

Strategic Profiles and Tactical Shifts: Rethinking China's Digital Diplomacy

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Abstract

This article revisits assumptions about China's "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy by analysing patterns in official digital communication. Drawing on a manually coded sample of 3,846 tweets from verified Chinese diplomatic accounts (2017–2022), we identify five recurring communication profiles - Informer, Promoter, Complex Challenger, Taiwan Challenger, and Provoker - that reflect consistent combinations of tone, function, topic, and geographic focus. Using cluster analysis and weighted scoring, we track how these profiles feature across time and diplomatic context. Rather than showing a wholesale turn toward confrontational rhetoric, the data reveals a stable messaging repertoire where more assertive profiles appear selectively and temporarily. A case study of the COVID-19 pandemic further illustrates how diplomats intensified certain styles during periods of reputational pressure while maintaining continuity in broader messaging. The study offers a structured framework for understanding how state actors organise digital communication through patterned variation, challenging simplified narratives of an aggressive diplomatic turn.

1. Introduction

Diplomatic communication is no longer confined to private negotiations behind closed doors. In the contemporary digital and social media-saturated environment, state actors increasingly engage global audiences in real time, using platforms like X (formerly Twitter) to promote narratives, respond to crises and signal strategic intent. Digital diplomacy, in this context, reflects a broader transformation in the exercise of power and influence, no longer limited to formal statements or backchannel diplomacy, but through public engagement that is fast-moving, strategic and visible (Cull, 2008; Bjola and Holmes, 2015; Manor, 2019).

This shift is particularly notable in China, where diplomacy has become more public, digitally mediated and narratively assertive under Xi Jinping. Chinese diplomats have used platforms such as X to promote national achievements, respond to international criticism and advance Beijing's preferred narratives in global discourse (Huang and Wang, 2019; Repnikova, 2022). These practices are embedded in an institutional system that links external messaging with the CCP's domestic legitimacy, and form part of broader efforts to contest Western dominance of global information and communication environments (Zhao, 2015; Huang, 2022).

The greater visibility of Chinese diplomats in global discursive spaces has been interpreted as evidence of a more assertive stance, captured by the term “Wolf Warrior diplomacy.” Observers have pointed to a rise in confrontational rhetoric as diplomats challenge criticism from Western actors and defend China’s global image (Martin, 2021; Dai and Luqiu, 2022). Yet, this framing oversimplifies a more complex diplomatic repertoire. The notion of a linear shift towards “Wolf Warrior”-type aggression masks how Chinese diplomacy combines assertiveness with more conventional promotional and informational communications in a strategic and responsive manner.

This article provides a counterpoint, and a more complicated account of China’s digital diplomacy. We develop a profile-based framework for analysing Chinese diplomatic communications, identifying five distinct communication profiles - Informer, Promoter, Taiwan Challenger, Complex Challenger and Provoker. These profiles represent recurring combinations of tone, function, issue focus and geographical reference. Based on a manually coded dataset of 3,846 tweets posted between 2017 and 2022, we use clustering and weighted scoring techniques to map how these profiles evolve over time and in response to strategic and environmental stimuli.

Our central argument is that Chinese diplomatic communication is strategically adaptable, yet structurally stable. While assertive rhetoric increases during moments of geopolitical stress, it does not replace the dominance of softer promotional and informational messaging. Instead, we observe calibrated shifts in profile intensity rather than wholesale changes in communication strategy. Chinese diplomats thus rely on a resilient communication architecture that allows for tactical adaptation without strategic transformation.

To test and illustrate this dynamic, we examine China’s diplomatic communication during the COVID-19 pandemic (January 2020 to July 2022). The pandemic represented an intense reputational challenge for Beijing amid a rapidly shifting geopolitical landscape. We construct a four-phase framework based on pandemic developments and apply weighted scoring to a subsample of 1,200 tweets. Our analysis shows how diplomats adjusted their messaging by temporarily amplifying confrontational profiles during crises, before reverting to baseline themes of leadership, solidarity and economic recovery. These changes reflect a responsive recalibration rather than the emergence of a fundamentally new diplomatic posture.

This study contributes to three strands of research. First, it challenges binary narratives of Chinese diplomacy by demonstrating patterned rhetorical flexibility within a broader structure of continuity. Second, it introduces a replicable framework for mapping strategic communication using profile-based analysis. Third, it shows how crisis periods like COVID-19 can serve as stress tests that expose the mechanisms through which states adapt communication while preserving long-term strategic objectives.

2. Literature Review and Background

States increasingly use digital platforms not only to communicate policy, but to shape narratives, manage international reputation and signal strategic intent in real time (Bjola, 2016; Men et al., 2018). This evolution is especially visible in China, where diplomacy has become more public, narratively assertive and digitally mediated. This section situates our approach at the intersection of four strands of literature: China’s evolving diplomatic posture, the blurred boundary between public diplomacy and propaganda, the rise of digital diplomacy, and the recent scholarly debate on “Wolf Warrior” communications.

China’s evolving diplomatic posture

China’s diplomatic identity has undergone significant transformation in recent decades. Following the ideological fervour of the Maoist era, the Reform and Opening period initiated by Deng Xiaoping

emphasised pragmatism, economic development, and non-confrontation (Zhao, 2015). Deng's maxim to "hide one's capabilities and bide one's time" (taoguang yanghui) encapsulated a posture of cautious engagement with the international system. This approach underpinned China's re-entry into international society and was largely characterized as cautious, defensive and shaped by norms of non-interference.

Under Xi Jinping, China's foreign policy has entered a more assertive phase. The concept of Major Country Diplomacy (daguo waijiao) calls for China to play a leading role in global governance and explicitly links external representation to internal legitimacy (Callahan, 2010; Ye, 2021). Strategic slogans such as the "Chinese Dream" (Zhongguo meng) and a "a shared future for mankind" (renlei mingyun gongtongti), and efforts like the Belt and Road Initiative, project China's rise as inevitable and normatively desirable. Diplomatic messaging has thus become a tool for both international positioning and domestic consolidation, connecting global ambition with national rejuvenation under the CCP's rule (Huang and Wang, 2019).

Discourse power (huayuquan), effectively the capacity to shape global narratives, has been identified by Chinese leaders as essential to securing China's interests and image abroad (Shambaugh, 2007; Ye, 2021). Diplomats now play a frontline role in strategic messaging campaigns, often embedded in tightly coordinated institutional structures that align with CCP priorities (Huang and Wang, 2019; Ou, 2021). In this context, rhetorical assertiveness is no longer exceptional, but a tool in an evolving repertoire of global communication (Pollard and Baptista, 2020).

Public diplomacy, propaganda, and hybrid messaging

Classic definitions of public diplomacy focus on dialogue, cultural exchange and relationship-building to enhance soft power (Nye, 2004; Cull, 2008). Propaganda, by contrast, is often seen as unidirectional, intended to instruct, persuade or discredit through selective framing, mis- and disinformation (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2018). In the Chinese context, the boundary between public diplomacy and propaganda is not clearly distinguished in theory or practice. Instead, a hybrid form of political messaging has emerged, in which the boundaries between persuasion and promotion are blurred (Repnikova, 2017; Huang, 2022).

China's communication strategy combines symbolic diplomacy, historical narratives and modern technological platforms to advance foreign policy goals. Concepts like "telling China's story well" (jianghao Zhongguo gushi) are central to this project (Xu and Qian, 2024), positioning China as a benevolent actor and framing its development model as globally relevant and benign (Barr, 2012; Zhao, 2015). These efforts are not confined to foreign audiences, with Chinese public diplomacy simultaneously serving the domestic goals of reinforcing CCP legitimacy, nurturing popular nationalism and aligning China's international standing with national confidence.

Rather than a clear separation between international and domestic communication efforts, China operates an integrated messaging system. Messages are crafted not only to shape external perception but to reinforce internal legitimacy, national pride, and ideological alignment. In this sense, communication in China's diplomacy is always dual-purpose, articulating strength to the outside and affirming cohesion at home (Zhao, 2015; Barr, 2012).

Digital diplomacy and the role of diplomats

The rise of digital and social media has altered how diplomacy is practised, making it more immediate, visible and strategically performative. This change has been particularly pronounced in China. Since 2019, Chinese diplomats have rapidly expanded their use of platforms like X, shifting from occasional formulaic announcements to sustained public engagement. Many diplomats now act as key nodes in China's international messaging ecosystem, using social media to promote

government achievements, defend national interests and engage directly with critics (Martin, 2021; Thunø and Nielbo, 2024).

This increased digital visibility is not an organic outcome of individual initiative, rather it reflects a deliberate institutional shift. Diplomats have become central actors in China's external communication efforts, expected to embody a "dare to fight" (gan da) orientation, and defend China's international image with rhetorical skill and political alignment (Xinhua, 2019). Some have adopted personal communication styles and provocative tone to attract attention at home and amplify strategic narratives abroad. Their messages are often synchronised with official media and central government priorities, especially during moments of heightened geopolitical tension (Schliebs et al., 2021).

This shift is sometimes interpreted as a turn away from traditional diplomacy. But in practice, Chinese diplomats have not abandoned conventional engagement: They are complementing it with digitally mediated performativity. Their messaging combines personalised voice, institutional coherence and rhetorical agility, reflecting the increasing importance of systematic online presence as a form of power projection (Sullivan and Wang, 2023).

From "wolf warrior" to strategic profiles: Bridging the gap

The term "Wolf Warrior diplomacy" has become a shorthand for China's growing assertiveness, referring to combative statements by diplomats that challenge Western criticism and promote Chinese national pride. While the phrase has gained currency in media and policy circles, its analytical value is limited. It implies a binary shift from cooperative to confrontational diplomacy, often overlooking the strategic context in which assertiveness occurs (Dai and Luqiu, 2022; Duan, 2023).

Scholars note that Chinese diplomats rarely adopt a uniform tone. Instead, they employ a mix of rhetorical strategies ranging from assertive and defiant to cooperative or promotional depending on geopolitical events, target audiences and issue salience (Mattingly and Sundquist, 2023; Huang, 2022). Confrontational messaging tends to spike during diplomatic crises and recedes when China seeks to project calm leadership or global solidarity.

We build on this insight by proposing an empirically driven profile-based framework that better captures the full spectrum of Chinese diplomatic messaging. Rather than treating assertiveness as a linear or exceptional shift, we argue that diplomats operate within a structured rhetorical repertoire. They draw on different communication profiles - patterns of content, tone and function - that can be activated and calibrated depending on political context.

3. Methods and Data

This study develops a profile-based framework to analyse how Chinese diplomats communicate on X. Using a mixed-method approach that combines manual content analysis with statistical clustering, we identify empirically grounded communication profiles across over five years of diplomatic social media activity. Our analysis traces how Chinese diplomats communicate different issues, vary their rhetorical tone, and change the function and geographical focus of their messaging over a longer term and during a high-pressure case study.

Data collection

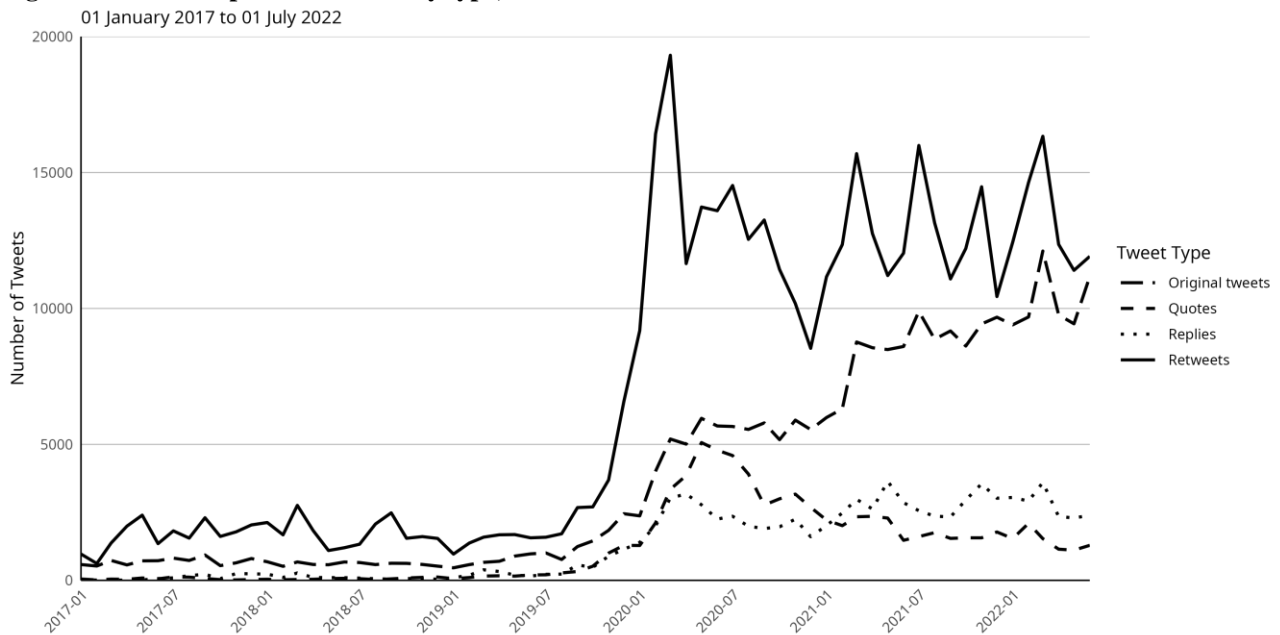
The dataset consists of posts from 187 officially verified PRC diplomat accounts, including ambassadors, consuls general and official missions, from January 2017 to July 2022. This timeframe captures long-term developments in Chinese digital diplomacy as well as key inflection points, including the global COVID-19 pandemic (Duan, 2023). These accounts were identified by cross-referencing curated lists from academic and policy sources (e.g. Koetse, 2020; Nigro, n.d.; Schliebs

et al., 2021) and confirmed using embassy websites, government directories, and account verification status on X.

Tweet data were collected using X's API v2 accessed via the *academictwitterR* package in R (Barrie and Ho, 2021). The resulting dataset included 964,591 tweets, replies, quote tweets and retweets. We limited our core analysis to original and quote tweets to isolate diplomats' own words, consistent with approaches in digital diplomacy research.

From this full dataset we drew a stratified random sample of 3,846 tweets for manual coding. Sampling was stratified by week and user to ensure representation across time and to account for substantial variation in posting frequency across different accounts. This approach allowed us to capture activity from both high- and low-frequency users throughout the five-year period, avoiding bias toward the most prolific accounts or event-specific spikes. It also ensured comparability across communication contexts while keeping the manual coding dataset analytically manageable.

Figure 1. Chinese diplomatic tweets by type, 2017–2022



Manual content analysis

Each tweet was coded manually across four core variables: topic, location, function, and assertiveness. The codebook was developed through pilot testing, literature review, and cross-lingual calibration. These categories reflect established approaches in diplomatic communication, propaganda, and public diplomacy research (Cull, 2008; Fitzpatrick et al., 2013; Repnikova, 2017; Dai and Luqiu, 2022; Thunø and Nielbo, 2024).

Topic codes captured the tweet's substantive focus, drawing on 14 categories grounded in Chinese diplomacy and messaging literature (Dai and Luqiu, 2022; Zhao and Xiang, 2019). These include standard domains like health, economy, technology, and climate, alongside more specific themes such as sovereignty and hegemony (e.g. emphasising resistance to interference), human rights, diaspora, ethnicity and race, and governance and party affairs (including references to Xi Jinping Thought and Party meetings). The code for diplomacy covered formal statements, visits, or symbolic statecraft, while culture and tourism, religion and philosophy, and foreign affairs captured broader soft power narratives and China's global outlook.

Location codes reflected the geographical or geopolitical focus of a tweet. These included China, its Special Regions (e.g. Hong Kong, Xinjiang), individual countries (e.g. USA, India), continents and regions (e.g. Africa, Southeast Asia), and ideologically constructed blocs such as The West or The Developing World (Wang et al., 2023; Duan, 2023). This schema allowed us to trace where rhetorical attention was directed and how narratives varied across regions.

Function codes classified the communicative aim of each tweet, using a typology drawn from public and digital diplomacy research (Cull, 2013; Fitzpatrick et al., 2013; White and Radic, 2014; Chao, 2023). Tweets coded as Inform reported events or updates; Promote advocated policies, ideas, or achievements; Reinforce supported China's existing positions; Challenge presented alternative interpretations; Criticise targeted other actors; and Provoke used antagonistic or attention-seeking rhetoric. This framework distinguishes not only tone but communicative intent and strategic layering.

Assertiveness was measured on a three-point scale - Low, Medium, and High - based on rhetorical intensity and tone (Brazys et al., 2022; Chen, 2023; Dai and Luqiu, 2022). Low assertiveness indicated neutral language, often ceremonial or informative (Kampf et al., 2022). Medium assertiveness signalled rebuttals or defensive postures without escalation. High assertiveness captured strong, direct, or confrontational rhetoric, particularly regarding sovereignty, criticism, or geopolitical disputes (Men et al., 2018; Thunø and Nielbo, 2024).

Coders could assign up to two codes per core variable, or mark "None or Unclear" where appropriate. Inter-coder reliability was evaluated on a subsample using Krippendorff's alpha, with scores averaging 0.82 across variables (lowest = 0.75), and $\alpha = 0.86$ for topic, indicating strong consistency.

To support our assessment of the level of assertiveness, we computed AFINN sentiment scores using the *textdata* package in R for sentiment analysis (Nielsen, 2011). In this dictionary, words are not classified in binary fashion as is commonly done for a simplified version of sentiment analysis but are assigned a numerical value ranging from -5 to +5 to reflect how strongly negative or positive they are. Comparing the automated results with the human coding reassures us that our measures of assertiveness are valid (see Figure 2 for the frequencies of each code).

Statistical identification of communication profiles

We used a two-stage analytical approach to identify recurrent communication strategies in the coded tweet data. First, we applied Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) to reduce dimensionality and uncover associations across the four core coding variables. Second, we used Hierarchical Clustering on Principal Components (HCPC) to group tweets into empirically grounded communication profiles. This combined approach is widely used in discourse analysis and categorical data modelling (Greenacre and Blasius, 2006; Husson et al., 2017) and supports both statistical rigour and interpretive clarity.

Dimensionality reduction with MCA

We applied MCA to summarise the categorical coding data and detect co-occurrence patterns across topic, function, location, and assertiveness codes. MCA dimensionality reduction technique designed for categorical data that is commonly used as a pre-step to clustering analysis (Greenacre and Blasius, 2006; Friendly and Meyer, 2015). Each tweet was converted into a binary matrix indicating the presence or absence of individual codes, with low-frequency categories removed to improve stability.

Six MCA dimensions were retained, selected using the Kaiser criterion (eigenvalues >1) and scree plot inspection. These dimensions accounted for 52% of total variance. Sampling adequacy was confirmed by a KMO score of 0.71, and Bartlett's test for sphericity was statistically significant ($p < .001$). This confirms the suitability of the data for subsequent clustering analysis.

Clustering with HCPC

We developed a weighted scoring method that allowed us to analyse the salience of each communication profile over time. This approach enabled us to examine not just whether a profile was employed, but how prominently and consistently it featured in China's diplomatic communication across different periods.

We then used HCPC to identify communication profiles based on tweet similarity along the MCA dimensions. HCPC clusters tweets based on their projection in reduced-dimensional space, grouping those that exhibit similar combinations of assertiveness, function, topic, and geographic focus (Husson et al., 2017).

We applied HCPC using Ward's method and Euclidean distance, implemented with the *FactoMineR* package in R. The optimal number of clusters was determined with the *NbClust* package (Charrad et al., 2014). HCPC is particularly suited for clustering MCA outputs as it can handle non-metric categorical data and generates interpretable hierarchical groupings. The analysis identified five distinct clusters, each representing a communication profile, i.e. a patterned combination of issue focus, tone, communicative function, and geopolitical focus. These form the empirical foundation for the analysis in Sections 4 and 5.

Temporal deployment and weighted profile scoring

We then developed a weighted scoring method that allowed us to analyse the salience of each communication profile over time. To do so, we measured how strongly each tweet reflected each profile, based on the list of defining features established earlier. This enabled us to assess not only which profiles appeared at which time, but also how consistently and prominently they were used as part of China's broader diplomatic messaging strategy.

Profile definitions were drawn from the HCPC results (see Table 1), based on distinctive combinations of topic, function, assertiveness, and geopolitical focus. Using associated Cramér's V scores we identified which features most strongly contributed to each cluster and used these as weighted criteria in the scoring process. We also considered whether it was the presence or absence of a given feature that defined a profile. Each tweet was compared to all five profiles and assigned a partial affinity score depending on the number and relative importance of matched features. This yielded five scores per tweet, reflecting its degree of alignment with each profile.

To illustrate, a tweet that matched three of the four core features of a given profile might receive a score of 0.75, with each feature contributing equally to that total. In cases where features had different discriminative strengths as indicated by Cramér's V, their contribution to the profile score was weighted accordingly. This logic ensured that more central features had greater influence on the scoring, while partial matches still contributed to our understanding of profile usage.

Altogether, this empirical design offers an inductively grounded framework for analysing Chinese diplomatic communications. By applying it across a large dataset and examining it more closely through a focused case study, we show that diplomats draw on a flexible yet stable repertoire of communication strategies. This approach also allows us to track how these strategies vary in salience and consistency across time and geopolitical context.

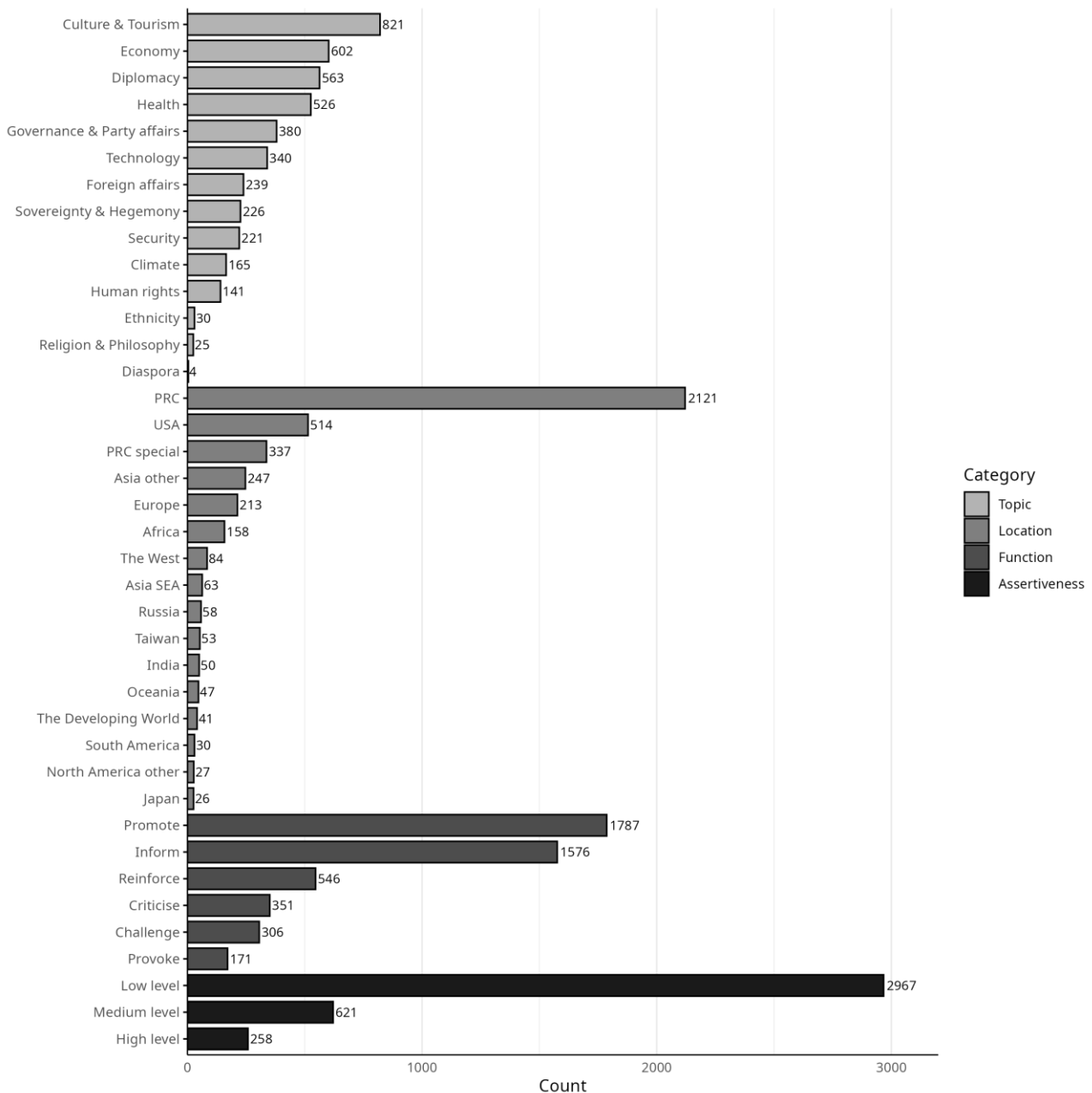
4. Results

This section presents the empirical results of our analysis. We begin with an overview of code frequencies across the full sample (N = 3,846). We then introduce the five inductively derived communication profiles identified through statistical cluster analysis. Finally, we analyse how these profiles were employed over time, offering insights into how Chinese diplomats adjust their communication strategies across different geopolitical contexts.

Overview of messaging patterns

Figure 2 summarises the frequency of tweet-level codes by topic, function, location, and assertiveness. Several trends are immediately visible. First, most tweets are characterized as a low or medium level of assertiveness, which challenges assumptions that Chinese digital diplomacy is dominated by confrontational rhetoric. Second, diplomats communicate across a wide range of topics. For instance, frequent topics include diplomacy, sovereignty, health, economy, and governance issues. Third, the most frequently referenced location is China. While purely descriptive, these distributions suggest that Chinese diplomats operate within a broad and diverse messaging repertoire that extends beyond purely assertive or promotional styles.

Figure 2. Tweet frequency across topics, locations, functions, and level of assertiveness (N = 3,846)



Communication profiles: identification and interpretation

To move beyond descriptive code frequencies, we used Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) followed by Hierarchical Clustering on Principal Components (HCPC) to identify common messaging patterns across tweets. These methods enabled us to classify observations based on how features co-occur, without predefining categories or expected groupings. The analysis was conducted on the full dataset (N = 3,846) using all coded variables for topic, function, location, and assertiveness.

This analysis produced five communication profiles. Each profile reflects a distinct style of diplomatic messaging, based on the combination of features that most strongly characterises it. These styles are not based on who sent the tweet, but on how particular topics, tones, functions, and geographic references cluster together in practice. Table 1 summarises the most defining features of each profile.

Table 1. Communication profiles identified via cluster analysis

| Cluster 1 (Informer profile) | Cluster 2 (Promoter profile) | Cluster 3 (Challenger profile) | Cluster 4 (Challenger profile) | Cluster 5 (Provoker profile) |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Economy (32.2)*** | Culture & Tourism (17.9)*** | PRC special (34.1)*** | Taiwan (18.2)*** | Assertive (31)*** |
| Technology (23.1)*** | Promote (7.1)*** | Human rights (17.2)*** | Sovereignty & Hegemony (17.4)*** | Criticise (26.4)*** |
| Inform (13.8)*** | PRC (6.1)*** | Challenge (7.1)*** | Assertive (12.2)*** | Highly assertive (23.1)*** |
| PRC (12.8)*** | Economy (26.1)*** | Assertive (3.8)*** | Challenge (7.75)*** | USA (22.3)*** |
| Asia SEA (10.7)*** | Assertive (21.3)*** | Sovereignty & Hegemony (3.7)*** | Security (6.7)*** | Provoke (17.5)*** |
| Culture & Tourism (15.8)*** | PRC special (19.1)*** | PRC (15.3)*** | Inform (5)*** | Challenge (17.4)*** |
| Assertive (11.5)*** | Challenge (18.2)*** | Economy (4.1)*** | Culture & Tourism (4.5)*** | The West (13.1)*** |
| Criticise (10.5)*** | Highly assertive (17.5)*** | | Promote (3.3)*** | Foreign affairs (9.1)*** |
| PRC special (10.4)*** | Criticise (17.4)*** | | | Sovereignty & Hegemony (8.8)*** |
| USA (9.7)*** | Technology (17.3)*** | | | Security (4.2)*** |
| Challenge (9.7)*** | Sovereignty & Hegemony (15.5)*** | | | Inform (16.2)*** |
| Highly assertive (9.6)*** | Human rights (12.3)*** | | | Promote (15.8)*** |
| Sovereignty & Hegemony (8.6)*** | Provoke (12.2)** | | | Culture & Tourism (10.3)*** |
| Security (8.2)*** | USA (10.2)*** | | | PRC (10.3)*** |
| Foreign affairs (7.3)*** | The West (9.3)*** | | | Technology (4.3)*** |

Note: Cell shading indicates whether the presence (grey) or absence (white) of a given variable (topic, location, function, or assertiveness level) statistically defines the profile. Cramér's V values (in brackets) indicate the strength and significance of each association (***) $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$).

The results presented in Table 1 reflect statistically significant associations between coded variables and profile membership. Both the presence and absence of features shape the identity of each cluster, as shown through cell shading. For example, the Promoter profile is defined in part by the presence of “Culture and Tourism,” while the Provoker profile is associated with the absence of the “Inform” function. The Cramér's V values further indicate the strength of each relationship. These empirically derived profiles form the analytical foundation for the results that follow.

Informer Profile (Cluster 1): Messages in this profile are characterised by a strong focus on informing, particularly on economic and technology related topics, with a notable absence of assertiveness. References to Southeast Asia and the PRC suggest a regional emphasis. Assertiveness is typically low or moderate, and provocative or promotional functions are rarely present. This profile represents routine diplomatic communications, such as policy engagement, event announcements, or reporting on diplomatic visits.

Promoter Profile (Cluster 2): Messages in this profile are defined by efforts to promote national image through references to culture and tourism in a non-confrontational tone. Messages frequently highlight Chinese cultural events, traditions or symbolic achievements, and are commonly associated with mentions of the PRC. Assertiveness is generally low and tweets in this profile do not typically address sensitive topics or foreign criticism.

Complex Challenger Profile (Cluster 3): This profile is defined by efforts to challenge external narratives, particularly around sensitive issues that are deemed “internal affairs” in official Chinese discourse. Tweets often reference PRC Special Regions (such as Xinjiang and Hong Kong), and the topic of human rights or sovereignty and hegemony. The average level of assertiveness is moderate. It reflects a defensive style of diplomatic messaging that seeks to reassert China's position and rebut reputational criticism. This profile is distinct for the absence of features that defined the Informer and Promoter profiles.

Taiwan Challenger Profile (Cluster 4): Tweets in this profile combine assertiveness and challenging messages with reference to topics of core national interest. The defining theme is Taiwan in the context of sovereignty and hegemony, and security. This profile distinctly lacks reference to features that characterise the Informer and Promoter profile and captures the phenomenon of targeted rhetorical escalation.

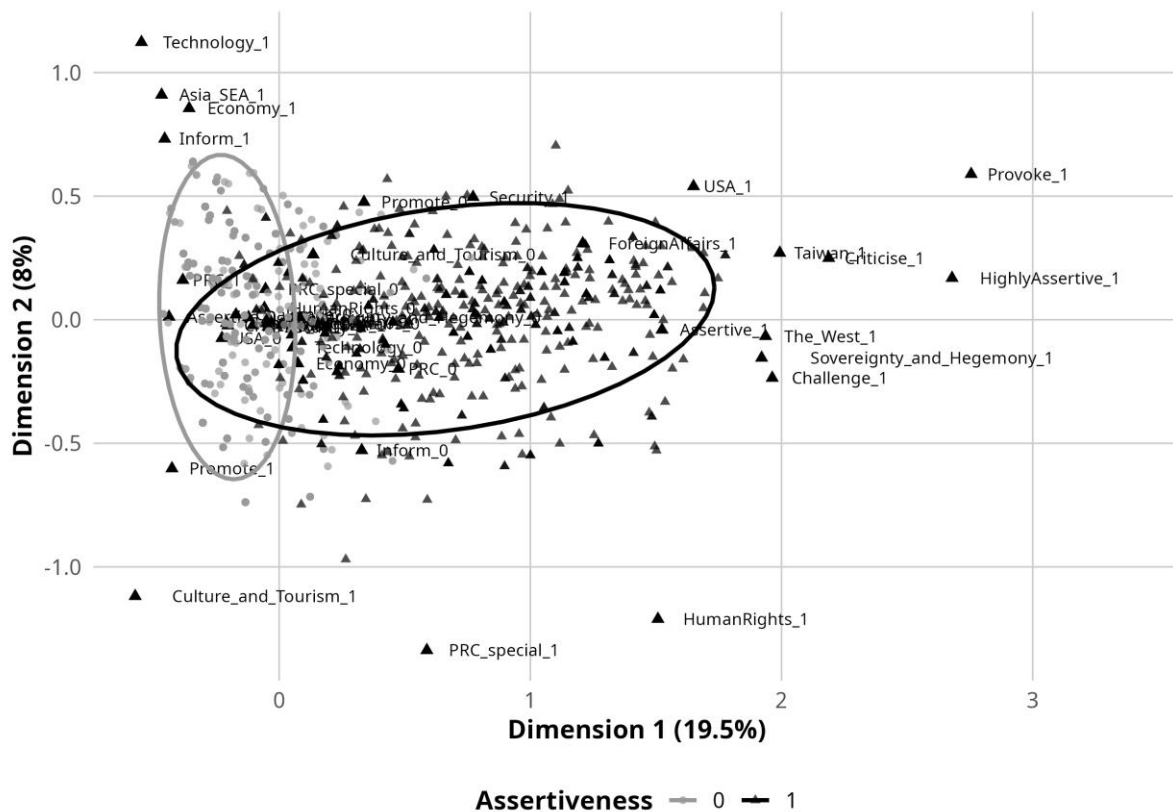
Provoker Profile (Cluster 5): This profile is marked by a high level of assertiveness, frequent use of criticism and provocation, and a focus on geopolitical rivals such as the USA and the West. Tweets in this cluster regularly challenge external actors' positions using direct and confrontational rhetoric. Informative and promotional content is largely absent. This profile reflects a combative messaging style, often aligned with attention-seeking or symbolic confrontation in international discourse. The Provoker Profile is the closest equivalent of what is often characterized as “Wolf Warrior”-style communication.

For illustrative purposes, Figure 3 presents a factor map for dimensions 1 and 2 from the MCA analysis, showing the top 10 contributing variable categories (0 for absent, 1 for present). The factor map shows the relationship between the variable categories for dimension one on the x-axis and dimension two on the y-axis. Variable categories with a similar profile are grouped together. Negatively associated variable categories are positioned on opposite sides of the plot origin. We added spheres for the point cloud of tweets to further differentiate whether it was assertive or not. While there is some overlap, the spheres in the factor map strongly signal tweets with higher and lower levels of assertiveness cover different topics, locations, or have different communication functions.

For instance, dimension 1, which explains 19.5% of the variance, is characterised by high assertiveness and confrontational topics such as sovereignty, hegemony, and China's relations with the US and the West. In contrast, dimension 2, which accounts for 8% of the variance, is defined by more informational content, particularly focused on technology and economic issues. This dimension also shows a negative correlation with promoting cultural and tourism topics, suggesting a strategic separation between information sharing and promotional efforts.

The factor map also highlights distinct associations between variable categories. For example, high assertiveness is closely associated with criticising and challenging, particularly in relation to topics like sovereignty and relations with the US. Conversely, non-assertive tweets are more likely to focus on promoting economic achievements and sharing information about non-controversial topics. These patterns help explain the structure of the communication profiles shown in Table 1.

Figure 3. MCA factor map showing top contributing variables across dimensions 1 and 2



Note: Variable names indicate whether presence (1) or absence (0) defines the dimension. Points differentiate tweet assertiveness: grey circles for non-assertive (0) tweets, black triangles for assertive (1) tweets. Ellipses indicate 95% confidence intervals.

Together, these five profiles demonstrate that Chinese diplomats use a range of communication strategies rather than relying on a single style. Yet, these strategies are also dynamic, raising questions about their relative salience and consistency over time, which we turn to in the following sections.

Trends in the salience of communication profiles

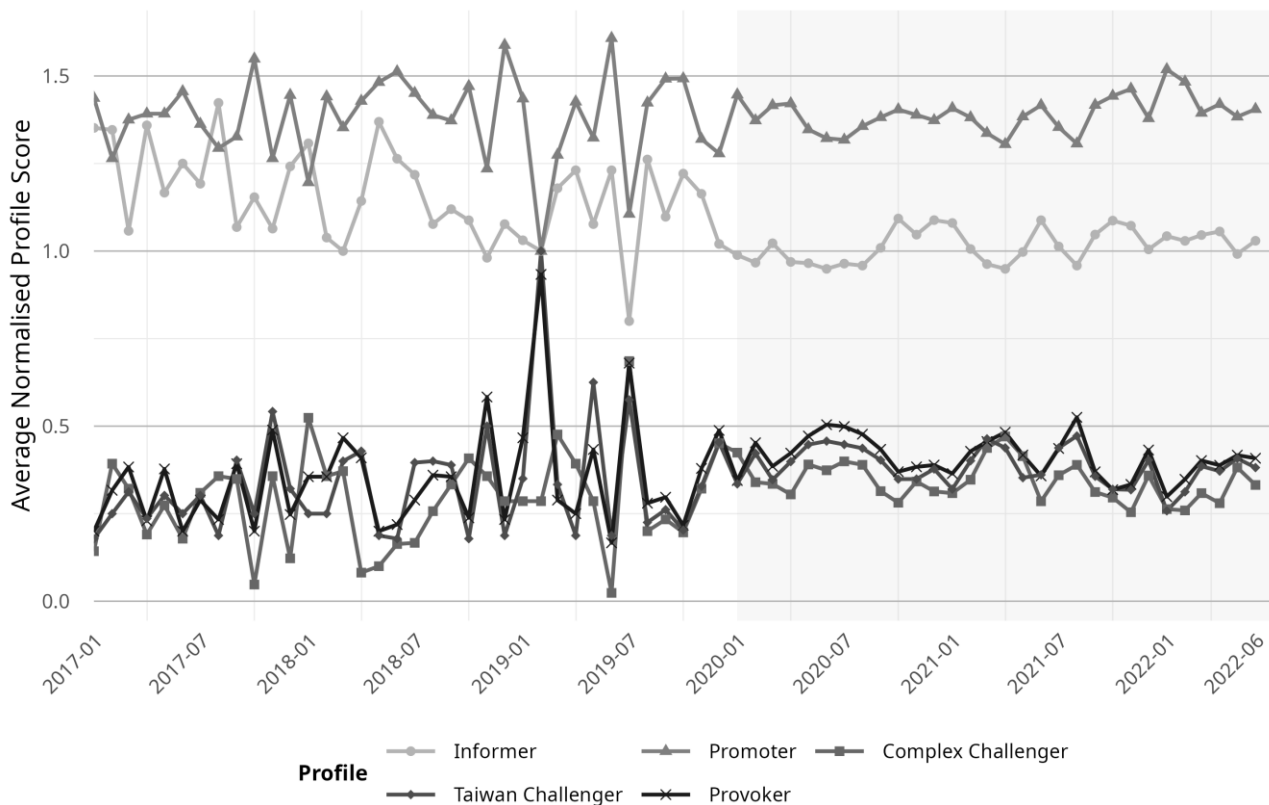
To explore how diplomatic communication strategies changed over time, we used the weighted scoring method introduced in Section 3. Each tweet was scored based on its degree of similarity to each profile. This allowed us to trace not just the frequency but the relative salience of each communication style over time. This method yielded three main insights.

First, non-confrontational profiles (Informer and Promoter) dominate across the five-year period. However, their internal balance shifts: while Informer was more prominent in earlier years, the Promoter profile overtakes it from 2020 onward. This suggests a strategic pivot toward soft power projection and cooperative branding, particularly under conditions of heightened global scrutiny during the pandemic.

Second, assertive profiles (Complex Challenger, Taiwan Challenger, and Provoker) appear in short, coordinated surges rather than as a long-term trend. These spikes align with periods of geopolitical friction, including sovereignty disputes, human rights criticism, or broader reputational tensions. The timing suggests strategic, issue-driven activation rather than reactive or random escalation.

Third, a clear increase in assertive messaging occurs in mid-to-late 2019, before the onset of COVID-19. This period aligns with growing tensions between China and the United States, the Huawei ban, and protests in Hong Kong. The simultaneous increase across all three assertive profiles indicates a deliberate intensification of strategic messaging, rather than fragmented or ad hoc responses.

Figure 4. Monthly salience of communication profiles, 2017-2022



Note: Weighted affinity scores for each communication profile, aggregated by month. The shaded area indicates the COVID-19 period (2020–2022).

These three patterns reinforce our central claim that China’s digital diplomacy is strategically consistent but tactically flexible. Assertive styles are not uniformly applied but selectively activated depending on reputational threats, political disputes, and narrative competition in the international

arena. We now examine this dynamic through a case study of diplomatic communications during the COVID-19 pandemic.

5. COVID-19 Case Study: Strategic Adaptation in Chinese Digital Diplomacy

The COVID-19 global pandemic that began in Wuhan represented a prolonged diplomatic crisis and reputational challenge for China. It combined geopolitical friction with great challenges, and yet new opportunities, for global image-making. The case study focuses on Chinese diplomatic messaging between January 2020 and July 2022 to assess whether communication patterns shifted significantly or remained anchored in established profiles.

Rather than treating the pandemic as a break from established practice, we analyse it as a stress test of China's digital diplomacy. Using a focused subset of 1,200 manually coded tweets, we examine how the five distinct communication profiles we have identified above were deployed during a period of global uncertainty.

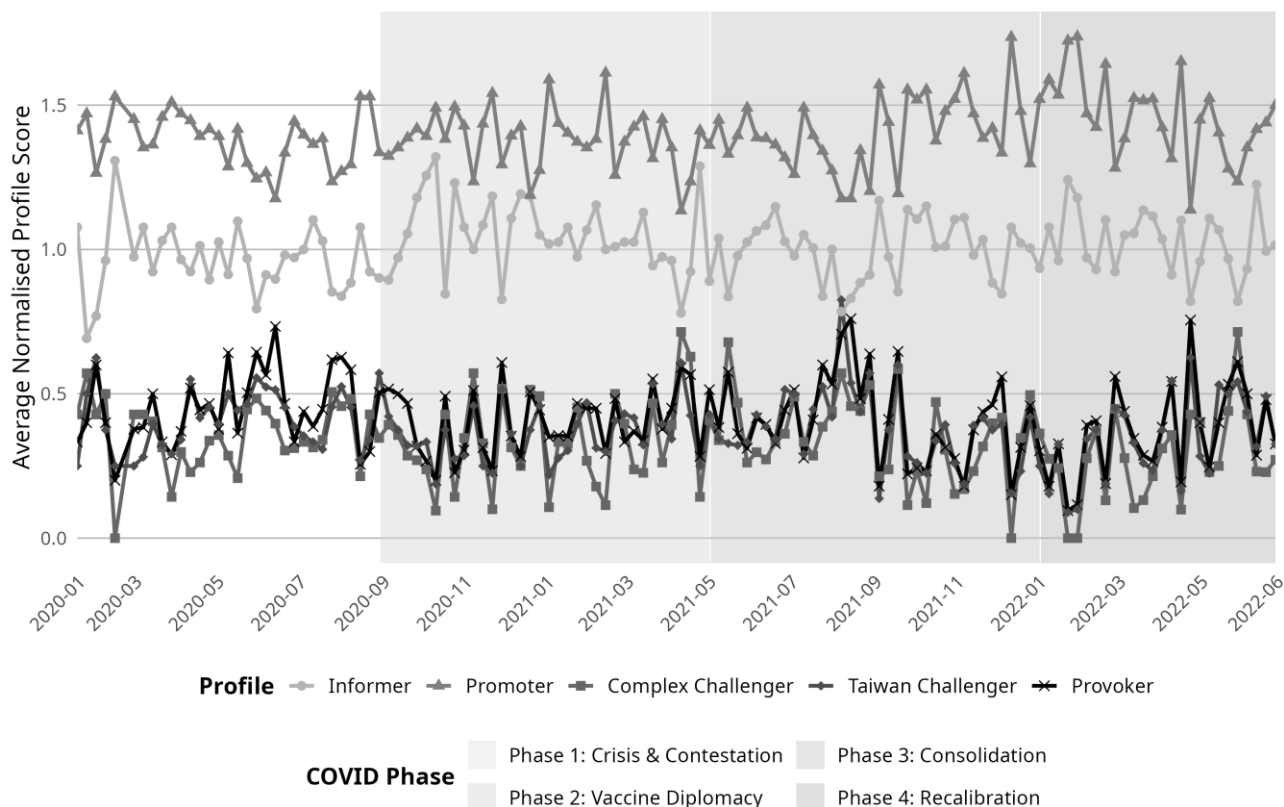
This approach allows us to test the core argument of the paper, namely Chinese digital diplomacy is built on a consistent set of communication strategies that can be flexibly adapted according to shifting geopolitical conditions.

Profile dynamics during the pandemic

Figure 5 presents weekly profile scores during the COVID period. It shows a remarkable degree of strategic consistency, with Informer and Promoter profiles maintaining a dominant presence throughout. These profiles underpinned efforts to project competence, control, and international responsibility.

Assertive profiles - Challengers and Provoker - emerged in targeted, short-lived surges, predominantly at times of international criticism or diplomatic conflict. These spikes occurred without displacing the dominant styles, which reveals a pattern of temporary intensification rather than long-term transformation.

Figure 5. Diplomatic communication trends during COVID-19, by week



Note: Weighted affinity scores for each communication profile, aggregated by week. Shaded areas represent different phases of the COVID-19 pandemic.

These, as yet descriptive, observations suggest that China’s external messaging remained strategically anchored but tactically responsive. While tone and emphasis shifted in response to events, the overall structure of communication remained intact.

Communicative shifts across four pandemic phases

To better understand this adaptive strategy, we divide the pandemic into four analytically distinct phases based on geopolitical events, messaging shifts, and key policy inflection points. These phases help trace how Chinese diplomats balanced reputational defence, narrative repositioning, and strategic assertion.

Phase 1: Crisis Response and Narrative Contestation (Jan–Sep 2020). This initial phase saw intense global scrutiny on China and exposure to extreme reputational risk. Events during this period included the World Health Organization’s declaration of a global pandemic, U.S. travel bans, and widespread narratives blaming China for the outbreak, including those emanating from the Trump administration. Chinese diplomats responded with high levels of Informer profile content detailing the country’s successes in containing spread of the virus within China and promoting a narrative about governmental transparency. Simultaneously, there was a surge in Challenger profile tweets rebutting various theories about the origin of the virus and foreign criticism of China’s handling of the outbreak. Assertiveness peaked during this phase, especially in relation to the U.S. and Trump administration officials.

Phase 2: Strategic Repositioning and Vaccine Diplomacy (Oct 2020–Jun 2021). As new vaccines emerged globally, China shifted from a crisis management posture to one of responsibility and leadership. Messaging increasingly drew on Promoter and Informer profiles to highlight Chinese vaccine donations and international cooperation. Assertive styles declined, giving way to soft power narratives underpinned by the “Health Silk Road” and themes of global solidarity.

Phase 3: Consolidation and Counter-Narrative (Jul–Dec 2021). During this phase China reaffirmed its successful handling of the pandemic and reasserted its ideological confidence. Messaging combined continued promotion of China’s governance model juxtaposed with critical comparisons to the West. Challenger and Provoker tweets increased, especially around the emergence of the Delta variant of the coronavirus, American rhetoric on the “lab origin theory,” and the Centenary of the CCP’s founding.

Phase 4: Recalibration and Strategic Diversification (Jan–Jul 2022). With the pandemic entering a more stable pattern globally, assertive messaging remained present but was increasingly directed at emerging geopolitical disputes such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Provoker and Taiwan Challenger tweets re-emerged, but soft power messaging remained stable. This suggests a recalibration rather than retreat from strategic assertiveness.

The COVID-19 case confirms that Chinese diplomatic communication operates within a stable but adaptive profile system. Rather than undergoing a transformation, the pandemic period reveals a communication strategy capable of calibrating assertiveness without discarding consistency.

Assertive messaging spikes when external pressure intensifies, but the structural dominance of informational and promotional content remains. These case study observations support our core claim that China’s digital diplomacy is not defined by rupture or radical change, but by strategic continuity with tactical flexibility even during periods of sustained environmental stress.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Strategic consistency and context-sensitive adaptation

This study set out to rethink how we understand diplomatic communication in an era of digital media and geopolitical contestation. Rather than simply examining what diplomats say, we explored how communication strategies shift across time and in response to political events. Drawing on a five-year dataset and a focused case study of the COVID-19 pandemic, we find that Chinese digital diplomacy relies on a stable yet contextually flexible set of communication strategies.

Contrary to depictions of a sharp turn toward “wolf warrior diplomacy,” our findings reveal a more consistent and calibrated approach. Informer and Promoter profiles dominate across the dataset, projecting legitimacy, competence, and international engagement. The more assertive styles associated with the Challenger and Provoker profiles are used in short bursts, often aligned with moments of increased external pressure or reputational risk.

Even during a prolonged global crisis, as shown by our COVID-19 case study, Chinese diplomats did not abandon their core messaging styles. Assertive communication intensified around key flashpoints such as the blame attached to China for the outbreak, but the broader emphasis on cooperation and control remained. Rather than a pivot, this period served as a stress test of the broader strategy, showing how diplomatic messaging can respond to pressure while remaining anchored in familiar patterns.

Analytical and methodological contributions

This paper makes three key contributions to the study of diplomatic communication. First, it advances a conceptual understanding of diplomacy as a strategic use of diverse communication strategies. Rather than treating soft power and assertiveness as opposing trends, our profile-based approach reveals how these strategies coexist and are used flexibly depending on geopolitical context.

Second, the paper develops a replicable empirical framework for analysing diplomatic communication. By combining manual content coding with inductive clustering and weighted scoring, we show how researchers can identify and track the use of rhetorical strategies across time and events. This approach offers a structured way to examine variation in tone, topic, and intent, without oversimplifying diplomatic behaviour into singular narratives.

Third, we provide new empirical insights into how Chinese diplomacy operates under pressure. The COVID-19 case study demonstrates that diplomatic messaging remains anchored in established profiles even as the intensity and prominence of assertive styles increase. This highlights the strategic logic behind profile deployment and the importance of flexible emphasis rather than wholesale transformation.

Implications and future research

While this study focuses on China, its approach opens space for broader comparative analysis. As digital platforms become integral to diplomacy, profile-based methods offer a way to move beyond anecdotal interpretations and systematically assess how states communicate across time and crisis. This framework allows researchers to capture how governments manage reputation, project influence, and adjust tone—without reducing diplomacy to isolated incidents or singular styles.

Future studies could explore whether similar communication profiles emerge in other state contexts. Do liberal democracies recalibrate their tone during moments of reputational threat? How do multilateral institutions adapt their messaging in response to crises? Cross-national comparisons could reveal whether profile-based communication strategies are unique to China or part of a wider repertoire of digital diplomacy across regime types.

There is also value in extending this framework to include audience reception. Do different profiles attract distinct forms of media coverage, public engagement, or diplomatic response? Do surges in assertiveness lead to reputational gains or backlash? Integrating this framework with audience metrics, public sentiment data, or cross-platform diffusion patterns would enrich our understanding of how digital diplomacy functions in practice—not only in message production but in strategic effect.

Ultimately, this paper moves beyond the “Wolf Warrior” narrative by showing that Chinese digital diplomacy is built on stable communication strategies in which assertive messaging has a tactical role. Chinese diplomats’ deployment of assertive messaging is not a sign of a new communication model. By identifying distinct communication profiles and tracking these patterns empirically, we offer a clearer framework for understanding how states adapt their messaging in a competitive and fast-moving digital communications environment.

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