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4 Unravelling diverse Chinese discourses on the Russo-Ukrainian War

A comparative analysis of official and individual accounts on Weibo

Jian Shi and Dechun Zhang

Introduction

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched a “special military operation” to defend the Russian-controlled territories in eastern Ukraine from the north, east, and south, marking the ignition of the largest military conflict in Europe since World War II (Zinets and Vasovic 2022). The Russo-Ukrainian conflict has captured extensive attention from global media and social media. As the internet provides an opportunity for the rapid dissemination of information and communication across geographical boundaries (Conversi 2012; Eriksen 2007), a substantial online debate ensued after the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, launched a “special military operation” to defend the Russian-controlled territories in eastern Ukraine.

Previous studies found that China has adopted a pro-Russian standpoint in the conflict (Korolev 2022; Kuo and Shepherd 2022; Luo and Li 2022). Chinese media framed Russia’s actions as the consequence of US pressure and NATO expansion, and portrayed China as being in a similar position to Russia (Liu 2022). This position may foster a nationalist sentiment and reinforce a dichotomous perspective between the Western world and China (Luo and Li 2022).

Various scholars have explored the multifaceted origins of the pro-Russia narrative in the online public sphere (Repnikova and Zhou 2022; Liu 2022; Hille 2022). An analysis conducted by Repnikova and Zhou (2022) suggests that this narrative is partially influenced by international political dynamics. Additionally, it arises from domestic economic and political pressures, as illustrated by the influencer economy, where social media influencers align with official stances for financial gain (Repnikova and Zhou 2022). Some argue that information-filtering mechanisms and ideological disparities also play a role in the pro-Russia environment in China (Liu 2022; Hille 2022). However, these opinions have often overlooked broader themes that dominate online discussions. For instance, beyond the nationalist discourse surrounding the Russo-Ukrainian War, there has been a proliferation of conspiracy theories on China’s internet, as reported by the US-China Perception

Monitor in 2022. The advancement of the internet has made it increasingly difficult to establish hegemonic narratives or framings in conflicts (Kaempf 2013; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2014; Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2015).

China's social media platforms continue to serve as limited but vital public spheres, enabling individuals to engage in critical discourse, discuss contentious subjects, seek social support, and manage turbulent emotions, as explored by Sukosd and Fu (2013). Hence, it is imperative to explore the nature of official media expressions and public discussions on social media platforms. To foster a deeper understanding of the underlying dynamics at play and stimulate informed discussions on this consequential subject matter, the overarching objective of this chapter is to shed light on the nuances and intricacies of the official media discourse and public opinion on social media regarding the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

China's news media and digitalization

Previous research characterizes China's official media as affiliated organizations of the Chinese government and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), primarily serving to convey and propagate the political ideologies of the CCP and the Chinese government (Chan and Qiu 2001; Duan and Takahashi 2017; Qi 2018; Zhang 2021). Nonetheless, following China's adoption of the reform and opening-up policy in 1978, the Chinese media system underwent a significant transformation. Media outlets in China started to experience greater freedom, especially during the 1990s (Gang and Bandurski 2011; He 2000). While some Chinese media ventures adopted market-driven strategies and relied on advertising revenues for profits, they continued to operate under the watchful eye of the government (Duan and Takahashi 2017; Qi 2018). As a result, Zhang, Zhang, and Shao (2023) suggest that Chinese state-affiliated media often find themselves in a delicate balancing act, torn between their roles as mouthpieces for official agendas and as conventional, commercial news organizations. Furthermore, the rise of information communication technologies (ICTs) has amplified the influence of social media in China's political landscape (Yang 2009). Chinese news media have also undergone a process of digitalization (Zhang 2021; Zhang, Zhang, and Shao 2023). As reported by Custer (2012), there are now more than 50,000 government-affiliated accounts on platforms like Sina Weibo.

Chinese news organizations employ a distinct communication style on Weibo, which differs from the presentation in newspapers or on television (Zhang, Zhang, and Shao 2023). On the one hand, Chinese news media's Weibo accounts adhere to the logic of hard propaganda, aiming to showcase the ruling party's strength as to social control and its ability to handle potential challenges (Huang 2015, 435). On the other hand, these media outlets also embrace the logic of social media, actively competing for attention (Durant and Lambrou 2009; Han and Qi 2019). Chinese news

media on Weibo employ a form of soft propaganda by delivering content in an entertaining format and with emotional appeal (Zou 2021; Mattingly and Yao 2022; Zhang, Zhang, and Shao 2023).

Notably, Chinese news media on Weibo are known for engaging in nationalistic propaganda (Schneider 2018; Zhang and Xu 2022). When addressing international conflicts, these media outlets consistently adopt a critical stance towards Western democracies (Zhao, 2004; Zhang and Bux Jamali 2022; Zhang and Xu 2022) while portraying China in a positive, peaceful, and harmonious light (Zhang, Zhang, and Blanchard 2022). According to Liu and Zhou (2011), Chinese news media on Weibo can serve a multifaceted role, encompassing functions such as facilitating Chinese propaganda, acting as information dissemination platforms for the public, and serving as channels for collecting public opinion. Overall, while Chinese news media on social media still primarily function as mouthpieces for the Chinese government, they have evolved their communication strategies to become more engaging and interactive.

Online participation and expression

Chinese social media users actively voice their opinions on both domestic and international issues (Xue and Stekelenburg 2018). While earlier studies confirm the substantial influence of Chinese news media in shaping public opinion (Hyun and Kim 2015; Schneider 2018; Zhang and Bux Jamali 2022; Zhang and Xu 2022), other research suggests that Chinese social media users express their opinions independently (Fang and Repnikova 2018; Zhang, Liu, and Wen 2018; Han 2021). In essence, the public's online discourse may share similarities with Chinese news media, but this should not be misconstrued as unquestioning adherence to the official media's narrative (Han 2021; Zhang and Xu 2022).

Social media platforms have emerged as powerful tools that empower and reinforce online political participation and personal expression (Bennett 2012; Bondes and Schucher 2014). Notably, nationalism stands out as a prominent feature of public online expression (Schneider 2018; Zhang and Xu 2022). Research has shown that platforms like Weibo provide internet users who share similar beliefs with virtual spaces to express their nationalistic sentiments (Hyun and Kim 2015). For instance, Weibo is replete with expressions of Chinese identity, calls for national unity, and aspirations for China's prosperous future (Zhang 2020). International issues also hold sway in public discourse (Yang and Chen 2020).

Furthermore, in discussions pertaining to foreign countries, especially the United States and other Western democracies, public sentiment frequently exhibits a strong anti-Western bias (Peng et al. 2020; Zhao 2020). For instance, Chinese people have used social media to criticize the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic by some Western countries (Zhao 2020). Peng et al. (2020) observed that social media users often expressed negative evaluations of the British prime minister and the UK's management of the

pandemic. While Chinese bottom-up nationalist expression often reflects confidence when comparing China's performance with other countries during the pandemic, it can also harbour hostile sentiments in response to external provocations, marked by confrontational and xenophobic attitudes (Zhao 2020). Hence, Chinese online participation shares similarities with state media but also exhibits differences, even within the context of nationalist discourse.

China–Russia relations and nationalism

Since the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian War, Chinese officials have expressed support for Russia. Chinese social media also demonstrated a pro-Russian sentiment (Peng 2022; Repnikova and Zhou 2022). Peng (2022) argues that Russia has become a symbol of China's strategic partnerships because both countries possess the will and power to challenge Euro-American hegemony in the international order. Chinese internet users often perceive Putin as a symbol of Russia's strength in challenging Euro-American dominance (Peng 2022). As a result, discussions regarding the Russo-Ukrainian War in China frequently revolve around the United States as a central target (Peng 2022; Repnikova and Zhou 2022; Wang 2023).

Pan (2022) reports that over 50% of 500,000 Weibo posts attributed the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War to the US-led coalition or the Ukrainian government. Wang (2023) suggests that Chinese people's supportive stance towards Russia stems from their anti-US and anti-Western nationalist sentiments. The Russo-Ukrainian War has spurred numerous discussions and disputes on social media, offering a valuable lens through which to examine social media users' opinions of Russia and Sino-Russian relations (Wang 2023). Existing studies have focused on quantitatively describing the supportive attitude toward the Russo-Ukrainian War on China's social media (Pan 2022; Repnikova and Zhou 2022; Wang 2023) rather than focusing on the social media discourse. Therefore, this chapter analyses how the Russo-Ukrainian War was discussed in Chinese social media. It focuses on the context and aims to compare official media with individual users and identify prevalent themes as to how political actors were represented in Weibo posts.

Methodology

Data collection

To examine posts about the Russo-Ukrainian War, this study conducted a discourse analysis of Sina Weibo. Weibo is a social media platform that provides users with an "imagined community network" (Gruzd, Wellman, and Takhteyev 2011), which could offer a public sphere for exchanging opinions. With approximately 600 million registered users, Weibo is a major social media platform in China where hot social issues are publicly discussed

(Wang 2018). Given that “Weibo forms a space where diverse ideologies can coexist and compete” (Zhang et al. 2018, 4), Weibo is a handy platform for collecting social media users’ attitudes (Zhang 2020). We conducted an analysis of the content, commencing on 21 February 2022, which coincided with Putin’s order to deploy Russian troops into two separatist pro-Moscow regions in eastern Ukraine. Our data collection extended until 25 April 2022. We employed the keywords “Russo-Ukrainian War” as our search criterion. Throughout this period, we identified a total of 30,476 Weibo posts, comprising 4,410 posts by official accounts and 26,066 posts by individual accounts.

Discourse analysis

This chapter utilizes discourse analysis techniques, employing contextual analysis (Van Dijk 2006) to examine the broader context of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Van Leeuwen’s (2013) critical discourse approach analyses how discourse reflects and reinforces social and political differences and hierarchies in society. We closely examined Weibo posts and found similarities and differences across themes between individual and official accounts. First, we conducted manual open coding by reviewing various types of posts and noting our own interpretations. This initial phase allowed us to select representative examples that captured the diversity of content within the Weibo platform. Next, we transitioned to a more systematic analysis applying a socio-semantic inventory methodology as outlined by Van Leeuwen (2008, 2013). This method facilitated a thorough examination of the texts, taking into account contextual factors such as geographical location, ongoing events, and social relationships. By doing so, we were able to create a framework that allowed us to categorize and make sense of the discourse on Weibo. Fuchs (2018) suggested that to keep individual users safe, researchers should not disclose usernames unless these are of public figures or an organization. Hence, names of individual users have been withheld in this study. Overall, our methodology provided a structured and holistic approach to analyse Weibo posts in a qualitative way.

Results

Western provocations

In both individual and official accounts, a recurring theme suggests that the United States and other Western countries are actively involved in stirring up tensions between Russia and Ukraine. Some posts highlight the idea that the United States is using the conflict to further its own interests. The discourse analysis also suggests that the war in Ukraine was not just seen as about military and territorial matters but also control over energy resources. Posts mention that the conflict could benefit the United States by disrupting

Russia's energy supplies to Europe, potentially increasing demand for American energy resources. For example:

- "The United States is hyping up the Russo-Ukrainian conflict and creating a war atmosphere to ease its own domestic inflation." (*Global Times*, 10 March 2022)
- "The Russia-Ukraine war has been ongoing for over a month, with many EU countries expressing their intention to boycott Russian energy. Meanwhile, Europe, which has been eagerly leading the global green revolution, has also proposed plans to 'de-Russify' its energy sector. One of the most controversial aspects of this plan is the choice of energy sources for power generation." (*Phoenix TV*, 8 June 2022)
- "The war has disrupted European-Russian energy trade, allowing high-priced American oil and natural gas to enter the European market, benefiting U.S. energy companies." (individual account, 15 May 2022)

Anti-war

Another theme that emerges in both individual and official accounts is that the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War has ignited a global conversation and raised concerns in various nations. This discourse reflects the deep-seated desire for peace and aversion to war resonating with people worldwide. It is a stark reminder that war's devastating consequences are not limited to soldiers but also affect innocent civilians who must endure the trauma and upheaval of their lives being torn apart. For example:

- "Regarding the Russia-Ukraine war, firstly, like all peace-loving Chinese people, we oppose war and call for peace. Secondly, as for who is right or wrong between Russia and Ukraine, we do not take sides, and no one can force us to take sides." (individual account, 3 March 2022)
- "This conflict is unlikely to yield favorable outcomes for either of the two nations involved, and it carries a greater disadvantage for the global community than any potential advantages." (*China News Service*, 2 May 2022)
- "A war that should never have happened has occurred, and the damage it brings will take generations to repair. We should not be celebrating behind our keyboards. There are no winners in war, but there are certainly losers, and they are the innocent lives caught in the midst of conflict." (individual account, 26 February 2022)

Official accounts and the economic impact

Another theme in the discourse of official accounts focuses on the global economic consequences of the war. The discourse highlights the interconnectedness of the world economy and the vulnerability of financial markets

to geopolitical tensions. The mention of oil and technology stocks reflects the immediate repercussions on specific industries, with some stocks plummeting while others surge. This economic discourse underscores the broader consequences of conflicts beyond their humanitarian toll, reminding us of the intricate web of relationships and interests that bind nations together in an increasingly interconnected world. It raises questions about the stability of global financial markets in the face of geopolitical instability and the need for international cooperation to address such challenges. For example:

- “The Russia–Ukraine war is having a systemic and sustained impact on global food, fuel, and finance, and it continues to deteriorate.” (*Phoenix TV*, 14 April 2022)
- “The World Trade Organization predicts that the Russia–Ukraine war could lead to nearly halving global trade growth this year, thereby dragging down global economic growth, and in the long term, it could even result in the disintegration of the global economy into several blocs.” (*Lianhe Zaobao*, 24 March 2022)

Individual accounts and the human angle

The individual accounts address a broader spectrum of topics than the official accounts. The former include discussions about the impact on civilians, the experiences of soldiers, and the human stories behind the war. They also delve into subjects like the motivations of foreign fighters, media coverage, and public opinion. Individual discourse is diverse as to subject matter, reflecting the concerns and interests of individuals. For example:

- “Two Russian-speaking veterans in their forties from Luhansk, before charging into battle, were gazing towards the distant battlefield. Behind them stood parents and children, their homeland. For the sake of survival and peace, they embarked on this journey without hesitation. They knew that they couldn’t leave the burden of war for the next generation.” (individual account, 2 April 2022)
- “We are fortunate to live in a peaceful nation, and we should feel profound empathy for those who endure the hardships of war. I am uncertain about how they and their children will survive.” (individual account, 3 June 2022)

While Chinese official accounts convey nationalist sentiments, individual accounts express more conspiracy theories that contain strong anti-US and anti-West nationalist sentiments. The discourse on relations between Russia and Ukraine, Russia and NATO, Russia and the United States and other Western countries, and Russia and Turkey, is negative among individual accounts. For instance, a post that received more than 3,000 likes claims that:

- “The Russia–Ukraine war is orchestrated by the United States, with numerous perceived benefits that the U.S. can gain from this conflict. First, European turmoil benefits the U.S. dollar and can attract global capital flow to the United States. Second, the U.S. military–industrial complex depletes its weapon stockpiles and profits immensely from the war. Third, the war disrupts European-Russian energy transactions, allowing high-priced American oil and natural gas to enter the European market, benefiting American energy companies. Fourth, European dependence on the United States for security increases due to the confrontation between Europe and Russia, giving the United States more control over Europe. Fifth, a Russia embroiled in conflict will be less capable of countering the United States.” (individual account, 24 April 2022)

Thus, individual users express nationalist sentiments, suggesting that the war might have been provoked by the United States for its own benefit. While the Chinese public generally holds a favourable view of Russia, it is also infused with a strong sense of nationalism. For instance, another popular post claims that

Russia has issued a list where it repays the debt of countries and regions that have imposed sanctions on Russia directly in rubles, and the patents of these countries and regions are no longer protected... Russia has become the frontline of conflicts between China and the West... China doesn't need to openly take sides in this war. We simply need to cast a wide net and unreservedly gather the funds and wealth that have been looted by these American and European robbers as they scatter and flee.

(individual account, 4 April 2022)

In summary, discourse among official accounts presents a formal and authoritative tone. The tone is diplomatic and focused on international relations, emphasizing Ukraine's position in the conflict, the impact of sanctions, and the need for global support. It calls for justice and accountability through the establishment of a special court. In contrast, discourse among individual accounts tends to be more diverse in terms of opinions and speculations about the Russo-Ukrainian War. People express a wider range of views, from conspiracy theories to alternative narratives. Some may question the official narratives put forth by governments and news outlets, leading to a variety of interpretations and conjectures. Additionally, compared with posts from official accounts, posts from individual accounts often carry more emotional content, as individuals may express their fears, concerns, and frustrations about the war. This emotional aspect can lead to passionate discussions, with some users sharing personal anecdotes or stories related to the conflict. It reflects the impact of the war on individuals' lives and their empathy towards people in the war.

Conclusion

This chapter delved into the portrayal of the Russo-Ukrainian War on Chinese social media, particularly Weibo, showing how it serves as a platform for mobilizing and directing nationalist sentiments, notably during global crises. Anti-Western sentiment consistently emerges as a dominant theme in international conflict discussions (Zhao 2004; Schneider 2018; Zhang and Bux Jamali 2022; Zhang and Xu 2022). In line with several previous studies (Peng 2022; Repnikova and Zhou 2022; Wang 2023), this chapter finds that both official accounts and Chinese internet users actively voice their opinions on the Russo-Ukrainian War. Findings also reveal similarities and differences in the discourse on the war between Chinese official media and individual users. In terms of similarities, official media and individual users express similar sentiments. They demonstrate a positive sentiment towards Russia and its allies, while showing a negative one towards Western countries. Notably, Chinese individuals on social media exhibit more significant nationalism, directed towards the United States and other Western countries (Zhang and Qiu 2022).

This chapter reaffirms that Chinese netizens are inclined to express their views on international matters with nationalist sentiment (Zhang and Xu 2022). Prior research indicates that Chinese social media generally exhibits a positive attitude towards Russia (Peng 2022; Repnikova and Zhou 2022). As with Peng (2022), our chapter finds that Chinese social media characterizes the relationship between China and Russia as amicable, collaborative, and mutually beneficial, reflecting Russia's growing importance as a strategic partner to China. However, when it comes to Russia's relationship with Western democracies, a consistently negative frame prevails, emphasizing antagonism, confrontation, sanctions, and condemnation. Russia is positioned as a frontline actor in China's challenge to Euro-American hegemony (Peng 2022), with the Russo-Ukrainian War serving as a tool for Chinese nationalist discourse. In other words, the Western democracies are among the most heated targets in Chinese discussions about the war (Pan 2022). Thus, anti-Western sentiment remains a prominent feature on Chinese social media (Zhao 2004; Schneider 2018; Zhang and Bux Jamali 2022; Zhang and Xu 2022), with Chinese social media's support for Russia largely rooted in anti-Western, nationalist sentiment (Wang 2023).

However, discourse and practices on Weibo vary between individual users and official accounts. Opinions expressed by individual accounts are diverse, encompassing not only international issues but also their potential impact on daily life. Chinese official media, on the other hand, maintains a formal and authoritative tone when reporting on the Russo-Ukrainian War, while simultaneously displaying a pronounced negative attitude towards the West and a positive one towards China and Russia. Ultimately, social network sites in China act as a catalyst for channelling nationalist sentiments, fostering

convergence among individuals with shared beliefs, and reinforcing a sense of national identity through the exchange of slogans and symbols.

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