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Exploring China's Digitalization of Public Diplomacy on Weibo and Twitter: A Case Study of the U.S.–China Trade War

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This study of the U.S.–China trade war investigated how Beijing (a) uses institutional discourse and rhetoric to conceptualize digital public diplomacy based on the autocratic system of the Communist Party of China and (b) legitimizes its highly centralized and politicized international communication practices. We also investigated how China's domestic public diplomacy practices affect its international communication. Comparing the online activities of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs domestically (i.e., Weibo) and internationally (i.e., Twitter) revealed (a) that China first centralizes and politicizes communication content production and distribution to ensure that all messages follow the desired political direction and promote the desired value orientation; and (b) that, although inspired by the network communication perspective, Beijing's digital public diplomacy emphasizes advocacy and narrative, ignores listening and exchange, and does not seek mutual cross-cultural adaptation. Digital public diplomacy is an instrument that serves China's internal affairs, controlling and guiding domestic public opinion online to defend Communist Party of China leadership.

Keywords: digitalization, public diplomacy, domestic dimension, social media, China, trade war

New public diplomacy refers to the way diplomats manage their international environment using Web 2.0 tools and virtual collaboration. Diverse terminology, including digital diplomacy (Bjola & Holmes, 2015), digital public diplomacy (Snow & Cull, 2020), and public diplomacy 2.0 (Arsenault, 2009), highlight increasing scholarly attention to the digital transformation of traditional public diplomacy. Scholars have shown increasing interest in the way embassies, consulates, and diplomats use interactive communication instruments and digital technologies.

Traditionally, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) is not only a government department in charge of "staffing and supporting missions abroad" to manage favorable or hostile relations with other states, but also

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a political department that engages in "policy-making and implementation" (Berridge, 2015, pp. 9, 10, 15) encouraging diplomats to coordinate and interact with foreign constituencies. Public diplomacy is, therefore, a set of government-led communication efforts to alter how foreign publics think and, *in fine*, to influence policy making in their governments. However, the digital revolution, based on the connective ideology, has enabled states to exceed the conventional hierarchical chains of diplomatic communication, which focus on interstate representation, negotiation, and benefit protection. They now use (para-)diplomatic activities to engage in social structuring and identity formation based on long-term, dynamic, continuous, and interactive relationship building. These conditions have not only increased opportunities for the MFA to communicate with foreign counterparts and publics, but also allowed it to manage public opinion while "building supports" for domestic public affairs (Berridge, 2015, p. 19).

We examined how the Chinese MFA uses digital public diplomacy to manage both international and domestic public opinion. The Internet blockage system known as the "Great Firewall of China" has prevented most Chinese citizens from accessing international social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. As a domestic alternative to Twitter, Weibo is the mainstream Chinese microblogging platform that Beijing uses to distribute domestic digital propaganda. Therefore, any investigation of Beijing's digital public diplomacy must include both platforms officially accepted and used by the Chinese MFA: Twitter and Weibo.

The Chinese MFA created its first social media account—the Public Diplomacy Office [@外交小灵通]—on Weibo in April 2011. It aims to "popularize the public diplomacy concept, introduce China's national conditions and ideas, and interpret China's policy and advocacy" (Qin, 2013, paras. 5, 6) for domestic publics. A month after Chinese President Xi Jinping urged diplomats to "tell China stories well" (Xi, 2013, p. 2) in August 2013, the Chinese MFA created its first diplomatic Twitter account to digitalize its public diplomacy efforts in the European Union [@ChinaEUMission].

However, China's digitalization of global communication is remarkably inactive. Only the MFA operates the Public Diplomacy Office account on Weibo. Moreover, according to Huang and Wang (2019), Beijing operated fewer than 20 active diplomatic Twitter accounts as of late 2018. Nonetheless, China has built a virtual network using the interrelational and intertextual functions of social media and managed international public opinion to legitimize Chinese foreign policy by disseminating stories and maintaining regular online interaction with international and domestic counterparts and publics.

The U.S.–China trade war, which began on March 22, 2018, provided an opportunity for Beijing to revisit its digital public diplomacy. Chinese scholars also called on the MFA to learn from previous social media communication experiences (Y. Han & Qi, 2019), "quickly adapt to social media communication logic" (Shi & Tong, 2020, p. 26), strengthen Beijing's long-term oriented and durable international influence and discursive power online (X. Chen, 2019), and actively defend "overall national interests" (H. Li, 2019, p. 145).

Starting in mid-2019, Beijing accelerated its investment in social media use. Chinese scholars consider this action a response to Xi Jinping's call for the "Long March spirit" in a recent speech on China's global strategy during the U.S.–China trade war (H. Han, 2020). As a significant episode in Communist Party of China (CPC) history, the *Long March* refers to a strategic choice for dealing with and managing political and military uncertainties during the protracted civil war. It is also a practice of the Maoist "protracted war" (Mao, 1967, p.

109). According to Mao (1967), the Long March strategy includes "offense within defense, quick decisions within a protracted war, and exterior lines within interior lines" (p. 157). By reintroducing Maoist thought in the U.S.–China trade war, Xi Jinping argued that all departments "must be conscious of the long-term and complex nature of various unfavorable factors at home and abroad, and properly prepare for various difficult situations" (Stevenson, 2019, para. 6).

We monitored the websites of all foreign agencies of the Chinese MFA to review their digitalization efforts and found that Beijing's diplomatic services have rapidly reinforced their presence on social media. Such efforts concern both international and domestic communication. On Twitter, we discovered massive growth in the number of diplomatic accounts (from fewer than 20 to 80)[1]; on Weibo, the MFA had also reinforced its presence by creating another official account— the Spokesperson Office [@外交部发言人办公室]—to demonstrate its diplomatic activities to domestic publics. For this case study, we reviewed existing literature about public diplomacy and social media and examined how Beijing localized Western theories in the non-Western and authoritarian context of the party–state system. Furthermore, by analyzing the social media communication activities of the Chinese MFA during the U.S.–China trade war, we shed light on the specific characteristics, strategies, and actions of China's digitalization of public diplomacy.

Public Diplomacy and Social Media

The conventional definition of public diplomacy is "state-based communication aimed at influencing well-connected individuals and organizations that are capable of impacting upon a foreign government's policy choices" (Pamment, 2014, p. 255). Yet, the development of communication technologies, especially the widespread use of social media, widens the definition of public diplomacy to include the formal, connected, timely, and interactive practices of network communication.

Based on user-generated content and interaction, social media are a "new topology of distribution of information of a real interpersonal social network" (Terranova & Donovan, 2013, p. 297). Connectivity and interactivity can be understood as social actions that promote the generation and acquisition of knowledge and messages and constructing relationships (Schroeder & Ling, 2014). Therefore, the characteristics of Web 2.0 correspond to the notion of "social as social relation," which permits "the behavior of a plurality of actors insofar as, in its meaningful content, the action of each takes account of that of the others" (Weber, 1978, p. 26). From a constructivist perspective, the use of social media "increases our ability to share, to co-operate, with one another, and to take collective action, all outside the framework of traditional institutional institutions and organizations" (Fuchs, 2014, p. 35). Moreover, social media platforms permit user-centered, communal activity that builds networks and "promotes connectedness as a social value" (van Dijck, 2013, p. 11). Kent (2010) analyzed social media as an unimpeded and persistent communication channel that facilitates "two-way interaction" and confirmed social media's potential "for real-time interaction, reduced anonymity, a sense of propinquity, short response times, and the ability to 'time shift,' or engage the social network whenever suits each particular member" (p. 645). Such interaction

[1] The number of China's diplomatic Twitter accounts has rapidly increased since mid-2019. The current study is based on data collected on January 16, 2020.

and collaboration facilitate two-way symmetrical communication between network members to improve mutual understanding and trust, and not only accumulate social capital, but also "foster pluralism and help create democracy" (Pisarska, 2016, p. 24).

In the context of public diplomacy, social media platforms such as Twitter have allowed diplomats to maximize "engagement with increasingly interconnected foreign publics" and move away from "one-way information flows towards dialogue and engagement" (Bjola & Jiang, 2015, p. 73). Web 2.0 technology motivates and encourages user contribution and interaction online. MFAs and diplomats can mobilize social media platforms to generate content suitable for rapid dissemination and initiate grassroots online exchange and participation through mechanisms such as "comment," "like," "repost," and "share." These mechanisms allow them to defend and promote policy effectively and implicitly (Payne, Sevin, & Bruya, 2011). Therefore, the digitalization of public diplomacy refers to a long-term socially constructive process in which digital technologies progressively affect the "norms, values, working routines and structures of diplomatic institutions, as well as the self-narratives or metaphors diplomats employ to conceptualize their craft" (Manor, 2019, p. 15).

Scholars have used various perspectives to discuss the specific mechanisms by which social media shape public diplomacy. Some consider digital public diplomacy a communication instrument for shaping international perceptions of a nation and public debate in foreign societies. This intention assumes that social constructs are essential resources of power (van Ham, 2010) and seeks to bridge differences and achieve collaboration. Others have found that using social media facilitates narrative production and efficient information dissemination (Hayden, 2013). Digital platforms allow states to articulate their identity and foreign policies while legitimizing their attempts and behaviors (Holmes, 2015). Furthermore, social media provide technological support for changing the medium, model, source, and message of conventional public diplomacy (Arsenault, 2009). Digitalization strengthens the relationship-building function of public diplomacy, promoting "interconnectedness as another salient characteristic of engagement in a holistic logic" (Zaharna, 2018, p. 322). In turn, online relationship building and management should ultimately establish more commonality among states. Therefore, digital practices can transcend the limitations of conventional information dissemination and image cultivation, move toward "creating shared values," and target publics more strategically (A. Yang, Klyueva, & Taylor, 2011, p. 4).

Domestic Dimension of Digital Public Diplomacy

Digitalization also brings diplomatic communication into a profoundly mediatized context: The diversity, convenience, and accessibility of social media are rapidly blurring the boundaries between domestic and foreign publics (Bjola, Cassidy, & Manor, 2019). All of them are able to discuss foreign policy decision making and exchange ideas with diplomats directly. Bjola and Manor (2018) found that the digital blurring of the foreign and domestic allows diplomats to implement "domestic digital diplomacy" to "shape and build domestic support for the government's foreign policy" (p. 7). "Domestic digital diplomacy" treats the domestic citizenry as "a target, partner, or interlocutor with which public diplomacy relationships are to be developed and conducted by representatives of the state in which they live" (Sharp, 2016, p. 266).

Huijgh (2012) considers the domestic dimension of digital public diplomacy the "broader transition from state-centered information to this 'new' multi-actor network-relational public diplomacy" (p. 361). Thus, attending to the domestic publics permits diplomats to bridge the growing cognitive gap between foreign policy goals and domestic public statements toward the foreign states (Zaharna, 2010). First, at the international level, the digitalization of public diplomacy includes a wide variety of activities: attracting target publics, releasing messages, building and managing relationships, listening to and helping others, advocating policies, and advancing the interests and practicing the responsibilities of the state (Melissen, 2005). Second, the domestic dimension of public diplomacy provides "supportive relations" (Pisarska, 2016, p. 33) by generating dialogue and interaction between the government and publics. The goal is "to produce specific consequences and serve specific national interests by shaping the ideas held by cohorts of people" (Sharp, 2016, p. 268).

China's Domestic Digital Public Diplomacy

China's conceptualization and digitalization of public diplomacy is booming more than any other state. The so-called "Chinese characteristics" of public diplomacy exist in the party–state's political perception of diplomacy. CPC theorists consider diplomacy in China a continuation of its internal affairs (Q. Zhao, 2012). China's foreign policy, including public diplomacy, is managed and guided by internal affairs: "The strength or moderation of foreign strategy depends on how diplomacy serves internal affairs and consolidates CPC leadership" (Yu, 2017, para. 4). Zhou Enlai, founder of China's diplomacy, explained Beijing's fundamental diplomatic rules:

> We emphasize the conscientious observance of discipline in the interest of the Party. . . . To create a highly political atmosphere, our comrades must first dedicate themselves to the Party, temper themselves ideologically, and always act in accordance with [domestic political] principles. (E. Zhou, 1989, p. 101)

The term *public diplomacy*, proposed by Zongyun Zi (1988), first appeared in a CPC academic journal. Public diplomacy provides a practical reference for propaganda in terms of "cultural and ideological penetration" (Zi, 1988, p. 13). Unlike the Western idea of propaganda as an authoritarian concept of psychological control, manipulation, falsification, deception, and disinformation (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012), propaganda harvests "flowers and applauses" in China (Liu, 2013, pp. 30–31). It forms a fundamental part of CPC ideology, representing "Chinese intellectuals' pursuits of national independence and the awakening of the public, which are regarded as the result of modernization and, in turn, further promote modernization" (Lu, 2015, p. 329). Although the term *propaganda* has multiple meanings in the current Chinese context, including media/public communication and public relations (Q. Zhou, 2018), the basic task of CPC propaganda lies in

> mass mobilization campaigns; the construction of ideological and educational "models" to be emulated; the control of the content of newspaper articles and editorials; development of a nationwide system of loudspeakers that reached into every neighborhood and village; the domination of the broadcast media. (Shambaugh, 2007, pp. 26–27)

Based on the domestic propaganda system, Chinese scholars have used the term *external propaganda* to describe their localization of public diplomacy, framing public diplomacy as a continuation of internal propaganda that aims to combine "mass media-driven" and "political campaign" logic (K. Zhao, 2019, p. 170) to achieve self-promotion and self-advocacy rather than shape a more global cultural engagement (Y. Wang, 2012).

China's digitalization of public diplomacy is also slowly unfolding to prioritize its domestic political needs. In response to then-President Hu Jintao's (2003) domestic political reform proposal for "establishing the Party for the Public and exerting Power for the People" (para. 19), the Chinese MFA has established a Mass Diplomacy Division to strengthen a public-centric e-government service. Tan (2019) identified the main responsibility of this division: (a) to interact with domestic publics through an e-government platform and other Internet tools to promote and explain the government's foreign policy and actively "manage and orient domestic public opinion" (p. 79), and (b) to mobilize publics to defend national interests. Not until the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, when CPC leaders reframed China's diplomatic activities by applying the concept of "harmonious society with peaceful development" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2009, para. 7) did the division begin its international communication function.

As for the organization and structure of China's digital diplomacy, in 2009, the government promoted the Mass Diplomacy Division to the Public Diplomacy Office, which is now in charge of domestic and international diplomatic communication coordination and deployment (Tan, 2019). This type of organizational structure represents a traditional bureaucratic model of a state's diplomatic services on the surface. However, the CPC's propaganda organs, especially the International Communication Office of the Central Committee, play the critical role of institutional and content censorship in the upstream of public diplomacy (X. Chen, 2016). Its aim is to publicize and legalize China's peaceful rise and to serve domestic public opinion needs for harmonious society building (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2009). At this point, public diplomacy is an integral part of CPC doctrine.

CPC official Jiechi Yang (2011b) insisted that public diplomacy should be "led by the government" (para. 2) and that China "must balance the domestic situation . . . and the international situation . . . as [the government] advances public diplomacy, so as to ensure success both at home and abroad" (J. Yang, 2011a, para. 9). Another politician, Qizheng Zhao (2012), argued that the essence of public diplomacy is the extension of CPC propaganda, with the aim of building China's reputation, legitimizing Chinese policies and initiatives, promoting Chinese modernization, and endorsing its peaceful rise. Furthermore, the government needs to explain its foreign policies and display diplomatic achievements to domestic publics to persuade, motivate, and mobilize them to participate in defending national interests.

Xi Jinping arrived at the CPC decision-making center in 2012 and urged officials to display the "Chinese dream" of national modernization. Since then, the MFA has set up diplomatic Twitter accounts to fulfill Xi's request to find "new concepts, new categories, and new expressions of propaganda that could be accepted by both China and foreign states" (Xi, 2013, p. 2) in the digital era. Although Beijing has partially accepted the suggestions of domestic scholars for building a communication network, interacting with online publics, and engaging them (X. Chen & Liu, 2015), China's digitalization of public diplomacy has not escaped the domination of its internal affairs and propaganda system.

With the rise of Chinese social media, the MFA established its first public diplomacy account on Weibo in April 2011 to engage domestic publics (Xu, 2015). Meanwhile, Beijing strengthened Internet censorship to cope with the increasing domestic online democratization that threatened CPC authority (G. Yang, 2009). This initiative not only denied Chinese netizens access to social media overseas, but also reinforced Beijing's ability to use Weibo to control domestic public opinion (Creemers, 2015). Therefore, the public diplomacy Weibo account was for "introducing foreign policies to Chinese citizens" (W. Wang & Zhang, 2013, p. 113), managing and guiding domestic public opinion about foreign relations (Tang, Huang, & Wang, 2019), and "participating in the Party's cyber censorship and governance" (F. Chen & Li, 2019, p. 171). Even Weibo has become an important means for Chinese institutions to enhance online nationalism (Zhang, Liu, & Wen, 2018).

Nonetheless, Xi encouraged the MFA to engage in digital communication abroad because the use of international social media (e.g., Twitter) can deploy "China's cultural soft power and disseminate the values of modern China," including "socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Xi, 2014b, p. 404). The background of China's digitalization of public diplomacy lies in the need for the CPC to consolidate the core values of socialism (K. Zhao, 2019).

Arifon, Huang, Yue, and Zyw Melo (2019), Huang and Wang (2019), and Huang and Hardy (2019) analyzed China's recent digital diplomacy actions and found that the MFA gradually adopted a relationship management approach in its narrative-led communication practice. Beijing's diplomatic Twitter accounts have increasingly built an online network to project a diverse and inclusive image of China while defending the geopolitical initiatives of the CPC. Tan (2019) summarized this phenomenon as the effort to "fight for China's discourse power in the Western context" (p. 3). Such efforts belong to Xi's (2014a) *cyberpower*-building policy: "innovate and improve online publicity, use Internet communication rules to advocate things wholesome and positive, and disseminate and put into practice the core socialist values" (p. 489).

The U.S.–China trade war launched by the Trump administration on March 22, 2018, brought China into a long-term diplomatic mediation. During this period, the Chinese MFA began to enhance its domestic and overseas digital public diplomacy to "do a better job in telling the story of China, with its realities and policies" and "make use of such platforms to facilitate exchange and promote mutual understanding" (Geng, 2020, para. 6). The aim of this case study is to map how the Chinese MFA achieved its digital public diplomacy during the U.S.–China trade war. Two research questions guided the analysis:

RQ1: How did the Chinese MFA create and maintain network coordination in the digitalization of its public diplomacy during the U.S.–China trade war?

RQ2: How did the domestic dimension become an integral part of China's digital public diplomacy, and what role does it play in Beijing's digital diplomacy strategy?

Method

We selected five critical events that appeared frequently in mainstream media and academic research (cf. Han & Qi, 2019; Reuters, 2020) as key nodes of the U.S.–China trade war (see Figure 1). The

data come from two social media platforms: Weibo and Twitter. On Weibo, we focused on the accounts of the Public Diplomacy Office and the Spokesperson Office. On Twitter, we found 80 active Twitter accounts operated by the Chinese MFA by the time of the U.S.–China Phase 1 agreement signing (January 15, 2020).

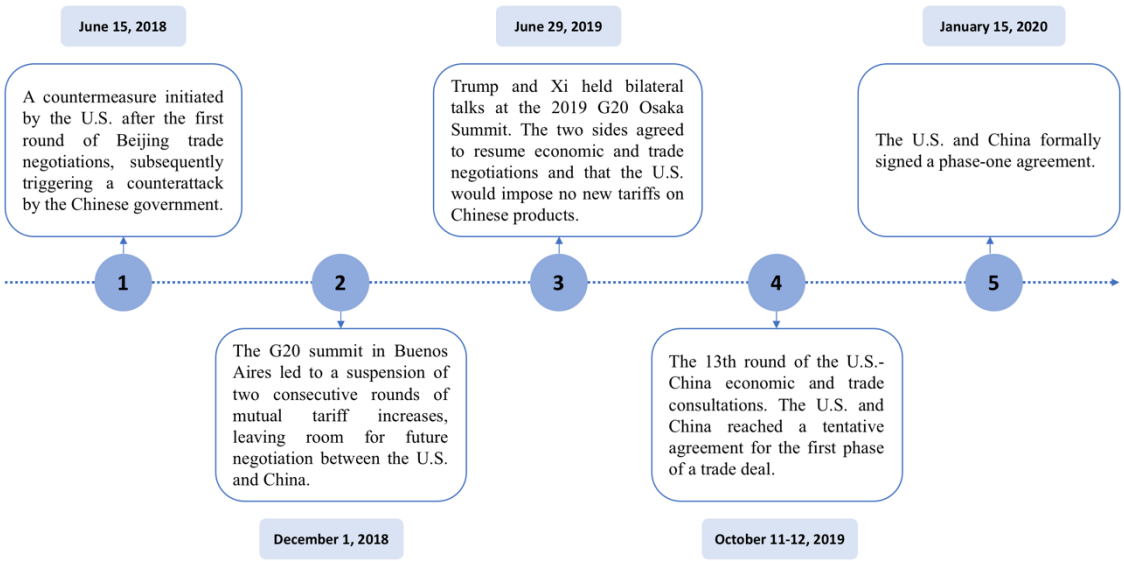


Figure 1. Timeline of five critical events during the U.S.–China trade war.

We manually downloaded Weibo posts and used Crimson Hexagon to download all diplomatic tweets. Based on the five key events, we selected posts released on the previous day, the event day, and the following day. The purpose was to account for the time difference factor that affects most U.S.–China trade negotiations. We read every post carefully and retained the posts related to the trade war: 20 Weibo posts and 263 tweets. The data set included multilingual posts, including Chinese, English, French, Spanish, Arabic, Turkish, Russian, Japanese, and Korean. Because we were proficient only in Chinese, English, French, and Spanish, we used Google Translate for the other languages during content analysis.

To address Research Question 1, we investigated China's diplomatic social media network building and coordination. Using R, Python, and Gephi, we extracted the interactive connections between users (e.g., retweet, mention, reply) and created links between users as network graphs. According to user profiles, we also added user type (e.g., MFA official accounts, Chinese embassies, ambassadors, consulate generals, MFA officials, other diplomats, media) to the metrics for analysis.

For Research Question 2, discursive and rhetorical analysis of messages published by Chinese MFA social media accounts revealed how CPC rules and prescriptions for Chinese political leaders regarding propaganda oriented online information production and release for public diplomacy. Dominant groups discursively construct and reproduce their own positions of institutional dominance (van Dijk, 1993). Thus, using discourse analysis methods, we can understand how China uses different strategies in its public diplomacy for domestic and international publics to construct, defend, and enhance CPC credibility and

authority. Second, for quantitative analysis, we adopted the metrics of social media use (e.g., number of posts, number of retweeted posts from other accounts, number of user name mentions, number of replies to other posts) to identify different communication strategies: active, two-way communication; or one-way, broadcast communication.

Results

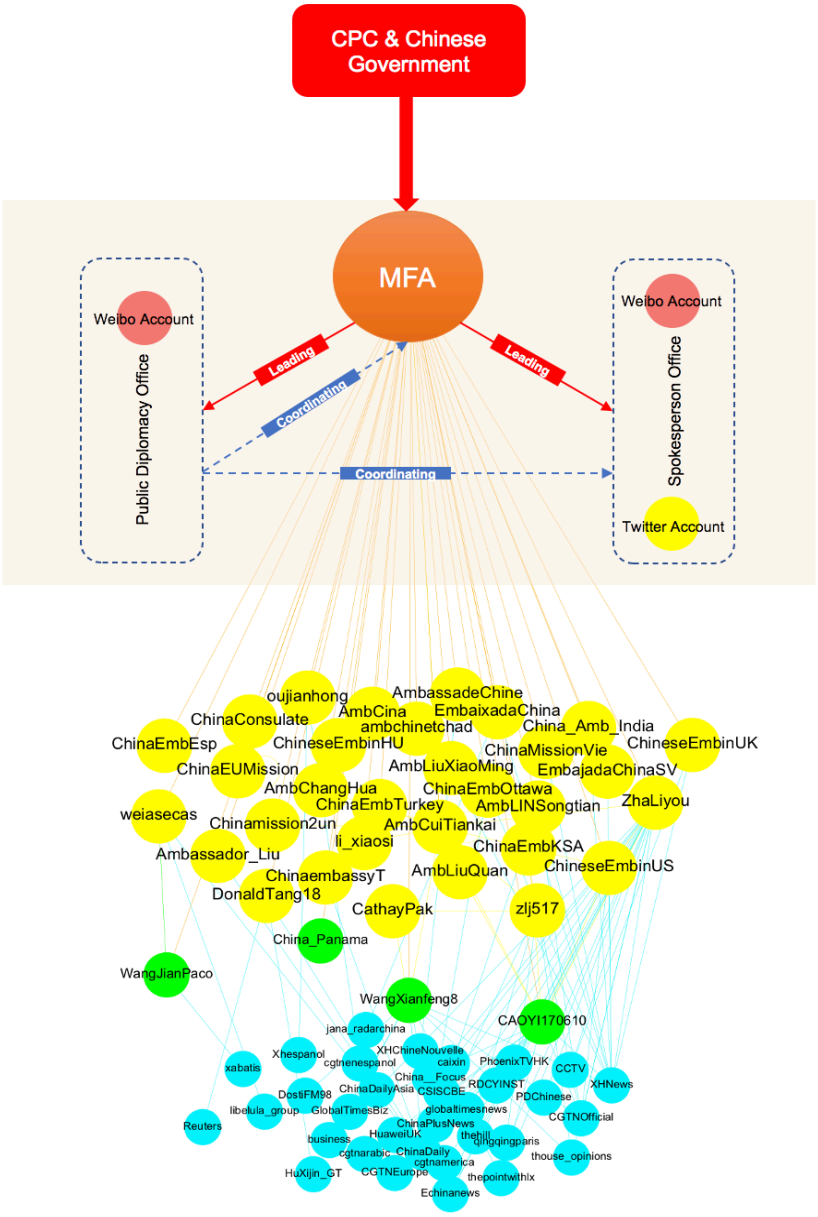
Finding 1: A Hierarchical Network Centralized by the MFA

Chinese diplomatic services and officials rapidly strengthened their presence on social media, especially Twitter. The MFA operated only 13 Twitter accounts as of October 20, 2018 (Huang & Wang, 2019); this number had grown to 80 by January 17, 2020. A large number of diplomatic accounts emerged between September and December 2019.

According to the Chinese government, the major responsibilities of the MFA include "to release information about important diplomatic activities, elaborate on foreign policies, conduct information-related work about important diplomatic activities, organize public diplomacy activities" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, n.d., Article 9). In terms of public diplomacy, the primary charge of the Public Diplomacy Office is to establish a "synergy mechanism with other agencies and departments" (Tan, 2016, p. 80). The office is responsible for organizing, coordinating, and guiding public diplomacy activities of all other related institutions.

After scrutinizing all posts sent by the MFA on Weibo and Twitter, we found that although Weibo and Twitter are distinct microblogging platforms, Chinese diplomats, at the level of content production and distribution, have artificially built an invisible content network that aligns with official statements issued by the MFA on Weibo. Networks enable the production, exchange, and strategic use of messages by diverse interactive communication actors (Huang & Wang, 2019); actors can coauthor messages to serve the same goal and move them from one point to another through time and space (Monge & Contractor, 2003).

The tweets sent by Chinese diplomats often related to content published by the MFA on Weibo, suggesting an organizational hierarchy and the leading role of the MFA in organizing public diplomacy at home and across the globe. According to the online activities of China's diplomats on social media during the fifth time frame of the U.S.–China trade war, we discovered Beijing's digital diplomacy network structure (see Figure 2).



Color: Red = CPC and Chinese government; Orange = MFA; Light Coral = MFA Weibo accounts; Yellow = Twitter accounts of Chinese MFA spokesperson, embassies, ambassadors, consulate generals; Green = other diplomats; Blue = media and other. Layout: Network Splitter 3D in Gephi.

Figure 2. Chinese diplomatic communication network. CPC = Communist Party of China; MFA = Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

This network is textual and based on content connections. By comparing the content of Weibo posts and tweets, we found that messages posted by Beijing on Weibo and Twitter demonstrated online intertextuality. Kristeva describes intertextuality as "a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (as cited in Martin, 2011, p. 148). Barthes (1977) likens text to "woven fabric" (p. 159), a passage that contains a particular meaning. Intertextuality connects diverse texts with their respective meanings, whether explicit or implicit, in an organized way to construct new expressions and "induce social actions" (Hauser, 2002, p. 3).

In China's digital diplomacy network, intertextuality derived in part from the technical differences between Weibo and Twitter. Weibo maintains traditional blogging features, providing a "long Weibo" service and allowing users to post long articles without word limits. The two MFA Weibo accounts made extensive use of "long Weibo" to report China's official opinions on its trade dispute with the United States. Overseas services and diplomats typically fragmented the MFA's long Weibo posts to maintain accurate expression of China's attitude while meeting the technical requirements on tweeting. A similar practice also occurred in the third time frame: Long texts about Xi's speech and his meeting with President Trump appeared, in fragments, across 34 tweets from 12 Twitter accounts, representing 11 different states and four different languages (see Figure 3). This strategy explains the asymmetry in the frequency and number of MFA Weibo posts and tweets.

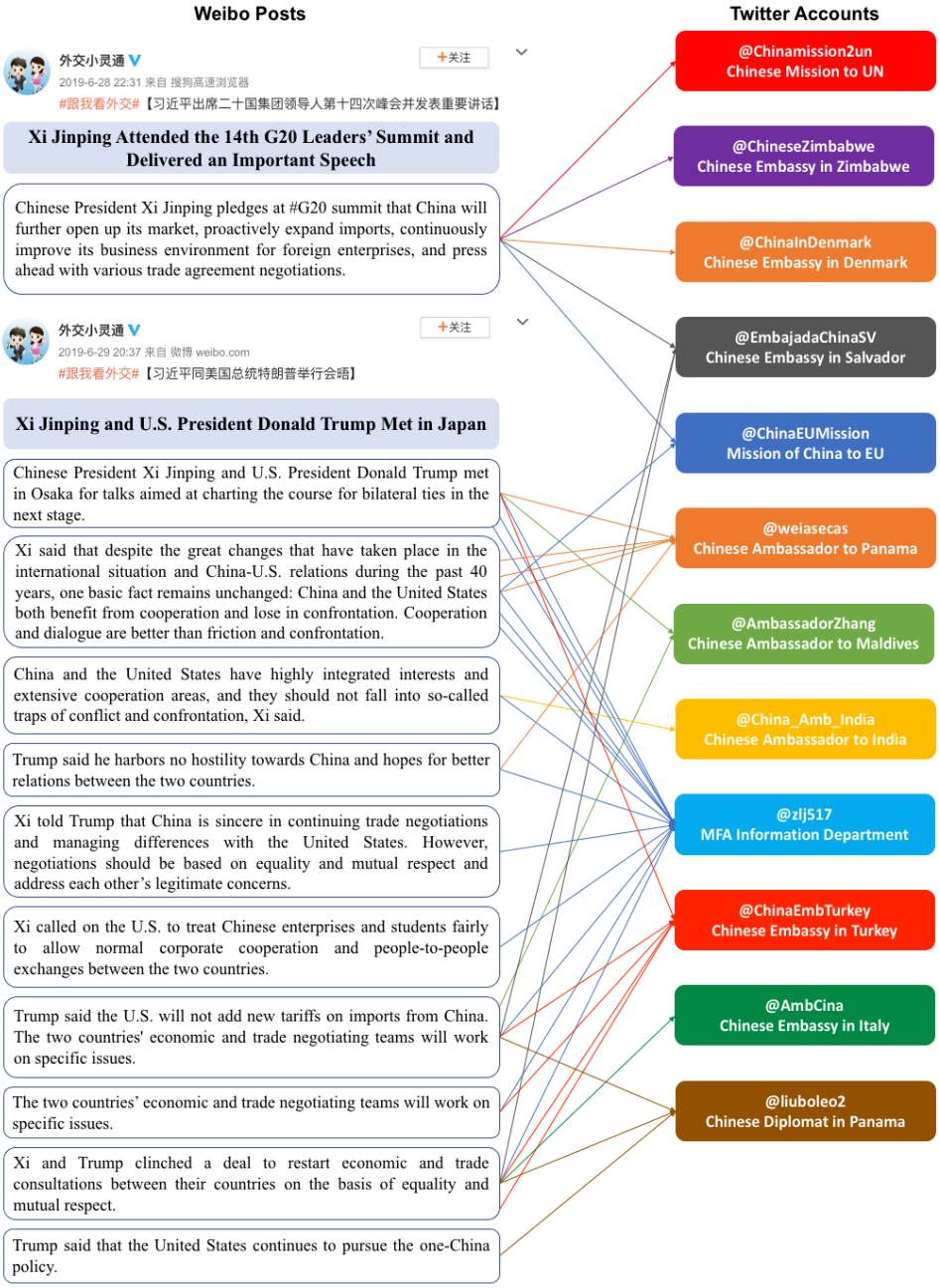


Figure 3. Twitter accounts fragmented long Weibo postings. MFA = Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In practice, the three social media accounts directly managed by the MFA— the Public Diplomacy Office and the Spokesperson Office on Weibo and Spokesperson Office on Twitter—compose the central kitchen of information production for domestic and international publics. This arrangement allowed Beijing to issue institutional discourse with an official attitude and tone, particularly on Weibo, which has no word limit. The MFA drew a bottom line for China's global communication activities at various stages of the U.S.–China trade war. Chinese diplomats used "meta-discourses and semi-official discourses" on Twitter to "erase heterogeneity, mismatch, and political sense" (Oger & Ollivier-Yaniv, 2006, p. 63) of Beijing's official language. Such practice generates homogenous discourse for foreign publics to read or hear. As Xi (2017b) insisted, "Propaganda and ideological departments alone are not enough to do a good job of publicity and ideological tasks. The entire party must take [coordinating] action" (pp. 32–33). One CPC political scholar interpreted this statement as the need to use "new media platforms and different enunciations to localize public diplomacy" to tell domestic and foreign publics about "China's roads, theories, systems, spirit, and power" (B. Cui, 2018, paras. 4, 9).

In the fifth time frame, when the United States and China signed the Phase 1 agreement, intertextuality helped Beijing advocate online for a win-win situation and international cooperation initiated by the Xi administration (Xi, 2017c). On January 15, 2020, Chinese ambassador to the United States Cui Tiankai (2020) published a series of tweets expressing his positive attitude toward the signing, favoring equality and mutual respect between the two nations; he also implicitly promoted the multilateralism and win-win international cooperation initiated by Beijing (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Tweets of Ambassador Cui Tiankai (2020).

Meanwhile, the Chinese Embassy in Saudi Arabia (2020) tweeted in Arabic its endorsement of the U.S.–China trade agreement, while expressing that China–U.S. cooperation was beneficial to the world (see Figure 5).[2]

Figure 5. Tweet of the Chinese Embassy in Saudi Arabia (2020).

Other Chinese missions and diplomats (e.g., Chang, 2020; Chinese Embassy in the United Kingdom, 2020) also reacted to this event by underlining the core idea that equality, cooperation, and win-win are the best and right choice for China and the United States (see Figure 6).

[2] Translation: Reaching agreement on the first stage on the basis of equality and mutual respect, which is good for China, the United States, and the entire world. It is hoped that the two sides will implement the agreement in earnest to achieve further cooperation between China and the United States.

Figure 6. Tweets of Chang (2020) and the Chinese Embassy in the United Kingdom (2020).

However, the content of these tweets are fragments of the long statement published by the MFA on January 15, 2020, underlining the tone set earlier by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on December 13, 2019, when the two countries reached an intention agreement: "Sino–U.S. cooperation is the best choice and the only right choice for the two countries" (Public Diplomacy Office, 2019, para. 6). He also emphasized that the aim of China–U.S. relations is to uphold the value of "non-conflict and non-confrontation, mutual respect, and win-win cooperation" (Public Diplomacy Office, 2019, para. 6).

Finding 2: Different Communication Strategies on Weibo and Twitter

For Zaharna (2007), "information-sharing is a key component of information politics in transnational advocacy networks" (p. 220). Digital public diplomacy from the network communication perspective refers to "a communicative construct situated context and discursive patterns" (King, 2009, p. 20). Thus, messages become strategic instruments for public diplomacy actors in building agendas, projecting images, and gaining legitimacy and credibility.

During the five time frames of the U.S.–China trade war, China's public diplomacy message production strategy was strictly influenced by the CPC domestic propaganda system and prescription for political leaders. Although most of the content had the same background, the specific communication tactics and purposes were distinct. In other words, the expressions and tone on Weibo aligned with relevant news released by China's official Xinhua News Agency and the CPC's mouthpiece *People's Daily* to "strengthen the guidance of domestic public opinion" (F. Chen & Li, 2019, p. 171). However, when Chinese diplomates

posted these messages on Twitter, China's digital diplomacy discourse featured the illusion of discursive polyphony. This public diplomacy production strategy of China mobilizes different voices, opinions, and communication tones to mediatize dynamically the government's advocacies online. Although these elements of language subtly promote and recognize specific events from various angles, they do not cross the red line of CPC censorship. Such phenomenon meets Xi's requirements for "telling China stories well," takes into account both "public opinion guidance" (domestic level) and "public opinion seeking and advocacy" (foreign level), focuses on "the principle of domestic and foreign distinctions," and adheres to the general rules of CPC propaganda (Xi, 2019a, para. 34). That is, the propaganda task "must adapt to the changing national and international situation, . . . insist on the leadership of the Party, and provide the right political direction . . . to ensure the correct orientation of public opinion" (Xi, 2018, p. 412).

On the eve of the U.S. tariff announcement in the first time frame, the Public Diplomacy Office released two long Weibo posts to circulate several speeches delivered by Foreign Minister Wang Yi. One includes the following: "Wang Yi talks about Sino–U.S. competition: aiming to surpass oneself rather than replace each other" (Public Diplomacy Office, 2018b). The expression "surpass oneself" implies "self-confidence" (Xi, 2017a, p. 12) in China's major-country diplomacy. It also echoes the Chinese dream put forward by Xi's ruling team: not only the peaceful rise of China as an emerging great power, but also China's rejuvenation as a historical, cultural, tolerant, and glorious nation. Another long Weibo post described the meeting between Wang Yi and U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo on June 14, 2018 (Public Diplomacy Office, 2018a). Using a structuralist approach to dialogue analysis and a pragmatic approach to enunciative positioning analysis (Ducrot, 1984), we found that six of the eight paragraphs focused on Wang's speech and action. Only two paragraphs focused on the discourse of the U.S. representative. Such enunciative imbalance points to a Chinese communication strategy: to show domestic publics the proactive and dominant position of Beijing during the negotiation with the United States. This long post also featured declarative statements to convey China's political position and requirements. In this way, Weibo posts allow the CPC to perform internal publicity while conveying China's tough attitude toward the trade war. This domestic public opinion orientation activity promotes an online patriotism, even a nationalist sentiment (Zhang et al., 2018). However, when Chinese diplomats framed the same incident on Twitter, their attitude softened. Descriptions of Wang's speech and behavior carried a more neutral, even prudent, tone. For example, the Chinese Embassy in Japan (2020) tweeted a simple message reporting the meeting between Wang Yi and Pompeo (see Figure 7).[3]

[3] Translation: Wang Yi, Secretary of State and Foreign Affairs Secretary, met with U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo in Beijing on Wednesday.

Figure 7. Tweet of the Chinese Embassy in Japan (2020).

Similar practices emerged after the 13th round of U.S.–China economic and trade consultations, a round that featured a specific political background: The United States used Xinjiang issues related to human rights to restrict the visas of several Chinese officials and their families and placed 28 Chinese entities on its export control entity list. In response, Chinese diplomats also adopted two distinct strategies on Weibo and Twitter.

On Weibo, due to China's information censorship concerning Xinjiang issues, Beijing attempted to downplay the details behind the dispute. The MFA Spokesperson Office posted a one-sided statement describing U.S. behavior as "a flagrant interference in China's internal affairs" and "fiercely slandering and smearing China over Xinjiang" (MFA Spokesperson Office, 2019, para. 2). The aim was to express to domestic publics a tough governmental position toward unreasonable U.S. critics. By the end of the statement, the MFA had judged Washington's behavior as erroneous, urging the United States "to immediately correct its mistake" (MFA Spokesperson Office, 2019, para. 4). This propagandistic strategy successfully aroused an online nationalist desire at home to boycott the United States. However, on Twitter, Chinese diplomats used neutral, moderate, and subtle expressions to frame this dispute. They retweeted posts presenting Beijing's efforts and contributions to Xinjiang's modernization, multicultural respect and protection, and people's happy life to demonstrate the success and achievements of China's Xinjiang governance (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. Tweets about Xinjiang (Chinese Embassy in Pakistan, 2019; Chinese Embassy in Uganda, 2019).

The Chinese Embassy in the United States (2019a) posted tweets that were consistent with sentiments on Weibo to fight against U.S. criticism. But it rapidly softened its attitude and tone by releasing two more tweets to point out that Washington's actions flagrantly violated the Vienna Convention. Chinese diplomats also hinted at a tight, inurbane, and arrogant image of U.S. unilateralism, while expressing the goodwill and innocence of Beijing: "So far, the Chinese side does not have similar requirements on American diplomats and consular officers in China" (Chinese Embassy in the United States, 2019b).

Discussion

According to Western public diplomacy literature, the domestic factors of public diplomacy reflect that the influence exerted by domestic society "requires moving beyond the notion of electing representatives . . . towards the continuous participation of domestic constituencies in foreign policy formation, debate, cooperation, and the conduct of diplomatic affairs" (Pisarska, 2016, p. 32). In this sense, the domestic public understanding of foreign policy is conducive to more support for implementing the state's public diplomacy overseas. However, due to the party–state regime and authoritarian system, the domestic dimension of China's public diplomacy focuses on better serving the internal affairs led by the CPC (Q. Zhao, 2012), and the digitalization of public diplomacy contributes to CPC propaganda and domestic public opinion management and orientation.

During the U.S.–China trade war, China used digital public diplomacy to reach multiple goals. The MFA used Weibo and Twitter to construct, artificially and intentionally, an intertextual communication

network. Doing so ensured that the CPC could review and guide the production and spread of messages. For Xi (2017a), "greater unity in thinking both within the Party and throughout society" (p. 4) can strengthen CPC capacity to prepare positive information and narratives. Thus, for domestic public diplomacy, Beijing first centralized content production and distribution to "ensure all messages released adhere to the correct political direction and value orientation" (Xi, 2019a, para. 9). Through a hierarchical intertextual network, Beijing reinforced its agenda building and setting while effectively controlling domestic public opinion and strengthening international support.

China's digital public diplomacy is an instrument for the CPC to legitimize and popularize its ideology and enhance its credibility among domestic publics. Previous findings about China's public diplomacy suggest that the Chinese dream was a way to demonstrate Xi Jinping's socialist ideas about self-confidence in CPC theory, the party–state system, and socialist culture (Xi, 2014b). These *credos* frame the political and ideological connotations of the CPC (Y. Wang, 2008).

Comparing MFA activity on Weibo and Twitter, we found that building an online network to tell China stories reflects the mass media-driven model that continues to dominate China's international communication strategy, which concentrates on global political advocacy and storytelling (see Table 1).

Table 1. Weibo and Twitter Account Activity.

Account	Total posts	Retweeted others	Replied to others	Mentioned others
Weibo	20	0	0	0
Twitter	263	152	5	8

Although Chinese diplomats are more active on Twitter than on Weibo, most of the tweets they released were fragmented or synthetized versions of domestic Weibo content, repackaged for external propaganda. Such findings suggest that Beijing lowered the value of listening in public diplomacy, instead emphasizing a one-way and uniform flow of information to share its claims with the world. The small amount of online interaction we found consisted of retweets or replies to other Chinese counterparts and media. This finding echoes the conclusions of Huang and Wang (2020) about China's digital panda diplomacy: Even with active and interesting content carriers, Beijing still uses traditional propaganda-based methods for public diplomacy practices and ignores online interaction with foreign publics. As Y. Wang (2012) describes, Beijing preferred to display superficially its "opening up to the world" rather than participate in "mutual adaptation" or "co-evolution" (p. 465) with other states. At the domestic level, by continuing to use propaganda, Beijing attempted to build its image of toughness and as an emerging great power in the diplomatic field. It blocked or deleted comments on Weibo regarding several public diplomacy activities and statements while promoting domestic nationalism to enhance the "cultural self-confidence of socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Xi, 2019b, para. 2) and to defend and reinforce the leading position of the CPC in domestic political life.

The findings of this case study of the U.S.–China trade war preliminarily underline how domestic factors influence China's digital public diplomacy. However, this study has limitations. First, we focused only on China's public diplomacy efforts during the U.S.–China trade war. Scholars should observe more cases, such as the aggressive crisis communication practices of the MFA during the COVID-19 pandemic to verify and improve our theoretical assessment of the domestic dimension of China's digital public diplomacy.

Second, China's attempt to tell China stories involves social media accounts operated by national media, such as Xinhua, *People's Daily*, and CGTN. Such diplomatic and paradiplomatic social media accounts are also part of Beijing's global external system of propaganda (*da wai xuan*), which projects China's image and manages international public opinion. Expanding the data set and analyzing the role of media would draw a larger picture of China's digitalization of public diplomacy.

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