

China Defenders From Abroad: Exploring Pro-China Foreign Political Influencers on X/Twitter

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Abstract

Political influencers are social media users who attempt to shape others' political attitudes and behaviors through personal influences. While prior research has mainly examined political influencers in Western democracies, this study shifts attention to an international context, focusing on the self-presentation strategies and discursive frames used by non-Chinese political influencers who support China on Twitter (X). Through a thematic analysis of online profiles and a frame analysis of 3000 tweets by 10 influencers, we identified two self-presentation strategies: "the explorer," which highlights the influencer's attractiveness, closeness, and passionate authenticity, and "the expert," which emphasizes expertise and intellectual authenticity. We further propose a typology of four frames used by the influencers to defend or promote China: "Western Hypocrisy," which criticizes Western double standards; "Western Threat," which presents the West as a major threat to global security and growth; "System Superiority," which promotes China's political model against Western models; and "Common Destiny," which envisions a prosperous future shared by China's global partners. We argue that although the political affiliations of these influencers remain ambiguous and difficult to determine, they have become de facto contributors to China's quest for global reputation in a digital age.

Keywords

political influencers, self-presentation, authenticity, source credibility, frames

Introduction

The rise of digital technology has substantially transformed the landscape of information consumption and opinion formation (Bennett, 2003; Tewksbury & Rittenberg, 2012). Notably, social media have become increasingly popular among actors who intend to expand their social influence to shape the attitudes of others (Brown & Hayes, 2008). Often referred to as "social media influencers," these accounts play important roles in the evolving online information ecosystem (Freberg et al., 2011). With their widening reach and impact, social media influencers have attracted broad interest from various groups, including political actors (de Gregorio & Goanta, 2022). Recent scholarship has further identified the emergence of "political influencers" who leverage their online presence to shift others' political opinions (Maly, 2020). Noting the growing salience of this topic, scholars have called for more research on the roles played by political influencers in digital media ecologies, and their impacts on political communication processes and outcomes (Riedl et al., 2023).

In recent years, many political influencers who self-present as neither ethnically Chinese nor citizens of China have been

found active on international platforms such as Twitter (X) to endorse China's political stance and policy approaches. Their social media activities appear to target a mainly English-speaking audience and could be interpreted as attempts to influence the attitudes of foreign publics toward China. Therefore, we consider these influencers as "pro-China foreign political influencers." They have emerged at a pivotal moment in China's diplomatic endeavor to reconstruct its global reputation (Verma, 2020). By creating and amplifying positive narratives around China, these influencers have become de facto contributors to the reputation-management project of a foreign state, regardless of their real motivations.

These influencers' activities align closely with the concept of soft power—a nation's capability to shape international

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preferences through cultural appeal and ideological attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 2008). However, as foreign users who are neither state media representatives nor official Chinese propagandists, their presence complicates conventional understandings of both political influencers and soft power practices. Acknowledging the importance of understanding political influencers from a global and dynamic perspective, this study addresses the following research questions: how do “pro-China foreign political influencers” present themselves on Twitter? What are the frames they use to shape political discussions about China on Twitter?

By analyzing 10 influencer accounts and the posts they made between February 2022 and February 2023, we probed into the self-presentation strategies and the frames they used to defend or promote China. We identified two key self-presentation strategies among these influencers—“the explorer” (emphasizing attractiveness, closeness, and passionate authenticity) and “the expert” (centering expertise and intellectual authenticity)—alongside four discursive frames: “Western Hypocrisy,” “Western Threat,” “System Superiority,” and “Common Destiny.” These frames systematically counter criticisms of China while promoting its political model and global leadership. Although the influencers’ formal political ties remain unclear, we argue that they are nonetheless effectively participating in China’s digital reputation-building efforts.

Political influencers on social media

The concept of influencers can be traced back to opinion leaders, which refers to people who filter and interpret mass media content to shape others’ decisions and behaviors (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). Early research showed that opinion leaders could intermediate between mass media and the public by selectively presenting media information and shaping discourses (Perse & Lambe, 2017). In the digital age, the reach of influencers has expanded from traditional interpersonal communication to digital networks (Lyons & Henderson, 2005). Moreover, the development of social media has significantly enhanced influencers’ ability to intervene in mainstream discourses and compete with traditional sources (Maly, 2020).

Due to their current association with social media as opposed to mass media, political influencers are sometimes understood narrowly as “self-created” grassroots contributors of “self-produced” political content (Bause, 2021, p. 296). However, others argue that established political actors can also become political influencers, such as parliamentarians (Esteve Del Valle & Borge Bravo, 2018) and famously, U.S. president Donald Trump (Pérez-Curiel & Limón-Naharro, 2019). Reflecting on existing studies, Riedl et al. (2023) propose to define political influencers broadly as “content creators that endorse a political position, social cause, or candidate through media that they produce and/or share on a given social media platform” (p. 2). According to this definition, political influencers can be politicians,

journalists, activists, ordinary users, and even automated or semi-automated “bot” and “troll” accounts (Riedl et al., 2023). Their motivations for acting as political influencers also diverge, ranging from promoting election candidates to supporting social movements (Peres-Neto, 2022).

While many studies examine the domestic activities of political influencers in Western democracies, others shift attention to their role in a more dynamic and international context (Liang & Lu, 2023). Some studies focus on influencers employed by state actors to intervene in foreign elections, such as Russia’s internet research agency (IRA) “trolls” who were found to have conducted cross-platform disinformation campaigns during U.S. presidential elections (Golovchenko et al., 2020). Others investigate how states use influencers to construct national images (Liang & Lu, 2023) or shift foreign publics’ attitudes (Beskow & Carley, 2020). However, these studies focus mainly on automation and disinformation, and little attention has been paid to influencers who engage in the more subtle practice of online identity performance while endorsing political authorities on international platforms.

Self-presentation strategies of influencers

Social media influencers constantly engage in self-presentation practices to attract audiences and traffic (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical analysis provides a metaphor for these practices: on the social media “front stage,” influencers develop different self-presentation strategies to manage how audiences perceive them (Kováčová, 2022). As such, social media influencers become what Wernick (1991) calls “a subject that promotes itself, constructs itself for others in line with the competitive imaging needs of the market” (p. 192). The resulting online “persona” of such self-presentation work becomes an identity performance, mediated by platforms and detached from an individual’s offline presence (Moore et al., 2017).

A key aspect of influencer self-presentation is the performance of “authenticity” (Pöyry et al., 2019; Raun, 2018; Xia et al., 2019), a multifaceted concept that has been broadly recognized as “a cultural construct closely tied to Western notions of the individual” (Handler, 1986, p. 2). Therefore, the notion of staying true to one’s authentic self is often associated with preserving individual uniqueness against external social influences (Van Leeuwen, 2001). Meanwhile, the validation-seeking practice of “proficiency” (Moeller & D’ambrosio, 2021)—displaying one’s identity via curated public profiles, is often seen as the antithesis of authenticity (Moeller, 2022).

Nevertheless, on social media where everyone becomes a “profile,” the perceived lack of intent toward proficiency such as the “raw aesthetic” (Harff & Schmuck, 2024, p. 2759) of seemingly amateur content can signal authenticity. Some tactics can also facilitate impressions of authenticity, such as sharing personal experiences and “vulnerabilities” (Wang &

Picone, 2021), articulating non-monetary and intrinsic motivations for content production, and openly discussing commercial details of their promotional work (Audrezet et al., 2020). Specifically, Audrezet et al. (2020) termed the expression of intrinsic motivations as “passionate authenticity,” and the disclosure of external sponsorship as “transparent authenticity.” In this way, influencer authenticity is understood as a target display of signals and traits that allow their audiences to picture an authentic individual.

Influencer’s self-presentation strategies can be further analyzed through theories of source credibility. Ohanian (1990) famously defined source credibility as “a communicator’s positive characteristics that affect the receiver’s acceptance of a message” (p. 41). The most influential source credibility model consists of two dimensions: expertise, which indicates a communicator’s perceived ability to make accurate claims, and trustworthiness, which refers to an audience’s confidence in the communicator’s integrity and genuineness (Pornpitakpan, 2004). Other researchers, notably McGuire (1985), identify attractiveness to be a third dimension, which has been developed to indicate not only a communicator’s physical attractiveness but also the audience’s sense of affective proximity to the communicator. This psychological component of attractiveness resembles what Horton and Richard Wohl (1956) called “intimacy at a distance,” a phenomenon also observed among social media users who develop “parasocial relationships” with the influencers they follow (Dibble et al., 2016). Building on this, Li and Yin (2018) propose to separate the feeling of similarity from the dimension of attractiveness, terming it “closeness”—the extent to which influencers are seen as “common people” whom the followers feel they can relate to. Therefore, to achieve more effective persuasion, influencers can strategically construct their communicative credibility by self-presenting as an authoritative, trustworthy, attractive, and/or relatable source of information.

Framing theory and political influencers

While a substantial body of the literature focuses on how commercial influencers shape their followers’ purchase intentions, much less research has specifically examined the mechanisms through which political influencers shape people’s attitudes toward politics. We argue that the framing scholarship could help us explore different argumentative approaches employed by political influencers to sway opinions. The sociological study of framing emerged as the analysis of interpretive structures that are socially constructed and used by individuals to make sense of their experiences (Goffman, 1974). Entman (1989, 1991, 1993) further argued that frames exist at not only the cognitive level as models of information processing but also the textual level as attributes of a message, and the two levels interact with each other to form communication outcomes. Moreover, framing as the practice of bringing salience to a selective representation of

reality is particularly relevant for political actors, whose power acquisition depends on the relative competitiveness of their views (Entman, 1993).

Importantly, Entman (1993) identified four functions of frames: (1) *problem definition*, which provides a value-laden description of an action, (2) *causal interpretation*, which attributes the problem to a set of factors, (3) *moral evaluation*, which makes a moral judgment of the actors and the outcomes of their actions, and (4) *treatment recommendation*, which prescribes certain remedies for the identified problem (p. 52). This classic four-dimensional approach provides a convenient structure for examining issue-specific frames, which “is pertinent only to specific topics or events” compared to generic frames (de Vreese, 2005, p. 54). Therefore, we draw on Entman’s foundational work on frames and framing to understand how political influencers compete for topical dominance in the intricate landscape of online discourses.

China’s quest for reputation in global communication

Soft power conventionally refers to a country’s capacity to exert cultural and ideological impacts on the international community to achieve desirable outcomes for itself (Nye, 2008). Since the 1990s, Chinese scholars and authorities have paid increased attention to soft power (Cho & Jeong, 2008) and have Chinese-ized the concept, aiming at the “soft use of China’s power” (Li, 2009, p. 7). More recently, the advent of social media has motivated changes in China’s public diplomacy approach. Over the past decade, China has shifted its focus to the development of a digital publicity framework, especially on international social media like Twitter (X). Jia and Li (2020) propose the term “public diplomacy whole network” to describe this emerging communication system composed of diverse actors across digital platforms. Official actors play leading roles in this network, such as state-own media outlets (Huang & Wang, 2020), Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson (Sullivan & Wang, 2022), and ambassadors (Huang & Wang, 2021).

Despite the connectivity and interactivity of social media, China has continued to follow a covert, centralized, top-down actor management model of public diplomacy (d’Hooghe, 2021). With Xi Jinping’s policy of building “international discourse power” and engaging in “the struggle for international public opinion” (Xi, 2021, para. 1 & 3), China’s public diplomacy Twitter (X) accounts have set out to “build the system of Chinese discourse and Chinese narratives” in the international community. The digitalization of China’s public diplomacy primarily involved promoting Beijing-accredited diplomatic institutions, diplomats, official organizations, media, journalists, and influencers to create accounts on international social media (Huang & Wang, 2021).

There is, however, a lack of understanding of non-Chinese foreign actors who are also part of this public diplomacy whole

Table 1. Influencer Information.

Number	Profession	Nationality	Current location
1	Journalist	New Zealand	China
2	Student	Germany	China
3	Writer, Journalist, Academic	United Kingdom	United Kingdom
4	Analyst	Sweden and Italy	China
5	N/A	Australia	China
6	YouTuber	United States	United States
7	Entrepreneur	N/A	N/A
8	YouTuber	United States	China
9	Writer, Musician	United Kingdom	United Kingdom
10	Researcher	United Arab Emirates	China

Note. All information presented above was publicly accessible from the influencers' X/Twitter account profiles and posts. Current locations were obtained from their X/Twitter profiles as of February 13, 2023. "N/A" indicates that the information was not disclosed.

network. Despite their ambiguous affiliations with the Chinese authorities, it is important to acknowledge their digital influences on China's soft power and global reputation. To explore this topic, this study addresses the following two research questions, focusing respectively on the performative and discursive aspects of their content:

Research Question 1 (RQ1). How do "pro-China foreign political influencers" present themselves on Twitter?

Research Question 2 (RQ2). What are the frames used by "pro-China foreign political influencers" to shape political discussions about China on Twitter?

Methodology

This study examined 10 "pro-China foreign political influencer" accounts (Table 1). Relevant Twitter accounts for the study were first identified using a snowball sampling approach beginning with Andy Boreham, a New Zealand journalist, public figure, and influencer who became labeled by Twitter as "China state-affiliated media" on February 19th, 2022. By observing the accounts that he followed and interacted with, a few other similar accounts were identified, whose social networks were tracked down further to locate more accounts. The profiles of these accounts and their most recent 50 posts were observed to assess their relevance to our research, determined by whether they expressed overtly positive attitudes toward China while presenting themselves as non-Chinese by both ethnicity and nationality. Finally, from the pool of identified "pro-China foreigner" accounts, 10 accounts with at least 50,000 followers were selected for analysis. This threshold was chosen for its effectiveness in distinguishing "macro-influencers" from "micro-influencers" within the target population—while the most suggested cut-off point between macro and micro-influencers is 100,000 followers, this figure may vary for smaller markets (Conde & Casais, 2023). In the

case of pro-China political influencers, most influencers with less than 50,000 followers were observed to have significantly fewer followers (e.g., only a few thousands) and little to no engagement. Therefore, 50,000 followers was used as the minimum threshold for sampling.

To answer RQ1, a thematic analysis was conducted to explore the recurring patterns of meaning in publicly visible artifacts on the account main page, including profile pictures, banners, bios, hyperlinks, and the most recent 100 posts (tweets and retweets) as displayed in February 2023. To answer RQ2, a frame analysis was applied to examine textual and visual materials in account posts that engaged with social and political topics involving China. Frames were inductively identified and broken down into the four categories suggested by Entman (1993). From each account, 300 posts created between February 2022 and February 2023 were manually collected via screenshots for frame analysis, selected based on their relevance to RQ2.

It is important to note that publicly available content on social media should not be automatically treated as public data, and hence suitable for research. Researchers should evaluate the contextual meaning of privacy and the potential risks for individuals to be included in datasets and publications (Zimmer, 2010). Within the context of this study, we consider "pro-China foreign political influencer" accounts as public profiles designed to attract engagement on China-related political topics. For example, Andy Boreham was outspoken about his intention to provoke discussions on controversial topics about China through his social media presence. Given this and other examples alike, we treat content posted by these influencers as suitable for collection and analysis for the purpose of this study. To mitigate potential risks, we deleted all raw data 12 months after collection, except for the one screenshot (Figure 1) used for demonstration. Except for Andy Boreham, the first identified influencer and public figure, we refer to all other influencers by assigned pseudonyms.



Figure 1. Tweet posted by Andy Boreham.

Table 2. Self-Presentation Strategies and Self-Images.

Strategies		
Self-images	Signaling credibility	Signaling authenticity
"The Explorer"	Attractiveness, Closeness, Trustworthiness	Passionate Authenticity
"The Expert"	Expertise, Trustworthiness	Intellectual Authenticity

Results

Two self-images

In response to RQ1, we examined the self-presentation strategies and self-images developed by these influencers through their Twitter activities. Across the 10 accounts, we recognized two types of self-images presented via two different sets of strategies to signal source credibility and authenticity to audiences. As Table 2 shows, the first self-image, *"the explorer,"* is constructed by displaying attractiveness, closeness, trustworthiness, and passionate authenticity. The second self-image, *"the expert,"* relies on strategies of signaling expertise, trustworthiness, and what we call "intellectual authenticity"—that is, their integrity and independence as original thinkers.

The explorer. An "explorer" is a political influencer who promotes China's soft power by sharing content about Chinese society and culture, especially their experiences and daily routines in China. These personal testimonies tend to be

emotion-laden, curated in engaging formats, and typically feature a "raw aesthetics" of amateur media content, such as showing photos captured via a personal smartphone with limited editing. The individual who supposedly runs the account—that is, the influencer—frequently appears as the protagonist in these photos in appealing and likable ways. The experiences being shared are usually distinctly China-related, such as celebrating Chinese festivals and cooking Chinese cuisines. Meanwhile, other lifestyle-related content about personal hobbies and social life also appears on such accounts, which can be interpreted as a form of parasocial activity to diminish audiences' perceived social distance with the influencer. As such, the regular sharing of personal activities becomes a dual process of promoting Chinese culture to a primarily Western audience while constructing affective intimacy with the followers. Moreover, to signal their trustworthiness as an independent and reliable source of information about China, an explorer is likely to disclose their personal reasons for being in China such as traveling and studying abroad, and portray their participation in online discussions about China as voluntary and self-motivated.

For instance, the influencer “Judith” presents herself as an international student studying at a Chinese university. Judith joined Twitter in March 2020 and already gained 79,000 followers by February 2023. Her unique personal lifestyle and likable qualities are the main features of her “explorer” image. As of February 2023, Judith’s profile picture is a portrait of a blonde-haired white woman, presumably in her twenties, posing in a bar-like environment with her drink on the table and turning around to face the camera with a contented smile. The banner at the top of her account page shows a photo of a Northern Chinese barbecue restaurant with a sign that reads “wumao xiaochuan shaokao,” “fifty-cent small skewer barbecue.” The term “fifty-cent” alludes to “50 cent party,” a term that denotes internet users who are paid to show support for Chinese authorities in online forums. This humorous reference to herself as a China supporter highlights her originality through self-irony and becomes a tactful response to skepticisms about her true motivations. The subject matter of the banner photo also expresses Judith’s enjoyment of the street food culture and night life in urban China. Combining these visual components, a viewer’s first impression of Judith is likely driven toward a curious and passionate international student who enjoys exploring the local scenes in China.

Judith’s dedication to the branding of an explorer persona is further exemplified by her tweets, most of which depict cultural moments in her daily life. For example, in a tweet created during *Chunjie* (Chinese New Year), she posted pictures of herself proudly holding two large plates of raw dumplings, captioned, “My handmade Chinese dumplings/ Could eat it everyday.” Ordinary and simple as it is, it quickly became one of her most popular tweets that received many comments praising her dumpling-making skills and wishing her a happy holiday. Moreover, in the background of the photo, television can be seen playing the anime *Case Closed* (Detective Conan). This detail highlights a personal interest of Judith: as she claims in her account bio, she is a fan of Animation, Comics, and Games (ACG). In one simple tweet, Judith shows herself as a likable and relatable individual while presenting Chinese culture in an appealing and accessible manner.

The expert. The second type of political influencer, “the expert,” concentrates on showing their expertise in China-related topics and the ability to make compelling and original arguments in support of China. Instead of underscoring their intrinsic motivations for promoting China, expert influencers signal their authenticity by constructing an impression of neutrality in political discussions. This strategy of intellectual authenticity serves to show both intellectual integrity and the ability to minimize external influences in one’s thinking. Accordingly, these influencers tend to present themselves as independent scholars, watchdog journalists, and influential authors who make reliable and responsible claims about China based on rigorous research rather than

political biases. While they seldom post any personal content, they are keen to share press coverage of their conference speeches, award receptions, and other appearances in professional occasions that can enhance their prestige and credibility. Their Twitter activities focus on direct engagement in debates about China, where they signal expertise through assertive arguments.

“Henry” represents an expert influencer of this kind. His profile picture is a headshot of a late middle-aged white man dressed in a white shirt, bold and beardless, looking through his glasses directly at the spectator with a confident smile. The photo appears formal and professional, complemented by a black-and-white banner which shows him delivering a public lecture in front of a bar chart, a visual testimony to his intellect. He writes in his bio, concisely and proudly, “Author, . . . columnist, broadcaster, speaker.” His scholarly and professional identities are jointly displayed to establish an image of a well-experienced and knowledgeable thinker, capable of engaging with complicated topics and qualified to produce original research.

Henry’s tweets continue to embody this style of concise writing, refrained from overt expressions of personal feelings. He seldom retweets or quote-tweets others but frequently tweets in purely textual forms without any multimedia components. In many of these heavily text-based tweets, he writes effectively like a trained journalist and makes frequent references to statistical data, historical “facts,” and other sources that appear credible to support his arguments. For example, in a four-part tweet thread about the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, he wrote: “China faced two huge challenges: Covid and US hostility. China conquered both.” He went on to list four triumphs of China, including the successful operation of a closed loop in the Olympic Village, a “tour de force” type of overall organization, the emergence of Eileen Gu and her symbolic significance for Sino-U.S. relations, and the athletic achievements of China’s national team. To support his first claim, he cited numbers that only “437” positive cases were reported in Beijing during the 17-day Olympics, whereas the U.K. “had a daily average of over 45,000 last week.” Backing his analysis with data from established sources, Henry constructs his own credibility by referencing and echoing known authorities.

Hybrid types. We also found that many political influencers employ mixed strategies that can be categorized as *hybrid*. They rely on attractive qualities that allow their unique personality to shine through while constructing an authoritative voice to make themselves heard. Some influencers display explorer and expert traits simultaneously without breaking the consistency of their self-images, and others tailor their strategies to specific contexts. “Frank” is an influencer who exemplifies such strategic hybridity. With a profile picture depicting an elderly white man in his bicycle helmet and suit, and a banner that shows a highway disappearing into a deserted landscape, Frank presents himself as an aged foreign

Table 3. Four discursive frames.

Function	“Western Hypocrisy”	“Western Threat”	“System Superiority”	“Common Destiny”
Problem Definition	Widespread hostility toward China in the West	Increased tensions and conflicts around the world	The West declines while China rises	Western hegemony and global inequality
Causal Interpretation	Western media and elites are biased toward themselves and against China	The West benefits from its aggression and is motivated to continue; China does the opposite	Western liberal models produce chaos and moral demise; the Chinese model leads to stability and growth	The lack of cooperation with China hinders global growth, especially in non-Western countries
Moral Evaluation	China is wronged by double-standard hypocrites in the West	The West invades and oppresses; China makes peace and friends	Individualistic anomie in the West versus social harmony in China	Capitalist egocentrism of the West versus internationalism of China
Treatment Recommendation	Distrust Western narratives and “do your own research” on China	Condemn the West and endorse Chinese initiatives	The West needs to recognize and learn from China	Countries should strengthen their ties with China

traveler who has biked around China, even the most remote areas. It is easy to form the impression that Frank, an experienced traveler who has seen everything for himself, can be trusted as a reliable source of firsthand information about China. Meanwhile, Frank seldom posts any personal content but frequently engages in online discourses about China’s international image, where he adopts a direct and assertive tone. As such, his experience as a cyclist who traveled across China presents a likable personality and supports the credibility of his opinions on China, while his argumentative style further signals his intelligence and trustworthiness.

Indeed, the case of Frank does not apply to every influencer whose self-presentation strategy falls within the hybrid category. “Dylan” is an influencer whose hybrid strategy differs from Frank’s. While he mostly presents himself as an expert figure by regularly posting links to his recorded TED Talks and videos from his YouTube channel, he also occasionally acts like an ordinary social media user who shares their life with a network of acquaintances and friends, posting his reactions to the World Cup and updates on business trips. Dylan combines the two strategies and signals his authenticity mainly by separating his ordinary self from his professional persona. Unlike Frank, he seems to maintain a conscious boundary between sharing his personal life and discussing China-related political topics. Therefore, Dylan’s strategic hybridity is characterized by performing the image of a credible Chinese expert who consciously separates his intellectual work from his private activities.

Four discursive frames

This section examines four common frames identified from the tweets made by the sampled influencers: “Western Hypocrisy,” “Western Threat,” “System Superiority,” and “Common Destiny.” Following Entman (1993)’s definition of a frame, each identified frame is expressed in four functions (Table 3).

“Western Hypocrisy.” The Western Hypocrisy frame describes how pro-China foreign political influencers object to

hostility from the West toward China by depicting Western actors as hypocrites who deliberately present China negatively and themselves positively. These Western actors include Western media, intellectuals, politicians, and/or governments. The frame accuses these actors of harboring double standards, such as praising an act when it is performed by Western actors while dismissing a similar act of China. Influencers who enact this frame challenge prevalent Western criticisms of China by problematizing the moral underpinning of such discourses. To demonstrate this, they employ three types of argument: first, the West consistently neglects and justifies its own unethical and morally dubious acts; second, the West interprets China’s acts as undisputedly ill-intentioned; and third, in an event that involves both Western and Chinese actors, the Western actor always assigns the moral high ground to itself and blames China for any negative outcome. Respectively, these arguments portray the West as hypocritical in treating its own wrongs, in representing China, and in its interactions with China.

When constructing the first argument, recurring topics raised by the influencers include the prevalence of Eurocentrism, the Western justification of its aggression toward other countries, and the neglect of its own system failures such as capitalist exploitation and growing inequalities. When engaging with these topics to construct an argument on how the West downplays its own mistakes, many influencers cite both current and historical events as evidence of unchanged hypocrisy in a post-colonial age. For example, when accusing the U.S. of violating domestic human rights, an influencer mentioned both the recent tragic death of George Floyd and the past genocide of Native Americans. With these two examples, the influencer criticized the U.S. for failing to change this repeated pattern of injustice while constantly shifting attention to China in human rights discussions.

The second argument primarily engages in topics about the quality of life in China, China’s relationship with non-Western countries, and the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) one-party leadership. Influencers who employ this argument often claim that the West perpetuates an untruthful representation of life in China as materially impoverished

and politically repressed. They argue that Western interpretations of China's diplomatic interactions with non-Western countries are usually distorted by the prevalent perception of China as an evil giant rising to become a new imperialist. Moreover, the influencers criticize the West for portraying the party-state as illegitimate and oppressive to its people. One typical instance raised by these influencers is that Western actors would repeatedly alter their argument to attack every policy shift made by the Chinese authority. For example, Andy Boreham drew attention to how the West discussed China's approach to COVID-19 regulation before and after the end of the Zero-COVID policy in December 2022 (Figure 1).

In this tweet, Andy made a satirical comment on the contrast in Western attitudes toward China's COVID regulations before and after a significant policy shift. In an ironic tone, he first imitated how Western politicians used to show their distaste for China's Zero-COVID measures, with a "clown" emoji at the end of his sentence to mock and express disapproval of such statements. Then, he posted three screenshots of online news about Western governments' defensive reactions to China reopening its borders. The comparison appears to suggest that Western politicians and media remain negative about China's COVID policy despite a drastic shift from strict to no control, thereby implying that Western attacks on Chinese policies are motivated by political biases rather than fair judgment.

The third type of argument is often found in discussions about recent events involving both Chinese and Western actors, especially the U.S. For instance, in February 2023, an uncategorized Chinese balloon was detected in U.S. territory and shot down after arousing U.S. suspicions about it being a "spy balloon." The influencers mocked the U.S. for overreacting to a "banal and harmless" weather balloon that "accidentally" appeared above its land. Moreover, some influencers cited the incident as an example of U.S. hostility and hypersensitivity toward China. They argued that the U.S. has been actively destroying Sino-U.S. relationship by habitually labeling ambiguous gestures from China as potential threats to its national security.

To counter this identified hypocrisy, many influencers suggest distrusting Western media who they perceive as watchdogs for prejudiced Western politicians and seeking information from alternative sources, including themselves—the "credible" and "authentic" sources of information about China. As the influencer Frank states in his bio, "Everything Western media says is sinister or evil about China, when researched is found to be quite reasonable. Do the research." Noteworthy, while this statement seems to promote independent and critical thinking, it is still anchored in a pro-China stance that takes negative understandings of China as inherently biased and inaccurate.

"Western Threat." The Western Threat frame argues that the West is responsible for tensions and conflicts globally,

whereas China, often seen in the West as a threat to world peace, is in fact playing the opposite role. Influencers who use this frame usually contend that the West has economic and political interests in provoking and maintaining conflicts elsewhere. Moreover, they reason the West is further motivated to repeat aggressive acts due to experiences of positive outcomes for itself, knowing fully the harms they can inflict upon the other actors involved. Similar to the Western Hypocrisy frame, these influencers also underline the contrast between popular Western rhetoric and "the reality," between the widespread "China Threat" discourse and the actual perpetrators of violence in their view. Furthermore, they contend that Western countries, especially the U.S., intend to strengthen their international influence and weaken rising competitors such as Russia and China to create a unilateral world.

One influencer who has frequently enacted the Western Threat frame is "Carlo." In one such typical tweet about the crisis in Ukraine, he asserted that Ukrainian soldiers are only "puppets" of their Western sponsors—that is, according to him, the U.S. and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) under U.S. leadership. In his other tweets, Carlo repeatedly emphasized the decisive role-played by the U.S. in escalating the conflict for its own political interests as part of its agenda to achieve global hegemony. Meanwhile, he also criticized the U.S. for demonizing countries who challenges its agenda, which he perceived as similar in nature to U.S. propaganda during the Cold War. As such, Carlo portrays the U.S. as dividing the world into two camps: one that endorses U.S. hegemony, and one that resists a unilateral future. His arguments thus present the U.S. and its allies, rather than China, to be the real threats to world peace.

Within this frame, the recommended treatment can be understood as an attitudinal and positional one: to condemn the West and to support Chinese initiatives. In one of the tweets that Carlo retweeted from Andy Boreham, an image was posted, captioned: "China has released its proposal on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis." The image is a summary of the main points raised by Chinese officials, including "respecting the sovereignty of all countries," "ceasing hostilities," "resuming peace talks," "promoting post-conflict reconstruction," and so on. These points are summarized by Andy and echoed by Carlo exemplifies the Western Threat frame's suggested remedy: Western aggression should be condemned and sanctioned, while Chinese initiatives toward peace-making and restoration should be endorsed by the international community, especially non-Western countries. Consistent with the Western Hypocrisy frame, the influencers argue that the real threat to world peace is the one who places the blame on China, and other countries should protest the West and stand with China.

"System Superiority." The System Superiority frame introduces a comparison between Western and Chinese political systems, which results in the conclusion that the Western

model is heading toward its own demise, while the Chinese model is leading China toward prosperity. Compared with the abovementioned frames which focus on defending China against Western aspersions and accusing the West of being the “real villain,” this frame can be interpreted as a proactive attempt at reconstructing China’s international image. Although the image is still presented through a comparative lens, influencers who use this frame are not passively responding and reacting to Western narratives about China but actively seeking to intervene in mainstream discourses and reshape foreign publics’ impressions of China. Moreover, by presenting the Chinese model as a more desirable prototype, they seem to target the fundamental conceptual instruments people rely on to evaluate and compare political systems. Ultimately, they attempt to justify the argument that the West and the rest of the world should question their old paths and learn from China’s success.

Several examples of the System Superiority frame can be found in discussions comparing gun violence in the U.S. to China’s ban on private guns. For instance, in a thread posted by the influencer Dylan, he argued that mass shootings in the U.S. are direct results of the legalized possession of private firearms, while China effectively prevents gun violence in the country by defining such possession as illegal. In supporting his argument, Dylan contrasted what he called the “mass shooting epidemic” in the U.S. with the safe living environment in China. He further argued that the U.S. prioritizes individual rights at the cost of collective welfare, while China does not compromise the public good for private interests. As such, Dylan depicts the principles and values underlying the Chinese system as more beneficial to the whole society.

For countries to avoid repeating what they consider as the inherent drawbacks of the Western model, the influencers suggest that other countries should look toward China for inspiration. While different influencers may offer different interpretations of the Chinese model, it is common for them to mention traits such as high efficiency, a strong public orientation, and a focus on tackling social inequality. By contrast, the Western model according to them is one that discourages social cooperation, which hinders the development of large-scale projects intended for the public good. To fix these malfunctions of Western systems, the influencers propose that other countries should agree with them on the advantages of the Chinese system and modify their system designs accordingly.

“Common Destiny.” The term Common Destiny derives from the concept “community of common destiny” proposed by the Chinese government to denote its general diplomatic principle (Zhang, 2018). The concept can be described as a harmonious vision for the international community where countries collaborate to maximize the shared interests of humanity. Given the current unequal distribution of global power, the phrase also implies China’s wish to challenge the

status quo and obtain a stronger voice in the world (Zhang, 2018). The Common Destiny frame thus demonstrates a proposal for reshaping international dynamics, which replaces current structures that work to preserve Western dominance with a China-initiated framework that self-claims to encourage cooperation.

Influencers who employ this frame are among the most active endorsers of China’s official narratives and foreign policies. They emphasize how the current state of international affairs must be reshaped for the betterment of all, especially for non-Western countries whose voices have been disregarded in major global conversations. Moreover, they express the belief that China is the best candidate to lead and drive this transformation because of its demonstrated willingness to construct mutually beneficial partnerships with marginalized actors in the global economy. The thesis of their argument, therefore, is that all countries should strengthen their ties with China and embrace Chinese initiatives.

Since the frame focuses on China’s relationship with non-Western countries, many influencers discuss how China-led global initiatives signal a genuine intent toward common prosperity with its partners. One frequently cited case is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For example, the influencer Henry argued in one of his commentary tweets that Chinese loans such as those included as part of the BRI are issued to “countries at risk of financial crises to help ease their debts” rather than “encourage dependence on China.” Without explaining how these loans are different from the West’s, Henry suggested that negative interpretations of these loans are merely speculative and driven by widespread Sinophobia in the West. Similarly, another influencer Frank tweeted a fact sheet that shows robust growth in the number of countries that signed up for the BRI. He also commented on how the international Group of Seven (G7), which consists of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the U.K., and the U.S., should humbly learn from China if they want to establish sincere partnerships with African countries. Concluding his tweet, Frank suggested that China could offer better alternatives to Western proposals and benefit the whole world.

A major weakness of the frame, however, lies in a lack of effective differentiation between China’s and Western countries’ intentions behind such initiatives. Potentially because of this, it is not unusual to observe influencers combine this frame with other pro-China frames to distract or add an impression of comprehensiveness to their claims. For example, some influencers like Henry use the Western Hypocrisy frame to argue that suspicions about China’s real intentions are only products of biases and ignorance. Some influencers use the Western Threat frame to shift audiences’ attention from the weakness of their argument to criticisms of the West. Other influencers bring in the System Superiority frame to highlight how China has a better model for economic and social development that can benefit partner countries seeking effective growth. Pushing back against concerns about China’s pursuit of global domination, these influencers

combine different framing strategies to depict China as a benevolent giant on its peaceful rise, working toward a brighter future for all.

Discussion

This study provides references for further research into the links between such political influencers and the political authorities they support. While our findings do not suffice to determine whether these influencers are unorganized individuals expressing their genuine opinions online or a new type of diplomatic agent, the identified two self-images and four frames can serve as a framework for categorizing these influencers and their discursive positions. Admittedly, the name chosen for the fourth frame “Common Destiny” already implies an observed connection between the arguments used by these influencers and the official narratives. While our naming practice only alludes to a perceived similarity, we encourage future studies to critically examine the interactions between these influencer frames and official discourses to understand their potential relationships.

Moreover, while our study addresses how these influencers use identity and framing strategies to enhance their persuasiveness, it is missing an effectiveness assessment of these strategies in influencing attitudes toward China. Although we took into account some aspects of audience feedback in our analysis, such as follower reactions to a tweet, they played a rather trivial part in this study and were not assessed in relation to the strategic variations across influencers. Furthermore, the shared identity of these influencers as foreigners to China can be treated as an overall self-presentation strategy to signal authenticity. Therefore, we recommend that future research use interview and survey methods to investigate audiences’ cognitive and affective responses to the content posted by these influencers, compare the perceived authenticity of foreign and domestic influencers, and evaluate other strategic factors that may affect an influencer’s ability to shape foreign publics’ perceptions of a country.

Connecting back to the broader research theme on political influencers, we have two main reflections. To start with, political influencer research should take advantage of the existing scholarship on commercial influencers, especially the impression management literature. Further research can look into ways of developing theories of source credibility and performed authenticity to enhance our understanding of political influencer self-presentation. Another possibility is to examine how the practice of disclosing external motivations or affiliations can have different implications for political versus commercial influencers. While commercial influencers could benefit from some forms of disclosure to signal honesty and integrity, political influencers who rely on a strategy of intellectual authenticity might completely avoid being perceived as externally motivated.

In addition, our study suggests that the social media strategies of influencers who support political authorities can

exist in more intricate and subtle forms than the automated approach examined in previous literature. Yet, the formal political affiliations of these influencers are ambiguous, and this study alone cannot determine whether the influencers consider themselves as pro-China political influencers, or as political influencers at all. To address this classification challenge, future political influencer research should consider exploring this topic from the perspectives of influencers, to understand their motivations and how they perceive the roles they undertake as influential players in a global discursive landscape.

Conclusion

Looking at the self-presentation strategies and discursive frames of pro-China foreign political influencers on Twitter (X), this study suggests two conceptual frameworks: first, “the explorer” and “the expert” as two types of self-images, which are constructed through two different sets of self-presentation strategies to signal credibility and authenticity. The explorer focuses on sharing their personal experiences in China and expressing their intrinsic motivations for promoting China, while the expert highlights their intellectual independence and prestige to construct an authoritative voice in China-related discourses. Second, four frames are identified from the content posted by these influencers to defend or promote China. In response to Western criticisms of China such as the China Threat theory, the “Western Hypocrisy” frame argues that the West is hard on China and soft on itself, and the “Western Threat” frame presents the West as a major source of threat to global security and development. To promote a positive image of China, the “System Superiority” frame portrays China’s political system as a better alternative to Western counterparts, and the “Common Destiny” frame provides a blueprint for a prosperous future shared by China’s global partners. The study has implications for future research on political influencers’ social media strategies and the roles they play in shaping global political communication dynamics.

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Ethical considerations

This study is based on publicly available data collected from X/Twitter. Ethical approval and informed consent are not required.

Except for one public figure, referenced influencers are anonymized with pseudonyms in published materials.

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