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China's "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy": The Interaction of Formal Diplomacy and Cyber-Nationalism

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Abstract

For all the popular interest in "wolf warrior diplomacy," scant attention has been paid to the internal logics and mechanics of representative communications, notably the intersection with grassroots cyber-nationalism. Centring the connections between official and unofficial actors, we situate Chinese diplomatic communications within the domestic nationalist cyberspace cultures that demand and nourish the "dare to fight" orientation of formal Chinese diplomacy on the international stage. We argue that there is a synergistic interaction between officials and popular nationalism that creates bottom-up incentives to adopt a "wolf warrior" posture, distinct from simultaneous top-down pressures from the central leadership under Xi Jinping to appropriately represent China's "confident rise." We show through case studies involving MoFA spokesperson and archetypal "wolf warrior" Zhao Lijian, that this interaction extends to sharing unofficial content and ideas in a mutually reinforcing cycle that facilitates a harder edge to diplomatic communications.

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Keywords

Wolf warrior, diplomacy, communications, Zhao Lijian, cyber-nationalism

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Introduction

In his opening statement marking the first ministerial level meeting between China and the United States under the Biden administration held in Alaska in March 2021, Secretary of State Blinken enumerated a litany of Chinese actions of "deep concern" to the United States, which he said were threatening the "rules-based international order." Seemingly angered by his counterpart's introduction, Central Foreign Affairs Commission Director Yang Jiechi (杨洁篪) delivered a searing 16-min riposte, juxtaposing Chinese achievements with his own assessment of American failings in democracy, human rights, and foreign relations. The remarkable exchange was broadcast by media in attendance (*C-Span*, 2021). During his lecture, Yang delivered a line that would resonate for weeks in Chinese media and cyberspace: "Chinese people won't swallow this crap" (中国人不吃这一套, *Zhongguoren buchi zheyitao*). Irrespective of whether Yang was angrily extemporising or making a premeditated statement for the consumption of his political superiors and publics in China (Wright, 2021), the performance was depicted by *The Washington Post* and other US media as the essence of "wolf warrior diplomacy" (Taylor and Rauhala, 2021).

The description of communications by Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) officials, ambassadors, and other diplomatic staff as abrasive, pugnacious, and sometimes controversial "wolf warrior diplomacy" is commonplace in western discourse. Naturally, Chinese actors do not have a monopoly on such behaviours. President Trump, Secretary of State Pompeo and numerous officials in the former administration routinely directed barbs, insults and harsh rhetorical critique China's way, even when a solid evidentiary base was lacking, as was the case with theories about the origins of Covid-19. The extent of popular interest in China's "wolf warrior diplomacy" is stimulated by the sense that it embodies an assertive or aggressive turn in Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping and marks a departure from the established Chinese diplomatic repertoire. The Chinese position that more robust communication methods are necessary to defend China's "discourse power" (话语权, *huayuquan*) against distorted narratives purveyed by hegemonic western media, is criticised by western observers as propaganda or "sharp power," a term coined by researchers at the National Endowment for Democracy to describe influence activities within global communications spaces (Walker et al., 2020). Scant attention has been paid to the internal logics and mechanics of "wolf warrior diplomacy." One blind spot addressed in this article is the intersection with cybernationalism, manifest in the reproduction and repurposing of content as it moves between official and grassroots actors, across Chinese and American social media platforms in Chinese and English. Centring the connections between official and unofficial actors helps situate Chinese diplomatic communications in the nationalist cyberspace cultures that demand and nourish the "dare to fight" (敢打, *ganda*) orientation of formal Chinese expressions on the international stage. We argue that there is a synergistic interaction between "wolf warrior" officials and popular nationalism that creates bottom-up incentives to adopt such a posture, distinct from simultaneous top-down pressures to appropriately represent China's "confident rise" (自信崛起, *zixin jueqi*). We show

through case studies involving MoFA spokesperson and archetypal "wolf warrior" Zhao Lijian (赵立坚), that this interaction extends to sharing content and ideas in a mutually reinforcing cycle that facilitates a harder edge to diplomatic communications. At the same time, we show that actors like Zhao are subject to political and institutional constraints that determine how and when they enact the "wolf warrior" communications repertoire. The article is organised as follows. We first specify what is meant by the term "wolf warrior diplomacy." Next, we describe the top-down pressures on officials as they relate to a changing foreign policy strategy under Xi, and identify the bottom-up pressures that emerge from nationalist cultures online. Finally, we employ three case studies to demonstrate the co- and re-production of messaging through interactive processes between official and grassroots actors. The resulting discussion helps establish a new lens on "wolf warrior diplomacy" that foregrounds the domestic context in which officials' actions are both stimuli for and responses to popular nationalism.

Specifying "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy"

The phrase "wolf warrior" (战狼, *zhanlang*) originated with the Chinese action film of the same name directed by and starring Wu Jing (吴京) released in 2015. Two years later, the sequel became China's highest grossing box office hit, spurring numerous imitators within the genre. The films centre on Leng Feng (冷锋), a maverick sniper in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), portraying his righteous vengeance, humanistic altruism, and die-hard patriotism across a global tableau structured by a Manichean dichotomy of virtuous Chinese and evil foreign forces. The films are not subtle: The tagline to the first movie was "Even though a thousand miles away, anyone who affronts China will pay." They deal with themes like love and loyalty to country, the symbolic resonance between Leng and the Chinese state, and the dialectic relationship between individual and nation. Commercial success suggests that the emphasis on national strength as a source of pride resonated with Chinese publics at a time when China is pursuing national aspirations like "the Chinese dream" (中国梦, *Zhongguomeng*) and "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (中华民族伟大复兴, *Zhonghuaminzu weida fuxing*). After the films' release, the term "wolf warrior" enjoyed currency in Chinese cyberspace as a way of ridiculing excessive nationalistic expressions, and some critical or mocking attitudes towards "wolf warrior diplomacy" can still be found on the Chinese Internet. One of the stimuli for this usage was a display of chauvinistic nationalism and vulgar language by Wu Jing himself during an interview about the BBC's reception of his film *Wolf Warrior*. Later, the term was adopted and popularised by western journalists as shorthand for boorish overreach and hypersensitivity. As a relatively new phenomenon, there is scant academic literature. Preliminary engagements with the concept and practice of "wolf warrior diplomacy" (Dai and Luqiu, 2021; Mattingly and Sundquist, 2021; Min, 2020) leave it under-specified and lacking in analytical utility. With the qualified exception of Wang (2017), PRC scholars have not engaged with the "wolf warrior" concept outside the immediate context of the movie franchise.

To begin the task of specifying "wolf warrior diplomacy," we first proffer a minimalist definition restricting it to communications by official actors. Operationalising communication acts constitutive of "wolf warrior diplomacy" then requires disaggregation by stimulus, tone, form, rhetorical device and medium. Our first point is that the term "wolf warrior diplomacy" is most useful in reference to communication acts. Physical actions outside of the discursive and rhetorical arena, such as sanctions or visa cancellations, bring the behaviours it describes into the realm of influence activities or decision- and policy-making that is generally outside the purview of MoFA. Furthermore, the fundamental role of the diplomatic corps and MoFA is to communicate positions and preferences as they pertain to Chinese foreign policy interests. Second, the application of the term "wolf warrior diplomacy" is most usefully restricted to Chinese actors in official positions within the institutional foreign policy and diplomatic apparatus. Popular application of the term "wolf warrior diplomacy" invokes a range of Chinese actors, many of whom are neither diplomats nor foreign policy officials. The interventions of editors, journalists, academics, and other public figures are significant, particularly in terms of the popular information environment, but the implication that they are all participants in "wolf warrior diplomacy" renders the scope of diplomacy excessively capacious. A diplomat or spokesperson represents the nation in a way that other actors simply do not, with implications for, among other things, the inferences we can make about what this behaviour reveals of Chinese behaviours, strategies, and objectives.

The proximate stimulus for "wolf warrior" communication acts is generally twofold. The first is criticism of Chinese positions, policy or behaviours by a foreign government, corporation, journalist, or other public figure. The second is interference (real or instrumentally conceived) in China's internal affairs, especially issues touching on core interests (核心利益, *hexin liyi*) relating to sovereignty, territory, security, and the government's determination of how it governs within its jurisdiction. There is substantial variation, and progressive expansion, of what counts as a core interest. Hence "wolf warriors" are liable to engage on a range of issues, from the highly sensitive like Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan, the South China Sea and the origins of Covid-19, to seemingly less consequential matters like Australian wine or Swedish hoteliers. But since the "wolf warrior" posture is inherently pro-active and poised to launch on offense, it does not necessarily require an egregious cause to be ignited. An ever-present alertness to injustice and insult renders any issue, real or imagined, serious or trivial, cause to access the "wolf warrior" toolkit. However, while a similar mindset prevails among many grassroots nationalists, for whom it has become a habitual reflex and part of their identity, "wolf warriors" are institutional actors and thus subject to institutional restraints.

The tone of "wolf warrior" communications is often described in western media as harsh, confrontational, belligerent, bellicose, rude, and so on. From the perspective of Chinese audiences, the same tone is often perceived as strong, frank, or bold. We are less concerned with positive- or negative-valanced descriptors than to point out that the tone of these communication acts is not accidental: The decision to employ a hard/

active rather than soft/passive approach is a feature not a bug. Dispensing with traditional diplomatic niceties of politesse, ambiguity, and nuance is a deliberate signalling device, to both outside interlocutors and grassroots nationalists within China. In reproducing the unforgiving tone of cyber-nationalism in particular, it validates, creates a permission structure, and mollifies the section of nationalist publics that demands the state adopt a harder line in foreign affairs. As such, there are points of consonance with political communicators like Trump, Putin, and Modi, whose diverse communication strategies similarly cultivate cynicism, doubt, and confusion. Some elements of "wolf warrior" communications fit the definition of straightforward propaganda and misinformation, such as Zhao's tweeted conspiracy theory about the supposed origins of Covid-19 in an American military laboratory. Beyond the immediate effects of "flooding the zone," such communications are experimental and cumulative, sowing ideas to see what resonates and priming publics to receive subsequent related messaging. But it can be hit-and-miss, like the official Weibo of the Political and Law Committee posting an image at the height of India's devastating Covid-19 spike, of China's Long March No.8 rocket blasting off juxtaposed with an enormous funeral pyre, with the caption: "China lighting a fire vs. India lighting a fire." It was soon removed by the censors, despite pugnacious public intellectuals like Fudan professor Shen Yi (沈逸) defending it on the principle of free speech.

Communication acts occur in many forms depending on the medium and platform. Messaging can be in the form of direct speech, textual comments, recorded video messages, images, or memes. On western social media platforms, they are delivered in English or relevant foreign languages. "Wolf warrior" communication acts are not defined by the medium in which they are delivered. The case studies we present in this article are derived primarily from digital media, but we could equally have chosen physical world examples like Yang in Alaska, or extracted them from the broadsheet op-ed pages beloved by former PRC Ambassadors to the United Kingdom and the United States, Liu Xiaoming (刘晓明) and Cui Tiankai (崔天凯), respectively. Regardless of media and format, a key feature is that content delivered in one medium invariably ends up in full or abbreviated form on western and, if it fits the messaging needs of the day, Chinese social media platforms. It can be directly shared by the relevant official or institution, and by state media and other organs of the vast online propaganda apparatus. Indeed, there is systematic coordination and support provided by various party or state-affiliated institutions, media and portals, amplified by tools like bots and fake followers (Han, 2018; Schliebs et al., 2021) and tactics like the use of "clickbait" (Lu and Pan, 2021), all situated within the overarching architecture of cyber-governance (Schneider, 2018). A single "wolf warrior" communication act is thus embedded in a system that can operationalise a multi-faceted repertoire honed by long experience of mastery over the domestic information environment (Brazys and Dukalskis, 2020; Gallagher and Miller, 2021; King et al., 2017). This includes the tactics of diversion and distraction meticulously identified by Roberts (2018) and reflects the centring of "digital technologies at the heart of propaganda, public opinion and social control work" observed by Creemers (2017: 85).

It is necessary to note that "wolf warrior" communication acts are not the only component in the diplomatic communications repertoire: Even among the officials who best embody the term, most communications are presented in the standard terms and formulaic constructions common to official Chinese political discourse. However, when the need for a different mode of communication arises, several rhetorical devices are commonly deployed to (re-)assert Chinese positions and deflect criticism, including refutation, redirection, and reframing. Techniques supporting these aims include the use of sarcasm and irony to dismiss others' claims, burnishing Chinese arguments with evidence (often in the form of Chinese materials, some of uncertain accuracy or provenance), invoking support of other actors and public opinion, citing logical flaws, factual inaccuracies, or contradictory prior statements. None of these rhetorical devices is special or unique to Chinese communicators, indeed they are common to many interactions across digital spaces. One thing that is unusual in terms of longstanding Chinese diplomatic practice is the willingness to employ them directly and publicly to engage foreign state actors. For example, when the US State Department criticised the human rights implications of Chinese policies in Hong Kong, Foreign Ministry Information Department director, Hua Chunying (华春莹), immediately fired back with a tweet that said simply: "I can't breathe," the last words of George Floyd, a Black man murdered by police in Minneapolis. There are countless examples of Chinese officials engaging directly with official foreign counterparts, and Hua's tweet encapsulates the modus operandi of "wolf warrior" communications: Outside criticism, particularly from US government, requires a rapid and direct riposte. In this instance, Hua employed redirection to point to vulnerabilities, inconsistencies, and hypocrisy in the critic's own record in a related issue space. This "whataboutism" is a rhetorical device frequently used to deflect criticism, say of repressive policies against Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, and redirect it at the critic by constructing an equivalent set of failings, like structural racism in the United States. It was pioneered by propagandists in the Soviet Union and is increasingly common to political communications in diverse contexts (Tsvetkova and Rushchin, 2021). Yet it also speaks specifically to the deeply embedded sense of grievance attached to "western hypocrisy" that suffuses Chinese nationalism (Tang and Darr, 2012; Wang, 2014).

One further aspect to "wolf warrior diplomacy" is that it is not a self-appellation. Chinese official receptiveness to the terminology has vacillated between embrace and rejection. As used in western critiques, the term possesses inherently negative or pejorative connotations, which Chinese officials routinely reject. Some Chinese media suggest it is illustrative of western prejudice, a discursive trap or a new iteration of the China threat syndrome. Increasingly, however, there are signs of greater comfort with the term. In July 2021, CGTN responded on Twitter to *The New York Times* criticism of "wolf warrior diplomacy" with a rhetorical "Why Not?" Liu Xiaoming explained the necessity of "wolf warrior diplomacy": Because China faces "many wolves out there" (*The Paper*, 2020). To date, the concept of "wolf warrior diplomacy" has not stimulated scholarly engagement in China: Our search of the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database failed to return any PRC publications dealing explicitly with the issue.

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

The controversies and criticism surrounding the Covid-19 outbreak in Wuhan, including US officials' support for unproven theories on the origins of the virus, have some explanatory power for the "unleashing of wolf warrior diplomacy" in spring 2020 (Yang, 2021: 7). However, we maintain that the phenomenon more broadly represents the culmination of an unfolding trajectory reflecting changes in Chinese foreign policy principles and posture. Specifically, it reflects the increasing salience of the concept of "major-country diplomacy" (大国外交, *daguo waijiao*) and an evolving conception of the aims and means of public diplomacy during the Xi era (Huang and Wang, 2019). During the first decades of the reform era, the primary diplomatic signalling tactic was to invoke "hurt feelings." Few diplomatic formulations had the power to make CEOs and shareholders fret more than the phrase "hurt the feelings of the Chinese people" (伤害中国人民的感情, *shanghai Zhongguorenmin de ganqing*), with its implied threat of "informal sanctions" like losing access to the Chinese market and consumer boycotts (Reilly, 2012). Reactive and defensive, hurt feelings episodes framed China as the wronged party, assigned blame to others' transgressions and sought to compel them to accede to Chinese preferences without the need for escalatory formal threats or policy responses. The longevity of hurt feelings as a diplomatic tactic can be explained by the consonance it enjoyed with Deng Xiaoping's dictum to "hide your capabilities, bide your time" (韬光养晦, *taoguang yanghui*). However, the debate around the appropriateness of the hide and bide strategy began almost as soon as Deng's passing in 1997, with a multiplicity of viewpoints reflecting variation in preferences within Chinese foreign policy circles (as detailed in Shambaugh, 2013). As China has become more demonstrably powerful economically, militarily and global influence, the concept of "major-country diplomacy," first advocated by scholars like Ye (2000), has subsumed academic debates around international communication and public diplomacy. Chinese scholars have actively debated the contours of "diplomacy with Chinese characteristics," while unanimously accepting the need for it (Wang, 2021; Xu, 2020; Yang, 2021). The emerging consensus among these scholars is that major-country diplomacy involves "going beyond dealing with major countries, to act as a major country" (Yang, 2016: 19). The emerging concept of Chinese major-country diplomacy incorporates a renewed understanding of sovereignty, the concept of common and sustainable global security, the principle of upholding justice while pursuing shared interests, and the idea of leading progressive reform of the global system (Yang, 2021). Significant moves in foreign policy and diplomacy, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which might previously have been discussed under the rubric of public diplomacy, are now treated as components of major-country diplomacy.

A central obstacle to the implementation of Chinese major-country diplomacy is identified as volatile foreign public opinion and the rise of foreign hostility, smear campaigns and racial prejudice, in part stimulated by the Covid-19 outbreak (Zhao and Zhao, 2020). Ye (2021: 36) argues that western misinterpretation and distortion of *Daguo Waijiao,* understanding it not as "major-country diplomacy" but as "great power diplomacy,"

has contributed to uneasiness about China's diplomatic practice and intentions. The solution to these challenges is constructing international discursive power that matches China's major-country status (Yang, 2016; Ye, 2021). Alongside this thinking, harder and softer approaches to diplomacy have converged as major western countries explicitly identify China as a systemic competitor or rival, and Chinese elites internalise the prospect of American/western decline. In sum, the currency of hide and bide has declined. Similarly, the hurt feelings tactic has declined utility for the front-foot, agenda-setting posture required for the new stage in China's development. Notwithstanding discursive constructions around the BRI and "community of common destiny for mankind" (人类命运共同体, *renlei mingyun gongtongti*) that retain elements of Hu Jintao's "harmonious world" (和谐世界, *hexie shijie*), China's diplomatic posture under Xi is rooted in the "confident rise," "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," and "new model of major-country relations" (新型大国关系, *xinxing daguo guanxi*), which dovetail with aspects of the domestic-focused "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想 *Xi Jinping Xin Shidai Zhongguo Tese Shehuizhuyi Sixiang*). It is premature to say that the hurt feelings tactic is obsolete given that the last major case, Houston Rockets executive Daryl Morey's faux pas on Hong Kong, occurred as recently as December 2019. However, in formal communications, state media, and Chinese cyberspace alike, the emotional fragility and victimhood implied by invoking hurt feelings has given way to more forceful expressions like "insulting China" (辱华, *ruhua*), "anger the Chinese people" (激怒中国人民, *jinu Zhongguo renmin*) and the active and harder-edged communication styles in the "wolf warrior" toolkit.

The concept and practice of "wolf warrior diplomacy" in the service of major-country diplomacy, is justified by the "fight for discourse power." Many scholars acknowledge that China's international discourse power is incommensurate with its major-country status (Yang, 2016: 27; Zuo, 2016: 5), and its international communications capacity is inadequate to the task of countering the dominant negative framing of China's rise emanating from the west. Hence the need for "proactively setting the agenda and winning over international public opinion pre-emptively" (Ye, 2021: 40). This thinking provides a basic rationale for the "wolf warrior" approach to communication. Other PRC scholars have identified international critique around Covid-19 as ushering in a period of "emergency diplomacy" requiring "strategic pro-activeness" operationalised in large part by "resolutely hitting back at unjustified speeches and deeds against China on foreign social media platforms" (Zhao and Zhao, 2020: 35).

Xi Jinping's own speeches, pronouncements, and policies over the last decade leave no room to doubt his preference for a robust foreign policy strategy, consistent with his position on domestic policy and management of the communist party. As long ago as 2009, on a visit to Mexico as Vice President, Xi made the unusually unrestrained comment that the PRC's critics were merely "foreigners who've eaten their fill and have nothing better to do" (吃饱了没事干的外国人, *chibaole meishigan de waiguoren*). Xi's orientation has created pressures on MoFA and the diplomatic corps, relatively dovish and circumspect institutions through most of the reform era. The environment

and incentive structure created by Xi's consolidation and centralisation of power has reanimated Zhou Enlai's conception of a "diplomatic front" requiring a "martial ethos" in which "diplomats are the PLA in civilian clothing" (Martin, 2021: 8). A leaked directive from 2013, Document No. 9, revealed Xi's preoccupation with combatting hostile forces infiltrating the ideological sphere. He instructed assembled diplomats and military leaders at a Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference in 2014 to fully embrace major-country diplomacy. At other times he exhorted them to fight for Chinese discourse power, uphold China's "image sovereignty" (形象主权, *xingxiang zhuquan*), and to "tell China's story well" (讲好中国故事, *jianghao Zhongguo gushi*). As other countries have pushed back against Chinese foreign policy, the soft power initiative of the previous decade has lost ground to "the battle" or "struggle over public opinion" (舆论战/斗争, *yulunzhan/douzheng*). Xi thus ordered diplomats to be more proactive and strengthened decision-making and oversight through the Central Foreign Affairs Commission. The result, documented by Martin (2021), is that officials have become increasingly anxious to demonstrate that they are able to represent Xi's vision and style on the global stage, fearful that failure to do so could have dire consequences for their careers. In their diplomatic interactions overseas they have become constrained and hyper-cautious, yet at the same time more assertive and caustic. Knowing that their superiors would receive detailed reports of all their diplomatic engagements and public pronouncements, the central leadership in Beijing became their prime audience (Martin, 2021: 201-202). If they needed further evidence that Xi approved of the "wolf warrior" approach, Zhao Lijian's promotion from the obscurity of the PRC diplomatic mission in Pakistan to MoFA spokesperson provided an unmistakable disambiguation: Timidity was a liability, combative advocacy of China's interests was rewarded.

The Interaction Between "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy" and Cyber-Nationalism

Taking into consideration foreign service and diplomatic officials' response to the tactical needs of a robust foreign policy, Xi's expectations and injunctions, increasing resistance from nations anxious about Chinese policies, and a broadly deteriorating foreign relations environment, the emergence of "wolf warrior diplomacy" is explicable. The incentive structure is clear, but it doesn't tell the whole story about "wolf warrior diplomacy." First, it neglects public opinion, reinforced by a popular cultural discursive shift, which actively embraces and demands a harder approach to diplomacy. Popular nationalist sentiment, to an extent, influences the foreign policy orientation of the central leadership (Weiss, 2014; Zhao, 2013), and in turn the performance requirements of foreign service officials. Second, top-down accounts help identify officials' incentives, but they are quiet on the practical enactment of "wolf warrior" communication acts. A purely top-down account neglects, for example, the cross-fertilisation of ideas, content, and messaging that cycles between official and unofficial actors. In sum, grassroots

cyber-nationalism, and specifically its interaction effect with diplomatic officials, is a missing link to a fuller understanding of "wolf warrior diplomacy."

Much has been written about the burgeoning of Chinese nationalism in the late reform era, its origins, fundamental underpinnings, and manifestations in policy and protest (Weiss, 2014; Zhao, 2004; Zheng and Zheng, 1999). Similarly, manifestations of popular cyber-nationalism have attracted significant scholarly attention as it has evolved over time through angry youth (愤青, *fenqing*), little pinks (小粉红, *xiao fenhong*), and online expeditions (帝吧, *diba*) to the contemporary complexities of replacement theory (入关学, *ruguanxue*) and accelerationism (加速主义, *jiasuzhuyi*) (Han, 2015; Schneider, 2018; Wu, 2007). Embedded within a broader system of networked authoritarianism (MacKinnon, 2011; Tsai, 2016), Chinese cyber-nationalism is dynamic and heterogeneous, defying sweeping generalisations (Fang and Repnikova, 2018). While "grassroots nationalists" (Blanchette, 2019) also tend to oppose the globalisation agenda engineered by Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin and advocate a more assertive diplomacy, especially against capitalist countries, they are not synonymous with "cyber nationalists." While there is some overlap in preferences and positions, both categories hold a diversity of views and the latter is distinguished by the active propagation of its messaging and active engagement of opponents in Chinese and western cyberspaces. It is also necessary to point out here the difference between "patriotism" and "nationalism" in the PRC's official and popular discourses. China's official discourse has constructed patriotism (爱国主义, *aiguozhuyi*) as not only positive, but a duty that its citizens must perform, reflected in the position of patriotism as the first "core socialist value." Official China avoids invoking of nationalism (民族主义, *minzuzhuyi*) because chauvinistic associations risk undermining its promotion of patriotism. When the temperature of popular nationalism runs high and endangers social stability, the government reigns in ultra-nationalistic voices and calls for "rational patriotism" (理性爱国, *lixing aiguo*), but refrains from explicitly condemning nationalism.

Schneider's (2018: 32) account of cyber-nationalism as a form of political technology involving long-term "processes of construction, innovation, and negotiation" and facilitated by discursive construction by instrumental elites is persuasive. Because the political socialisation that nurtures nationalism is a predominantly discursive process, the role of communications in harnessing emotion and perception in the construction of nationalist worldviews is significant. Hence, the seriousness with which both party and state actors, and scholarly analyses, approach the technological affordances of mass-scale instantaneous communications via the Internet, especially since the popularisation of now-ubiquitous social and digital media. For commercialised media and Internet operations, required to maximise profits while staying within the bounds of politically permissible parameters, nationalist content is both safe and profitable: in effect, a "media ecology that encourages nationalism" (Schneider, 2018: 192). But media are only part of the story. Party and state actors have leveraged technological affordances on a massive scale to shape and engage publics with new forms of messaging that complement and concretise the messaging that dominates the broader information environment. Crucially, party and state actors have come to recognise that digital cultures are

inherently participatory, interactive, and collaborative, and thus effective digital operations must serve and nurture these propensities. The massive expansion of party and state organs into digital media and cyber-spaces enables these actors to harness the creativity of grassroots digital cultures as an engaging vehicle for construction and channelling of nationalism (Guo, 2018). The Communist Youth League and various state- and party-affiliated media are at the vanguard of this process, producing and repurposing content in increasingly adept ways that are consonant with digital cultural practices that resonate with digital native publics. Repnikova and Fang (2018) describe the encouragement of interaction and participation through the co- and re-production of grassroots cultures as constituting a system of "authoritarian participatory persuasion 2.0."

Unwieldy grassroots nationalism, characterised by belligerence and animosity, had long been distinct from the more circumspect official form of state-led nationalism. Although Hyun and Kim (2015) report evidence that the disparity between these two nationalisms did not translate into widespread anti-system sentiment, official actors no longer possess a monopoly over how the symbols that underpinned their system of "emotional governance" are interpreted, disseminated, and leveraged (Schneider, 2021). Online Chinese publics have frequently run ahead of the government in exposing and protesting "insults to China," sometimes culminating in punitive online expeditions that swarm or deface perceived transgressors' online spaces (Liu, 2019). Publics taking the initiative to organise and conduct "crusades" of their own volition, not awaiting or seeking permission and guidance from official actors is a feature of cyber-nationalism. This does not imply a loosening of controls: The state has centralised and increased the sophistication of its management of online public opinion through a combination of propaganda, censorship, and techno-legal frameworks (Creemers, 2015). In part, the intensification and expansion of the cyber-governance architecture in recent years is driven by the threat of "rogue" popular nationalism and the challenge it represents to the conduct of foreign policy. The proclivity of cybernationalists to actively seek out triggers for mobilisations, thereby inserting themselves into Chinese diplomacy, is a pressure that complicates foreign policy and sometimes diminishes the party-state's claim to be the ultimate defender and promoter of Chinese nationalist interests. The intense informatisation of Chinese society, the porousness of the Great Firewall, and the interpenetration of western and Chinese social media provide Chinese publics with access to alternative information sources to tightly controlled mass media. Although the expansion of state media operations and the broader propaganda apparatus has begun a process of colonising Chinese cyberspaces, it is difficult to prevent people from discovering "undesirable" information, for example, comments about the country made by foreign actors. This is especially true of the tech-savvy digital natives who disproportionately make up the ranks of cybernationalists. The same affordances provide them with a powerful platform to express their opinions and coalesce with like-minded individuals, who are primed to quickly mobilise against foreign criticism or insults. While the state retains levers to manage public anger through information and physical control measures, and definitive evidence that online public opinion (网络舆情, *wangluo yuqing*) influences foreign

policy is hard to come, it is reasonable to assume that nationalist online public opinion is a consideration in the formal decision-making calculus (Jakobson and Manuel, 2016).

The emergence of "wolf warrior diplomats" symbolises the incursion of cyber-nationalist preferences for a hard-edged foreign policy posture, and their typically belligerent modus operandi, into formal Chinese diplomacy. This represents a convergence of sorts, but it is premature to imply that cautious formal nationalism has been replaced by its less restrained cyber-nationalist relation. Xi's preference for robust foreign policy that has created an incentive structure for diplomats to adopt the communication behaviours beloved of cybernationalists does not necessarily mean that China has abandoned its longstanding strategy of "defensive nationalism" (Shambaugh, 1996: 205). However, it is telling that it perceives utility in encouraging a partial and periodic application in the form of "wolf warrior diplomacy." Ever mindful that failure to accommodate the fervour of grassroots nationalists could spill over into public discontent and anti-system sentiment, the incorporation of "wolf warrior diplomacy" is part of a broader trend under Xi, in which the liberal and internationalist counterpart to hard cyber-nationalism has been systematically weakened. A consequential campaign to suppress heterodox online discourse has led to the closure of websites and key opinion leaders and public intellectuals being muzzled, discredited, or even jailed for spreading liberal ideas. Gallagher and Miller (2021: 2) provide compelling evidence of what they identify as a strategy for "taming citizens" and "maximally shrinking non-official public spaces that could threaten the CCP's authority or compete with it ideologically in the future." Meanwhile, party-state actors have spared no effort in spreading pro-regime propaganda through the penetration, plantation, and promotion of quasi-official news outlets and a co-opted set of opinion leaders to manufacture online public opinion (King et al., 2017). The result is that nationalist and generally pro-system voices have seized a dominant position in online popular discourse in the few years since Zhang et al. (2018) argued that anti-system sentiments held sway. Former Big-Vs, online opinion leaders who espoused internationalist or liberal sentiments have been cowed, modified their stances or simply kept quiet, ceding the terrain to harder nationalist commentators like *Global Times* Editor-in-Chief Hu Xijin (胡锡进). The emergence of "wolf warriors" is a milestone in this trajectory, and a reflection of overlapping popular and official nationalisms.

Zhao Lijian: Case Study of "Wolf Warrior" Communications

Many Chinese diplomatic officials have been described as "wolf warriors," but no one embodies the title more viscerally than Zhao Lijian, the pioneer of the approach. In Martin's (2021: 218) telling, Zhao was so enraged by US condemnation of Chinese policies in Xinjiang that he set up a Twitter account in 2019 to defend China's interests and redress the hypocrisy of the United States own failings in race relations and human rights. Amid a torrent of lies and smears, it was, Zhao said, "time for Chinese diplomats to tell the true picture" (Smith, 2019). Undaunted, or inspired, by caustic early exchanges with US officials, Zhao continued to call out perceived unfair criticism, badmouthing, and untruths about China, gaining a fan base among Chinese nationalists who embraced

this rare unapologetic diplomat unafraid to fight China's corner. It is striking that to date Zhao is the only diplomat with a personal presence on Chinese social media platforms. His personal Weibo account currently boasts close to 2 million followers, despite not posting his own views until 13 March 2020, seven months after he opened the account. In his first original message, Zhao thanked his fans for their support and called on them to "strive for our motherland." The timing of Zhao's adoption of his personal account coincided with his promotion of Covid-19 conspiracy theories on Twitter. While "China has resisted the celebritisation of politics" (Sullivan and Kehoe, 2019: 12), there is evidence to suggest nascent attempts by Chinese media to construct a distinctive "wolf warrior"-type persona around Zhao. Combined with his popularity among cybernationalists, Zhao is on the way to attaining quasi-celebrity status. Within the diplomatic firmament itself, he was initially received guardedly, but his stunning rise up the ranks signalled that his methods enjoyed Xi's seal of approval. We set out three cases below to illustrate the mechanics of Zhao's "wolf warrior diplomacy" in practice.

Peaceful Army – November 2020

A digital artwork depicting an Australian soldier holding a bloody knife against a child's throat, with the caption "Don't be afraid, we are coming to bring you peace," appeared on Zhao's Twitter with the message: "Shocked by murder of Afghan civilians & prisoners by Australian soldiers. We strongly condemn such acts & call for holding them accountable." Zhao's tweet was not triggered by a particular incident or insult involving China's dignity, he was merely seizing the opportunity to comment on allegations that Australian soldiers were responsible for the murder of Afghan civilians between 2009 and 2013. China-Australia relations had been on a downward trajectory for some time, and the chance to spotlight Australia's own failings on human rights and its reputation as a responsible stakeholder, issues on which it had previously critiqued Chinese policies, was fair game. Australian Prime Minister Morrison called the image "repugnant" and Zhao's tweet "utterly shameful," demanding Twitter to remove the post and Beijing to apologise. Both declined. At Hua Chunying's daily press conference, she condemned Morrison for "trying to distract attention" from the allegations. At the heart of the controversy was the implication conveyed by the image that Afghan children had been victims, which Australia denounced as "disinformation" distorting the nature of the alleged crimes. Hua parried the disinformation charge by noting that the image was the creation of Chinese netizens, an artwork rather than photographic fabrication.

The image was the work of Harbin-based artist-illustrator Fu Yu (付昱) who has attracted a substantial following for his nationalist art works under the pseudonym *Wuhe Qilin* (乌合麒麟). In his Weibo bio he describes himself as a "wolf warrior artist" and "Boxer" (义和拳, *Yihe quan*) running a "patriotic business." Fu posted the image to his Weibo on 23 November with the ironic title *The Peaceful Army* (和平之师, *Heping zhishi*). Four days later, Zhao issued a text-only Chinese language Weibo post criticising Australia's alleged war crimes. On 29 November, almost a week after

the original image was posted, Zhao posted the image and his comments in English to Twitter, where it provoked a significant reaction. Within an hour, Fu reposted and praised Zhao's tweet on Weibo. As Australian condemnation rolled in, Fu mocked their response on Weibo, which quickly gained traction. Zhao's participation in the subsequent Weibo storm was muted, mainly restricted to sharing other Weibo commentators' positive reception and support without comment, which he continued to do until 6 December.

Zhao's tweet paved the way for other high-profile public figures, not "wolf warrior diplomats" per our definition, to fan the flames on both Weibo and Twitter. Hu Xijin actively engaged on the issue across both platforms, in Chinese and English. On Twitter, Hu lambasted Australia as a US pawn on the "urban rural fringe of Western civilization," and mockingly encouraged the Morrison administration to seek salvation in Buddhism. He shared Fu's Weibo video messages to Morrison on Twitter, and retweeted Fu's newest artwork, "To Morrison," on 1 December. Hu's *Global Times* published numerous op-eds and mocking cartoons, which it repeatedly disseminated via its Chinese and English social media accounts. Activated by these high-profile interventions, grassroots Internet users in China produced more artworks in the same vein, modified versions of the original repurposed as memes, and countless commentaries and comments, some of which Zhao then shared on both Weibo and Twitter. Zhao's single "wolf warrior" communication act engaged a fertile pool of grassroots nationalist sentiment and initiated a torrent of creativity from which Zhao and state media derived further content to embellish and consolidate support for the initial tweet. Notwithstanding his complete lack of foreign media exposure, or even a foreign social media account, Fu's digital art became notorious in the western world overnight, inserting the strident nationalist voice of an ordinary citizen into China's diplomatic communications with an important bilateral relation.

The Great Nuclear Wave – April 2021

A wave engulfing small fishing boats with Mount Fuji visible in the background is a beloved tableau from Edo painter and print-maker Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa.* Zhao tweeted the famous image on 26 April 2021, with one meaningful modification: The wave had been rendered as nuclear wastewater. He posted it a week after Japanese Prime Minister Suga enjoyed a warm first meeting with President Biden, and two weeks after Japan announced its intention to dump 1 million tonnes of contaminated Fukushima wastewater into the sea. Japan had not directly insulted or threatened China's interests, but the confluence of these events provided an opportunity for creative expression among grassroots nationalists, for whom Japan is an evergreen source of inspiration. One such creator was a Sina blogger known by the screenname A boy who loves studying (一个爱学习的男孩, *yige aixuxi de nahai*). *The Great Nuclear Wave off Kanagawa* was his creation, which he posted to Weibo on 20 April. The post was picked up and shared by *Guancha* (观察), a digital media portal that has become the locus of nationalist sentiment in Chinese cyberspace. Shen Yi and others

also shared the image, and it is reasonable to intuit that Zhao became aware of it via his Weibo account. But it was not until a week later, courtesy of Zhao's tweet, that the digital artwork became the centre of attention in both Chinese cyberspace and China's diplomatic communications with its biggest export partner, Japan. Foreign Minister Motegi condemned Zhao's tweet, calling it "unacceptably low" and demanded the post be deleted. Zhao responded by pinning it to the top of his Twitter account. Like an Internet troll who succeeds in provoking a response, cybernationalists celebrated Motegi's denunciation. Revelling in his unexpected elevation into Chinese diplomacy, A boy who loves studying reposted Motegi's protest on Weibo with the rhetorical: "Am I being low?"

A day after Motegi's intervention, Zhao used the daily MoFA press conference to double down on criticising Japan. He deflected from his tweet and turned the tables, telling the Japanese government to apologise for its actions rather than "picking quarrels" (寻衅, *xunxin*) with him. To a greater degree than the Internet posts alone, Zhao's press conference energised the information environment in China, where the issue spilled over into state media reports and editorials. On Weibo, the official MoFA account, various opinion leaders and media weighed in. Even *People's Daily*, which had remained above the fray in previous cases, used its Weibo to repost the image and condemn Japan. Zhao did not respond on Weibo until 28 April, and again restricted himself to sharing others' endorsements. The end result of this incident was widespread anger among Japanese publics for what they saw as a cherished cultural artefact being used to attack Japan and not merely critique a policy decision made by the Japanese government. As information of Japanese hurt and anger reached Chinese cyberspace, nationalists laughed it off, gleefully interpreting it as further proof that they had gotten under Japanese skins.

The Japanese and Australian cases shared several things in common. Both were initiated by the creativity of grassroots nationalists online subsequently picked up Zhao. Zhao's intervention in turn stimulated a wave of commentary, recycling and reproduction of materials engaged in by key opinion leaders, media organisations, and regular Internet users. This role is reminiscent of the influence of key "information brokers" in an earlier era of online protest on Weibo (Sullivan, 2014: 28). Zhao played an initiator role through his communications online and in his day job, but he then ceded centre stage to other high-profile commentators and the mobilised masses of online users. Both cases played out across different platforms and languages, and elevated ordinary citizens into diplomatic communications with key bilateral relations. In both cases there was a delay between the original images being posted on Weibo and Zhao adopting them as content for his own purposes, during which time it is reasonable to speculate that he was seeking feedback or permission from his superiors.

Xinjiang Cotton – March 2021

The third case involves a consumer boycott of Western clothing brands like H&M, Nike, and Adidas after they issued a statement distancing themselves from Xinjiang-produced

cotton. Citing a report by the Better Cotton Initiative NGO they raised concerns about forced labour in the production of Xinjiang cotton, an accusation linked to systematic repressive policies in the Uygur Autonomous Region. It followed a round of international sanctions imposed on China. Having long denied human rights abuses or repression in Xinjiang, framing its policies as re-education and combating extremism, the Chinese government responded with physical actions to both the sanctions and the business sector. This case is dissimilar from the previous two in that it was a top-down initiative, involving a coordinated response by various state and party organs to mobilise support for a boycott, while exerting strong control over the direction and form of online discourse. Since this incident involved physical world consequences rather than just rhetoric, the messaging was disciplined and managed by state actors with scant room for input from grassroots online culture. Zhao himself was also highly disciplined, and essentially tangential to the unfolding response.

On Weibo *People's Daily* took the lead, refuting criticism of policy in Xinjiang, endorsing Xinjiang cotton and the domestic brands that pledged to use it, and redirecting to the United States' history of using forced and slave labour in cotton production. Hua Chunying emphasised the latter point in her MoFA daily press conference. Still out-front, *People's Daily* digital accounts then began calling for online collective actions. It did so in an innovative way, marshalling online opinion makers and celebrities. One method it used was to produce a digital artwork in the style of an H&M advertisement with the tagline "I support Xinjiang cotton" (我支持新疆棉花, *wo zhichi Xinjiang mianhua*). Easy to share, with clear and resonant messaging, the image demonstrated the venerable party mouthpiece's newly acquired adeptness with digital communications, a trend across state/party media and organs like the Communist Youth League (Guo, 2018). By the end of March, posts under the "I support Xinjiang cotton" hashtag had generated 6 billion views on Weibo. Many celebrities and influencers shared the image and announced their severance of commercial ties to implicated brands. *People's Daily* kept an updated list, which it repurposed as content and as a demonstration of influential individuals' adherence to the official position.

While the campaign represented a cycle of manufactured consent and cohesion, popular grassroots actors were still active, but they did not occupy central positions within the domestic discursive space. Fu Yu produced a digital artwork, *Blood Cotton Initiative*, depicting slave labour in American cotton fields, but it was not widely championed by official channels or nationalist opinion leaders. Zhao shared an artwork on Weibo, but it was a straightforward image of Xinjiang's natural beauty. In fact, Zhao did not engage with grassroots popular discourse in his communications. His response was muted and formulaic, focusing directly on the sanctions and foregrounding sanctioning states' own records on human rights and racial justice. Other high-profile commentators, like Hu Xijin, were similarly circumspect, and when crossing over from Chinese to western social media platforms they reproduced official messaging rather than content from Chinese popular discourse. The leading role of *People's Daily*, the marginalisation of grassroots nationalist expressions, and the muffling of "wolf warriors," suggests that a high-level decision was taken to manage and control the parameters of China's response

directly through official party media, with state actors in a subsidiary role. The complexities and sensitivities of the Xinjiang issue create substantial risk for the central leadership. A strong response demonstrating the cohesion and resolve of the Chinese people was required, and to do so it needed careful direction from the top rather than chaotic emergence from the bottom. Xinjiang is also an issue on which China is on defence, reducing the scope for more attacking tactics. In this case, Zhao was compelled, by instruction or intuition, to act conservatively and follow the lead of other institutional actors. We infer from this experience that "wolf warrior diplomacy" is something that can be reined in, and since actors like Zhao are not freelancers, they are beholden to institutional forces that temper their actions. By contrast, on the occasions when they are let loose, we can intuit that they have received permission or instruction to do so.

Conclusion

As popularly understood, "wolf warrior diplomacy" is a widely used neologism lacking in conceptual clarity and prone to eye-of-the-beholder subjectivities. It has been used inconsistently, describing such a range of actors and behaviours that, beyond journalistic heuristic, its analytical utility is limited. With its pejorative connotations in popular western usage, it is derided and associated with a plethora of negative adjectives, a distinct normative interpretation that again hinders analytical application. In China, the same set of behaviours is reported, received, and often celebrated as an appropriate demonstration of the fighting spirit needed to stand up for China's interests against outside criticism and interference. While there is ambivalence about the term "wolf warrior diplomacy" in China, the wolf warrior of the movie resonates: As an embodiment of the Chinese military and state, Leng Feng's patriotism and altruistic heroism in rescuing imperilled Chinese and African people symbolises a responsible and powerful nation that stands for liberty, equality, and justice around the globe.

Specifying "wolf warrior diplomacy" as a concept and identifying how it is operationalised, we have shown that it can be a useful construct and analytical lens. Situating its emergence in terms of a changing foreign policy posture and response to grassroots cyber-nationalism, "wolf warrior diplomacy" is neither idiosyncratic nor inexplicable. Indeed, it is consistent with the trend in China's presentation, propaganda, and purpose under Xi (Brazys and Dukalskis, 2020). The question of whether "wolf warrior diplomacy" is having the intended effect depends on what the ambition driving it is. Cross-national survey data shows a decline in favourable opinion towards China among western publics (Xie and Jin, 2021) and historically high negative opinion (Silver et al., 2020). These data are inconclusive about the effect of "wolf warrior diplomacy," but we suggest that positively influencing public opinion in the west is not the underlying goal and thus we shouldn't judge it by that standard. Instead, the internal logic of "wolf warrior diplomacy" is serving the twin demands of manifesting a robust foreign policy posture and salving the preferences of popular nationalism. The loud laudatory noises in Chinese cyberspaces that accompany "wolf warrior" communication acts are suggestive of success by that standard. More important to the contribution of this

article, however, is identifying the interaction of official and grassroots actors. This represents a significant development. For one thing, until recently the state had been at pains to keep cyber-nationalism at arm's length from formal diplomacy. The incorporation of cyber-nationalist expressions, in terms of tone and content, into formal diplomatic communications would have appeared outlandish even in the very recent past. Similarly, the notion that grassroots actors have the potential to insert themselves into Chinese diplomacy through the conduit of "wolf warriors" is astonishing.

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