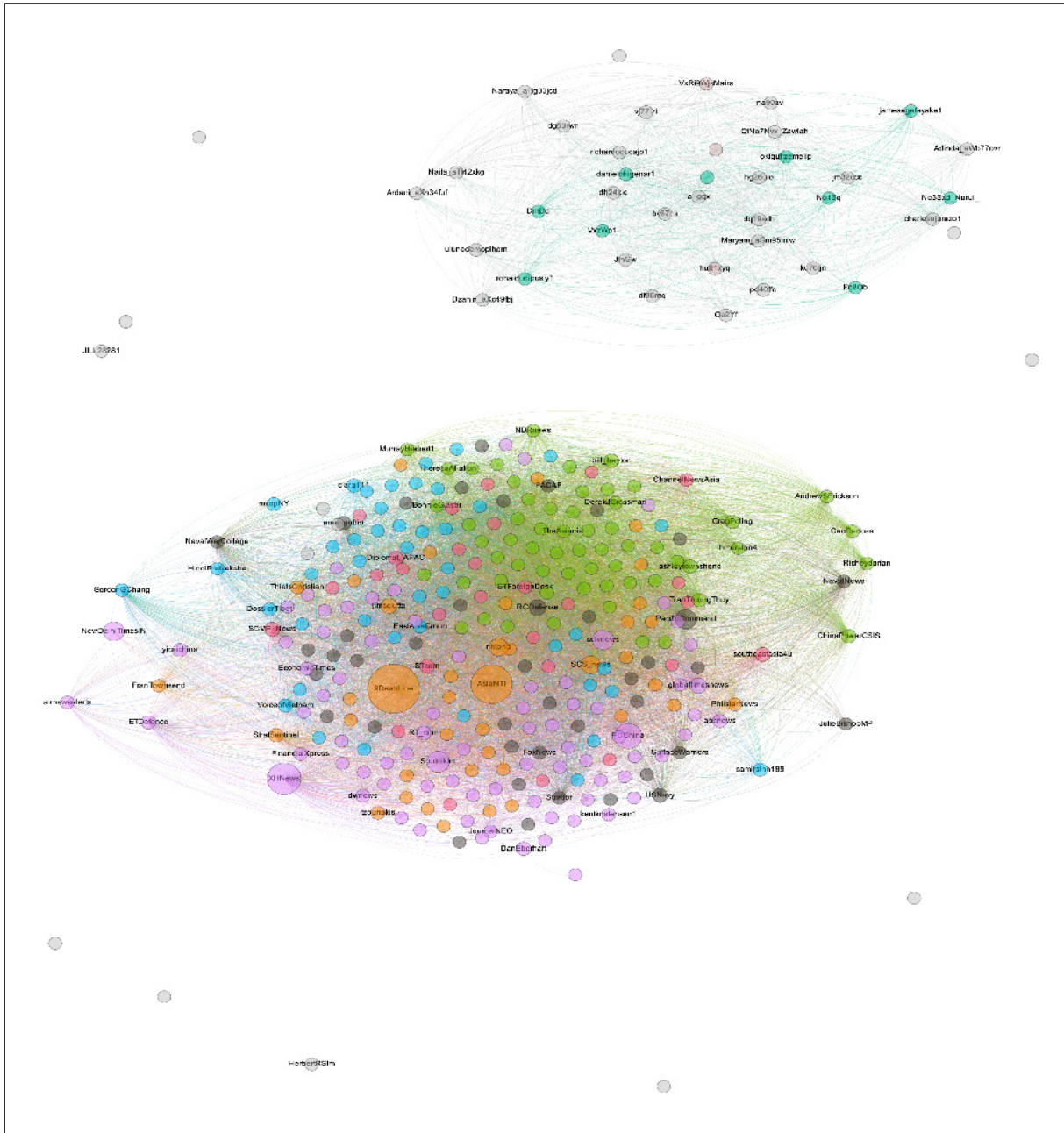


Figure 1. Retweeting networks of accounts that received 20+ retweets in #SouthChinaSea in 4 November 2016 - 7 June 2018

China's presence in #SouthChinaSea

Manual inspection of the 344 accounts found 19 accounts (5.5%) related to China. They included 14 official central-level state (overwhelmingly news) media, two local-level news media, one government, one NGO, and one citizen account (Table 2).

Table 2. China accounts that received 20+ retweets in the dataset

Twitter username	User real name	Nature of account	No. of original tweets (T=933)
BeijingReview	Beijing Review	Central-level state media	22
CCTV	CCTV	Central-level state media	15
CCTV_Plus	CCTV+	Central-level state media	56
cgtnamerica	CGTN America	Central-level state media	3
CGTNOfficial	CGTN	Central-level state media	71
China__Focus	China Focus	Central-level state media	0
ChinaDailyAsia	China Daily Asia	Central-level state media	30
ChinaDailyUSA	China Daily	Central-level state media	16
chinaorgen	China.org.cn	Central-level state media	14
ChinaPlusNews	China Plus News	Central-level state media	36
Echinanews	China News 中国新闻网	Central-level state media	13
globaltimesnews	Global Times	Central-level state media	191
PDChina	People's Daily, China	Central-level state media	135
XHNews	China Xinhua News	Central-level state media	112
yicaichina	Yicai Global 第一财经	Local-level business media	11
SCMP_News	SCMP News	Local-level (Hong Kong) media	113
chinascio	China SCIO	Central government	32
ChinaUSFocus	China US Focus	NGO based in Hong Kong	59
ez (anonymized for privacy)	(hidden for privacy)	Chinese citizen	4

Central-level state media, which are owned by the state, directed by the Central Publicity Department of the CCP, and managed by Party-appointed personnel, are considered state actors. Four (21.1%) of the accounts, including one NGO, two local-level news media providers, and one citizen, could be considered non-state actors. The only citizen account, *ez*, indicates her location as China, and self-describes on Twitter as “Chinese Citizen, views my own, retweets ≠ endorsements, IT person” when checked on 30 July 2021. The pinned tweet on her timeline is a video dated 15 August 2019 of the “wondrously chaotic night market in Xinjiang,” which is described as having benefited from a huge investment from the Chinese government to boost tourism. *Yicai Global* is labelled on the Twitter interface as “China state-affiliated media,” but, as a local-level business news provider invested with private capital, would be classified as non-official media by China scholars (Stockmann, 2013). *SCMP* (*South China Morning Post*) is a commercially operated newspaper with a long history in Hong Kong dating back to the British colonial period before it was bought by the Chinese technology giant, Alibaba, in 2015. *China US Focus* is a magazine published by the China-US Exchange Foundation described as “to promote exclusive dialogue, insight, and perspectives on the world's most important bilateral relationship”. The China-US Exchange Foundation

website says it was founded as an NGO of China in 2012 and managed by the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, which is “a national people’s organization engaged in people-to-people diplomacy of the People’s Republic of China.” The Foundation is chaired by the former Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Tung Chee-Hwa, and its address is in Hong Kong (Table 2).

China’s monologic communication

The long period of data collection enables us to compare the level of tweet publishing (hence one-way communication) of the 19 accounts. In the data period, globatimesnews, known for its sometimes-provocative nationalistic stance, published the most original tweets that contained the #SouthChinaSea hashtag, followed by PDChina and XHNews. At the other end of the spectrum, China__Focus, the NGO account, published none, and cgtnamerica, which targets the US audience, published only 3. Altogether the 19 accounts published 933 original tweets, on average 1.61 per day over the 581 days (Table 2).

China’s dialogic communication

Compared to their original tweeting, the number of replies (n=10) and mentions (n=28) made by China’s accounts to other accounts (including accounts among themselves) is far lower. Their replies to and active mentions of other accounts are also far lower than the replies (n=220) and mentions (n=364) they received from other accounts (Table 3). This suggests that China’s accounts engage in far more monologue than dialogue, with the latter highly asymmetrical as others attempt far more interaction with them than they with others.

Table 3. Replies, mentions, and retweets of the 19 China accounts

In Reply		Out Reply		In Mention*		Out Mention*		In Retweet		Out Retweet	
No. of accounts	Count	No. of accounts	Count	No. of accounts	Count	No. of accounts	Count	No. of accounts	Count	No. of accounts	Count
110	220	3	10	189	364	18	28	13,027	18,565	11	24
32 (29.1%) no more				22 (11.6%) no more				4,676 (35.9%) no more			

*The In Mention and Out Mention counts refer to active mentions, excluding cases where the “@” sign is automatically included in retweeting and replying

The numbers of accounts found to be non-existent are based on looking up the user ids on Twitter using Tweepy on 30 July 2021 of the accounts identified in the dataset that replied to, mentioned, and retweeted the 19 China accounts.

Reply

The 110 accounts that replied to the China accounts overwhelmingly replied once only, with only 9 of them replying to the same account 5 times or more. This hardly supports the development of relationships over time. Two accounts alone contributed 20.0% of the In Replies to the China accounts. GreaselyWee replied a total of 22 times to the China accounts: to PDChina 10 times; globaltimesnews 4 times; SCMP_News 4 times; XHNews 2 times; and ChinaDailyUSA 2 times. However, tweets published by GreaselyWee express a clear negative sentiment towards China. DibakarGhosh111, which did not exist on Twitter when checked on 30 July 2021, also replied 22 times: to globaltimesnews 12 times; SCMP_News 8 times; and ChinaDailyUSA 2 times.

Active repliers in #SouthChinaSea seem to share a negative sentiment towards China. Reading through replies made to the 5 most replied-to tweets of the China accounts and one most replied-to tweet each by the 10 China accounts with the greater number of common retweeters, we found that China state media tweets draw many negative replies from users in its neighbouring countries including India, Vietnam, and the Philippines (each of which has border disputes with China on land or at sea). In return, some of these replies draw replies that accuse the US of being the real invader and Japan being a slave of the US. Positive Supportive short replies or assertions of China's sovereignty in the South China Sea or sensitive regions such as Tibet are also found. Some of the supporting repliers seem to originate from China's ally countries as they sometimes glorify the friendship between Pakistan and China, for example. The other replies, published in broken English or Chinese, could be Chinese citizens who live outside China, who reside in China but act as volunteers in fighting the country's perceived enemies (Wang, 2019), or even officially deployed to fabricate public opinion (King, Pan and Roberts, 2017).

Mention

Figure 2 visualizes the modularity group analysis of using Gephi at default settings, based on the In Mentions of the 19 China accounts from the 189 accounts. Again, most accounts mentioned China's accounts only once in the data period, with only 12 of them mentioning the same account 5 times or more. The one account that most actively mentioned China's accounts is VoiceofVietnam (n=31 times, 8.5% of total, XHNews 16, PDChina 15). The account did not exist on Twitter on 30 July 2021. VoiceofVietnam was reported as taking the communication strategy of retweeting China's state media while adding its negative annotations (Jia & Li, 2020) presumably in the form of quote tweets. In this dataset, it did not retweet any of the 19 accounts, only mentioning and replying.

AsiaMTI, the NGO, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, based in Washington DC at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, actively mentioned 4 China media accounts (including SCMP_News) a total of 20 times.

China's network communication

Twitter metrics suggest that network communication of the 19 China accounts is highly successful: 13,027 (26.8%) of the accounts in the dataset retweeted their messages a total of 18,565 times (Table 3). As seen in Figure 3, each of the accounts have its clique of retweeters, with XHNNews, PDChina, CGTNOfficial, and globaltimesnews having the largest cliques. In comparison, even the more successful non-state actors (China US Focus and ez) have relatively small retweet cliques. The China accounts are not strongly networked with each other through their retweeters.

As in replying and mentioning, the accounts that retweeted China's accounts overwhelmingly only retweeted the same China account once, again implying the non-existence of long-term engagement. Checking the accounts that retweeted the China accounts 30 times or more each on the Twitter interface, we identified 2 other China accounts. 2ndArtillery (real name "ChinasFuture"), which indicates its location as the PRC, expresses a clear political stance in its self-description: "Destroying terrorism can we bring World Peace. A good nation with a powerful military must be used for defensive purposes." On 30 July 2021 it was pinning a tweet dated 22 May 2018:

God bless the #SAA for the securing and defending the Syrian Arab Republic.Finally securing the capital #Damascus from the terrorists.God bless those who fought for the Syrian people and righteousness.God bless the IRGC,Hezbollah,Palestinian forces and the Russian Aerospace force

Another account HunanofChina (real name "GoodHunan"), located in Changsha city of Hunan, China, calls on others to "Follow #GoodHunan to know more the traveling、studying、working、living information in Hunan province of China." It retweeted several of China's state media dozens of times each. Some of the other accounts not located in China, but which retweeted China accounts typically tend to post few original tweets and mainly just retweet (but not limited to China accounts).

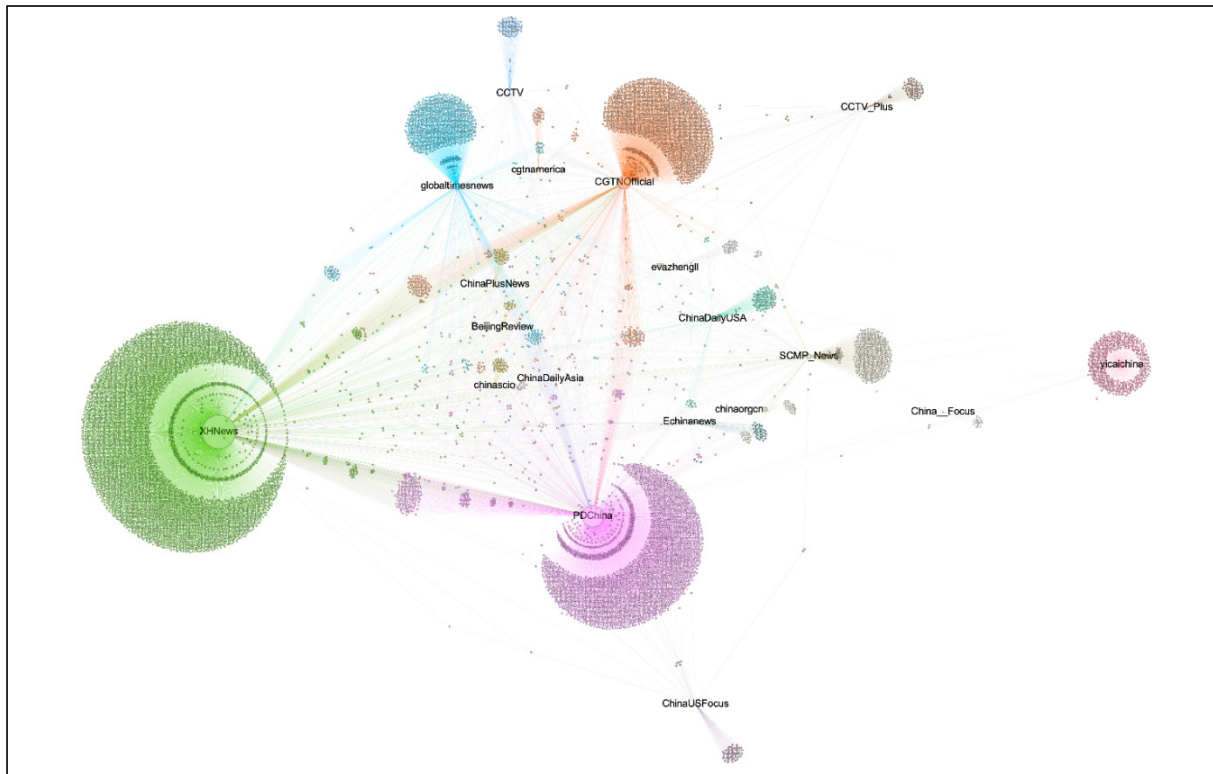


Figure 3. In Retweet networks of the 19 China accounts

On the other hand, we found quote tweets that are not all supportive of China’s messages. The sample given in Table 5, published by Western users, gives a sense of the sentiment. Bill_hayton (real name Bill Hayton) is a UK-based writer about China. nktpn (Ankit Panda) is the Stanton senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in the US. 9DashLine, which self-describes as “independent and non-partisan” with its location in Europe, appeared to be a republishing account during the data period in our earlier checking. More recently, its website says it was launched as a commentary platform in April 2020 and is based in the UK.

Table 5. Sample of quote tweets of China’s state news media

Publishing account	Message	Quote account	Comment added when quoting
	First cinema opens on #SouthChinaSea island http://bit.ly/2umksSe	bill_hayton	Woody Island in the Paracels gets a cinema
@PDChina	Two Chinese navy frigates are cooperating w/ the US in the #SouthChinaSea in search of a sailor reported missing from a US destroyer: report	nktpn	Very interesting development. (USS Dewey's high seas FONOP involved a man overboard drill, IIRC.)
	Two Chinese navy frigates are cooperating w/ the US in the #SouthChinaSea in search of a sailor reported missing from a US destroyer: report	9DashLine	Cooperation on any level a step in the right direction. #SouthChinaSea

Publishing account	Message	Quote account	Comment added when quoting
@XHNews	Facts and figures about the wide support of the international community for China on the #SouthChinaSea issue #2 #Xiplomacy On the South China Sea issue, China has received wide support from the international community. Subsequently, more than 80 countries and international and regional organizations have voiced understanding and support for China's position on the South China Sea issue.	nktpnd	#Xiplomacy?
@globaltimesnews	China has right to peaceful activities in #SouthChinaSea: FM in response to Western reports of China's anti-ship cruise missiles and surface-to-air missile systems in the Nansha Islands http://bit.ly/2FGiGO7	9DashLine	#PeaceMissiles

Our Tweepy checking on 30 July 2021 of the 13,000+ accounts that retweeted China's 19 accounts found that 4,676 (35.9%) of them did not exist anymore. Although quote tweets may contain oppositional content, the number of quote tweets compared to simple retweets (without added comment) is much lower. So, it is fair to say most retweeters help users to spread their message and build their agenda. The lack of persistence and scale of discontinuation among China's retweeters, however, suggests weakness in the networking of China's accounts. The weakness may be partially caused by the lack of mutuality, as China accounts only retweeted a total of 24 times (Table 3), 18 of which were of China accounts themselves. They only retweeted 5 non-China accounts (4 are from the US) 6 times.

Discussion and conclusion

This study attempts a conceptual assessment of China's PD based on an empirical analysis of the communication of related accounts on Twitter. It is not a normative assessment about the effectiveness of its PD efforts (Sevin & Ingenhoff, 2018). It uses a retweet count of 20 to identify important China actors in the #SouthChinaSea conversation, and analyzes the inward and outward replying, mentioning, retweeting, and to a lesser extent, liking of these accounts. We identified 19 key China accounts, most of which are central-level state news media. Four of the key accounts, including two local level news media providers, one NGO, and one citizen, are considered non-state actors in China's centralized political context. We found that while many other actors interacted with the China accounts by liking (which also has a networking effect), mentioning, and replying to their tweets, China's accounts rarely interacted with other users using these Twitter functionalities. Many other users also retweeted the China accounts, but again the China accounts rarely retweeted others. We also found that the overwhelming majority of the repliers, mentioners, and retweeters of China's tweets only did so once in the 19-month period. The lack of persistent two-way interactions

by these accounts reflects the ineffectiveness of China's accounts in engaging with other Twitter users in building a relationship that sustains over time. These results suggest that the mode of PD conducted by China's actors in the #SouthChinaSea conversation on Twitter is best described as basic PD/white propaganda.

The predominance of news media providers among China's actors in the #SouthChinaSea conversation poses limits to its dialogic and network communication, as news media tend to inform more than engage. As an addition to China's non-state actors in the #SouthChinaSea conversation, in March 2019 the South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative (@SCS_PI) under the remit of the Peking University Institute of Ocean Research opened a Twitter account. Since then, it has been an active tweeter in the #SouthChinaSea conversation. This, together with the increased presence of diplomatic accounts on Twitter, should help China move towards a PD approach involving multi-actors of more varied nature. However, the fact that Twitter is blocked from ordinary users in China means that the number of mainland Chinese users on the platform is very small, and therefore organic networked reinforcement of messaging from China's accounts would continue to be difficult.

China's accounts conducting basic PD most of the time does not preclude them from conducting other forms of information intervention. Follow-up tracing of the accounts that interacted with the China accounts found that a substantial percentage of the accounts that replied to, mentioned, or retweeted their tweets no longer exist. Previous discovery of fake social media accounts originating from China supports the possibility that some of these accounts could be fake. Indeed, a recent report published by the Oxford Internet Institute said that a significant share of retweets of China's diplomatic and media accounts on Twitter is done by fake accounts (Kinetz, 2021). The fact that the Chinese authorities deploy paid commenters on domestic social media to distract attention and publish supportive narratives (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2017) also lead one to suspect the authenticity of the combative replies made to unfriendly repliers to China's accounts. Using fake or hired actors to reply is analogous to concealing or lying about the source of information and therefore makes the process grey propaganda; although, the tweets published by the China accounts are open and clearly attributable. Using algorithm driven accounts could amount to computational (black) propaganda.

Beyond China's accounts, the study also found that many retweeters of the most retweeted messages in the #SouthChinaSea conversation ceased to exist. This suggests high volatility in Twitter existence. Since at least some of these accounts express a negative sentiment towards China, it is possible that grey/black propaganda is also employed by non-China actors that are antagonistic to China in the #SouthChinaSea hashtag. A previous study (Nip & Sun, 2018) found evidence that manipulated actors that are unfriendly to both China and the US participate in the #SouthChinaSea conversation.

The findings about antagonistic tweeting alert us to the diplomatic relations context of China's communication in this study. Even before relations between China and the US deteriorated in mid-2018, conversations about the South China Sea issue was already

politically charged, involving actors with conflicting interests and claims. In the high-tension context, the outcome of dialogue or networking could be difficult to predict and may not be effective in achieving a country's foreign policy goals. This can partially explain the predominantly one-way communication used by China's actors. Other scholars (d'Hooghe, 2005; Hartig, 2016; Huang & Wang, 2021) have suggested that the propaganda tradition in China also influences the model of PD it conducts. Looking ahead, how does China counter the narratives of its biggest geopolitical rival, the US, and the multiple neighbours it antagonizes on an American platform, foreign to it in both language and culture, is the biggest question for China's foreign-directed social media PD. What is for sure, is the wolf warrior style does not cultivate a lovable image of China.

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