Building a Network to "Tell China Stories Well": Chinese Diplomatic Communication Strategies on Twitter

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The phrase "tell China stories well" (*jianghao zhongguo gushi*) is an important guide to China's approach to public diplomacy. Uttered by Chinese president Xi Jinping in 2013, this phrase is an encouragement to use China's own communication channels to promote and testify to official Chinese views and opinions and to strengthen the international influence of China. While social media diplomacy in China is still in its infancy, the Chinese government has launched a few diplomatic Twitter accounts to develop its public diplomacy network and to post stories about China for a global audience. Using a mixed-methods approach (i.e., manual coding, computer-assisted content analysis, network analysis, and discourse analysis), we examined how the Chinese government has mobilized a small number of diplomatic Twitter accounts to build a communication network and pursue the external propaganda goals of the Communist Party of China.

Keywords: China, public diplomacy, Twitter, network communication

　　　　Widespread adoption of digital devices and social media have made contemporary society more global and networked than ever before (Castells, 2010). Individuals are not only able to disseminate messages and interact with others in real time, but they can also participate in various forms of exchange because of the openness of organizations and institutions. Because of their flexibility and convenience, social media platforms such as Twitter have not only sped up organizational and institutional communication but also enhanced connectivity, symmetrical interaction, dialogue, and engagement between organizations and target audiences. The Chinese government has also enjoyed the communication dividends of social media, attempting to mobilize it in the diplomatic arena. According to an official report, China's social media diplomacy is still in its "infancy" (F. Chen, 2015, p. 28). Our research has revealed the same. By monitoring all official websites of Chinese diplomatic departments, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Chinese embassies and consulates in foreign countries, and Chinese missions in international organizations, we find that only fourteen Chinese embassies and consulates abroad had officially opened Twitter accounts and that only three Chinese diplomats were active on Twitter.

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Analyzing the Twitter contents of two Chinese missions to the European Union and Canada, Huang and Arifon (2018) find that the Chinese government has tried to use social media platforms to project the "Chinese dream." All twitter contents sent by Chinese embassies had "timid polyphonic features" (p. 51). "Timid polyphony" is an expression referring to Chinese institutional communication practices under the censorship system of the Communist Party of China (CPC); it is the proactive attempt by Chinese public institutions to include various voices and opinions in news writing and storytelling. The objective is to display, promote, and endorse specific events from diverse perspectives without violating the government's censorship rules. Similar to musical polyphony, in which the melodic lines of multiple voices or instruments interweave to complement the main theme, polyphonic Twitter content creates political harmony to represent China in a favorable way. Chinese public diplomacy practitioners intentionally bring multiple viewpoints and voices into their Twitter content while still respecting the government's censorship rules, to create a tolerant, democratic, and responsible online image of a rising global power. Although Chinese diplomatic missions and diplomats operate only a few Twitter accounts, the retweets, replies, and mentions that redistribute content across a vast network create another form of polyphony that can help China promote a favorable image through storytelling.

In this study, we examined the structure of the Chinese diplomatic Twitter network, the collaborations and interactions that characterize that network, and the communicative strategies used on the featured Twitter accounts. We explored the following questions: How does the Chinese government manage its *waixuan* (external publicity) and public diplomacy? How do Chinese missions, consulates, and diplomats use Twitter to build a communication network for "telling China Stories well and spreading China's Voices" (Xi, 2013, p. 2)?

Public Diplomacy in the Digital Age

Scholars from various fields (e.g., communication, public relations, international relations, and political science) have shaped the complex definition of the hybrid term "public diplomacy," which is generally regarded as direct communication, initiated by a government, to "influence a foreign government, by influencing its citizens" (Frederick, 1993, p. 229). Gilboa (2008) developed this concept by adding nonstate actors and underlining the importance of using various communication channels to alter public opinion in foreign nations. Public relations scholars have conceptualized public diplomacy as a long-term strategic communication effort to build a favorable foreign public perception and national image while achieving mutual cross-cultural and cross-border understanding and relationships (Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2015; Fitzpatrick, 2007; Huang & Arifon, 2018).

Recent findings suggest that mass media-driven public diplomacy, an example of the one-way communication model, is increasingly difficult to use in the social media era (Sevin & Ingenhoff, 2018; J. Wang, 2006; Zaharna, 2007, 2018b). First, "at the core of social media technology" (Bucy, 2004, p. 373) is interactivity, an exchange-based system of understanding that requires a "dynamic perspective" (Henneberg, 2002, p. 95). Interactivity is an "expression of the extent that in a given series of communication exchanges, any third (or later) transmission (or message) is related to the degree to which previous exchanges referred to even earlier transmissions" (Rafaeli, 1988, p. 111). In the social media age, scholars have discussed interactivity in various ways: (a) two-way communication (Rafaeli, 1988; van Dijk,

1999), (b) personalization of information (Kalyanaraman & Sundar, 2006), and (c) technological support for changing the medium, model, source, and message of communication (Sundar, 2009; Zaharna, 2007). Lilleker (2015) indicated that any online click could be regarded as a replication of face-to-face conversation, which has a certain degree of interactivity because of its experiential and perceptual nature (Bucy, 2004). Second, highly interactive online content can heighten individual participation in specific social media topics (Oh & Sundar, 2015). Online interaction can promote more favorable public attitudes toward the information distributed on a network and allows individuals to maneuver across a dynamic terrain, communicating and engaging with others in real time (Pfeil, Arjan, & Zaphiris, 2009). Therefore, interactivity can "positively influence persuasion" (Sundar & Kim, 2005, p. 15). Third, social media offers "reciprocal symbolic interaction" (Fuchs, 2014, p. 54), which shows "the behavior of a plurality of actors insofar as, in its meaningful content, the action of each takes account of that of the others" (Weber, 1978, p. 26).

Accordingly, meaningful, symbolic interaction on social media strengthens social relationships. Social media "manifest a convergence between personal communication (to be shared one-to-one) and public media (to be shared with nobody in particular)" (Meikle & Young, 2011, p. 68). All formal communication activities need to be connective, timely, and interactive in the digital age. As envisioned by Deibert (1997), the evolution of communication technology created and shaped the communication ecosystem and dynamics of international political exchange. The "two-way communication" and interactive models are common targets of public diplomacy research. Gregory (2011) emphasized the necessity of dialogue and interaction between nations, institutions, and people for relationship building. Fitzpatrick (2007), and Fitzpatrick, Fullerton, and Kendrick (2013) placed relationship management at the core of public diplomacy. Kampf, Manor, and Segev (2015) also demonstrated the potential of social media to foster dialogue and relationship building between a country and foreign populations. Zaharna (2018a, 2018b), using a cultural approach, argued that relationalism has become a trend in public diplomacy research and practice. In the social media era, public diplomacy has shifted toward a network-building, development-oriented, and relationship-focused communication model.

China's Xuanchuan and Public Diplomacy

Public diplomacy has been at the heart of the Chinese national promotion strategy since the beginning of Xi Jinping's first presidential term (Q. Zhao & Lei, 2015, p. 3). Replicating the idea of the "American dream," Xi proposed the "Chinese dream" (*Zhongguo Meng*) as a guiding idea for public diplomacy (Shen, 2015; Q. Zhao, 2018). In line with this idea, the Chinese government has looked for innovative ways to broadcast stories about China to the rest of world. As Xi (2003) mentioned at the National Conference on Propaganda and Ideology, China needed to "create new concepts, new categories, and new expressions that could be accepted by both China and foreign countries" (p. 2) to serve the purpose of *duiwai xuanchuan* (or *waixuan*, meaning external propaganda[1]).

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[1] The term *waixuan* was initially translated into English by the Chinese government as "external propaganda." In 2004, being clearly aware of the ideological and totalitarian connotation of the term *waixuan*, Beijing rebranded the term in English—and only in English—to mean "external publicity" (see Rawnsley, 2016; Sun, 2015).

Chinese scholars have disagreed with Western interpretations of *xuanchuan* as a "dirty notion" that underpins the restriction of public information, truncated or misleading distribution of political facts, and even false information communicated by the government. In China, the term "propaganda" has positive connotations, including public communication (Shi & Shi, 2007), public relations (X. Chen & Liu, 2015; Zhou, 2010), and legitimate promotion and advertising (Y. Wang, 2008). External propaganda (*waixuan*) includes "all communication efforts to promote China in a positive way abroad" (Sun, 2015, p. 404). Therefore, Chinese scholars understand public diplomacy as an extension of external propaganda. It is an invisible and ubiquitous global communication practice that shapes China's international image, promotes Chinese culture, and upholds Chinese politics. Public diplomacy achieves two-way communication and interaction with foreign audiences (Zhou, 2018). Chinese politicians have also defined "public diplomacy" in official rhetorical terms. In the journal of *Qiushi*—the official publication for research on CPC ideology and theory—the former foreign minister Yang Jiechi (2011) emphasized that China's public diplomacy must be a long-term, network-oriented approach to relationship building.

At the same time, within the communist system of government in China, all media and foreign-related institutions—"the throat and tongue of the party" (Sun, 2015, pp. 403–404)—must operate in line with CPC propaganda and control. The term "gatekeeping," according to Chinese communication theory, is invariably related to censorship, including the self-censorship of media practitioners. At the top of the censorship pyramid, the Department of Publicity of the Central Committee of the CPC is responsible for public opinion censorship, communication strategies, and external propaganda rhetoric in China.

Social media usage is also subject to the paradigm of propaganda and public opinion censorship. Both the government and the academy in China consider the Internet a "two-edged sword" (Sun, 2015, p. 409). On the one hand, international relations scholars are prudent when addressing the government's use of social media, repeatedly emphasizing government dominance in China's social media strategy for public diplomacy (X. Li & Wang, 2010). In line with this idea of "government dominance," the responsibilities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China are "to release information about important diplomatic activities . . . [and] organize public diplomacy activities" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, n.d., para. 9). On the other hand, Chinese communication scholars are more optimistic about the use of social media, encouraging government institutions, particularly embassies and news agencies, to create Twitter and Facebook accounts to enhance and extend international communication and to engage and interact with foreign audiences (F. Chen, 2015; X. Chen & Liu, 2015).

Building Networks on Twitter

When communication technology (e.g., social media) and public diplomacy coexist in a social environment, the integration of information resources, institutions, and audiences (Hayden, 2013) creates a network that can build relationships and promote interaction. According to Cooke and Lawrence (2005), this network is similar to "institutionalized social relations which entails making a choice to be connected across recognized boundaries" (p. 1). It is a new communication channel in which the production, exchange, and strategic use of information play key roles (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). In other words, network communication builds internal structures of exchange, fosters relationship dynamics among network members, and promotes cocreation of content.

Therefore, investigating the application of network communication to public diplomacy requires attention not only to network structure but also to communication dynamics. Zaharna (2014) regarded a network based on the Internet and social media as an organizational structure in which online connectivity and interactivity result in "collaborative initiatives," including information, narrative, knowledge, and innovation (p. 222). The network-building characteristics of Twitter also result in collaborative initiatives. First, the basic functions of Twitter establish a virtual communication structure. Second, the connectivity and interactivity made possible by Twitter facilitates widespread message dissemination.

Twitter networks consist of users and the connections and exchanges that occur when users retweet, mention, or reply to each other (Cha, Haddadi, Benevenuto, & Gummadi, 2010). Users can retweet to show endorsement, raise the visibility of original tweets, amplify and spread thoughts, start conversations, and validate the views of others (boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010). Mentions, in particular, epitomize a high level of interactivity and engagement, enabling users to converse directly with each other. Although retweets, mentions, and replies establish network relationships using Twitter handles (i.e., @username), the hashtag function facilitates network building using common topics and shared interests. Hashtags (words or phrases preceded by "#") allow publics to index and access larger conversations across the Twitter network.

If the text, images, videos, and URLs featured in tweets construct and circulate meaning, hashtags and mentions facilitate the intertextual connections among tweets. Bonilla and Rosa (2015) argued that hashtags and mentions link "a broad range of tweets on a given topic or disparate topics as part of an intertextual chain" (p. 5). This intertextuality is not only a concrete illustration of the network structure of Twitter; it also contributes to network communication. The interdiscursive capacity of hashtags and the interconnective capacity of mentions can capture "accompanying texts and their indexical meanings as part of a frame" (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015, p. 6). Furthermore, in an intertextual chain, all contents and their associated elements exist within a complex network of interconnected meanings, backgrounds, and messages (Kristeva, 2002). That is to say, the use of discourse, symbols, and images suggest an intention (Bakhtin, 1981; Davis, 2013) to "induce social actions" (Hauser, 2002, p. 3). This idea is consistent with the connective, timely, and interactive features of Twitter communication. Retweets, hashtags, and replies supplement and distribute various pieces of information about a particular topic, continually growing and empowering a cocreated discourse network of senders and receivers.

Although the Twitter platform has successfully connected users worldwide, government institutions still have difficulty building online networks. For instance, scholars have shown that most online followers of politicians are family members, friends, or acquaintances (Baxter & Marcella, 2012; Strauß, Kruikemeier, van der Meulen, & van Noort, 2015). To reach a broader public and build and maintain a diverse network, institutions and politicians must understand how to use Twitter strategically and effectively. Previous findings indicate that social media users can expand their networks using interactive communication with their followers, such as allowing followers to post comments or send private messages, responding to followers' questions, and tapping various hashtags in posts (Baxter & Marcella, 2012; Strauß et al., 2015).

Building on the network communication approach of Zaharna (2007, 2014), we proposed research questions and hypotheses based on three elements: network construction, collaboration and interaction on a network, and network communication strategies. First, network construction refers to facilitating information exchange and flow by linking individuals and organizations (Zaharna, 2007). Therefore, we assessed how various actors performed on the Twitter network built by Chinese diplomatic agencies:

RQ1:   How do Chinese diplomatic missions and diplomats use Twitter to maintain and extend the network?

RQ2a: Who most frequently interacts with Chinese diplomatic Twitter accounts via retweets, replies, and/or mentions?

RQ2b: Which hashtags most frequently appear on the network?

Second, cooperation and interaction on the network builds relationships and increases diversity. The effectiveness of network synergy determines the stability of network construction and the performance of communication strategy on the network (Zaharna, 2014). A network accumulates resources from relationship-building activities. Because Chinese state-owned media outlets have opened Twitter accounts and participated in international communication for years, we expected that Chinese diplomatic departments and officials would have added those outlets to the network.

H1:   Chinese diplomatic departments and officials continue to build a network using Chinese state-owned media on Twitter.

Third, in transnational networks, the combination of local roots and global links can be a source of diversity (Zaharna, 2007). Therefore, we proposed the following hypothesis and research question:

H2:   Chinese diplomatic departments and officials continue to build a network with foreign counterparts on Twitter.

RQ3:   In addition to diplomatic departments and officials, do any other user groups participate in Chinese diplomatic communication on Twitter?

Finally, from the perspective of network strategy, we explored how networks use information to generate credibility, storylines, or master narratives:

RQ4:   How do Chinese diplomatic missions and diplomats effectively create favorable narratives about China on Twitter?

Method

Few scholars have explored Chinese diplomatic Twitter accounts. To determine the number of Twitter accounts held by Chinese missions and diplomats, we monitored the websites of all foreign agencies listed on the "Missions Overseas"[2] page created by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China. First, we searched for links to the Twitter accounts of relevant institutions or diplomats published directly on these official websites. In addition, we searched Twitter using keywords such as "Chinese embassy," "embassy of China," and "Chinese ambassador." We found only fourteen accounts held by institutions and three accounts held by diplomats. However, we excluded four of the institutional accounts for the following reasons: (a) the cultural office of the embassy of China in Chile had not been updated since December 21, 2015; (b) the embassy of China in Switzerland had no new posts since March 3, 2016; and (c) embassies of China in Japan and Turkey had Twitter accounts published in languages we did not understand.[3] Table 1 in the results section lists the profiles of the Chinese diplomatic Twitter accounts we included.

We used the Digital Methods Initiative Twitter Capture, Analysis Toolset (DMI-TCAT), and the Twitter API to collect tweets posted by Chinese diplomatic departments and diplomats. Written in MySQL, PHP, JavaScript, and Python, DMI-TCAT is a set of tools for retrieving and amassing tweets (Borra & Rieder, 2014). Using Twitter's REST API, DMI-TCAT can collect roughly 3,200 of the most recent tweets from each Twitter account. For Twitter accounts with fewer than 3,200 posts, this method collects all existing tweets. We collected a total of 17,372 tweets posted between August 18, 2014, and October 20, 2018 (UTC),[4] and stored this dataset in DMI-TCAT for further statistical and network analysis.

Similar to Meraz and Papacharissi (2013), we used a multimethods approach. First, we used quantitative methods to identify influential users on Twitter. In addition to statistical analysis, we conducted discourse analysis to understand the "systematic links between texts, discourse practices, and sociocultural practices" (Fairclough, as cited in Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013, p. 147). We read the content of the tweets carefully for meaning and rhetorical strategy.

Following methods used in previous studies,[5] we coded the 115 most-mentioned (i.e., ≥ 15 times) Twitter users for user type, country of origin, and location. Using Gephi (Bastian, Heymann, &

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[2] Missions Overseas (n.d.). Retrieved from Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China website at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/

[3] Embassy of China in Japan (@ChnEmbassy_jp) posted in Japanese; Embassy of China in Turkey (@ChinaEmbTurkey) posted in Turkish.

[4] We collected tweets on October 20, 2018, using the Twitter API, which allows users to collect roughly 3,200 of the most recent tweets from each Twitter account. The oldest tweet collected was posted on August 18, 2014. Therefore, our sample spans from August 18, 2014, to October 20, 2018.

[5] Meraz and Papacharissi (2013) coded the top 100 tweeters for their affiliations; Groshek and Tandoc (2017) coded the top 100 users into three user types. In this study, we found that the account of Luo Zhaohui (Chinese Ambassador to India) ranked 102nd and Wei Qiang (Chinese Ambassador to Panama) ranked 107th. We still included these two accounts because we focused on Chinese diplomatic Twitter

Jacomy, 2009), we graphed the connections among relevant Twitter accounts. To discover different content types, we downloaded a random sample of 1,000 Chinese diplomatic tweets for content analysis. The unit of analysis was a single tweet. We used emergent coding so that all tweet topics were set by examination of the data rather than reference to previous findings (Stemler, 2001). During our investigation, we (a) analyzed China's official communication strategies on Twitter, (b) identified various content types in China's official and unofficial diplomatic discourse, and (c) examined how these content types contributed to China's public diplomacy.

To build categories and improve accuracy, we coded 200 tweets together. Then we each coded the same 100 tweets independently to assess intercoder reliability using ReCal2 (Freelon, 2010). Krippendorff's alpha was 0.916, which is above the minimum standard of 0.70. Then, we each coded 350 tweets separately.

Results

Among the 13 Twitter accounts we observed (see Table 1), Chinese missions and diplomats followed three primary patterns of usage:

First, diplomats actively used Twitter to connect with other users. Although the information released was primarily work oriented, it occasionally incorporated personal life, sentiments, and attitudes. For instance, Zhao Lijian, a diplomat at the Chinese Embassy in Pakistan, was the most prolific Chinese diplomat on Twitter. His account was created in May 2010, the earliest of all the Chinese diplomatic accounts. Zhao had sent a total of 40,526 tweets, had 202,294 followers, and was following 215,505 users.

Second, several Chinese missions used Twitter to communicate and interact with foreign audiences and counterparts, promoting China in dynamic ways. Mission of the People's Republic of China to the European Union, for instance, was the most prolific Chinese diplomatic agency on Twitter. Its account was created in September 2013 and had a much higher proportion of original tweets and online interactions (e.g., mentions, retweets, and hashtags) than the other accounts.

Third, several Chinese diplomatic accounts used Twitter only to release information. They did not seek to interact with foreign audiences for fear of distress and uncertainty caused by multiple voices (Arsène, 2012; A. K. Li, 2015). For instance, the account of the Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in Chicago used Twitter only to disseminate information and was not following any other users.

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research. Because Wei Qiang was mentioned 15 times, we set the threshold to 15 mentions, ultimately selecting the top 115 accounts.

Table 1. Profiles of Chinese Diplomatic Twitter Accounts.

User	Username	Total tweets	Followers	Following	Launch Time
Mission of the People's Republic of China to the European Union	@ChinaEUMission	6451	6787	1500	2013.09
Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Canada	@ChinaEmbOttawa	2163	2013	211	2014.06
Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations	@Chinamission2un	683	13552	372	2015.04
Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland	@ChinaMissionGva	908	1692	139	2015.05
Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan	@CathayPak	4647	47791	144	2015.09
Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of the Philippines	@Chinaembmanila	943	2848	113	2017.02
Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in Chicago	@ChinaConsulate	272	84	0	2017.02
Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Slovenia	@ChinaEmSlovenia	459	33	64	2017.12
Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Uganda	@ChineseEmb_Uga	124	328	33	2018.01
Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Zimbabwe	@ChineseZimbabwe	24	12	11	2018.09
Zhao Lijian (diplomat in Pakistan)	@zlj517	40526	202294	215505	2010.05
Wei Qiang (ambassador to Panama)	@weiasecas	580	1142	63	2017.11
Luo Zhaohui (ambassador to India)	@China_Amb_India	1569	3353	155	2017.12

To explore how Chinese missions and diplomats continue to build a communication network on Twitter (RQ1), we examined user interactions and related content connections. User interaction analysis focused on three actions: (a) using @mention in an original tweet, (b) retweeting a tweet, and (c) replying to a tweet. Related content connection analysis focused on the use of hashtags.

First, original tweets revealed the official attitudes and aims of Chinese diplomatic departments. The inclusion of @mention could be considered an active attempt to interact and exchange with others. Among tweets posted by Chinese diplomatic Twitter accounts with a high frequency of original tweets (≥ 60%), 34.67% included @mention. The Mission of the People's Republic of China to the European Union used @mention most frequently; 53% of its tweets had at least one "@" symbol, followed by Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations (49%), Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Canada (44%), and Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland (37%). The consulate general of China in Chicago and the Chinese Embassy in Uganda had a high original content rate (≥ 94%) as well, but they rarely used @mention (≤ 20%), confirming their cautious approach to diplomatic communication on Twitter (i.e., more information release than interaction).

Retweeting was also an important way that Chinese diplomatic services established a communication network. For instance, as the most productive Twitter user in our sample, the diplomat Zhao Lijian posted 68 tweets per day on average ($Max = 224$, $Min = 1$, $Median = 65$, $n = 3,213$), 89.4% of which were retweets. However, the reply function was not frequently used by Chinese diplomatic accounts. Only Ambassador Wei Qiang used this function to interact with his foreign counterparts (13% of his total).

The hashtag allows all posts featuring the same hashtag to be linked. Chinese diplomatic accounts used this method to build a polyphonic information network, fulfilling the "harmonious communication objective" of telling favorable China stories on Twitter (Huang & Arifon, 2018, p. 43). All Chinese diplomatic accounts used hashtags in their tweets. Our findings show that the mission of China to the European Union had the highest proportion of tweets with at least one hashtag ($n = 2,680$; 83%), followed by Chinese Embassy in Pakistan ($n = 1206$; 38%) and Zhao Lijian ($n = 1079$; 34%).

To address RQ2a and RQ2b, we identified (a) who frequently interacted with Chinese diplomatic accounts and (b) which hashtags were most frequent. Our findings indicate that Chinese media held dominant positions on the Chinese diplomatic Twitter network. Chinese diplomats often forwarded news stories from the Twitter accounts of Chinese mainstream media outlets. Xinhua News Agency was the most-mentioned account (2,034 times), followed by *People's Daily* (1,253 times), and China Global Television Network ([CGTN], 793 times). Diplomat Zhao Lijian was not only a prolific user but was also frequently mentioned by others or himself (i.e., self-retweet, 751 times). In addition, the CPEC Portal, a Twitter account developed by the Pakistan-China Institute, a Pakistan-based, independent, nonpartisan research think tank, also received 430 mentions. The graph generated by Gephi displays a clear network (see Figure 1). Network analysis uses nodes and edges to illustrate actors and their relationships. In a Twitter network graph, each node represents a Twitter user. Each link (i.e., edge) indicates that one user mentioned another.

Figure 1 illustrates the essential characteristics of tweets posted by Chinese diplomatic officials. Although various embassies, consulates, and diplomats managed these accounts, most of the released information (e.g., Chinese political, economic, and social news) were initially published by China state-owned media outlets, such as Xinhua, *People's Daily*, and CGTN. Such behavior is a result of China's censorship system and institutional self-censorship. Xi Jinping has insisted that "all the work of the news media must reflect the party's will, reflect the party's ideas, safeguard the party's central authority, safeguard the party's unity, and love the party, protect the party, and serve the party" (B. Li & Huo, 2016, para. 15). Insofar as Xi's requirements for "adhering to the correct direction of public opinion" and "focusing on making positive publicity" (B. Li & Huo, 2016, para. 16) imply that Chinese media must review, verify, and filter all news, diplomatic accounts can safely forward tweets posted by Chinese media outlets without violating the censorship rules. At the same time, this phenomenon shows that the invisible hand of censorship extends to the Twitter communication management of Chinese agencies abroad.
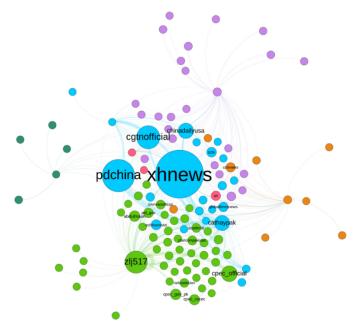

Figure 1. Top 115 most-mentioned users.
Note. Nodes = 115; Edges = 307; Spatialization: Fruchterman Reingold Layout; Size: Number of mentions; Color: Modularity.

RQ2b addressed the frequency of hashtags on the Chinese diplomatic Twitter network. As official representatives and spokespeople of the central Chinese government, Chinese diplomatic account managers used #China a total of 2,047 times in the tweets we analyzed (see Table 2). They added #China to enhance exposure to labels and topics related to their homeland on Twitter and to attract the attention of audiences interested in Chinese issues. In addition, the hashtag #CPEC appeared frequently in tweets posted by users located in Pakistan, including government departments, media, nonstate organizations, the Chinese Embassy in Pakistan, Chinese diplomats, and people working in Pakistan. CPEC is the acronym for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a significant economic and social cooperative between China and Pakistan and

an example of the "all-weather strategic partnership"[6] between the two countries. Notably, only two of the thirteen Chinese diplomatic accounts used #CPEC: diplomat Zhao Lijian and the Chinese Embassy in Pakistan. On the one hand, this finding suggests China's massive communication efforts to promote its close relationship with Pakistan and the CPEC initiative. On the other hand, it indicates that #CPEC has a regional characteristic, compared with widely used hashtags such as #China, #BeltandRoad, and #Xijinping. For instance, #BeltandRoad was posted by 11 Chinese diplomatic users on Twitter. Because the Belt and Road Initiative is an important geopolitical and economic development strategy of China, #BeltandRoad frequently appeared on Chinese diplomatic tweets to promote China's interest in cooperation and peaceful expansion. The fourth most frequently mentioned hashtag was #XiJinping, which refers to the name of the Chinese president. Twelve of the Chinese diplomatic accounts mentioned this hashtag when promoting Chinese policies and Xi's activities, speeches, and appearances.

Table 2. Top 20 Hashtags.

Rank	Hashtag	Frequency	Distinct accounts use the hashtag
1	China	2047	11
2	CPEC	584	2
3	BeltandRoad	482	11
4	XiJinping	264	12*
5	Pakistan	214	5
6	ChinaEU	203	1
7	Chinese	153	9
8	G20	108	6
9	EU	105	5
10	SouthChinaSea	98	5
11	CairoCPECsummit	95	1
12	ECTY2018	92	6
13	India	92	1
14	trade	91	9
15	Beijing	90	10
16	EUChina	86	1
17	TwoSessions	82	8
18	Panda	82	8
19	UNSC	77	4
20	ChineseNewYear	75	6

Note. * indicates the highest value in the column.

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[6] In the Chinese diplomatic partnership system, among 24 different types, the "all-weather strategic partnership" is the highest level and most-important partnership type after the "comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination" (Q. Li, 2019, p. 6).

To test the two hypotheses and address RQ3 (i.e., collaboration and interaction on the network), we selected the 115 most mentioned users (≥ 15 times) to code manually. We identified 12 user types in our dataset: (a) Chinese counterparts, including China's administrative departments and diplomatic services; (b) Chinese media; (c) foreign counterparts, including foreign government departments, foreign embassies and diplomats, international political representatives, and intergovernmental organizations; (d) foreign media; (e) Chinese organizations (e.g., companies, nongovernmental organizations); (f) foreign organizations; (g) Chinese experts; (h) foreign experts; (i) Chinese individual users; (j) foreign individual users; (k) social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, YouTube, Facebook); and (l) other (i.e., unidentified users). We also coded the country of origin and the location of the account owner. For instance, the user @CathayPak was a Chinese counterpart (*Type*) from China (*Country*) living in Pakistan (*Location*). See Table 3.

Table 3. Most Frequently Mentioned Users.

Rank	Username	Frequency	Type	Country	Location
1	XHNews	2034	Chinese media	China	China
2	PDChina	1253	Chinese media	China	China
3	CGTNOfficial	793	Chinese media	China	China
4	zlj517	751	Chinese counterparts	China	Pakistan
5	CPEC_Official	430	Foreign counterparts	Pakistan	Pakistan
6	ChinaDailyUSA	407	Chinese media	China	United States
7	CathayPak	400	Chinese counterparts	China	Pakistan
8	AbdulMaan	175	Foreign individual users	Pakistan	Pakistan
9	CPEC_gov_pk	174	Foreign counterparts	Pakistan	Pakistan
10	CPEC_CSCEC	157	Chinese experts	China	Pakistan
11	Echinanews	147	Chinese media	China	China
12	CCTV	135	Chinese media	China	China
13	pid_gov	127	Foreign counterparts	Pakistan	Pakistan
14	globaltimesnews	123	Chinese media	China	China
15	UN	115	Foreign counterparts	International	United States
16	cctvnews	111	Chinese media	China	China
17	PlanComPakistan	104	Foreign counterparts	Pakistan	Pakistan
18	PTVNewsOfficial	95	Foreign media	Pakistan	Pakistan
19	DostiFM98	95	Foreign media	Pakistan	Pakistan
20	RadioPakistan	87	Foreign media	Pakistan	Pakistan

We then calculated the number of times each user type was mentioned (see Table 4). For instance, the "Chinese media" category contained fifteen Chinese media accounts (e.g. Xinhua News Agency [2,034 mentions], *People's Daily* [1,253 mentions]). The total number of mentions for users in the category "Chinese media" was 5,327.

Table 4. Categories of Most Frequently Mentioned Users.

Type	Total mentions	Distinct accounts in this type
Chinese media	5327	15
Foreign counterparts	2178	47*
Chinese counterparts	1434	10
Foreign media	608	12
Foreign individual users	248	4
Foreign organizations	220	8
Chinese experts	181	2
Other	159	7
Foreign experts	144	4
Chinese organizations	90	4
Chinese individual users	44	1
Social media platforms	43	1

Note. * indicates the highest value in the column.

The graph in Figure 2 reflects the influence levels of different user types on the network. Based on the results, both H1 and H2 were supported. On the one hand, Chinese diplomatic accounts mentioned 47 distinct foreign counterparts, indicating the ambition of Chinese diplomatic officials to build a broad network of interaction with their foreign counterparts. On the other hand, these foreign counterparts were mentioned less frequently than Chinese media (2,178 vs. 5,327), confirming again that Chinese media outlets were the leading sources of information for Chinese diplomatic accounts.
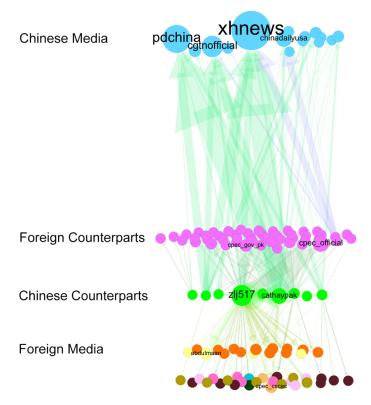
Figure 2. Ranking of user types by mentions.
Note. Spatialization: Network Splitter 3D Layout; Size: Number of mentions; Color: Type.

To address RQ4 (i.e., how Chinese diplomatic agencies used Twitter to tell China stories), we conducted a content analysis. Using the emergent coding approach, we coded 1,000 random tweets into seven categories. In this dataset, 96 tweets were "other," and 19 tweets were irrelevant (see Table 5).

Table 5. Topics of Chinese Diplomatic Tweets.

Topic	Frequency	Percent
China–foreign economic & social cooperation	251	25.1%
Political relationships	205	20.5%
Promotion of Chinese culture and society	162	16.2%
China's development achievement	112	11.2%
Other	96	9.6%
Explication of China's domestic policy	56	5.6%
Global responsibility	56	5.6%
Press-release of Xi's activities	43	4.3%
Irrelevant	19	1.9%
Total	1000	100%

In the China stories posted by Chinese diplomatic officials, the most frequent topic was China foreign economic and social cooperation (25% of the tweets). They tweeted or retweeted about how China cooperated with foreign countries to pursue economic or social development. Using these tweets, Chinese diplomatic officials promoted China as an advocate for free trade and international cooperation, demonstrating the openness and sincerity of China to foreign relations. The second most frequent topic was political relationships, which includes bilateral or multilateral relations, diplomatic ties, and military cooperation. Tweets in this category were more politically oriented and carried a more official tone. Promotion of Chinese culture and society was another important topic of China stories designed to increase national attractiveness: tourism scenery, traditional Chinese culture, and the daily lives of Chinese people. Close behind was China's development achievement, a topic that also showed the world an attractive and thriving China.

Our content analysis (see Figure 3) confirmed that intertextuality played a crucial role in the strategy and implementation of Chinese diplomatic network communication on Twitter. For instance, the Mission of the People's Republic of China to the European Union published numerous tweets on economic issues. One of its tweets (June 4, 2018) underlined China's motivation to encourage multilateralism and free trade with Germany. In the image published with the tweet, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his German counterpart Heiko Maas are shaking hands and smiling at the camera. To the left of Heiko Maas is the national emblem of Germany. In the background are the national flag of China and the flag of the European Union. The handshake in the photo echoes the emoji showing the Chinese flag and the German flag shaking hands in the text. This tweet emphasized the cooperative relationship between China and Germany and between China and the EU. Another tweet (July 23, 2018) contains an image of Donald Tusk, the president of the European Council. In this tweet, a photo of Tusk and a short part of a speech are combined in an image. The photo shows a stern gaze; to the left are the quoted words. Combined with the information in the tweet, Tusk's speech highlighted and endorsed China's pivotal role in the defense of multilateralism. Another tweet (July 28, 2018) addresses the same topic in more detail. The Chinese ambassador to the EU explains China's plans for promoting and defending free trade and multilateralism. The picture attached to this tweet linked to an article explaining the official Chinese positions. In the photo, sitting on either side EU and Chinese flags, representatives are under negotiation, further emphasizing the close relationship between the EU and China in multilateral cooperation.

Figure 3. Tweets about China–foreign economic and social cooperation.

By analyzing this set of tweets, we found that Chinese diplomatic agencies told China stories and conveyed the Chinese political views in a pluralistic way. First, they used the @mention function to interact with foreign counterparts on Twitter. They also used hashtags purposefully. Although related information was released at different times, tweets with the same theme are organically interconnected to form an online narrative. For example, both #China and #multilateralism were used twice in the three tweets in Figure 3.

Second, the tweets featured different types of discourse. Tweeters quoted news releases to show the favorable and active attitude of China toward global cooperation or directly cited the words of foreign political leaders to endorse China's contributions. The tweets also contained descriptions of China's solutions, often featuring emojis that made the content more vivid and dynamic. In addition, Chinese diplomatic agencies liberally used pictures that often contained implicit meanings to reinforce the content and increase dissemination.

Discussion

We examined network communication on Twitter to characterize public diplomacy efforts of the Chinese government, which runs a few diplomatic Twitter accounts to build a communication network and promote a favorable national image. Some accounts, such as Zhao Lijian and the Mission of China to the European Union, used Twitter actively. Diplomat Zhao Lijian, in particular, exercised less restraint, discretion, and caution than might typically be expected from Chinese officials who speak in public or post on social media.

In addition, we found that China's public diplomacy was impacted by CPC propaganda and censorship. Although Chinese missions and diplomats have interacted with various types of stakeholders online (e.g., domestic and foreign), information distributed by Chinese media outlets has become a major source of content because those outlets, as mouthpieces of their government, reflect the ideas of CPC and the Chinese government. Indeed, ideology and propaganda work comprise "an extremely important mission for the CPC" (Xi, 2013, para. 3). These findings confirm that Chinese public diplomacy practices are led by the CPC under the "Whole-Nation System," in which "the power structure is undeniably centralized to a large extent" (K. Zhao, 2019, p. 172). In fact, the Chinese government has legalized this system. According to China's latest constitutional amendment, "the leadership of the Communist Party of China is the defining feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Constitution of the People's Republic of China, 2018, Chapter I, Article 1). Moreover, under the order of Xi Jinping, China needs to uphold "the Party leadership over all work" (Xi, 2017, p. 17). In this way, the highly centralized management system is a distinct feature of public diplomacy in China.

Moreover, network building in the virtual world reflects international relationships in the real world. Although Chinese diplomats have attempted to reach a broad spectrum of foreign counterparts on Twitter, the existing relationship of "old friend" remains primary. Eleven of the top-mentioned accounts were located in Pakistan, including the Chinese embassy, Chinese diplomats, Chinese experts, Pakistani counterparts, media outlets, and individual users. This finding is consistent with the "all-weather strategic partnership" between China and Pakistan, the highest diplomatic relationship level defined by the Chinese government.

We concluded that China's effort to build a robust Twitter network centers around its closest friends and then expands outward to include other partners.

Furthermore, our content analysis confirmed that "timid polyphony" was a common practice among Chinese diplomatic Twitter users. While CPC leadership is reflected in the political and ideological direction of public diplomacy (Xi, 2013, 2018), public diplomacy practitioners have relative freedom to choose strategies and content for daily communication, permitting wide use of timid polyphony on Twitter. Timid polyphony is the use of diverse voices and perspectives to demonstrate and endorse government initiatives. Using hashtags, mentions, and time-phased information releases, Chinese diplomats could devote single tweets to particular aspects of China stories but link tweets across the network to form a narrative.

Despite its contributions, our study has noteworthy limitations that open pathways to future research. First, because of language barriers, we did not analyze two Twitter accounts, one in Japanese and another in Turkish. Therefore, our sample did not cover the entire Twitter network built by Chinese diplomats. Considering the limited number of Chinese diplomatic accounts on Twitter, scholars should consider including all existing accounts in future studies. Because the relationships between China and Japan tend to be dramatic and vital, we would expect to find valuable and interesting phenomena when looking through tweets posted by the Embassy of China in Japan.

Second, to ensure data integrity, our dataset derived from monitoring the Twitter accounts of all Chinese diplomatic missions and diplomats. However, potential usage gaps in different Twitter accounts, such as the extremely active diplomat Zhao Lijian, could have led to deviations in our dataset. For instance, Zhao Lijian's high level of activity on Twitter was positively related to a high frequency of hashtags (e.g., #CPEC) and mentions (e.g., @CathayPak) related to his work. On the one hand, such data deviation can produce skewed effects. On the other hand, a skewed distribution of user activities is common on Twitter because of super prolific users. Therefore, we could not remove such prolific users from our dataset. In future studies, scholars should consider using relative values to measure user influence on subnetworks in specific areas (e.g. South Asia, Europe, North America) or in the different partnership classes defined by the Chinese government (e.g., "comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination" and "all-weather strategic partnership").

Finally, we only collected tweets posted on Chinese diplomatic accounts. In this first step of a long-term research agenda, we focused on how these accounts actively built a communication network. In future studies, we plan to investigate interactions and dialogues between Chinese diplomatic accounts and their audiences on Twitter to draw a global picture of Chinese Twitter communication in service of public diplomacy.

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