Crossing the "Great Fire Wall": A Study with Grounded Theory Examining How China Uses Twitter as a New Battlefield for Public Diplomacy

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Abstract

In this paper, I applied grounded theory in exploring how Twitter became the battlefield for China's public diplomacy campaign. China's new move to global social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, has been a controversial strategy in public diplomacy. This study analyzes Chinese Foreign Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Twitter posts and comments. It models China's recent diplomatic move to Twitter as a "war of words" model, with features including "leadership," "polarization," and "aggression," while exerting possible effects as "resistance," "hatred," and "sarcasm" to the global community.

Our findings show that by failing to gage public opinion and promote the country's positive image, China's current digital diplomacy strategy reflected by Zhao Lijian's tweets has instead constructed a polarized political public sphere, contradictory to the country's promoted "shared human destiny." The "war of words" model extends our understanding of China's new digital diplomacy move as a hybrid of state propaganda and self-performance. Such a strategy could spread hate speech and accelerate political polarization in cyberspace, despite improvements to China's homogenous network building on Twitter.

Key words: Twitter, digital diplomacy, grounded theory, China

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"Public diplomacy" is the term first used and defined by Edmund Gullion in 1965 (Sharp, 2007), meaning that the states and non-state actors try to build relationships with people in foreign countries to deliver their policies and values and exert effects on target groups. Public diplomacy can be an effective way to build, enhance, and perform "soft power" (Nye, 2011) in setting the political agenda, framing a positive image, and establishing a favorable environment for the country.

Traditionally, public diplomacy occurs via in-person activities among diplomats, correspondents, private groups, citizens, and other forms of intercultural communications. When social media potentially provides governments a doorway to meet more people with unrestricted interactions (Christensen, 2013), public diplomacy becomes digitalized to amplify government policy distribution on world events and influence in the global narratives (Collins et al., 2019).

By digital diplomacy, governments launch campaigns on social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) to promote multi-directional communication between diplomats and their overseas counterparts, foreign publics, as well as foreign media. As a consequence, the study of digital diplomacy is rising. However, such investigations focus primarily on the United States or comparative studies between the United States and other countries (Aronczyk, 2013; Bjola & Jiang, 2015; Khatib et al., 2011; Melissen, 2005; Zaharna, 2010; Zhong & Lu, 2013). Research questions centered on whether the digital campaign has been successful or not in affecting the target population. Little in-depth research has been done on government officials, in particular, diplomats' performance, and effects on global society, as the global audience is full of divergence culturally and historically. Undoubtedly, we find relevant studies on Donald Trump's Twitter performance and debate-style linkage to populism (Bucy, et al., 2020; Pain & Masullo Chen, 2019). In the meantime, China, as a rising global power, which has also started its digital diplomacy campaign on Twitter, deserves equal academic attention. Previous literature on China's digital diplomacy addressed the country's overall public diplomatic policy, measures, and possible effects (e.g., Huang & Wang, 2019a; Jia & Li, 2020). This study turns to more in-depth analyses, focusing on how China's Foreign Spokesperson performs and represents China's new digital diplomatic move targeting global social media platforms (i.e., Twitter). It sheds light on the strategic framework of China's current Twitter diplomacy campaign and its interplay with the global audience.

China has long suffered from a relatively poor international image which hindered its soft power building. Brady (2015) argued that trying to "gain face" (p. 51) in the international arena has made China in recent years invest heavily in boosting its international approval rating. Traditionally, China promotes its messages abroad through a variety of official media, including the state official outlets like *China Daily, China Central Television* (CCTV), *China Radio International,* and *People's Daily* (overseas edition). However, this strategy is now widely regarded as a failure. Brady (2015) noted that foreign audiences interpret the information from official Chinese media as propaganda rather than news. From the early 2000s, China intensified efforts on its global image. It promoted propaganda to serve the country's soft

power building (Hayden, 2012) with new approaches, including political public relations, new technologies, and strict control on certain topics (Brady, 2009).

In November 2012, when the country entered Xi Jinping's era, the new leader pushed through a series of significant changes to China's foreign policy, including the *belt and road initiative,* the *Chinese Dream,* and the proposed *shared human destiny* to influence foreign audiences. Xi Jinping stressed the need for China to strengthen media coverage with innovative outreach methods and promote China's views internationally through innovative techniques in promoting ideological work and building a socialist cultural power (Xinhua, 2013). Since then, China's public policy strategy has moved to moved to a new level of "assertiveness, confidence, and ambition" (Brady, 2015, p. 55).

In the country's most recent 2016–2020 five-year plan, which has been adopted in March 2016 by the People's National Assembly of China to date the objectives of governmental implementation over the next five years, the internet was incorporated to highlight the significance of leveraging the capabilities of social media in fulfilling the propaganda purposes (Livingstone, 2016). In July 2019, China's senior Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Hua Chunying published an article in *Study Times* (a newspaper published by the Party School of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee), proposing that China's diplomacy needs to enter overseas social media to enhance China's discourse on the world stage and ensure that the country's positive image stand out in the global community (Hua, 2019). As a practice, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China started taking Twitter as a publicity platform in December 2019. By answering a question in a Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Regular Press Conference on January 13, 2020, Spokesperson Geng Shuang explained the purpose of China's diplomacy's move to Twitter:

> Our presence in social media platforms overseas like Twitter aims to do a better job in telling the story of China, with its realities and policies, to the world. We hope to make use of such platforms to facilitate exchange and promote mutual understanding.
>
> (Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China, 2020).

Geng also added that many Chinese embassies, consulates, and diplomats have opened social media accounts, among whom Zhao Lijian, a former diplomat at the Chinese Embassy in Pakistan who has become Foreign Ministry Spokesperson since 2020, was the most prolific Chinese diplomat on Twitter (Huang & Wang, 2019a) with a ten-year-old Twitter account and more than 800 thousand followers (as of December 2020).

Twitter was banned in Mainland China in 2009. Therefore, it is interesting to note that on one hand, the Chinese government prohibits its citizens from using overseas social media platforms, but on the other hand, it permits government officials and state media to open accounts on these platforms for publicity purposes, a kind of contradiction worthy of research. Despite millions of Chinese Internet users trying to log into Twitter through virtual private

networks (Chen et al., 2017), the target of China's public diplomacy on Twitter is obvious the foreign public (Jia & Li, 2020). Studies on China's Twitter diplomacy are found in the international relations studies and communication studies domains. Jia and Li (2020) examine the effects of China's public diplomacy communication on Twitter during the Two Sessions in 2018, the country's annual plenary sessions of the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in making national-level political decisions. By applying content analysis and social network analysis, the study found that China's public diplomacy communication continues its one-way monologue tradition.

Other studies centered on how Chinese official Twitter accounts tell the "Chinese stories well" and formulate the concept of the "Chinese dream" by case studies (Huang & Wang, 2019a, pp. 2984-2985). China's digital diplomacy is growing not only quantitatively in terms of numbers of official accounts and followers on Twitter, but qualitatively in the individual performances and the language game they play (Wittgenstein, 2009). It is time to critically examine the country's public diplomacy shift, how the government enables diplomats to go to the front line to conduct a social media campaign to promote the country's ideological work.

This study aims at constructing theoretical frames on China's digital public diplomacy around the 2020s by qualitative data collected on Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Twitter account. As the most prolific Chinese diplomat, Zhao's online Twitter postings have attracted global attention. He is famous, or infamous, for his strong critique against Susan Rice (newly elected director of Domestic Policy Council in Biden administration), Michael Pompeo (70th United States Secretary of State), and Donald Trump (45th President of the United States), to name a few, on various political issues. As a result, Zhao also became popular in the Chinese community and accumulated legions of fans calling him "Uncle Zhao" and the "Wolf Warrior."

Zhao Lijian opened his Twitter account in 2010 when he served as the first secretary in the Chinese embassy in Washington. His Tweets became active when he was the Deputy Chief of the Mission (DCM) of the Chinese Embassy in Pakistan from 2015 to 2019. Notably, after his rise on Twitter, Zhao successfully became the Deputy Department General (DDG) of the Information Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China in 2019 and was designated a foreign spokesperson since 2020. Therefore, his tweets are regarded a parameter of China's diplomatic move in the 2020s. As the main goal of this study is to explore China's new public diplomatic strategy, it is reasonable to analyze Zhao's tweets and the global community response to this ongoing strategy. In sum, the main research question of this study is:

What is China's digital diplomatic strategy in the 2020s reflected by Zhao Lijian's tweeting behavior, and how is the global community responding?

By studying a new phenomenon in an old field of public diplomacy, the researcher delayed the detailed literature reviews in generating hypotheses that could help the fresh insights emerge from the collected raw data (Charmaz, 2006a)[1]. Therefore, by applying grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), this article introduces the

methodology and data analysis first and then turns to literature reviews comparing the data analysis results to make some implications.

Methodology

Grounded theory (GT)

GT, with systematic guidelines to inductively construct theories from data themselves (Charmaz, 2006b), is rising as a promising methodology for researchers entering a new setting who aim at making new theoretical contributions (Al-Dabbagh, 2020; Creamer, 2018; Martin et al., 2018). Compared with deductive quantitative methodology, which is good at testing and extending existing theories, GT is beneficial in theory formation, which helps academia understand social problems abstractly and insightfully, especially when little is known about a phenomenon (Birks & Mills, 2015; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Originally, GT was developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) during their study on illness and dying by fieldwork in hospitals with patients and medical staff. They developed theories from research grounded in qualitative data rather than testing hypotheses from existing theories (Charmaz, 2006b). Components of the GT include "simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis," "constructing analytic codes and categories," "using the constant comparison method," "specifying the properties," and "sampling aimed toward theory construction" (Charmaz, 2006b, p. 5).

The grounded theory grew into different genres with extension and developments: the traditional GT with Glaser, the evolved GT with Strauss and Corbin, and the constructivist GT with Charmaz (Tie et al., 2019). Despite the genre differences in coding terminology, the GT coding categories are divided primarily into three stages: initial, intermediate, and advanced (Birks & Mills, 2015) which was applied to this study. By initial coding, categories emerge from the data. When categories begin to develop, the coding process moves to intermediate coding to focus more on categories and properties. In the advanced coding phase, additional data is added to facilitate the theory development (Mills et al., 2014).

Traditionally, GT is applied to ethnography and interviews, prioritizing the studied phenomenon or process rather than the settings while developing theoretical categories to understand it (Charmaz, 2006b). Charmaz (2006b) also noted that studying documents as data, such as written texts and recorded visual images, is also applicable with GT. For example, by studying published minutes of three Communist Party meetings in the Soviet Union, Serbia, Hungary in 1988, Hardman (2013) applied GT to understand the language in these political speeches linked to democracy. Therefore, by studying the recorded texts and images in this study, Twitter postings, in particular, GT helps to reach in-depth textual analysis.

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1) Grounded theory is typically useful when the researchers come to a comparatively new field. To ensure the fresh ideas come out and facilitate theory building, the researchers won't rely on others' work in generating hypotheses and assumptions. However, it is also helpful for the researchers who apply grounded theory to do some literature reviews beforehand to know more about the field and what they are exploring for.

The SMGT (Social Media Grounded Theory) approach

Compared with documents like media outlets, government reports, and history archives, Twitter postings are digital with different features. Except for the meanings reflected from the texts, images, or videos, it is common to observe interactions on Twitter (Mutz & Mondak, 2006). Therefore, the road map for social media research with GT needs to be developed and adjusted (Lai & To, 2015; Pousti et al., 2013; Vaast &Walsham, 2013). The role of social media context requires consideration (Urquhart & Vaast, 2012; Vaast & Urquhart, 2017). Focusing on theory building from Zhao Lijian's Tweets as a case study, I applied the SMGT approach proposed by Mohanad Halaweh (2018). The steps were listed as follows: Determine the research goals, search for the social media platforms, determine the data selection criteria, filter the data, conduct coding and comparison, identify categories and form the theory, review the literature, identify similarities as well as differences, and report the results.

Using the SMGT approach, the role of the researcher is to read historical data online without interacting with users, strictly adhering to ethical principles on not influencing the data (Halaweh, 2018). In this study, I also followed the observation model in reading Zhao Lijian's postings and comments he received without joining any discussions (Halaweh, 2012).

Theoretical sampling

Theoretical sampling is the core sampling method with GT. According to Birks and Mill's (2015)'s definition, theoretical sampling is the process of "identifying and pursuing clues that arise during analysis in a grounded theory study" (p. 68) which aids the evolving theory building (Tie et al., 2019). Many qualitative studies follow this sampling method as the central key to GT (e.g., Chamberlain-Salaun, 2015; Edwards et al., 2018). To minimize the influence of the Application Programming Interface (API) and search engine influence on data collection (Boyd & Crawford, 2011), I hope the data collected in this study can go beyond the control of algorithm-led extraction and facilitate in-depth analysis rather than breadth. Therefore, I theoretically sampled the data from Zhao's Twitter account alongside the manual coding and analyzing process. The detailed sampling criteria are introduced in the following section.

Research design

To answer this study's research question, the data collection and analysis compromise two phases. The first phase involves an analysis of Zhao's tweets. According to a study by Huang and Wang (2019a), retweeting was critical in the early stage of China's digital diplomacy. For Zhao Lijian, who posted an average of 68 tweets per day, 89.4% were retweets. He was also frequently mentioned by others or himself (i.e., 751 self-retweets).

Searching for in-depth analysis on informative content, the current study mainly focuses on Zhao's original tweets, and the timeframe of the dataset is from January 2019 to June

2020. A reason for choosing these criteria is that Zhao's tweets during his mission in Pakistan, especially in 2019, include more self-created content with rich information. After returning to Beijing in 2019 and becoming the foreign spokesperson, more tweets appeared as repetitions of his performance during his press conferences. As the study also paid close attention to Zhao's arguments after the COVID-19 outbreak, I purposely sampled part data from his tweets in early 2020. Apart from exploring the tweets by Zhao, the research question also asked how the global community responded to the ongoing strategy. Therefore, the study's second phase focuses on the comments that Zhao received. The comments analyzed are all on the tweets collected during the first phase to make the analysis more logical and consistent.

The data was collected in October 2020. Based on the above data collection criteria, I first summarized salient topics from Zhao's most hotly-debated tweets covered by the media. According to the author's observation, five hotly-debated tweets stood out during the study period (see Table 1). By reading these selected tweets, four salient topics were summarized as "Xinjiang," "Huawei," "Pakistan," and "Covid-19 & the U.S." By keyword searching using the Twitter search engine, I manually selected related tweets for coding and analysis until theoretical saturation. Short tweets without meaningful information (e.g., tweets simply stating "fake news" without further elaboration or tweets that only express thankfulness to his friends), retweets, and replies without comments were excluded from the data analysis. When reading all the posted tweets in the study period manually, the researcher selected the most relevant tweets with diplomacy purposes for detailed analysis while identifying and pursuing clues that arise. Upon theoretical saturation, the dataset for in-depth analysis and interpretations comprises 35 informative tweets with 150 comments.

Table 1. Five hotly-debated tweets from Zhao Lijian, from Jan. 2019 to June. 2020

	Date	Text	No. of Likes	No. of Retweets
1	Jan 3, 2019	"Fake News! Not Chinese language!!Not even Chinese police uniform!!! This is sheer propaganda against China, trying to sabotage relations between China & muslim countries. There's no 'East Turkistan' in China. Only terrorists & their sympathizers call Xinjiang 'East Turkistan'."	3098	1794
2	May 21, 2019	"BREAKING: It has been just revealed why @realDonaldTrump hated a private company from China so much that it went so far by announcing a national emergency. Look at the logo of Huawei. It has cut APPLE into pieces⋯"	6268	3509
3	July 15, 2019	"You are such a disgrace, too. And shockingly ignorant, woo. I am simply telling the truth. I stayed in Washington DC 10 years ago. To label someone who speak the truth that you don't want to hear a racist is disgraceful & disgusting!"	NA	NA
4	Aug 10, 2019	"Bidding farewell to my colleagues at the embassy. My last tweet in Pakistan. I will be in transit mode on Twitter. I will come back to Twitter after I settle down. Time to go. I wish I could drive the plane away and stay back. Thank you again, Pakistan. See you later."	4522	604
5	Mar 12, 2020	"CDC was caught on the spot. When did patient zero begin in US? How many people are infected? What are the names of the hospitals? It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! US owe us an explanation!"	7292	8446

Note: Data collected from Zhao Lijian's Twitter account in October 2020.

Data Analysis

Coding is the process of "reading textual data, identifying and labeling a significant fraction of that data" (Halaweh, 2018, p. 158). Due to continuous sampling and coding until theoretical saturation, the data analysis process is discussed in the following sections.

Phase Ⅰ: Coding on Zhao's tweets

Initial coding

By initial coding (open coding) in the first stage, four key features emerge from the data. First, Zhao is active in creating original content, making comments on foreign news resources, retweeting videos, and replying to other comments. Notably, retweeting state-owned media content takes a large percentage of his tweets. For example, in Table 1, all the selected tweets were his original content during his mission in Pakistan before becoming the country's Foreign Spokesperson[2]. Specifically, the first tweet was his comment on an Indonesian news video criticizing China's policy on Xiangjiang. The second tweet was his metaphoric elaboration on Huawei company's logo, implying that China's tech companies are beating those of the U.S. The third tweet was his reply to Susan Rice after Rice posted that Zhao was a racist and PGN (Persona non grata). The fourth tweet was his loving expression toward Pakistan with personal photos posted. The fifth tweet was one of Zhao's several successive postings stating that the U.S. brought COVID-19 to China when China was cast as the originator of the virus. Although Twitter sets a 140-character limit, which increased to 280 in 2018, making information concisely distributed, Zhao embellishes the tweets by embedding images, videos, hyperlinks, and hashtags to enrich the content and gain broader visibility for their views.

Secondly, there were strong emotions expressed from Zhao's tweets, such as his anger over the West's misunderstanding of China (excerpt 1), the powerful denial of western propaganda against China (excerpt 2), as well as his love and gratitude with Pakistani friends (excerpt 3).

> Excerpt 1:
>
> You are such a disgrace, too. And shockingly ignorant, woo. I am simply telling the truth. I stayed in Washington DC 10 years ago. To label someone who speak the truth that you don't want to hear a racist, is disgraceful & disgusting!
>
> Zhao Lijian's Twitter post on July 15, 2019

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2) Before serving as the Deputy Director-General of the Information Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China since August 2019 and later made his debut as the country's Foreign Spokesperson in 2020, Zhao Lijian served as the Deputy Chief of Mission of Chinese Ambassy in Pakistan. Based on the authors' knowledge about how the ministry works, Zhao did not have a secretary or assistant during his mission in Pakistan. Twitter postings were from his own interests and done by himself. However, after becoming the Foreign Spokesman, his Q&A sessions should be prepared by his colleagues and approved by high-rank officials.

Excerpt 2:

Attempts to demonize China by Xinjiang issue will prove to be day-dreaming. Xinjiang issue is not about human rights, ethnicity or religion, but about the fight against separatism & terrorism. The West should learn from China's effective measures instead of discrediting them.

<div align="right">Zhao Lijian's Twitter post on January 6, 2020</div>

Excerpt 3:

Pakistan is my second home. I remember the friends in Pakistan very fondly & miss u all! I learned so much from u in Pakistan. I wish BRI & CPEC will have a huge success in Pakistan. I wish the flower of our friendship will become even more beautiful.

<div align="right">Zhao Lijian's Twitter post on October 18, 2019</div>

From the sociological perspective, Denzin (1985) views "emotion" as lived experience accompanied by complexes of sensitive feelings as a whole. Therefore, emotions are not located in a particular part of the body but are an extension of the body, such as sorrow, sadness, despair, happiness, and anger. Emotional polemics of a diplomat on social media could have potential social and political consequences. Among excerpts 1, 2, and 3, the emotions reflected in Zhao's tweets are far beyond psychological triggering (Lindsley, 1951), although in excerpt 1, his words like "disgrace" and "shockingly ignorant" are a direct reaction toward Susan Rice's attack. However, in general, the emotions reflected in Zhao's tweets are long-term emotional situations cultivated with cultural, historical, and political meanings.

Third, "enemy" and "friend" distinctions find their way into Zhao's tweets. In his Tweets, the government and people of Pakistan are always friends while people with different opinions on China on Chinese or global issues are portrayed as enemies, especially U.S. politicians and the majority of western countries. He was also actively looking for alliance and support on Twitter by mentioning others (@). Excerpt 4 is an example.

Excerpt 4:

Those who call Xinjiang of China "East Turkistan" are separatists, terrorists & their sympathizers. This Twitter handle is notorious for anti-China propaganda. @PTVNewsOfficial @CathayPak @CPEC_Official @XHNews @CGTNOfficial @PDChina @ChinaDaily @globaltimesnews @DostiFM98

<div align="right">Zhao Lijian's Twitter post on March 29, 2019</div>

Intermediate coding

Continuing sampling and comparing the new data with the patterns, one additional feature of Zhao's tweets has been found. It is the frequent use of rhetorical devices, such as metaphor, parallel structures, personification, rhetorical questions, and puns. In excerpt 1, Zhao used the double "D" words, "disgraceful" and "disgusting" to attack Susan Rice. In excerpt 2, Zhao used the metaphor of "day-dreaming" to fight against the West's demonization of China. In excerpt 3, Zhao takes "flower" and "second home" as metaphoric devices to show his love for the country he was posted to, Pakistan.

Metaphor has been widely studied by scholars (Flusberg et al., 2017; Williams, 2009). As for Gibbs (2013), metaphorical cognition is a kind of interpersonal behavior with ideographic functions. In social media discourse, Zhao uses metaphors to invite the global readers to follow the metaphoric framework for reasoning, thereby affecting the listener's perception and behavior. In the tweets promoting Huawei, Zhao is even more passionate in using rhetoric with a sense of humor. *Figure 1* lists some examples. It is a language strategy to positively guide public opinion and making himself an idol or potential key opinion leader on social media platforms.
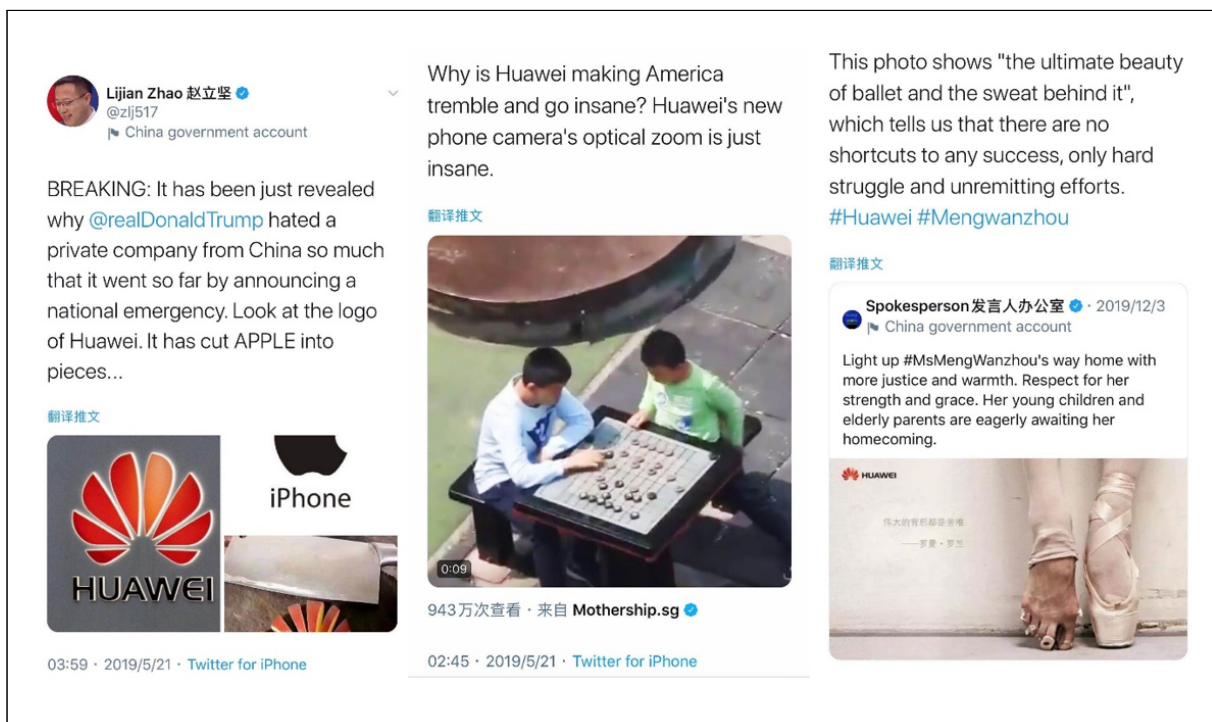

Figure 1. Data visualization on selected tweets

By playing the language game (Wittgenstein, 2009), Zhao was embellishing his tweets to attract public attention, more followers, and active retweeting. Based on the new findings, I constructed the model in *Figure 2*. The initial model resulted from the initial and intermediate coding process consisting of four traits of Zhao's digital diplomacy. They

include: 1) high initiative, referring to the active, original posts with informative content; 2) strong emotion, meaning the long-standing love, hate, and anger; 3) you and us, meaning Pakistan is the friend, the U.S. is evil, and many western countries are enemies; 4) language game, that is how he leverages the language strategies to attract the readers and try to gage their opinions.
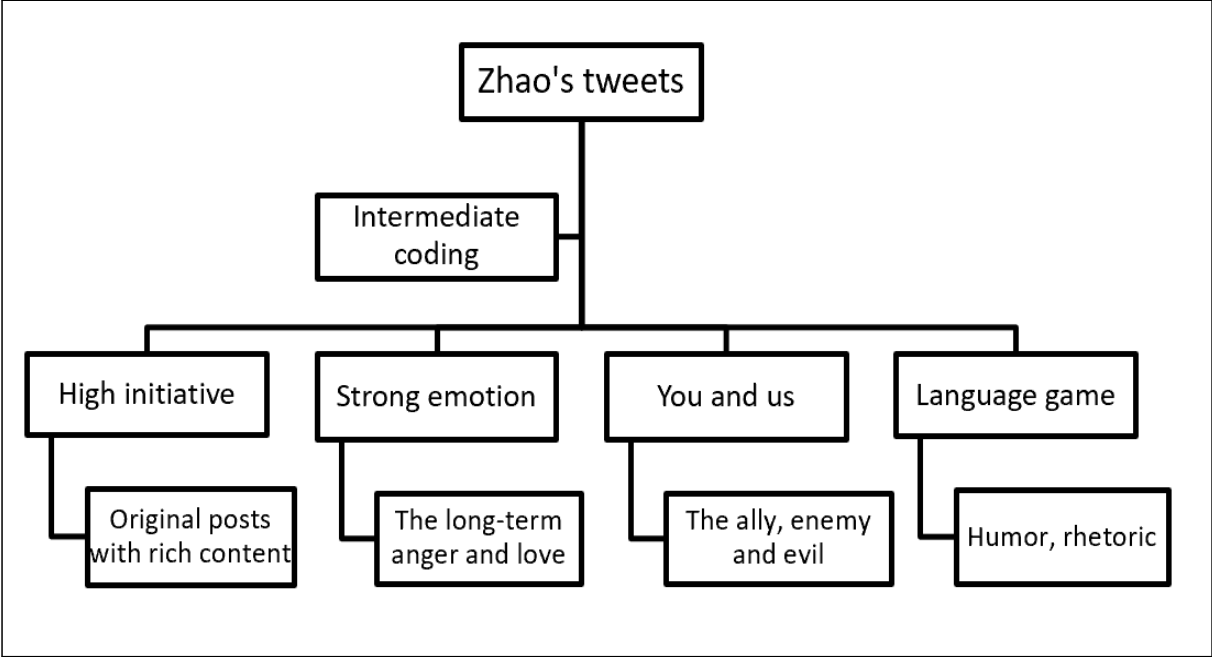

Figure 2. Initial model on Zhao's tweets

Advanced coding

The sampling ended when the categories became saturated, and I came up with the final model. I conceptualized Zhao's tweeting as a "war of words," with three properties: leadership, polarization, and aggression. The refined model presents in *Figure 3*. Compared with conventional warfare, it is also common to find strong leadership and aggression on the invader's part. In warfare, the enemy is attacked, and the alliance is unified. Studies on public diplomacy suggest that public diplomacy is to enlighten conversations, launch nation branding campaigns, and create a favorable policy environment for the home nation (Aronczyk, 2013; Bjola & Jiang, 2015; Khatib et al., 2011; Zaharna, 2010). However, the "war of words" model grounded from the data collected in this study suggested that public diplomacy can become wild, not for enlightening and mediating, but aggressively polarizing and attacking. It provides new insights on China's latest diplomatic move to Twitter, as its patterns are highly correlated to conventional warfare.
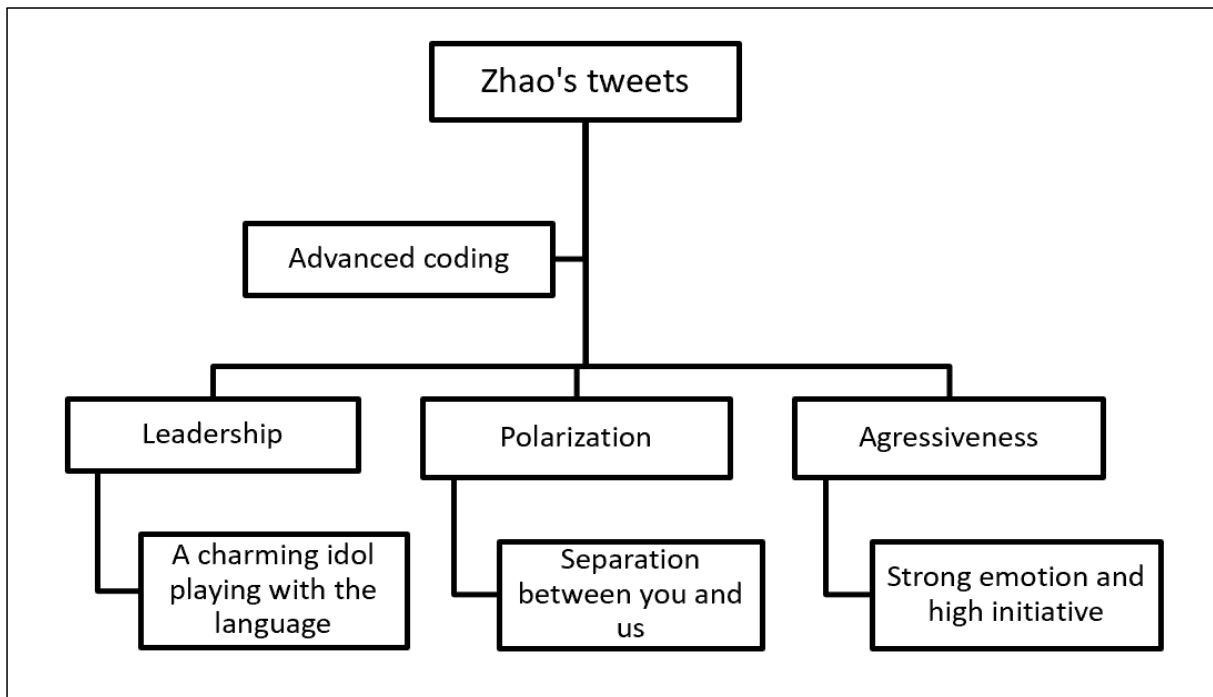
Figure 3. Refined model on Zhao's tweets

Phase Ⅱ: Coding on comments of the tweets

The same data analysis process went in the second phase, which is coding and analyzing comments of the tweets. For ethical and privacy concerns, only partial comments were included in this section without referring to the commentators' accounts. Long excerpts may be easily identified and directly linked to commentator accounts.

In initial coding, I found that "questioning," "distrust," and "criticizing" were among the common patterns reflected from the comments. For instance:

> "If this is mere a false propaganda, why Chinese Govt is still silent about this issue?"

> "You are literally spewing propaganda."

> "It's not out of the kindness of your heart."

> "Communist propaganda. We see through it all."

Some commentators question Zhao's promotion of Huawei by saying that "ambassador of a country doing a marketing," "says a man tweeting using an iPhone," and "You work for HUAWEI? How come you know everything about Huawei!?" These codes fall into the category of audience resistance.

Except for resistance, "hatred" is another characteristic that emerges from coding on the comments, which is a historic view against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government (Ahmed, 2013). Some examples are listed below:

> "One Bribe One Road is the Chinazis' scheme to steal natural resources, their ports & rail lines from third world countries."

> "Fool yourself CPEC is a dead project. #Baloch nation will not allow any expansionist projects in our land."

> "Get lost and never come back."

The expression of hatred is a rising phenomenon defined by attacking an individual or group based on race, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation, which is extended to bullying, trolling, harassment, antagonism, hate blogging in social media (Shepherd et al., 2015). On Twitter, hate speech happens not only in attacking the underprivileged groups, but also in political public spaces when politicians go to extremes to propagate their party and leave no room for political disagreement. Hate speech or disrespectful and uncivil speech (Coe et al., 2014) are properties found both in Zhao Lijian's tweets and the comments he received. Theoretical sampling continued before I saw more sub-patterns of hate speech, such as sarcasm (Frenda, 2018). Following Poole et al.'s (2020) definition, sarcasm in Tweets infers one thing, but explicit signifiers show the opposite meaning. Below are some examples:

> "Pompeo is deploying missiles in Japan pointing at Beijing and what does China do? It tweets…LOL!! have seen many animals but never a tweeting dragon."

> "Lijian Zhao: American tanks have invaded Tiananmen Square."

> "As if you really have 'journalists.'"

> "How about you stop eating bats first then come back to the table."

Hate speech, either direct personal or national attacks or sarcasm expressions, contributes to political polarization (Gruzd & Roy, 2014), which is a dangerous signal for the development of public deliberation (Bohman, 1996). In short, the resistance meant, that to some extent, Zhao failed in setting the agenda among the global audience. The hatred and sarcasm he received indicated that he failed to create a friendly environment for China's branding. I conceptualize the model on comments in *Figure 4*.
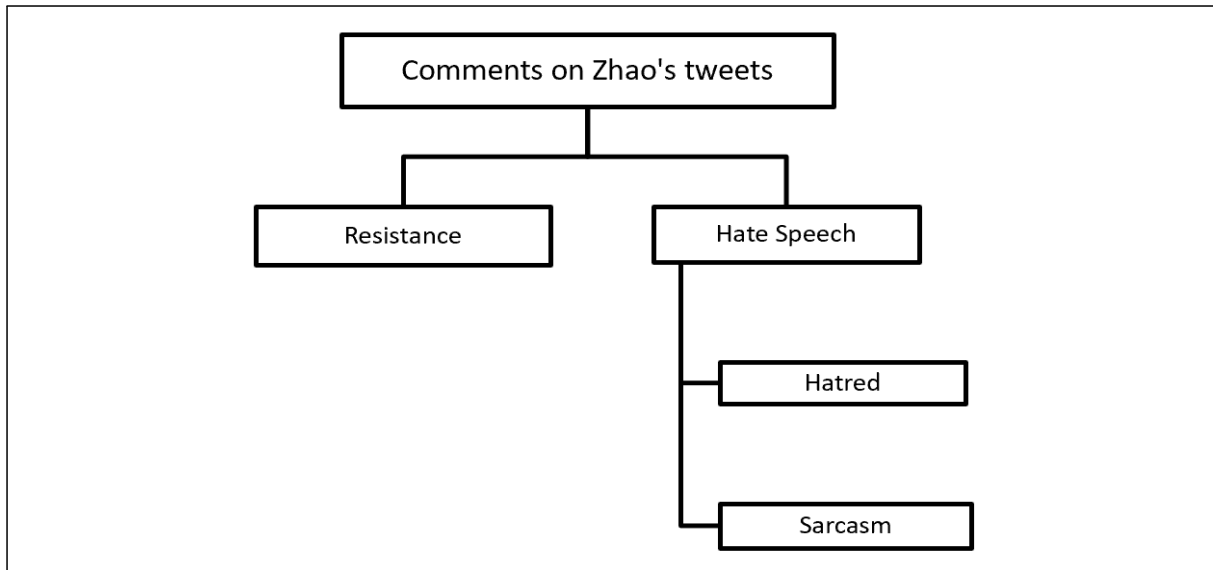
Figure 4. Model on comments Zhao received

Discussion

The storyline, as the theoretical conceptualization grounded from the data, is the key outcome of GT research. With the above two-phase sampling, coding, and analyzing, I combined the two models to construct the final storyline in Figure 5. Zhao Lijian, as the most prolific Chinese diplomat on Twitter and the country's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, represented China's new digital diplomacy move as a "war of words." Its strategy consists of powerful leadership, polarization, and aggressiveness, with consequences of resistance and hate speech in the Twitter community. Thus, the research question was answered.
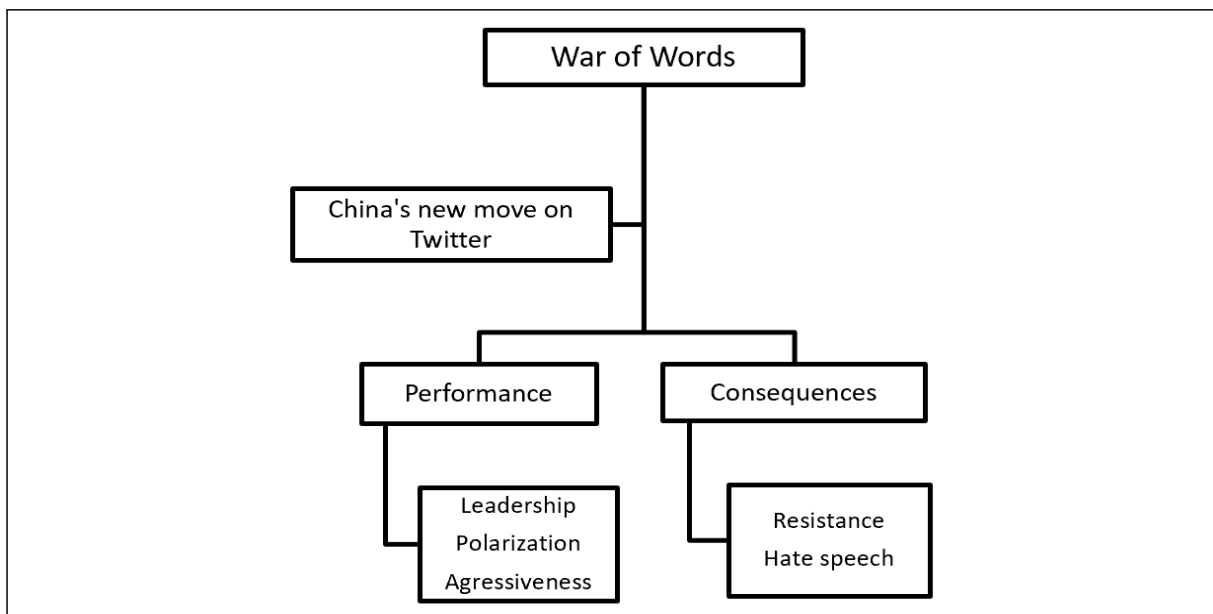

Figure 5. The proposed 'war of words' model of China's digital diplomacy

Model elaboration

According to the "war of words" model, there are three major properties summarized from Zhao Lijian's tweets. First, "leadership" indicates that Chinese diplomats are becoming more and more active in promoting the country's discourse and countering against the West's discourse, facing a diversified audience on global social media platforms.

Second, "aggression" points to how Zhao expressed his emotions and political opinion by actively tweeting with various "language game" strategies. Based on the analysis above, powerful emotions were reflected in Zhao's tweets. His anger toward the West, his love toward Pakistan, and his strong desire to justify for China were all based on his existing perceptions of the friend and enemy in Chinese history and contemporary politics.

Third, the polarizing effects indicate the extent to which Zhao's tweets tried to unify the friends and attack the perceived enemies of China. The foreign policy practices on social media do not happen in a sociopolitical vacuum (Shahin & Huang, 2019). Following the constructivist tradition in international relations (Hopf, 2002; Onuf, 2013), powerful Chinese identity shapes Zhao's tweeting behavior in making sense as who is a friend, who is an ally, and who is the rival, which echoes with the findings of Shahin and Huang's (2019) study on the U.S. Twitter diplomacy.

In addition, two major properties (i.e., resistance and hate speech) emerged from the comments Zhao Lijian received on Twitter. While both properties are the unwelcomed consequences of public diplomacy, it is worth examining why social media has become the battlefield where conflicts burst out between the message sender and the audience. According to Taylor (2014), the openness of networked communication infrastructure supports both identity play and political resistance. From the classic theory on power and resistance by Foucault (1978), where there is power, there will be resistance. When public diplomacy goes digital, the deliberate establishment of soft power is challenged by the capability of social media networks in renewing, recreating, defending, and modifying the hegemonic discourse created by the authority (Williams & Williams, 1977). It also echoes Stuart Hall's (1973) theory on encoding and decoding, meaning that when government propaganda, media, individuals are trying to persuade others to accept their values and policy. Thus, individuals are not passive recipients but actively decode and recreate the meaning based on their values and experiences. When Chinese diplomats, like Zhao Lijian, try to gage the opinions of the global community by actively tweeting, it is difficult for them to compete and balance the international community's current critique of China's domestic problems, human rights abuses, media censorship, policies toward Tibet or Uyghurs, and so forth (Gary, 2015).

Sticking to the SMGT approach, the study includes related literature to compare with the model proposed above. Some implications will be discussed to explain why China's Twitter diplomacy behaves following a "war of words" model and what the Chinese government is supposed to achieve from the digital diplomacy campaign.

The diplomatic performativity

Bjola and Jiang (2015) indicated that social media performs three key aspects of public diplomatic engagement: agenda-setting, presence expansion, and conversation generating. As a result, Twitter is used increasingly by diplomats and other government officials as a channel for information distribution, information exchange, and interaction (Adams & McCorkindale, 2013). A new paradigm of two-way dialogical diplomacy has been created (Kelley, 2010; Pamment, 2013), by which individuals in and out of the government become co-creators and co-deliverers of policy (Fisher et al., 2013). Growing numbers of self-media accounts on Chinese and global social media platforms have emerged, applying a vivid form of expression in delivering China's domestic and foreign policy, catering to the appetite of a mass audience (e.g., the unofficial WeChat account "ForeignLink," and Ministry of Foreign Affairs' official WeChat account "Diplo-Chat"). To effectively achieve public engagement, diplomats, like Zhao Lijian, are devoted to "digital performativity" in attracting more foreign public with actions, performance, and production (Leeker et al., 2017, p. 9).

As Shepherd et al. (2015) argues, online social media requires a communicative subject to be heard before they become able to communicate. It is different from offline communication, where the speaker creates the possibility of communicating. Therefore, making oneself heard online is the first task that "digital performativity" aims to achieve. In other words, making oneself stand out from the countless nodes of the internet society (Castells, 2010). Enli & Skogerbø (2013) also found that social media like Facebook and Twitter focus on the individual politician rather than the political party and allow individual campaign more independently of the central party (Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016). Donald Trump's Twitter campaign is a typical example of technological performance (Baldwin-Philippi, 2018) by centering individuals in the campaign. Trump, by frequent, conversational, and populist tweets, performs like he is having a face-to-face conversation with the audience to promote himself (Golbeck et al., 2010).

Likewise, Zhao Lijian also makes efforts for self-promotion on Twitter to increase his followers and make himself heard. By posting personal images, centering on hotly-debated social-political topics, attacking key U.S. politicians, and playing the language game with metaphors and humor, Zhao became the famous or infamous diplomat on Twitter, transforming his popularity to other social media platforms, as well as the traditional Chinese and western mass media, like the *People's Daily* of China, and *The Economist.* Being designated as the Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Zhao's digital performance is recognized and used by the government to conduct international political advocacy and shape public opinion. In this way, China is moving from a conventional one-way, top-down diplomacy to an engagement approach that involves listening, debate, and relationship-building (Peterson et al., 2002).

However, other scholars (Hartig, 2016) argued that China is still entrenching in the traditional monological public diplomacy despite a move to social media platforms. By analyzing the Twitter contents of Chinese missions to the European Union and Canada,

Huang and Arifon (2018) found that all Twitter content sent by Chinese embassies had "timid polyphonic features" (p. 45), which refers to Chinese institutional communication practices under the censorship of CCP. The public diplomacy practitioners in China try to include various voices and opinions in news writing and storytelling without violating the government's censorship rules.

Performing to be heard, individual politicians on Twitter are giving up their strict role and preciseness by posting with growing aggressiveness and extremism. By analyzing Trump's tweets with the first tweet starting from 2009 until he assumed office in 2017, Pain and Masullo Chen (2019) found that Trump did not use evidence to support points and attacks, which perpetuated division, misinformation, and did harm to deliberative discourse. They concluded that there is a tension between normative behavior for a politician and an all-out free individual online when a politician is striving for self-promotion. Interestingly, this study found similar clues in Zhao Lijian's tweets like Donald Trump's. As the "war of words" model indicates, Zhao posted strong affective expressions like anger, hatred, and love in his tweets. A diplomat became a "wolf warrior" online.

The polarized network

Based on the "war of words" model, although Internet censorship in China is getting more intensive, public diplomacy practitioners enjoy relative freedom to choose strategies and content in their daily communication with the foreign public. Apart from Zhao Lijian, other Chinese diplomats are encouraged to join the digital diplomacy campaign on Twitter. Zaharna (2005) believed that to forging a network is one of the strategic objectives of public diplomacy which is to build valuable relationships between stakeholders (Slaughter, 2009). However, in a digital context, the network is not always friendship-related. It can also be a network of hateful opposing forces. In Gary's (2015) study on public diplomacy and international broadcasting of China and Russia, Chinese public diplomacy activities revolve around the principle of "to know us is to love us" (p. 273). However, when reaching a broader audience among social media networks, the correlation between "know" and "love" is challenged by fragmented and divergent opinions.

Findings in this study suggest that the pre-existing and historical norms in international relations play a constitutive role in the hate speech expressed and received by Zhao Lijian online. In other words, the tense diplomatic relations with India, the United States, and their allies are remained as "enemies" in Zhao's tweets while Pakistan, the all-weather friend country is linked with gratitude and love in his expressions. Such behavior reinforced the positional polarization between different groups. It will be even more difficult for the outside group to adopt the view when it is already discredited as the "enemy."

The requirement of a short message on Twitter also forces Zhao to express the key opinions without sophistication and deliberation. Zhao Lijian strategically used humor to disguise the underline "hate." By hateful expressions as a counterattack to the western discourses

against China, such strategies have already triggered other hateful speeches against China, as reflected from the comments received by Zhao. Hateful messages have cumulated in the political sphere, demarcating enemies, and alliances, driving political polarization.

However, we cannot solely blame social media for making the content more sensationalized, contributing to fragmentation, and political polarization of contemporary political public spheres online (e.g., Settle, 2018; Stroud, 2010). In public diplomacy, reasoned debate and healthy views enable exchanges to make a difference rather than hate expressions and sensationalism. Zhao's propagated homogeneous content only succeeded in persuading the like-minded group to believe and love China, not the main target of the diplomacy campaign. Likewise, his aggressive tweeting style and the antagonistic terms he used also hindered negotiation and agreement building with people who have neutral or negative attitudes toward China. Unfortunately, Zhao's tweeting patterns were accepted and promoted by the Chinese government, indicating a gradual shift from moderate diplomacy to aggressiveness in China's diplomatic strategy.

Digital diplomacy in China and beyond

While studies in the political communication or international relations field have begun to pay attention to China's social media diplomacy in recent years (Huang & Wang, 2019a; Jia & Li, 2020; Schliebs et al., 2021), the academic progress on this topic is still in its infancy. Meanwhile, the main methodology for studying this topic is dominated by the quantitative deductive approach. For example, Huang and Wang (2019a) discussed how the Chinese government mobilized diplomatic Twitter accounts to build a communication network by quantitative computational methods. With a similar approach, Schliebs et al. (2021) analyzed every tweet and Facebook post produced by PRC diplomats and large state-controlled media outlets in recent two years in examining the activeness and retweeting networks of these accounts. These studies are helpful for the field to recognize the descriptive features of China's digital diplomacy move. However, more in-depth analysis on the virtual performance and engagement of Chinese diplomats is in need as they pioneer the country's digital diplomacy campaign.

In this vein, some scholars narrowed down the scope and focused on specific cases as research targets. For instance, Shuma (2021) investigates China's "wolf warrior" diplomatic form on social media accounts of the former Chinese Ambassador to South Africa, Lin Songtian, by discourse analysis. Others chose more specific issues or strategies as indicators of China's soft power building strategy, such as China-Africa relations, China-U.S. trade war, COVID-19 pandemic control, the Belt and Road initiative, Ping-Pong diplomacy 2.0, panda diplomacy, and vaccine diplomacy (Huang & Wang, 2019b; Huang & Wang, 2021; Lee, 2021; Marinho. 2020).

Huang & Wang (2019a) argued that Zhao Lijian "exercised less restraint, discretion, and caution than might typically be expected from Chinese officials who speak in public or post

on social media" (p. 3000). This study revisited how the Foreign Spokesman practices digital diplomacy, representing China's new strategy and ambition. The current study went beyond the well-applied deductive approach but utilized GT as a fresh attempt in generating the theoretical model of China's Twitter diplomacy. Instead, of empirically examining how Chinese state media and officials use social media platforms for public diplomacy or propaganda purpose, this study conceptualizes the new move of China's diplomacy to Twitter as a "war of words" based on qualitative textual analysis of Zhao Lijian's case. Previous studies resulted in either promising or disappointing results that China's digital diplomacy has made some progress in social network building but continues its one-way monologue tradition in communicating with the foreign public (Jia & Li, 2020). Some such activities have even been banned by foreign platforms like Twitter (Schliebs et al., 2021). However, the newly established model is from a more critical perspective. It provides new insights in understanding China's new digital diplomatic move with patterns that are highly correlated to conventional warfare. The new model also extends our understanding of China's digital diplomacy move as a hybrid of state propaganda and self-performance.

Conclusion

Before concluding the study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, data collected for analysis is only from one diplomat's performance on a single platform as a case study. We should acknowledge that it may not be broad enough to reflect the country's overall digital diplomacy strategy. Future research could work on a general picture of China's public diplomacy move by analyzing the recently released governmental documents, official speeches, Foreign Spokesperson Q&A outlets, and so forth.

Second, the evaluation of China's digital strategy in the 21st century is based upon Twitter comments received by the Foreign Spokesperson. However, the tenor of such comments should be sensitive due to the audiences' personal preference and favorability. Thus, it is also worth examining the overall social networks that China has already built or intends to build on different platforms and further exploring how the networks can build the country's global image. Such efforts could provide complementary findings and triangulations echoing the current study.

In addition, this study falls under the lens of China. With the proliferation of social media across the globe, digital diplomacy becomes trendy in large numbers of developing countries （i.e., India, Pakistan, United Arab Emirates, and African countries). In the light of the current study, I propose studies on digital diplomacy to give more specific attention to the global south with a comparative perspective.

Despite the limitations, the "wall of words" model concludes from this study help the field in forming an in-depth and critical examination of the current move and possible effects of Chinas' ongoing digital diplomacy campaign. Despite some improvements to China's homogeneous network building on Twitter, the country's current strategy could spread hate

speech and political polarization in cyberspace. The new model reflects the ambition of the country's leadership in leading the world, which motivates the authority to leverage every possible channel to make their voice heard. However, such strategies contradict the party's promoted "shared human destiny" which calls for introspections and vigilance.

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