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Wolf Warrior Diplomacy on Twitter: The Discursive Battle over Xinjiang

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Wolf Warrior Diplomacy on Twitter:

The Discursive Battle over Xinjiang



Universiteit Leiden

Thesis | MA International Relations - Culture and Politics

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1. Introduction

At the start of 2019, Zhao Lijian was a quotidian diplomat working in the Chinese embassy of Pakistan in Islamabad. Thanks to his Twitter fingers, this soon changed, however. On 13 July 2019, enraged by US criticism of human rights abuses against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang province, Zhao took to his private Twitter account to hit back at the US for its own failing domestic policies in a series of posts (Taylor, 2019). Though it has since been deleted, one post, in which Zhao refers to racial segregation in Washington DC, was picked up by Susan Rice, Obama's former national security advisor, who called him out for being ignorant and a "racist disgrace" (Rice, 2019). It was the first of many incidents in which Zhao's inflammatory remarks on Twitter would gain him widespread international media attention (Sullivan & Wang, 2022). Zhao continued to voice his indignation with Western criticism of China in the following months, drawing a large audience in the process. Despite his undiplomatic behavior on the platform, Zhao was not reprimanded. In fact, his combative and provocative rhetoric on Twitter was rewarded, and he was promoted from the embassy in Pakistan to spokesperson of the Chinese foreign ministry that same year (Sullivan & Wang, 2022). His Twitter account now has over two million followers.

Zhao Lijian is not an anomaly. Multiple Chinese diplomats have started to use jingoistic, confrontational and assertive rhetoric in their public communication. This new form of public diplomacy, named Wolf Warrior Diplomacy after a Chinese patriotic war movie, has been on the rise ever since Xi Jinping came to power in 2013 and it reflects his call for diplomats to adopt a "fighting spirit" in defense of China (Dai & Luqiu, 2022, p. 261). This fighting spirit is mainly used in response to Western criticism, especially when it touches upon Chinese core interests which involve Chinese sovereignty, territory and security, and has complicated relations between Western countries and China (Sullivan & Wang, 2022). The extent to which actors adopt a combative approach to public diplomacy differs, however, with a few actors within the foreign ministry and some high ranking ambassadors, such as China's ambassador to France, Lu Shaye, among the most assertive (Jerden et al., 2021).

Though visible wherever public diplomacy is conducted, Wolf Warrior Diplomacy is especially prominent on the social media platform Twitter. Over the past decade, the platform has become increasingly popular with foreign ministries and diplomats across the world and has challenged traditional practices that have shaped the way diplomacy is conducted (Duncombe, 2018; Bjola et al., 2019). Twitter has also increasingly gained traction as a communication tool within the Chinese foreign ministry, especially since Zhao's outbursts in

2019 saw him rise to international notoriety. Not only do the majority of embassies and consulates now have official Twitter accounts, but multiple actors in the foreign ministry have followed in Zhao's footsteps and set up their own personal Twitter accounts.¹ Zhao Lijian and the current spokesperson and Director-General of Communication in the Chinese foreign ministry, Hua Chunying, have the most popular Twitter accounts, each boasting over 2 million followers. While there is a growing body of literature on China's assertive public diplomacy, no research has focused on Chinese core interests involving sovereignty, territory and security, with scholarly work mainly centered on discourses around the Covid-19 pandemic and the US China-Trade War (Jerden et al., 2021; Huang & Wang, 2021; Alden & Chan, 2021; Shumba, 2021). In addition, only a few studies have focused on Chinese public diplomacy on Twitter (Huang & Wang, 2019; Huang & Wang, 2021; Alden & Chan, 2021).

In this thesis, I focus on how Zhao Lijian and Hua Chunying have used their influential Twitter accounts to communicate on one of the most contentious issues in international discourse involving China: human rights issues surrounding ethnic minorities, especially Uyghurs, in Xinjiang province. Through this research, I aim to provide insight into the strategies employed by the Chinese government and its foreign ministry to shape public perception on an issue that it is highly sensitive and defensive about. My thesis also provides a better understanding of how Wolf Warrior Diplomacy is conducted. Despite a reshuffle in the Chinese foreign ministry at the beginning of 2023 which saw Zhao reassigned to a different department and Qin Gang promoted as foreign minister, Wolf Warrior rhetoric is poised to continue to remain prevalent, as Xi remains in power and Western democracies become increasingly hostile towards China (Young, 2022). A better understanding of what factors, goals and strategies lie behind China's new diplomacy is therefore vital for future diplomatic relations with the world's second largest power. Furthermore, a growing body of literature shows that Wolf Warrior Diplomacy is a contingent form of public diplomacy highly dependent on individual actors (Jerden et al. 2021; Shumba, 2021; Chang-Liao, 2022). By focusing on two individual Wolf Warriors, I build on previous research looking at how individual actors are shaping contemporary Chinese public diplomacy. Lastly, my thesis goes beyond the scope of Chinese diplomacy. By looking at how two of the most followed diplomatic actors use the social media platform, I demonstrate how Twitter, through its visual nature, immediacy, lack of formality, and focus on the individual diplomat, is fundamentally reshaping how public

¹ Prominent examples include Zhang Heqing (@zhang_heqing), Cultural Counsellor at the Chinese embassy in Pakistan, and Zhang Meifang (@CGMeifangZhang), Consulate General of Belfast.

diplomacy is conducted. My thesis is guided by the following research question: *How do the Wolf Warrior Diplomats Hua Chunying and Zhao Lijian communicate on the Chinese core interests of Xinjiang on Twitter?*

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy

The Chinese foreign ministry has undergone many changes since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. After turbulent political times during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, the economic development since Deng Xiaoping's reform era, which has seen China emerge as an influential player on the world stage, has had the greatest impact on the Chinese foreign ministry (Martin, 2021). Under Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, Chinese diplomacy evolved, and political and economic ties were fostered with nations throughout the world. These decades established the basis that has seen China develop diplomatic ties with 181 countries as of 2022. Post-Mao China also sought a greater involvement in the UN and other international organizations and partnerships, as can be seen by China joining the WTO in 200 and the establishment of its own multilateral organizations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Hempson-Jones, 2005). Patience and forbearance guided Chinese foreign policy during that time and diplomatic behavior was of a more low-profile (Martin, 2021, p. 197). Thanks to its international engagement and its rapid economic growth in the age of globalization, the turn of the century saw China transition into a leading global power overtaking Japan as the second largest economy in the world in 2010. No one has been more eager to see this new power reflected in its foreign policy than Xi Jinping, who became China's president in 2013.

Xi's tenure has led to a departure from the low-profile diplomatic tone that guided foreign policy under Deng, Jiang and Hu (Martin 2021, p. 197). Under Xi's guidance, the foreign ministry has readopted the militaristic tone that was so prominent during the Mao years, with the likes of Wang Yi, Chinese foreign minister from 2013-2022, referring to the diplomatic service as the 'diplomatic front' (Martin, 2021, p. 198). Discipline, obedience and unquestioned loyalty - though always prominent in the Chinese foreign service - are especially valued today (Chang-Liao, 2022). Since coming into power, Xi has been adamant about the need for Chinese diplomats to "adopt a fighting spirit in defense of China," with the ultimate goal of achieving "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" through national strength (Dai

& Luqiu, 2021, p. 255; Sullivan & Wang, 2022, p. 2). Xi has also shown a greater aversion towards the United States and its dominant role in the current liberal international order and his foreign ministry often warns of the perils of US hegemony (Chinese MFA, 2023).

Early signs of a new diplomatic approach already started to emerge in the early years of Xi's rule. In December 2013, Wang Yi and Julie Bishop, Australia's foreign minister, sat down for a meeting that would set the tone for the coming years of diplomacy. Going against diplomatic conventions, Wang opened the meeting by publicly condemning Australia's involvement in an air defense identification zone in the East China Sea in a moment that is typically reserved for pleasantries and bland statements about shared interests (Martin, 2021, p. 193-194). A few years later in 2016, Wang went viral among Chinese nationalists for accusing a Canadian journalist of asking an unacceptable question "full of arrogance and prejudice against China" (Martin, 2021, p. 204). But it wasn't only Wang who adopted this open assertiveness. During his tenure as Canadian ambassador from 2017-2019, Lu Shaye repeatedly attacked Canadian media for its negative portrayal of China and has remained a prominent figure in the news during his ambassadorship in France (Lau, 2022). The former Chinese ambassador to Sweden (2017-2021), Gui Congyou, also became infamous for making so many provocative remarks that he was summoned by Sweden's foreign ministry more than forty times, with three Swedish political parties calling for him to be expelled (The Economist, 2020). And while diplomatic actors like Gui, Lu and Wang might have been anomalies in the past, this is no longer the case.

2.2 Defining Wolf Warrior Diplomacy

As China's new controversial, confrontative, and assertive style of diplomacy has become more prominent, so has its coverage in Western media. In 2018 it even received its own name: Wolf Warrior Diplomacy. The term comes from the patriotic Chinese action movie "Wolf Warrior 2" about a Chinese special forces operative saving African and Chinese citizens from European mercenaries. The movie is one of China's most successful blockbusters ever, making over 850\$ million in box office revenue, and was marketed with the tagline "Anyone who offends China, no matter how remote, must be exterminated" (Nordine, 2018). According to a recent study, around 20% of media articles mentioning Chinese diplomacy in 2020 used the term Wolf Warrior Diplomacy (Dai & Luqiu, 2021). And the term has remained prevalent

in media discourse up until the spring of 2023.² Scholarly attention to the topic has also grown in recent years, especially since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic when Chinese diplomatic rhetoric became even more assertive and controversial (Litvak & Pomozova, 2021; Dai & Luqiu, 2021).

Wolf Warrior Diplomacy is generally defined as a rhetorically assertive, aggressive and combative style of diplomatic approach that makes China's voice heard and defends the country's interests abroad (Jerden et al., 2021; Dai & Luqiu, 2021). Jonathan Sullivan and Wang Weixiang (2022, p. 3-4) offer the most comprehensive definition of the term to date. In their paper, they first provide a minimalist definition restricting Wolf Warrior Diplomacy to discursive and rhetorical communication acts, rather than physical actions, carried out by official actors. These actors in turn are restricted to actors operating in Chinese foreign policy with the ability to engage in communication acts that can reach a broad audience. This includes spokespeople and other actors within the Chinese foreign ministry, apart from just conventional diplomats and ambassadors. Sullivan and Wang (2022) elaborate even further on their definition, stating that Wolf Warrior communication acts are provoked by two stimuli: criticism of Chinese positions, policy or behaviors, and perceived interferences in China's internal affairs, especially issues touching on core interests relating to sovereignty, territory, security, and how it governs within its jurisdiction (Sullivan & Wang, 2022, p. 4). Defending core interests is an integral part of modern Chinese foreign policy and is a key component of Xi Jinping's call for the Chinese foreign ministry to develop a "fighting spirit" (Dai & Luqiu, 2021, p. 155). Core interest areas include Taiwan and the One-China Policy, Hong Kong, the South China Sea disputes, and human rights issues involving the ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. These are topics that Western politicians and media have been especially vocal about in their engagement with China, which is why research has found that Wolf Warrior rhetoric is typically only used vis-a-vis Western-style liberal democracies (Shumba, 2021). As it is categorized as a communication action, Wolf Warrior Diplomacy also falls into the realm of public diplomacy, which Joseph Nye (2008) defines as an instrument that governments use to communicate with and attract the publics of other countries.

However, the term's suitability as an analytical term has been questioned, as it can still be difficult to pinpoint which acts can be defined as Wolf Warrior Diplomacy and which cannot. In their study on Chinese public diplomacy in Europe during Covid-19, Jerden et al. (2021) advocate for caution when using Wolf Warrior Diplomacy as an analytical term, as they

² Based on a Google News Search of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy in the past year

are highly skeptical of its ambiguity, its reliance on anecdotal examples, and its negative connotation. For the purpose of my thesis, however, in which I focus on two individual actors in the foreign ministry, it is less important to provide an exact definition of what constitutes an act that can be defined as Wolf Warrior Diplomacy, but rather *who* can be considered a Wolf Warrior Diplomat. Based on the definitions offered by previous scholars working on the topic, these are actors operating in Chinese foreign policy and the diplomatic apparatus who repeatedly use assertive, aggressive and combative rhetoric to make China's voice heard and defend the country's core interests abroad. In line with this definition, the two spokespeople for the Chinese foreign ministry, Zhao Lijian and Hua Chunying, who are the focal point of my analysis, can be confidently regarded as Wolf Warriors.

2.3 A Form of Public Diplomacy Contingent on the Individual

Though an increasingly assertive rhetoric can generally be found in most diplomatic speeches held by Chinese ambassadors over the past ten years according to Litvak and Pomozova (2021), it is of paramount importance to note that the levels of assertiveness are highly contingent on individual actors and geographic location. Jerden et al. (2021), who compared Chinese public diplomacy across ten countries in the EU, found that Chinese diplomats only took a confrontational approach in a few EU countries, such as Germany, France and Sweden, and were less assertive in countries such as Italy, Spain, and Poland, despite the fact that all of these countries take a similar stance towards China. The importance of geography was also highlighted in a study on Chinese diplomacy in Africa, which found that when diplomats in Africa used Wolf Warrior rhetoric it was rarely directed at the African countries they were posted in. Instead, they attempted to influence narratives and to hit back at criticism from the West, especially the United States (Shumba, 2021). Furthermore, only a few diplomats in the Chinese diplomatic apparatus repeatedly find themselves at the center of media attention and are labeled Wolf Warriors (Lau, 2022). Other ambassadors rarely find themselves in the spotlight and not everyone is comfortable with the foreign ministry's new tone (Martin, 2021, p. 205). All of these findings point towards the fact that Wolf Warrior Diplomacy is not a systematic form of diplomacy, orchestrated on the institutional level and followed by all actors in the Chinese foreign ministry in the same manner, but a form of diplomacy highly contingent upon individual actors. A major question thereby arises: Considering the emphasis on discipline and obedience in the Chinese foreign ministry, how have a few individual actors risen to prominence by adopting their own style of diplomacy often differing in terms of

assertiveness and hostility? I have identified three key factors that can help explain this phenomenon: 1) The Chinese foreign ministry and fealty to Xi Jinping, 2) domestic nationalism, and 3) personal motivations.

According to Linda Jakobsen and Ryan Manuel (2016), the Chinese foreign ministry does not function as a fully autonomous institution. The reason for this is that other higher ranking ministries, such as the Ministry of Defence or the National Development and Reform Commission, regularly override its decisions even in foreign policy related issues. This can result in inconsistent actions by the foreign ministry and miscommunication (Martin, p. 191-192). Xi Jinping's rise to power has resulted in an even greater loss of autonomy for the Chinese MFA (Chang-Liao, 2022). Unlike his predecessors, foreign policy plays much more of a central role in his political agenda, as can be seen by the rapid expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative. His hands-on approach has led to the centralization of foreign policy decision-making with Xi as the main coordinator (Chang-Liao, 2022). Even outside of foreign policy, Xi has developed a political climate and structure in a manner that has not been seen since Mao. In this climate, loyalty to the party equates to loyalty to Xi (Chang-Liao, 2022). Therefore, political loyalty, which has long been a prerequisite for career advancement in the foreign ministry, has received greater importance due to the shift from collective leadership to personalist rule under Xi. The vague guidelines of adopting a fighting spirit to defend China and rejuvenating the Chinese nation through national strength have also resulted in varying interpretations among actors, some more radical than others (Sullivan & Wang, 2022). As these radical interpretations are still in line with Xi's guidelines, however, they are rarely ever punished, no matter how controversial or damaging to diplomatic relations they may be. In some cases they are even rewarded as can be seen by Zhao's promotion from an unknown diplomat in Islamabad to spokesperson of the foreign ministry (Sullivan & Wang, 2022). Fealty and loyalty to Xi Jinping, therefore, prevail over a shared institutional voice within the foreign ministry.

Xi Jinping's nationalist agenda has also emboldened nationalist at home, especially on Chinese internet platforms such as Weibo. Multiple scholars have found that cyber-nationalist wield a large influence over Chinese officials (Chang-Liao, 2022; Sullivan & Wang, 2022). An example demonstrating the close connection between Chinese diplomats and cyber-nationalists occurred in November 2020 when Zhao Lijian posted a digital artwork depicting an Australian soldier holding a bloody knife to the throat of an Afghan child. This artwork was in reference to a report that revealed several war crimes committed by the Australian military in Afghanistan. Though the post sparked enormous outrage, what is most interesting in this case

is that Zhao had sourced the digital artwork from a self-proclaimed nationalist artist named Wuhe Qilin (Sullivan & Wang, 2021). This demonstrates the close interactions between Wolf Warriors and cyber nationalists, among whom Wang and Zhao have even developed a fanbase (Martin, 2021). Diplomatic actors are therefore highly susceptible to the bottom-up influence of its own netizens. In their article on cyber-nationalism and Wolf Warrior Diplomacy, Sullivan and Wang (2022) go as far as claiming that the Chinese assertive style of diplomacy of recent years does not serve an international interest but rather focuses on appeasing Chinese nationalists and preventing criticism of the CCP within domestic circles. As a consequence, assertive and aggressive rhetoric is tolerated and encouraged in order to avoid public discontent among the increasingly nationalistic population.

The last reason for the contingent nature of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy is closely linked to the previously mentioned political climate that has come into existence under Xi, in which loyalty is vital in order to move up the ladder within the Chinese political system (Chang-Liao, 2022). As with any other job, diplomats also have a personal interest to improve their position and Zhao Lijian's promotion from a diplomat in Islamabad to spokesperson for the foreign ministry has shown that fierce nationalistic and assertive rhetoric is something that can be rewarded. This could explain why several lesser known diplomats have now taken to Twitter, much like Zhao, to voice their nationalist opinions in the hope to follow in his footsteps. To quote Jakobsen and Manuel (2016; p.110) it is vital to remember that "dealing with China's foreign policy requires dealing with a number of actors who each have different interests." I have therefore chosen to focus on the Twitter accounts of two individual actors within the foreign ministry, rather than an official Chinese diplomatic Twitter page.

2.4 Twitter and Public Diplomacy

Rhetoric and behavior labeled as Wolf Warrior Diplomacy is visible on all stages where China is engaged in public diplomacy, but there are few places where it is quite as prominent and unhinged as on the social media platform Twitter. Over the past decade, diplomats, foreign ministries and international organizations have started to increasingly rely on Twitter to communicate with their counterparts and the public; its speed, accessibility and reach have made it an especially attractive communication tool (Duncombe, 2018). The social media platform has also had a disruptive effect on diplomacy and is changing how diplomats and foreign ministries engage with their counterparts and the public. Traditionally, diplomacy has been strongly defined by ritualistic and habitual practices and by the repetitive use of

diplomatic jargon, especially when it comes to the production and dissemination of knowledge (Neumann, 2012). Though many of these practices are still in place today, Twitter has allowed actors to circumvent the traditional, formal, face-to-face channels of communication through its easily accessible platform and wide reach (Duncombe, 2017). At the same time, diplomatic communication on Twitter also departs from the typical discursive practices associated with diplomatic information dissemination, as content on the platform is typically brief, immediate, and largely absent from esoteric diplomatic jargon (Chhabra, 2020). The informal nature of diplomatic communication on Twitter has also led to a large increase in the use of images and videos, while giving countries, especially autocratic ones, the ability to use digital disinformation as a diplomatic strategy (Duncombe, 2018). As an increasing number of actors in the diplomatic field turn to Twitter, the platform has also disrupted traditional diplomacy in another way: by amplifying the voice of the individual. In his book on diplomacy, the political scientist Iver Neumann (2012) points out that the diplomat's individual voice is often drowned out in favor of an institutional voice (Neumann, 2012, p. 87). This has led to diplomacy historically being viewed as "the negation of the diplomat" (Thakur, 2021, p. 7). In the social media age this description of diplomacy lacks veracity, however, and nowhere is this more visible than in the Chinese MFA and diplomatic apparatus.

Despite being blocked in China due to censorship laws, the Chinese foreign ministry has also become increasingly active on Twitter over the past few years. With only fourteen Chinese embassies and consulates and three diplomats active on Twitter in 2019, the number of accounts set up by the Chinese foreign ministry has largely increased in the past years (Huang & Wang, 2019). Yet, it hasn't been the official foreign ministry or embassy accounts drawing the largest audience and engagement on the platform, but the private Twitter accounts set up by individual actors within the foreign ministry who tend to be more provocative, controversial and jingoistic than their official counterparts. In 2019, only Zhao Lijian had a Twitter following of over 100,000. Now at least four other Chinese diplomats have reached a 6-digit follower base, with Zhao Lijian and Hua Chunying, both at around 2 million followers each. That is almost triple the amount of the official Chinese MFA account (@MFA_China, 2023). Rather than drowning out the voice of the individual, Twitter has amplified it. And few countries have been as effective in reaching such a large audience on the platform as China's Wolf Warriors.³

³ Zhao and Hua each have more followers than the Spanish and German prime ministers, Pedro Sanchez (1.7 million) and Olaf Scholz (630k)

Beyond its accessibility and ability to reach a wide audience, scholars have pointed to several reasons why foreign ministries have increasingly turned to Twitter as a public diplomacy tool. A key term coined by the International Relations scholar, Constance Duncombe, is “the struggle for recognition” (Duncombe, 2017; p. 4). A “struggle for recognition” results when a state believes it is recognized in a way that is different from how it represents itself. As a result it engages in a struggle to convince others it should be represented, and recognized, in a different way. This struggle closely aligns with the findings of scholars looking at Chinese digital diplomacy (Alden & Chan, 2021; Huang & Wang, 2019). Huang and Wang (2019) claim that one of the main reasons the Chinese foreign ministry has turned to Twitter is to follow Xi’s call to “Tell China’s Stories Well” and to persuade the international public of Chinese views and opinions. Alden and Chan (2021) additionally argue that one of the reasons Chinese diplomats have turned to Twitter, apart from its reach and ability to monitor and gauge public opinion, is the ability to push back against criticism on the platform. Effectively, they argue, Twitter is used as a “crisis messaging tool” for Beijing and a way to shape the emerging debate on a given topic.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample

Actors

I have chosen two personal Twitter accounts run by prominent Wolf Warrior diplomats in the foreign ministry, Zhao Lijian and Hua Chunying, for my analysis. Zhao and Hua were active in high profile positions in the foreign ministry as spokespeople during the timespan selected for this analysis. Though both are spokespeople, Hua has a more senior position than Zhao as assistant director of the foreign ministry and director-general of the foreign ministry’s information department. In addition, Zhao was reassigned from the foreign ministry to the Department of Boundary and Ocean Affairs at the start of 2023. In 2019, Zhao became the first Chinese diplomat to ever reach 100,000 followers on Twitter when he was at the Chinese embassy of Pakistan and has since become known as one of pioneers of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy (Sullivan & Wang, 2022). Hua has become equally famous in recent years. Though her Twitter account was only created at the end of 2019, she too has amassed a large following, notably firing back at the US State Department’s criticism of China’s actions against protestors in Hong Kong with a tweet referring to George Floyd’s death that said “I can’t breathe” (Sullivan & Wang, 2022, p.8). Zhao and Hua are by far the most followed Wolf Warriors on

Twitter. Both of them boast a following of over 2 million and therefore wield a large influence in shaping and contributing to the discourse surrounding Chinese core interests. I have chosen these two accounts not only because they are the most influential personal Chinese diplomatic Twitter accounts, but also because both actors are very vocal in expressing their opinions, using typical Wolf Warrior rhetoric, and don't solely rely on reposting content from Chinese state-run media as some others tend to do.

Time frame

The time frame chosen for this analysis spans from 23 December 2021 until 30 September 2022. It includes several key political events that all drew widespread attention to Xinjiang and human rights abuses committed against the ethnic minorities, especially the Uyghur population, in the region. The two main events that drew the most media attention during this time span are the US government's signing of the "Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act," which was signed into law by the Biden administration on 23 December 2021 and serves as the starting point of my analysis, and the UN's OHCHR's report on Xinjiang, which was published on September 1st 2022. Both drew widespread criticism from Chinese government officials, including Zhao and Hua. The time frame also encompasses several other major events, including the EU's proposed law to ban products produced through forced labor, which will impact the trade of products from Xinjiang to the EU, and the call from the international Uyghur population to boycott the Beijing Winter Olympics. I selected 30 September as my end date of my time frame in order to include posts reacting to the OHCHR report and the EU's proposed law.

Posts

To find Twitter posts by Zhao and Hua related to Xinjiang, I used the Advanced Twitter Search tool offered by the platform and conducted a search for all posts containing the keywords "xinjiang," "uyghur," or "uyghurs" within the specified time frame. In total, the search resulted in 167 posts (Hua: 98; Zhao: 79). I have included all of these posts in my analysis, including those that do not necessarily use Wolf Warrior rhetoric in order to get a more complete picture of how Hua and Zhao communicate on Xinjiang. All of Zhao and Hua's Twitter posts are in English, as they are geared towards an international audience (Twitter is banned in China due to censorship laws). Many of the Twitter posts include videos, a majority of which produced by Chinese state-run media companies, such as Chinese Global Television Network (CGTN) and Globalink, the international version of Xinhua. Hua posted a total of 45

videos during the time span and Zhao posted 41 (see appendix). Zhao generally relied more on visuals. 29 of his posts included images as opposed to the 20 image-based posts by Hua. None of Zhao's posts are purely textual, except for 9 posts that still include links to either YouTube videos or news articles. Hua on the other hand regularly posts purely textual Tweets, of which only a few contain links. Of the 31 textual based Tweets, around 19 are longer threads composed of multiple Tweets at once. The sample does not take comments into consideration, as Zhao and Hua generally do not reply to comments on their posts, despite the fact that they often get over one hundred comments per post. Lastly, it is important to note that every Twitter post in the sample includes a caption written by the Wolf Warrior diplomats.

3.2 Analytical approach

In 1964, the communication scholar Marshall McLuhan famously posited that “the medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1964). This does not mean that the message itself is irrelevant, but researchers must bear in mind that it is the medium that defines the communication, and not vice versa. Diplomats, such as Zhao and Hua, for instance, adapt their message to the platform by using hashtags, images, videos and informal language. In order to effectively answer my research question and position my findings into the existing body of literature on the topic it is important to look at my question of how Wolf Warriors communicate on Xinjiang on Twitter from two sides: the discursive and the technical. This means looking at how the two Wolf Warriors communicate in terms of arguments and rhetoric but also how they use Twitter and all its functions and tools to communicate on a technical level, as the practices that are associated with the platform inevitably also shape the discourse on it.

The methodological approach that allows me to most effectively do this is a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Textual analysis is a key aspect of CDA, and allows for a better understanding of how Zhao and Hua communicate on a linguistic level by focusing on arguments, narratives and other rhetoric. But CDA also goes beyond that, using the analytical tool of intertextuality to investigate the relationship between produced language and its social conditions. The opportunity that a CDA framework offers to go beyond just the textual and visual and to look at the power relations, identities, ideologies and other factors that shape discourse is especially useful when looking at Twitter posts, which can often be short, cryptic and hard to understand without context. Beyond its usefulness on Twitter, CDA also lends itself to the study of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy, as Wolf Warriors typically respond to and push back against criticism from Western countries, exposing certain power dynamics, recurring

narratives and ideologies. In addition, research has shown that Chinese government officials often position Han identity in opposition to Uyghur identity (Allés, 2015). Using a CDA helps me draw findings on how Zhao and Hua's discourse draws on identity construction and power dynamics.

Language, and with it discourse, is not only limited to text in a traditional sense. Especially on Twitter, users often post a mixture of digital content, such as videos and images accompanied by self-written captions or purely textual Tweets. As my research question focuses on how Wolf Warriors communicate on Xinjiang, my textual analysis mainly focuses on the content that Zhao and Hu have created themselves, which are the textual Tweets and the captions that accompany the videos and images posted. This does not, however, mean that videos, images and links produced by other content creators or media companies and their content are not taken into consideration, as their contextual importance is vital for a fuller understanding of the discourse.

For the textual analysis each Tweet/caption was pasted into a Google Sheet with its date. The posts were then put into several overarching categories, i.e. did they include a video, did they mention the United States, was the post about modernization/development projects and so forth (see sheet in appendix). This coding helped give a better overview of the sample, how the two Wolf Warriors use Twitter and what themes and narratives play the most central role in their discourse. Posts were also analyzed in a more in-depth manner using a critical discourse lens. Some of the Tweets have been included in the analysis via direct quotes or screenshots. I have used a name-date format for my citations during the analysis, enabling the reader to find the Tweets via the two Google Sheets and screen recordings in the appendix.

4. The Discursive Battle Over Xinjiang

4.1 Xinjiang: Controversy, Identity, and the CCP's Official Stance

Xinjiang is home to one of China's largest ethnic minorities, the Uyghurs, who make up one of 55 officially recognized ethnic minorities in China. According to the 2020 Seventh National Population Census, Uyghurs represented just under half of Xinjiang's 25 million population with the Han-Chinese ethnic majority of China making up most of the other half. Xinjiang is also home to several smaller ethnic minorities. Culturally, Uyghurs differ greatly from their Han-Chinese counterparts. They are predominantly Muslim and speak a Turkic language which resembles those spoken in the countries West of Xinjiang, such as Kazakhstan,

Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. The region's historical proximity to the Muslim rather than Confucian world, especially in the north-western part of the region, has been one of the driving forces behind a separatist East Turkestan independence movement in the region. The CCP has strongly opposed separatist movements and has implemented assimilation policies aimed at reducing cultural and ethnic differences between minority groups and the Han majority. During the Cultural Revolution, for instance, Muslims were forced to raise pigs and eat pork (Allés, 2015, p.4). Since the reform years starting in 1978, however, minorities have enjoyed more political, religious and cultural freedom, providing they didn't challenge the CCP's rule (Allés, 2015). Yet separatist yearnings and ethnic tensions have remained and culminated in 2009, when Uyghurs, protesting against racism and mistreatment in the province's capital Urumqi, turned violent and attacked civilian Han Chinese. The ensuing violence, which included retaliatory attacks, claimed at least 197 lives, both Han and Uyghur (Tobin, 2020b). Xinjiang separatist also increasingly turned to terrorist attacks after the turn of the century. The most famous of these attacks was carried out in Kunming train station in 2014, in which two assailants killed 29 people and injured another 130 using fruit knives (Kaiman & Branigan, 2014).

As a result, Chinese minority policies have granted Xinjiang's ethnic minority population, especially those of Muslim backgrounds, such as the Uyghurs, less freedom, with religion and language especially targeted in the process. A new assimilation policy has emerged under Xi, based on a shared national identity built on 'ethnic unity' (民族团结). The policy has been criticized for its Han-centrism and for creating a binary where Han identity is viewed as superior and as something that needs to be shared with other minorities (Tobin, 2020b). According to this view, ethnic minorities' lack of Chinese national identity rooted in Han tradition makes them a threat to national security and the logical solution from a Chinese government perspective has been to reeducate the ethnic minority to make them more like the Han majority (Tobin, 2020a). In order to do this, Chinese authorities have built what they refer to as "reeducation centers." They have been one of the main points of Western criticism against the Chinese government in recent years who view them as forced internment camps. Reports of these centers first emerged in 2016 and the OHCHR report contains harrowing stories of violence and degradation occurring in the camps reported by detainees. Some Western governments, including the US, have even gone as far as labeling the Chinese government's actions in Xinjiang as a "cultural genocide," though not all agree with the use of the term "genocide." To this day, information on the camps in Xinjiang is limited. Foreign journalists

are no longer allowed to travel through Xinjiang freely, and a request from the UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to enter the province was long denied until it finally took place under close supervision with limited freedom in the summer of 2022 (Davidson, 2022). Following the trip in August 2022, the OHCHR published a report on Xinjiang that estimates approximately one million people, predominantly Uyghurs, have at one point been detained in one of these camps and accuses the Chinese government of serious human rights violations.

Chinese officials only admitted to the existence of the camps in 2018 and refer to them as “professional vocational training institutions” that focus on “the country’s common language, legal knowledge, vocational skills, along with de-extremisation education” (Gan, 2018). In response to the OHCHR report on the assessment of human rights concerns in Xinjiang, the Chinese Permanent Office to the UN in Geneva published a note verbale which can be found in the appendix of the OHCHR report (OHCHR, 2022). As first stated by Xinjiang government officials in 2018, the response adamantly maintains that the camps are vocational training institutions and that everything the Chinese government has done has been in accordance with international law. The eradication of terrorism also plays a central role in the 131-page document. The paper claims that the UN has not paid enough attention to the human rights achievements in Xinjiang accomplished through counter-terrorism measures, which have made the province more safe for its inhabitants of all ethnicities. There have also been 29 press conferences held by the Xinjiang government in Beijing all of which can be found in English on the Chinese US embassy website. Many of them include statements by Han-Chinese, Uyghurs and foreigners, all defending and endorsing Chinese government policies in Xinjiang. Posts on the Chinese foreign ministry’s official Twitter account on Xinjiang are less frequent than on the personal Twitter accounts of Wolf Warrior diplomats. Most of them are mainly comprised of direct quotes and video clips from their press conferences and accuse the West (mainly the US) of spreading lies about Xinjiang for their own gain and refuting any criticism about human rights violations in the region.

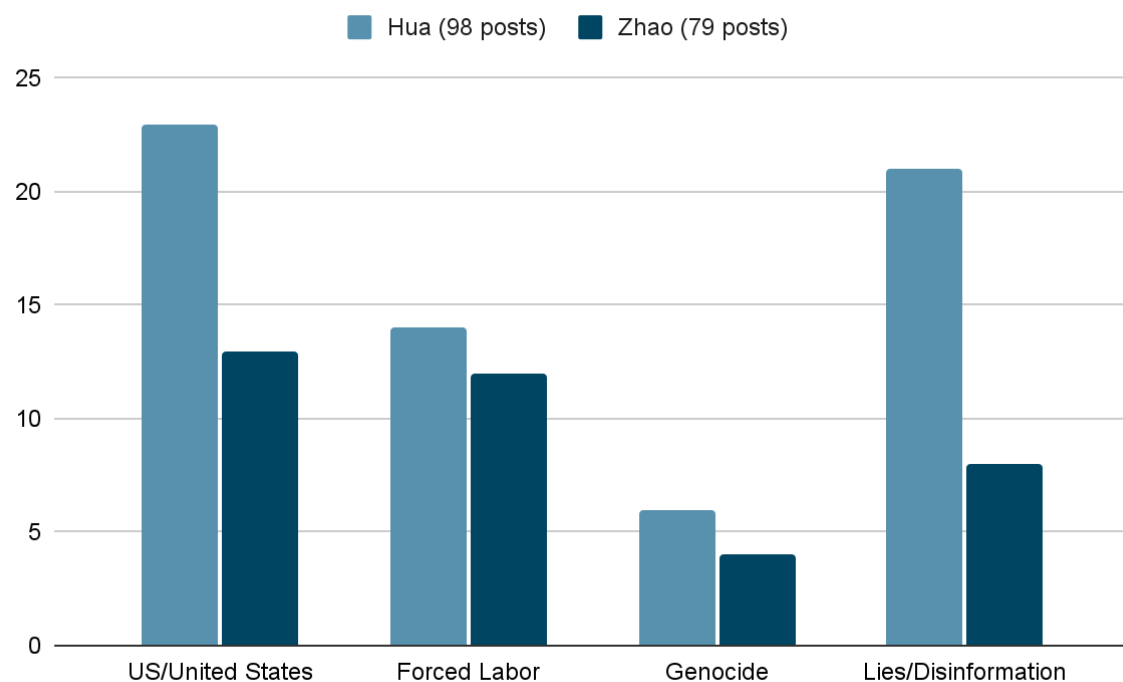
4.2 Critical Discourse Analysis

Wolf Warrior communication on Xinjiang is two-fold. On the one hand, Hua and Zhao dedicate a great number of Tweets to responding to Western criticism and defending the Chinese government's practices in Xinjiang, using the typical assertive and confrontational language associated with Wolf Warrior Diplomacy. On the other hand, both of them also try to

reshape the image of Xinjiang by promoting it as a prosperous, beautiful and modernized province in which ethnic minorities, such as the Uyghurs, are happy and thriving. This part of their communication is significantly less confrontational and assertive. I have therefore split my analysis into two sections. In the first, I focus on how Zhao and Hua communicate on the controversies surrounding Xinjiang and defend the Chinese government. In the second, I look at how they portray Xinjiang in a positive light that is less prevalent in the Western political and media discourse. In each of these sections I focus both on how Twitter is used to disseminate their discourse and the specific content of their communication.

4.2.1 Responding to Criticism

Chart 1: Core themes (Wolf Warrior rhetoric)



**some posts overlap*

Not all Tweets posted by Zhao Lijian and Hua Chunying use assertive, confrontational Wolf Warrior rhetoric. Those that do, however, are almost exclusively targeted at the United States government. Hua and Zhao directly mention the US in over 30 Tweets and dedicate a large portion of their Twitter feeds to US and Western criticism of Chinese government policies in Xinjiang (see chart 1). Two of the main points of contention brought up by both Wolf Warriors

were the Uyghur Forced Labor Act, passed by the Biden administration on the 23 December 2022, and the labelling of the CCP's actions in Xinjiang as 'cultural genocide' (see chart 1).

So how exactly was Twitter used as a public diplomacy tool to communicate on contentious issues in Xinjiang? Though both Twitter accounts overlap in terms of the topics they discuss (forced labor and genocide) and often even use similar arguments to hit back at the United States, their style and the way they use Twitter can differ greatly, especially when it comes to the Tweets that use the typical assertive and confrontational language they have become known for. Hua tends to favor purely textual threads, which often resemble the style of Tweets that Donald Trump championed during his time leading up to and as President of the United States (see image 1). These posts are written using informal and undiplomatic language, and use strong adjectives to discredit and attack political opponents. For example, she describes the US and their accusations as "vile and shameless" (see image 1) and claims that the US government needs to "save its bankrupt reputation" (Hua 28.12.21). Generally, her arguments are more elaborately articulated, unlike Zhao who relies on shorter captions (see comparison in image 1). Hua also takes advantage of the immediacy with which one can react and directly comment on recent political events on Twitter. This can be seen by the two threads she posted within a span of 24 hours following the signing of the Uyghur Forced Labor Act and the publication of the OHCHR report (Hua, 24.12.22; Hua, 02.09.22).

Zhao's posts on the other hand are more arbitrary in terms of timing. He did not post a single Tweet that consisted solely of text during the timeframe of this analysis and instead relies on visuals, especially images, while defending Chinese policies in Xinjiang and hitting back at the US. Unlike Hua, who also occasionally used images, Zhao's posts also include caricatures, graphs and charts (e.g. Zhao, 14.07.22; Zhao, 22.06.22; image 1). Zhao particularly takes advantage of the highly visual nature of the platform to defend Chinese interests, moving away from the more traditional diplomatic communication forms that are often produced on a more textual basis. Additionally, Zhao adopts a more sensationalist approach in his content. One illustrative example is his post from 20 July 2022, where he shared an image depicting a network of actors who, according to Zhao, have colluded to fabricate lies around forced labor in Xinjiang (see image 3). The image suggests that forced labor is a grand conspiracy in which the US government and other affiliated actors are colluding to undermine China.

These differences show that even between two Wolf Warriors who are working within the same ministry as spokespeople, as is the case with Zhao and Hua, the manner in which Xi's call for a "fighting spirit" is adopted still varies. Regardless of these differences, however, both have clearly adapted their discourse to the platform to help reach a greater audience, using

simplistic, undiplomatic language. Zhao and Hua also regularly use hashtags and Hua does not shy away from content that specifically names actors in the US government, such as secretary Blinken (Zhao, 20.07.22; Hua, 27.05.22). Their discourse, rather than being shaped by traditional diplomatic practices, is therefore more heavily influenced by Twitter and the practices on the medium itself.

Image 1:



Regarding the specific content of their communication, Zhao and Hua are especially vocal about two issues: the labeling of the China’s behavior in Xinjiang as genocide, and the accusations of forced labor in the region (see chart 1). The “reeducation camps” are not directly mentioned by either Wolf Warrior at all, however. This is a significant omission considering that they are one of the most discussed issues in Western political discourse and play a central role in the OHCHR report on Xinjiang. The main target of their assertive and confrontational rhetoric is the United States, which is mentioned in over 35 posts (see chart 1). A strategic method Zhao and Hua use in their discourse is to attack as a means to defend. Rather than just defend Xinjiang from criticism and refute accusations made by the US government, the two Wolf Warriors prefer to use Xinjiang as a way to directly hit back at the US for its own domestic issues. Through this approach, they portray the US as a hypocritical power that lacks the moral standing to criticize China and should focus on its own issues before meddling in China’s

internal affairs. Hua, for instance, criticizes US actors for fabricating and spreading allegations about Xinjiang and having a “holier-than-thou attitude”. In the same thread she then states that the country has “the blood of #NativeAmericans, #Iraqis, #Afghans, etc. on their hands ... Not to mention the 840,000 Americans who've died from COVID & the 100+ lives taken by gun violence every day” (Hua, 14.01.2022). She goes on to say that this a proof of the decline of US democracy, an argument that is often made by Chinese, Russian and other officials intent on seeing a new world order that is not led by the United States.

Image 2:



The previous example is not the only time Native Americans are brought up. Zhao and Hua each mention Native Americans several times. In one Tweet Hua states that “Crimes against humanity & genocide of Native Americans are undeniable facts with solid evidence” (Hua, 24.12.21) and Zhao employs a graph to compare population growths among both populations accompanied by the rhetorical question: “Which one would you call #genocide?” (see image 1). The time frames in his graph do not align with each other, with starting points in the 1500s versus the 1950s and the historical context is therefore largely ignored. The method of directly comparing domestic American topics with Chinese issues, regardless of their suitability for comparison, is repeatedly used by both actors. An image posted by Hua, for example, shows a picture taken on a slave plantation picture in Mississippi in 1908 versus a picture of a 2015 cotton harvest in Xinjiang (see image 2). Like Zhao, she includes a rhetorical question asking “is this forced labor?”. Though the highly contentious issue of religious freedom and Islam is barely ever touched upon, Zhao posted one image in which he juxtaposes Uyghurs in Xinjiang celebrating Eid al-Adha, with Muslims protesting in the US (see image 2). The two have little to do with each other as can be seen by the different captions

accompanying the images at the bottom of the comparison. Yet the image gives the impression that American muslims are unable to celebrate Eid and that Chinese Muslims do not believe that they face discrimination, though no evidence is provided for this. Furthermore, though Eid is a deeply religious Islamic holiday, the Xinjiang side of the image does not depict mosques or prayer.

Another method used by Zhao and Hua to fight back against criticism of Xinjiang, is to dismiss any form of criticism as a lie or disinformation (see chart 1). Hua accuses the US government of “diplomacy through lying” on several occasions (Hua, 11.01.2022; Hua 07.06.2022) and her discourse constructs an image of the US as an untrustworthy diplomatic actor that should not be listened to or trusted — not just in regards to Xinjiang and China, but in general. In one, uncharacteristically short post she states: “‘Genocide’ in #Xinjiang is a whopping big lie. Every such lie diminishes the credibility of the US government” (Hua, 13.04.22). By undermining the credibility of critics, she is able to deflect attention from the actual issues at hand. Portraying Western media and its sources as unreliable and as driven by a political agenda is a common tactic used by Chinese diplomats, but also by other autocratic nations such as Russia (Litvak & Pomozova, 2021; Szostek, 2016). On Twitter, one of the most notable examples of dismissing criticism from opponents and media as fake and untrue is Donald Trump, whose communication style seems to have been replicated by Hua to some extent. The narrative that all human rights issues and discriminatory policies in Xinjiang are invented by the Western media, is also reflected in Zhao’s Tweet which states that “almost 100 countries unanimously expressed support for China’s policy in #Xinjiang and opposition to interference in China’s internal affairs in the name of human rights” (Zhao, 04.03.22). In a different post, Zhao mentions that “diplomats from 30 Islamic countries (...) visited Urumqi, Kashgar and Aksu in #Xinjiang,” implying that Western criticism, especially regarding religious freedom, is an unwarranted ploy to contain China, as Islamic countries have no quarrels with visiting Xinjiang (Zhao, 11.08.2022). While Hua and Zhao repeatedly claim that disinformation is pervasive in the discourse surrounding Xinjiang, they themselves rely on sources, beyond just Chinese state-run media, that can be questioned in terms of their legitimacy. Hua for example quotes a paper by the “Counter Western Propaganda” consultancy, a one-person company run by the Australian Jaq James that has only published three papers, all of which question the legitimacy of Western information on Xinjiang. In addition, Zhao also posted two links to the YouTube channel “Reports on China”, run by a New Zealander living in Shanghai, who appears to be what is commonly referred to as a “50-

cent party” (五毛党) — an internet commentator paid by the Chinese government to produce positive content about China (Zhao, 28.01.22).

While the US and its government are at the center of both Hua and Zhao’s discourse on Xinjiang, European countries and the rest of the world are not. Apart from the UK — mentioned once in combination with the US (Hua, 03.03.22) — no European countries or EU member states are ever mentioned, despite the fact that European countries have been highly critical about Chinese government policies in Xinjiang. It is estimated that the EU’s Forced Labor Ban, which was proposed in September 2022, will have a great impact on trade from Xinjiang to the EU. Yet it was not mentioned once by either Wolf Warrior despite the proposal’s overlap with the timeframe of this analysis. This silence and hesitation to mention non-US actors closely aligns with China’s current foreign policy, in which the US is viewed as a direct competitor and foe, while countries in Europe and the EU are still seen as desirable partners, with whom diplomacy relations are nurtured and avenues of diplomacy are kept open. Zhao and Hua’s discourse around the UN is equally careful. One of the key events during my selected time frame was the OHCHR’s assessment of human rights concerns in Xinjiang. The topic received a great amount of media attention upon its publication in September. Yet the OHCHR report did not receive nearly as much attention on the Wolf Warriors’ Twitter accounts as the American Uyghur Forced Labor Act signed at the end of 2021. In fact, Zhao did not refer to the OHCHR and its report at all and only mentioned the UN twice in his 79 Tweets on Xinjiang (Zhao, 04.04.2022; Zhao, 26.05.2022). Hua on the other hand is slightly more vocal, mentioning the OHCHR in three posts. In addition to posting the link to the Chinese official response to the report, Hua dedicated one of her longest threads to criticize the report. Even in this rant, however, it was just the OHCHR specifically that was targeted, not the UN. In her tweet she says: “The US and few Western countries, with less than 10% of the world population, take up over 80% of OHCHR posts. Can they truly represent the world’s majority and effectively defend the human rights of the majority? The OHCHR assessment on Xinjiang is a patchwork of disinformation politically driven by the US and few Western forces aiming at containing China with lies on Xinjiang” (Hua, 02.09.2022/image 3). Even in her critique of the UN body, it is inevitably the US and “Western forces” who are blamed as the source of disinformation on Xinjiang.

Image 3



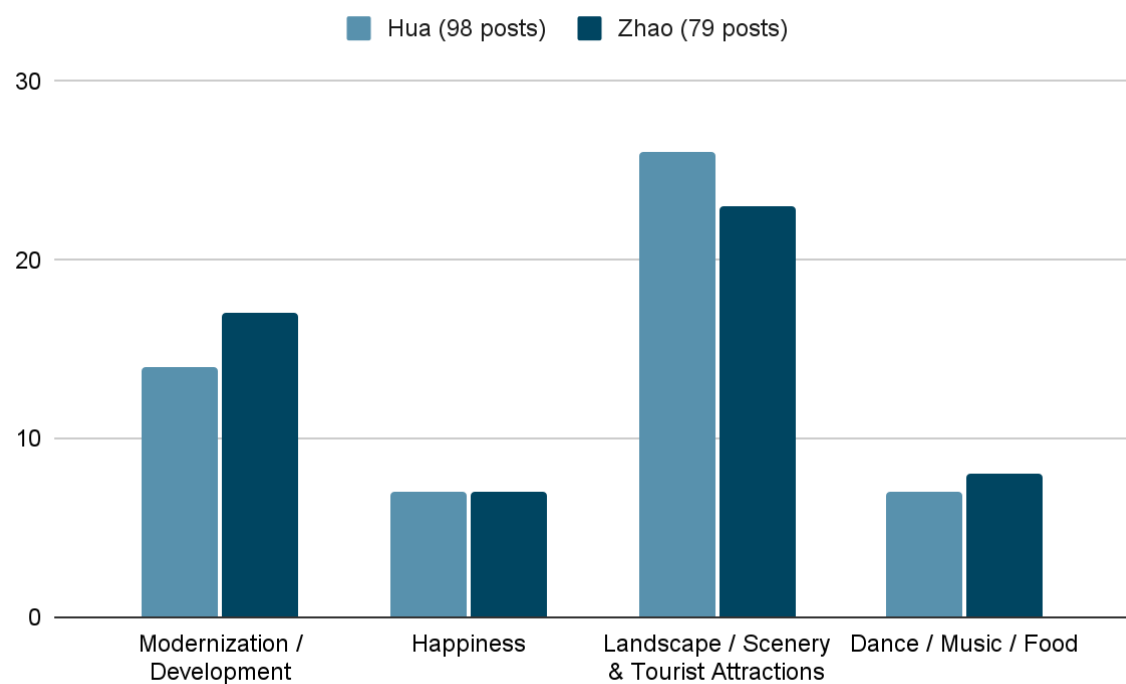
4.2.2 Portrayal of Xinjiang

Not all Tweets by Wolf Warriors are Wolf Warrior Tweets. As a matter of fact, the majority of Zhao and Hua's Tweets on Xinjiang and Uyghurs do not use the confrontative, assertive rhetoric that Wolf Warriors have become known for. Most of these types of posts consist of images or videos and a short caption, and do not directly respond to criticism or controversial topics surrounding Xinjiang. Instead, they are part of discourse seeking to shape an alternative, more positive image of Xinjiang that is less visible in foreign media and political discourse. Many of the pictures, videos and captions that fall into this category give the impression that they have been sourced directly from a tourism brochure, promising untouched nature, alluring landscape and vibrant cities (see image 4). Other posts focus on the modernization and economic development in the region. Posts dealing with the Uyghur population itself tend to focus on economic prosperity and the happiness enjoyed by the members of the Uyghur community (see chart 2).

Unlike in their communication that directly responds to criticism of China, Hua and Zhao's use of Twitter shares many more similarities when it comes to painting a picture of Xinjiang. Both rely heavily on visuals, such as videos and images, which even share similarities in terms of what they depict. Most show scenic, natural landscapes or vast infrastructure projects, while some videos also include "feel-good" personal success stories in Xinjiang (Hua, 05.05.22; Zhao, 19.05.22; Hua, 01.06.22). While a few videos stem from TikTok's Chinese mother company Douyin or unspecified sources, the majority of the videos clearly originate from

Chinese state-run media companies, most often CGTN and Globalink. The frequency with which Zhao and Hua post videos from Chinese state-run media shows how Wolf Warriors and state-run media have collaborated to achieve Xi's international propaganda goal of "Telling China's Story Well" (Huang & Wang, 2019). Twitter is the ideal tool to enable this symbiotic relationship, as Zhao and Hua have access to a large international audience with their combined accounts boasting over 4 million followers, while Chinese state-run media companies give Wolf Warriors access to a seemingly endless vault of content.⁴

Chart 2: Core themes (non-Wolf Warrior rhetoric)



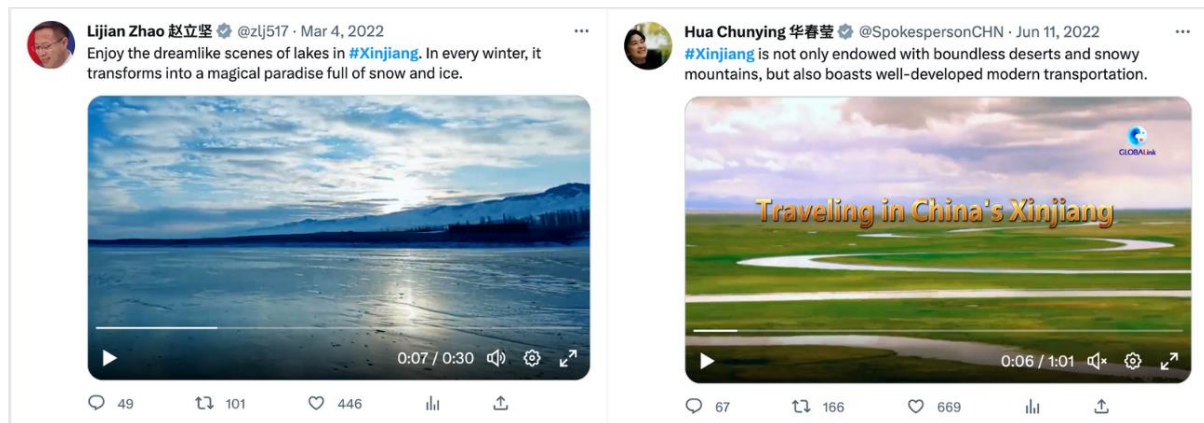
**some posts overlap*

In terms of their content, Zhao and Hua attempt to portray Xinjiang in a different light than in Western media discourse, as a beautiful tourist destination that should be at the top of everybody's travel list. This is visible beyond the plethora of videos and images featuring stunning landscapes, old towns and cities. One of Zhao's posts, for example, states that "over a thousand people in Japan signed up to travel to Xinjiang at the Chinese Consulate in Osaka" (Zhao, 07.01.22), portraying an eagerness among foreigners to go to Xinjiang despite all the

⁴ CGTN has 13 million followers on Twitter but rarely receives more than 5 comments or 20 likes per post (@CGTNOfficial). In comparison, Hua and Zhao's Twitter posts in this sample can reach over 1000 likes and over 100 comments on several occasions.

negative press. Hua also directly appeals to foreigners to come to Xinjiang saying “welcome to Xinjiang to enjoy the magnificent scenery & share the happiness of the local people when the #pandemic is over” (Hua, 28.12.2021). In reality, however, this hospitality is not extended to international journalists and human rights organizations.

Image 4



In addition to portraying Xinjiang as a beautiful, untouched region to their foreign audience on Twitter, Hua and Zhao also emphasize the modernization and economic development projects that have helped make the province, and more specifically, the Uyghur population more prosperous in recent years (see image 4 & 5). One of Zhao’s posts shows a video of a CCP official helping farmers in Xinjiang sell their produce through social media. The video is accompanied by the caption “This is one of the ways how #CPC officials help Xinjiang farmers make more money” (Zhao, 18.06.2022).⁵ Another post is captioned “technology is making cotton sowing much easier in Xinjiang, where autopilot tractors are busy farming in the fields. Is this ‘forced labor’?” (Zhao, 08.04.2022). Hua also makes several references to how machines have made farm work easier (Hua, 17.07.22; Hua, 08.09.2022/ see image 5). Zhao and Hua repeatedly refer to happiness, contentment and the smiles on people’s faces in their captions that result from these advancements (see chart 2). Many of the posts on this topic imply that the recent development and prosperity would not have been achieved without recent Chinese government policies in the region. In a series of Tweets all posted with the hashtag #ThisIsXinjiang, Zhao also creates an image of Xinjiang as a region that is waiting to be developed. He calls the province “a land of outstanding advantages with vast potentials

⁵ Chinese government officials have started to refer to the CCP as the CPC (Communist Party of China) due to the former’s negative connotation. For more see Kilpatrick (2023) in reference list.

for development” and a place “where the development approach has taken root” (Zhao, 28.06.22). Ethnic minorities appear to have little agency in these posts. Instead it is the Han-dominated Chinese government that decides what is best and helps the population in Xinjiang become more advanced. In addition, the emphasis put on the fact that Xinjiang has only just become developed and prosperous gives the impression that it was backward and undeveloped beforehand. This portrayal, which at times has an underlying neocolonial connotation, very much reflects the CCP’s ideology on Xinjiang, whose goal is to make Xinjiang more economically developed and technologically advanced like the Han dominated East coast of China.

Image 5



Zhao and Hua are also eager to demonstrate that the distinct Uyghur culture remains intact and is unaffected by Chinese policies in the region. Religion and language, aspects of Uyghur culture that are perceived as a greater separatist and security threat to the Chinese government according to Tobin (2020a), are rarely brought up, however. Instead the focus is on the less controversial parts of Uyghur culture that can be practiced without restriction, such as dance, music and food (see chart 2). In one post Hua writes: “Singing, dancing, and big smiles. People in Xinjiang are celebrating the traditional Corban Festival, also known as Eid al-Adha or the Feast of the Sacrifice” (Hua, 10.07.22). Despite mentioning the religious festival, which she refers to as a “traditional” festival instead, the video in the post only shows people dancing in the streets and does not depict any religious practices. Generally, religion, Islam, mosques and prayer are rarely part of their discourse. Another big omission in many of the posts on Uyghur culture are Han people themselves. Uyghurs are mostly portrayed on their own as a separate people in their own communities. In the previously mentioned dancing video posted by Hua on Eid, for example, Han Chinese are not featured dancing together with the

ethnic minorities of Islamic origin (Hua, 10.07.22). This is also the case in Zhao's post comparing Uyghurs celebrating Eid and American Muslims protesting (see image 2). The words "integration," "cooperation," "exchange," and "unity" do not appear at all in the sample used for this analysis.

Much of what I have mentioned regarding the portrayal of Xinjiang overlaps with what scholars studying minorities in China have defined as "Internal Orientalism" (Schein, 1997). The term emerged among anthropologists and China scholars to describe the Han treatment and perception of ethnic minorities in China. They claim that while minority culture has been accepted and even promoted as a way to boost tourism since the reform years, minority groups are dialectically constructed as an "other" for the purpose of constructing a modern Han identity in contemporary China (Allés, 2015). This minority 'other' is often shown as having little agency and is portrayed as less developed, traditional and exotic in order to juxtapose it with a Han counterpart that is modern, dominant and sophisticated (Schein, 1997). It also plays into Xi's current assimilation policy where cultural differences in music and cuisine are tolerated or even encouraged but other cultural characteristics such as religion are viewed as security threats (Tobin, 2020a). Zhao and Hua's "internal orientalist" discourse is not only reflected in their portrayal of Xinjiang as less developed and traditional but also in their emphasis on the Uyghurs as a distinct "other" separate from the Han majority population, despite being part of China. Hua, in particular, tends to refer to the Uyghur population as "Xinjiang people" (Hua, 05.05.2022) and distinguishes them as "the people there" rather than inclusive language such as "here" (Hua, 29.08.22). Only once does she refer to the story of a Uyghur man, as "happy story of a chinese ordinary life" (Hua, 10.04.22), while Zhao refers to the them as Chinese Uyghurs just once (Zhao, 04.06.22).

5. Discussion

So what conclusion can be drawn from my analysis which looks at Zhao and Hua's discourse on Xinjiang both in terms of the content of their communication, but also in terms of how they use the medium of Twitter to convey their message? To begin, the typical assertive and confrontational rhetoric that Wolf Warriors have become known for is clearly visible in Hua and Zhao's communication on Xinjiang. Adjectives such as "shameless" and "vile," graphs and images comparing US Native Americans with Uyghurs, and the constant emphasis on criticism of Xinjiang being based on lies, all clearly fall in line with previous scholarly work defining Wolf Warrior Diplomacy (Sullivan & Wang, 2022; Dai & Luqiu, 2021; Shumba,

2021). Notably, almost all of the posts defending China from criticism are targeted at the US, Zhao and Hua's designated enemy throughout the sample (see chart 1). In their posts targeting the US, and on a few occasions the OHCHR, Zhao and Hua both seem to be following the mantra of "the best defense is a good offense." The mantra is followed in two ways. The first method is to entirely dismiss criticism as lies and disinformation. Through this strategy, Hua and Zhao avoid standing on the backfoot by trying to refute points of criticism with evidence and elaborate arguments. Instead, they point to criticism of Xinjiang being part of an agenda "undermining Xinjiang (...) and containing China's growth" (Hua, 30.07.22). This tactic is increasingly being used by political actors in the disinformation age, especially from autocratic regimes such as Russia and China (Litvak & Pomozova, 2021; Szostek, 2016). Though they repeatedly point to disinformation, Zhao and Hua themselves post content from sources, in addition to Chinese state-run media, whose legitimacy could be questioned. The second way Zhao and Hua play defense through offense is by using Xinjiang as a front to criticize the US for its own foreign and domestic policies, portraying its government as a hypocritical power that has no right to involve itself in China's internal affairs. In terms of its criticism of the US, be it slavery, gun violence, or Native Americans, there seem to be no boundaries of what can and cannot be said.

This is not the case for the rest of the world. This study confirms the findings by Shumba (2020) that Wolf Warrior Diplomacy does not target countries from the Global South - at least when it comes to Xinjiang. But even with non-American countries, Zhao and Hua are considerably less combative. European countries are not mentioned (apart from the UK once) even though the EU's ban on products produced by forced labor was proposed during the time span selected for this analysis. Hua and Zhao also tread carefully around the UN. In Hua's most critical of the OHCHR, the UN as a body is not criticized, just the OHCHR and the "US and Western forces" who are accused of manipulating it (see image 3). In the past, some Wolf Warriors, including Zhao, have strayed from the party line in a way that has damaged diplomatic relations, leaving the foreign ministry on damage control (Sullivan & Wang, 2022; Martin, 2021). This analysis shows, however, that the two actors do not try to make enemies beyond the US, making them less likely to jeopardize Chinese governments international agenda, as one of the UN's largest supporters and as a country that continues to try and maintain strong diplomatic relations with European countries.

A key aspect of Zhao and Hua's discourse is that they not only try to defend Xinjiang through Wolf Warrior rhetoric but also aim to portray an entirely different, more positive image of Xinjiang than the one visible in foreign media. They depict Xinjiang as a beautiful,

modernized province where economic growth has brought prosperity and happiness to everyone, particularly the Uyghur minority population. A large share of these posts are sourced directly from Chinese state-run media, such as CGTN and Globallink. There is a clear symbiotic relationship between state-run media and Wolf Warriors visible in my sample. Zhao and Hua offer their platforms with a significant international audience, and Chinese state-run media provide an extensive repository of content that the Wolf Warriors can rely on, enabling them to fulfill Xi's international propaganda objective of 'Telling China's Story Well' (Wang & Huang, 2019). In this context, the narrative surrounding Xinjiang can, at times, exhibit what some China scholars refer to as “Inner Orientalism”, where ethnic minorities are predominantly portrayed as joyful, singing, and dancing individuals living separate lives from the Han-Chinese majority (Allés, 2015).

Hua and Zhao's discourse does not always coincide with the narratives most prominently featured in Chinese government discourse on Xinjiang. One of the main arguments in the official Chinese response to the OHCHR is that Chinese policies in Xinjiang, including the “reeducation camps,” are anti-terrorism measures that have helped protect the security and safety of the people in Xinjiang. This argument does not feature in Zhao and Hua's discourse. Only once does Hua mention terrorism, in a post in which she shares the link to the official Chinese response to the OHCHR report (Hua, 01.09.22). Safety, security and the reeducation camps are never mentioned at all. A possible explanation for this could be the previously mentioned argument that Wolf Warriors - in sports terminology - prefer to play offense rather than defense. The internment camps and lack of religious freedom are some of the most controversial topics in the debate surrounding Xinjiang. I would argue that Zhao and Hua could easily find themselves on the defensive by attempting to justify the reeducation camps in the face of mounting evidence of forceful detentions of Uyghurs and human rights abuses committed in these camps. The crackdown on freedom of religion could also be harder to defend, especially for their international audience from the Global South, where Islam is widespread and religion plays a more central role in everyday life than in the West. Restricting trade with Xinjiang because of reports on forced labor and the labeling of the Chinese government behavior in Xinjiang as genocide, however, are easier to challenge and argue against, as there is less of a shared international consensus on these topics, even within Western countries.

So far, this discussion has primarily focused on the content, narratives, and strategies employed by Zhao and Hua, highlighting the numerous similarities between the two actors. However, when we examine how they utilize Twitter, particularly with regards to their typical

Wolf Warrior rhetoric, my analysis reveals that even within the foreign ministry and between two actors in similar positions working in the same building on Chaoyangmen Outer Street in Beijing, their approaches to adopting Xi's desired 'fighting spirit' in defense of China differ. Zhao relies heavily on visuals, posting graphs and caricatures in addition to images. Of all of his 79 posts, not one purely consists of text, demonstrating a preference for imagery to successfully get his message across to his audience. Hua on the other hand, whose discourse is generally more elaborate, does not shy away from longer text based threads, reminiscent of the style championed by Donald Trump leading up to and during his presidency. Hua's tone also comes across as more authoritative and she takes greater advantage of the immediacy with which Twitter allows its users to comment on recent political events, as seen by her immediate response to the OHCHR report on Xinjiang. I believe that a significant factor influencing these differences are the two actors' positions within the foreign ministry. While both are spokespeople, Hua also serves as communication-general of the foreign ministry's information department, giving her more authority and autonomy. Being in a smaller role has not stopped Zhao from being very vocal in the past, but one cannot help but question if his reassignment, that was interpreted as a demotion by some China watchers, could have impacted his communication style during the timespan of my analysis.

But what do my findings on Zhao and Hua's communication on their personal Twitter accounts mean for diplomacy in general? My analysis strongly supports Duncombe's (2018) assertions that Twitter has fundamentally reshaped public diplomacy by challenging preexisting norms and practices that have dictated how diplomats and foreign ministries communicate with the public and their counterparts. Visuals in the form of images and videos prominently feature in their Xinjiang-related posts, and both actors actively contribute to shaping China's narrative by disseminating state-run information to a broader audience. In addition, their language, which much like that of other Wolf Warriors over the last few years, departs from traditional diplomatic discourse. Referring to the US as liars in a combined 26 posts and using adjectives such as shameless and vile serve as striking examples of this departure (see chart 1 and image 1). Iver Neumann (2012, p. 87) states that in diplomacy the diplomat's voice is drowned out in the favor of the institutional. In the case of the Chinese foreign ministry on Twitter, the opposite is true. Combined, Zhao and Hua have more than six times as many followers as the Chinese MFA's official account. Rather than posting on the official Twitter account of their ministry they consciously decide to post on their own private accounts, sometimes up to 8 times daily. These posts also diverge from the content shared on

the official Chinese MFA account, which typically includes lengthy statements from press conferences and press releases, rarely featuring eye-catching visuals or controversial graphics.

While the voices of individuals are amplified in the Chinese foreign ministry, the line between personal and institutional is strongly blurred. Zhao and Hua never once use the first-person singular in their posts, and neither of their bios disclaim that their views and opinions are based on personal opinion. The 177-post sample used in this analysis only includes one personal post by Hua featuring a picture of two melons from Xinjiang (Hua, 24.07.22). Regarding the question of what the Chinese foreign ministry stands to gain from having both individual and official accounts active on Twitter, I believe that it is precisely this blurred line between private and official that makes the accounts so effective as a public diplomacy tool for the Chinese foreign ministry. By having a face and a name behind the account and by not adhering to the diplomatic jargon and formalities that most official institutional accounts still adhere to, Zhao and Hua have been able to draw a much larger audience. Instead of presenting the typical image of two heads of state shaking hands in front of their respective flags with a bland statement on economic cooperation, for instance, they provide content such as a picture comparing cotton farming in Xinjiang in 2015 to a slave plantation in Missouri in 1908 (see image 2). As questionable as this new form of public diplomacy may be, it undeniably captures more public interest, as evidenced by the high engagement and follower count on Hua and Zhao's pages. Another aspect that makes these accounts so effective is that while there is little doubt that both Hua and Zhao reflect the foreign ministry's position in most of their posts, the foreign ministry can still resort to claiming that a post or opinion was a private one, should it cause too much outrage and damage to diplomatic relations. These advantages that come with amplifying the individual voice are likely the main reasons why these Twitter accounts remain so active and prominent in Chinese public diplomacy, even if they have at times undermined the foreign ministry and its values in the past.

This study has provided further insight into how Wolf Warrior Diplomacy is conducted and has shed light on how Wolf Warriors communicate on one of the most contentious topics in international relations: Chinese government policies and the resulting human rights issues in Xinjiang. However, there are many more core interests that still remain unexplored, such as Taiwan or the South China Sea. What would be especially interesting to see regarding these topics, is to what extent other countries other than the US are targeted in their rhetoric and if other countries' domestic issues are also openly criticized by Wolf Warriors. In addition, little is known about how Zhao and Hua's messages are received by the audience and how effectively Wolf Warriors are able to sway public opinion. Engagement and comments on the

Wolf Warrior's post suggest a mixed response. Furthermore, while I have compared the discourse of the Wolf Warriors with the official stance of the government on Xinjiang as expressed in the OHCHR response and on the Chinese foreign ministry's website and Twitter, a more detailed analysis that examines the specific differences between individual and institutional discourses could provide a deeper understanding of why this emerging phenomenon of prioritizing the individual voice over the institutional one has gained prominence. Another question that arises is whether this is solely a Chinese phenomenon or if foreign ministries in other regions of the world are also adopting this form of public diplomacy.

In terms of the limitations of my study, I have chosen a large sample size to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how Wolf Warriors communicate on a specific core interest over an extended period of time. This approach has allowed me to present a general overview of how Chinese public diplomacy is conducted on the platform. However, it has come at the cost of a more detailed analysis of the many videos and images posted by the Wolf Warriors, which could have resulted in similarly interesting findings. In addition, as a researcher looking at *how* diplomacy is conducted by Wolf Warriors, I have tried to remain as objective as possible regarding the contents of the post. However, subjectivity is inevitable, especially when it comes to discourse analysis, as the investigation of language is always influenced by preconceived notions of the researcher. Lastly, I want to emphasize that my focus on the Uyghurs as the largest ethnic minority in Xinjiang, does not mean to diminish the situation of other ethnic minorities living in the region that are subject to the same assimilation policies and circumstances.

6. Conclusion

The answer to my research question on how Zhao and Hua communicate on the Chinese core interest of Xinjiang on Twitter, can be divided into three parts. Each of these parts in turn has its own separate implications for academic discussions in the field of International Relations and for diplomatic relations with China.

First, Hua and Zhao use an informal, undiplomatic language using visuals and images adapted specifically to Twitter to communicate on Xinjiang. This aligns closely with Constance Duncombe's research, and demonstrates that Twitter has fundamentally reshaped how public diplomacy is conducted (Duncombe, 2018). But the findings of this analysis go beyond that. Zhao and Hua don't just challenge traditional forms of public diplomacy, they are even highly unorthodox in the way they use Twitter compared to other institutional Twitter accounts. By

sacrificing the institutional for the individual voice the Chinese foreign ministry has enabled its spokespeople to use more controversial, assertive and visual communication not typically suited for an official account. This has been extremely effective in terms of gaining an audience. For future research, as well as actors working in the diplomatic field, it will be interesting to see if other countries follow suit and how this development could further reshape how diplomacy is conducted.

Second, Hua and Zhao's communication is two-fold. On the one hand, they often use the typical assertive, confrontational and provocative rhetoric associated with Wolf Warrior Diplomacy, but both of them also refrain from using this rhetoric to portray Xinjiang in a different, more positive light. When it comes to their Wolf Warrior communication there seems to be some vague guidelines that both actors followed in their communication on Xinjiang. I summarized these guidelines in a brief manner, suitable for Twitter: *The US is your punching bag. Criticism of the UN and Europe is allowed BUT tread carefully. Countries in the Global South are off limits.* My findings confirm that Wolf Warrior Diplomacy is especially targeted towards the Western liberal democracies (Shumba, 2021; Sullivan & Wang, 2022). But while the US was mentioned in 36 posts, other similarly critical countries, in Europe or elsewhere, remain largely unscathed in my sample. In the past, Wolf Warriors have jeopardized diplomatic relations with non-American countries over controversial Twitter posts (Sullivan & Wang, 2022). Are my findings a sign that diplomatic relations with non-American countries in the West will become less hostile in the future? Research on other core interests such as Taiwan and the South China Sea might help us gain more insight on this. Regarding Hua and Zhao's communication that is not assertive and confrontative, my analysis shows a symbiotic relationship between state-run media and the two spokespeople to fulfill Xi's international propaganda goal of "Telling China's Story Well". But how well is this story on Xinjiang being told and how effectively does it persuade Zhao and Hua's international audience of China's position? As a researcher from Germany and the United States, I remain skeptical of their position, despite having spent half of my life living in China. How differently would a viewer from a non-Western country view the content on their Twitter?

Third, there are some key differences between Hua and Zhao's communication on Xinjiang. Zhao relies on short captions and visuals, and the timing of his posts are arbitrary and rarely in direct response to specific political events. Hua's Twitter feed on the other hand, is a more diverse mixture of videos, images and purely text based Twitter threads commenting on current events, reminiscent of the style once championed by Donald Trump. This confirms that even between two Wolf Warriors within the same ministry, Wolf Warrior Diplomacy is

highly contingent, emphasizing the importance of examining the role of the individual in order to truly understand contemporary Chinese diplomacy.

With Zhao Lijian's reassignment, one of the pioneers of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy has left the foreign ministry. In his place has stepped Hua Chunying, whose refined, elaborate and more immediate use of Twitter has seen her accumulate an even larger amount of followers than Zhao. In the coming years it will be interesting to see how Wolf Warrior Diplomacy evolves. In 2019, the use of Twitter among Chinese diplomatic actors was still at its infancy (Wang & Huang, 2019). Four years later, at the end of 2022, two actors in the foreign ministry have already amassed over two million followers. What will the next four years have in store? And will it have the same disruptive effect on diplomacy as the last? Time will only tell, but judging by the unprecedented amount of change the Chinese foreign ministry has gone through since the founding of the PRC, new developments seem to be inevitable.

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Appendix

<https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/13RmIXJJ9mUIsRq-XZ1vKlOf7ZTWZg7nN>