“Wolf Warrior” and China’s digital public diplomacy during the COVID-19 crisis

Zhao Alexandre Huang¹

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Abstract

This forum article aims to question the polysemy of China’s “wolf warrior public diplomacy”. This expression not only explains China’s current efforts in foreign affairs and the transition of its diplomatic communication strategy from a soft, defensive, and convergent tone to a progressively harsh, offensive, and aggressive one but also allows Beijing to manage and employ nationalist public opinion at the domestic level through the creation of a heroic image in order to disseminate a vision of Chinacentrism, even a Chinese chauvinism. “Wolf warrior” contains a serious nationalist sentiment that provides mechanisms and conditions for the Communist Party of China to maintain its dominant power in Chinese society and conquer discursive power on the international stage.

Keywords Public diplomacy · COVID-19 · Communication strategy · “Wolf Warrior” Spirit of struggle

For Manor and Bjola (2021), in a heterogeneous international context, more and more state actors have implemented expansionist foreign policy, gradually “weaponizing” social media platforms to promote political values and reshape international order. Beijing is not an exception. If the China–U.S. trade dispute helped Chinese diplomats understand the importance of using Twitter to carry out policy initiatives and advocacies on the international stage (Huang and Wang 2021), the COVID-19 crisis has created numerous opportunities to expand Beijing’s Twitter communication network. According to a study that we started in 2018 about China’s digital diplomacy efforts, Beijing has opened at least 301 (para-)diplomatic accounts on Twitter to advance its construction of international discursive power online. Furthermore, Chinese diplomats have embraced an offensive even aggressive discourse strategy online (Litvak and Pomožova 2021). The aim of this “wolf warrior” practice is to highlight the superiority of the socialist system and to hint at the feasibility of China’s model as an alternative to the U.S.-led international order during the global health crisis (Nagy and Nguyen 2020). The nature, novelty, and

narrative strategy of “wolf warrior” public diplomacy merit attention.

“Wolf Warrior” public diplomacy: origins

In 2017, the ideological film *Wolf Warrior II* became the first Chinese film ranked in the box office top 100 worldwide. The film is about a former special forces soldier of Chinese descent who protects Chinese citizens intervening during wartime in an unknown African country. The narrative suggests China’s active participation in international affairs and its sense of international responsibility, implying that “China moves beyond isolation from the West, beyond an accommodation with the West, into open hostility toward the West and contestation” (Berry 2018, p. 43). Moreover, the patriotic slogan of the film—“whoever offends the Chinese will be wiped out, no matter how far away”—not only echoes the “Chinese Dream” of the rise and rejuvenation of the great power outlined by Xi (2014) but also fuelled a rising nationalist enthusiasm in China (Shi and Liu 2019).

Therefore, Western media originally proposed the term “wolf warrior diplomacy” in response to Beijing’s radical and aggressive media and diplomatic statements during the COVID-19 pandemic (AFP 2020). Although Chinese officials initially denied this term and regarded it as “another version of the ‘China threat theory’ and a discourse trap

✉ Zhao Alexandre Huang
zhao.huang@parisnanterre.fr

¹ UFR Langues et Cultures Étrangères (LCE), Laboratory DICEN-IDF, Université Paris Nanterre, Paris, France

tailor-made for China” (Hua 2020, paragraph 39), Beijing eventually embraced and publicized the expression “wolf warrior.”

“Wolf Warrior” public diplomacy: institutionalization and legitimatization

Scholars who have analysed China’s public diplomacy practice during the COVID-19 crisis (cf. Julianne and Hanck 2021) have considered “wolf warrior” practice a sign that Xi Jinping’s administration has abandoned Deng Xiaoping’s foreign policy emphasis on forbearance and patience, but Beijing officials (e.g., Lu and Zheng 2021) have argued that “wolf warrior” diplomacy fulfils another aspect of Deng’s diplomatic doctrine: “we shall never seek hegemony over them or serve as their leader. Nevertheless, [...] we have to make our contribution” (1994, p. 350). In other words, another goal lurked behind the belief in forbearance and patience: to “promote the establishment of a new international political and economic order” (Deng 1994, p. 350). Therefore, “wolf warrior” diplomacy under the leadership of Xi Jinping is an inheritance and development of China’s diplomatic institutions, aiming to “break with the basic patterns of the international discourse where the West is strong and we [China] are weak” (The SCIO of the PRC 2017, paragraph 1). Framing the rationalization and legitimization of this practice is a fierce nationalistic rhetoric and sentiment. For example, Hua Chunying, spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, linked “wolf warrior” diplomacy with the maintenance of fairness and justice, emphasizing that “bending our [people’s] knee” is not a “Chinese tradition” (2020, paragraph 30).

In Chinese culture, the wolf is not only a fierce, blood-thirsty, and cruel animal but also represents the indomitable and relentless offensive spirit of individuals engaged in a group struggle (Hawes 2010). Therefore, the core doctrine of “wolf warrior” diplomacy is the “spirit of struggle” emphasized by Xi Jinping (The MFA of the PRC 2020, paragraph 4). This “spirit of struggle” embodies all of the well-organized efforts and actions in the fight against external forces that try to slow China’s development (Julianne and Hanck 2021). It requires actors to “change the mindset of mechanized warfare and establish the ideological concept of information warfare” (Xi 2016, paragraph 22). For Xi, “ideology is about flags, roads, and national political security” (Xinhua 2020, paragraph 5). Besides, China’s leading position in containing the COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity for its “wolf warrior” diplomats to tell “China Stories” about fighting the pandemic. Not only can Chinese diplomats use social media to demonstrate the superiority of the Communist Party of China (CPC)’s system, to belittle the crisis management of other governments, and to counter the narratives of Western media, but they can

also use propagandist discourse to promote the Beijing-led pandemic management model (Jin and Liu 2020).

“Wolf Warrior” public diplomacy: narrative strategy

In addition to emphasizing the “spirit of struggle” in the field of public diplomacy, Xi (2021) gave public diplomacy actors two charges: “effectively carry out international public opinion guidance and public opinion struggles” (paragraph 3) and “pay more attention to the strategy and techniques of public opinion struggles” (paragraph 6). This concept inherited Mao Zedong’s thoughts about protracted war (Huang and Wang 2021). Regarding war not only as a confrontation of coercive forces, Mao considered, to win, actors need to mobilize the mass public through a series of strategic communication activities. The goal is to adhere to the values of target publics and to orientate and coordinate public opinion to “unite with all forces that can be united” (Mao 1956, title). Thus, the protracted war strategy emphasizes two main tactics: “offense within defence and exterior lines within interior lines” (Mao 1967, p. 157).

In “wolf warrior” public diplomacy, such a strategic combination facilitates penetration of opposing lines by mixing offense and defence. Chinese diplomats have largely adopted this “act tough/talk soft” strategy in their Twitter communication practice. For instance, the Twitter account of the Chinese Embassy in France (@AmbassadeChine) has frequently published diametrically opposed opinions on the same subject on the same day (see Fig. 1). This strategy engages a wide audience in a specific topic by playing on the positive or guilt-inducing emotions of necessary solidarity and pejoratively classifying arguments contrary to Beijing’s official narratives. Furthermore, as Huang and Wang (2019, 2021) observed, Chinese diplomats have used Twitter’s forwarding function to construct a complex network of content dissemination with foreign stakeholders to endorse Beijing’s interests in subtle ways. This network-coordinated communication strategy is also an element of “wolf warrior” practice, especially when Chinese diplomats need to express or covertly belittle and satirize the ineffective or inefficient epidemic preventions of other governments. Diplomats have also used this practice to enhance the credibility and legitimacy of China’s socialist regime and its model for fighting the pandemic.

“Wolf Warrior” public diplomacy: a new area of research

The term “wolf warrior diplomacy” is a new form of Chinese-style public diplomacy. Such practice has become a critical tool for the Chinese government in fighting the

Fig. 1 Wolf Warrior narrative strategy of Chinese diplomats (tweets of Chinese Embassy in France on March 3, 2020)

"stigmatization of China by the Western media and government" (Jin and Liu 2020, paragraph 1).

However, the effect has been the opposite. Facing international criticism, Chinese diplomats have relayed many so-called "wolf warrior" messages on Twitter using several unconfirmed or false statements and irrational emotions. For instance, China's foreign ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian made the following statement on March 12, 2020: "It might be U.S. army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan." This phenomenon exposes a contradiction: digitalization has enriched and diversified global communication and made international political communication more challenging and complex (Surowiec and Manor 2021).

Indeed, post-truth and its proponents have arguably caused a decline in rational discourse in international political communication. Political actors have strategically organized and used discourse wrapped in emotion and anti-authoritative political rhetoric on social media to ignore evidence and shape public understanding. As emotion is a "power issue" (Alloing and Pierre 2020, p. 3), a potential instrument of domination of the body by biopolitical actors (Foucault 1994), "wolf warrior" public diplomacy is not only an ethical problem involving the use of fake news in online communication but also a type of propaganda involving the use of social media to spread emotional fragments and filtered messages to psychologically manipulate publics. Therefore, understanding China's digital public diplomacy in the (post-) pandemic age requires detailed interpretation and analysis of changes in CPC diplomatic doctrine, foreign policy, political rhetoric, and external propaganda institutions. To this end, scholars should consider conducting rich qualitative studies

(a) to identify and deconstruct the (para-)public diplomatic networks that China has constructed on international social media platforms, (b) to interpret Beijing's global narrative strategies, methods, and techniques in the (post-)pandemic era, and (c) to clarify the hidden form and relations of power in China's so-called "international public opinion struggle" (Xi 2021, paragraph 6).

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Zhao Alexandre Huang is an Associate Professor in Information and Communication Sciences at the *Université Paris Nanterre*. He works at the DICEN-IDF Laboratory. He studies institutional practices, political and public communication strategies, and the formation of strategic narratives in the practice of public diplomacy. His research interests include public diplomacy, strategic communication, public relations, social media, and China's propaganda and international communication.