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### Military's public relations practice in the social media era Exploring the Chinese military's use of WeChat and public engagement Huang, Wei; Wang, Yuan

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**Military's Public Relations Practice in the Social Media Era: Exploring the Chinese  
Military's Use of WeChat and Public Engagement**

Abstract

Militaries worldwide have adopted various social media platforms to influence, inform and build relationships with strategic publics. Guided by the organization–public engagement framework, this study conducted a content analysis to examine the Chinese military's social media practices for reaching out to the public. It analyzed the content patterns, message features, targeted publics, and engagement levels on WeChat. This study discovered that the Chinese military mainly used WeChat for information dissemination, promotion, mobilization, and interacting with intended publics (e.g., its internal servicemen). It also found that WeChat articles that used the promotion strategy, emotional appeal, fear appeal, messaging tactics, and vividness strategy generated higher levels of public engagement. Theoretical and practical implications were also discussed.

*Keywords:* military; WeChat; social media; military public relations; social media engagement

**Military's Public Relations Practice in the Social Media Era: Exploring the Chinese  
Military's Use of WeChat and Public Engagement**

**Introduction**

The pervasiveness of mobile technology has increased the convenience, efficiency, and frequency of communication (Tsai & Men, 2018) and marked a shift in information dissemination and gathering. As part of societies, militaries are not immune to this communication development, and some of the militaries have already played an active role in consuming and sharing ideas via social media (Giroux, 2021). Although a stream of scholars has warned the negative impacts of social media on militaries, such as infiltration, attack and leakage of sensitive information that can be used to gain soldier's positions and assets (GlobalData Thematic Intelligence, 2022), it is worth noting that some militaries have proactively and strategically adopted social media to reach out to targeted publics. The Chinese military is just one recent example. Different from social media usage at an individual level, the utilization of social media by the Chinese military at an organizational manner is more strategic and purposive.

Against a backdrop of political, technological, and communicational changes, the Chinese military has created numerous WeChat accounts to share reporter's encounters and convey authoritative information (PLA Daily News Agency, 2016). Branches of the military involved in warfare and other matters have created official WeChat accounts. Although the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) continued feeding news stories to state media like China's state broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV), its use of WeChat resulted in new communication strategies: gathering materials and editing and publishing stories through official accounts directly from within the barracks (Yin & Zheng, 2021). Because of its participatory nature, WeChat has helped the once-reclusive Chinese military spread

information and ideas, create networks, and develop interactive communication strategies, to every user of WeChat, regardless of where they are.

Although Western scholars have extensively studied how non-military organizations utilize social media platforms such as Twitter and YouTube to discuss such topics as nutrition and breast cancer (Twynstra & Dworatzek, 2016; Wright et al., 2019), and some other researchers have mainly analyzed militaries from security and defense perspectives (e.g., how the Chinese military has developed sophisticated weapons and attempted to change the balance of regional security; Han & Paul, 2020), research into how militaries are using social media is extremely limited. In addition, little is known about the messages that the military deliver, their effectiveness, and possible target audiences.

Putting these queries at the center of this study, we chose the Chinese military and China's most popular social media app, WeChat. This study conducted a content analysis to examine how the Chinese military use WeChat and public engagement on WeChat. It represented the intersection of security and communication and shed light on the social media practices of a large military organization in an Asian context. This study can advance the literature on social media, political communication, and particularly on military public relations. It was one of the first studies to examine military organizations' social media use for public relations and public engagement. In terms of practical implications, this study provided practical strategies for military organizations to effectively use social media.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Organization–Public Engagement Framework**

Engagement has been considered a new paradigm in public relations scholarship (Stoker & Tusinski, 2006). Public engagement centers on the comprehensive process of dialogue and interaction between an organization and its publics (Men & Tsai, 2014). Public engagement has been examined as an important antecedent of individuals' attitudinal and

behavioral responses to mediated messages. The organization–public engagement framework has been used to study how environmental nonprofit organizations (Xu & Zhang, 2022) and charitable foundations (Qu, 2020) in China used WeChat. However, few studies have adopted this framework to study military organizations. Thus, this study was grounded in the organization–public engagement framework to examine how Chinese military used WeChat and public engagement.

### **Military Public Relations**

Military’s public relations practices were rooted deeply in modern history. A good relationship with targeted publics is vital for any military in the world so as to ensure successful military operations and objectives. Functions of military public relations include media relations, community relations, and internal communication, directed towards various key publics (e.g., media, communities, allies, government leaders, and local populations in conflict areas; Heath, 2013).

Due to the secretive nature, militaries usually impose strict information control policy, but signs of a shift in thinking have emerged with the development of communication technology, especially social media. This is largely because the ease and reach of communication technology have meant that the military has lost its once tight grip on controlled images released to the media (Heath, 2013). The once one-way communication transmission is thus needed to be changed to focus more on dialogues and audience-centric messages to win hearts and minds.

### **PLA and the Media**

Similar to the U.S. military, the Chinese military has always been actively conducting public relations activities. Liaising with the Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party, the General Political Department of the Chinese military performs and monitors all publicity work (Shambaugh, 2007). The usage of social media by the Chinese

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military marked a significant shift when compared to the past, as this armed wing of China's ruling Communist Party maintained a deliberate distance from the public, partially because of the rigid publishing process in the print age (Jiang, 2016).

Political and technological changes in China prompted high-ranking leaders to develop strategies to use the Internet for the military's needs despite concerns that disseminating information online would may cause leaks of sensitive military information (Song & Huang, 2017). In 2014, Jinping Xi, the Chinese President and leader of China's highest military authority (i.e., the Central Military Commission), spoke about using the Internet for political work (Xinhua News Agency, 2014). And the next year, Xi demanded that the military adjust its communication strategies and channels to reach wider audiences (Cao et al., 2015). This marked a dramatic change in how the military handled the media and resulted in the creation of various military social media accounts, predominantly on WeChat and the Twitter-like microblogging site Sina Weibo.

Smaller groups such as the 77th Group Army began informing the public of its training activities on WeChat, whereas larger groups such as the Southern Theater Command used the app to display its efforts to safeguard China's vast territories. Even branches not directly involved in warfare, such as the Ministry of Veterans Affairs, began using official WeChat accounts to release news related to veterans. Although Chinese military officials have never indicated the exact number of official WeChat accounts affiliated with the military, Dai (2017) estimated that the number is more than 10,000. These accounts were created to publicize ideological and political work (Chang & Fan, 2019) and foster two-way dialogue with the public (Zhou, 2015). In early 2018, the Chinese government introduced a provision to help all military branches create official social media accounts to spread information regarding the military (China's Ministry of National Defense, 2018).

### **WeChat**

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As a populous country, China is home country to many social media platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and Kuaishou. As a popular instant messaging application (app), WeChat had 1.319 billion monthly active users as of May 2023 (Tencent, 2023), which has emerged as the dominant mobile app in China that reshaped Chinese people's lifestyles (Kharpal, 2019; Qu, 2020). Developed in 2011, WeChat is a free and multipurpose smartphone app. It is similar to Western social media apps such as WhatsApp and Facebook in its free text, voice messaging, video calls, emoticons, statuses, and "moments," through which users share photos and videos with friends and get friends' responses. It also has functions that are different from those of Western social media platforms, such as official accounts that publish articles regularly, mobile payment, charity donations, COVID-19 contact tracing, among many others. According to Yang (2022), WeChat has developed from imitating Western social media to mimetic exceeding them by extending its functions, and its technological evolution global expansion have provoked fear, anxiety, and platform otherisation, especially in America and Australia.

Unlike Twitter and China's microblogging platform Weibo, WeChat is a closed social media platform, offering only two methods of disseminating information: articles from official accounts and group chats (Yang & Wang, 2021). Official accounts can have an unlimited number of subscribers; articles can thus reach as many people as possible. Because the maximum number of members in a WeChat group is 500, the movement of a message across groups relies on shared members among groups (Harwit, 2016). Feeding subscribers content from official accounts is a more direct and effective form of engagement. Four figures (i.e., likes, views, comments, and reading) at the bottom of each article released through a public WeChat account, a one-to-many functional modules within WeChat (Zhou et al., 2018), can indicate the popularity of the article and its ability to engage readers. In



WeChat, “Reading” is a different viewership indicator compared to “View”, as a click of the “Reading” is to send the article to a publicly visible recommendation list other users can see.

Organizations can use official WeChat accounts, operating similarly to Facebook pages in that they enable account owners to gain followers and disperse information through articles that include text, pictures, videos, soundtrack, emojis and external links. Those articles resemble characteristics from both the traditional media and new media, as they are carefully written, edited, being put in attractive layout but contain far more communication symbols like sound, videos, emojis. Most organizations can publish once per day, each time with several articles published together, pushed in the user’s subscription folder. In this folder, articles published by the same official account are grouped, and only the article placed on top can have a picture a user can see before clicking to read full text. By June 2019, the total number of official accounts, created by both Chinese and overseas entities (e.g., multinational corporations and foreign embassies), had exceeded 20 million (Shao et al., 2020), making it a crucial means of disseminating content and expressing opinions.

### **Social Media and Public Engagement**

Social media has transformed the manner in which organizations connect with stakeholders and society and can help organizations develop relationships with both internal and external audiences (Wang & Yang, 2020). By using social media, organizations worldwide have attempted to appeal to the mobile-savvy public amid the growth of social media, which has created a public sphere that spurred social dialogue and facilitating public engagement, relationship establishment, and advocacy (DiStaso & McCorkindale, 2013; Yue et al., 2021; Zayani, 2020). Past studies found organizations have used social media strategically for the benefit of organizations (e.g., Paek et al., 2013; Wang & Yang, 2020). For example, Facebook and Twitter were found to be used for marketing, advertising,

knowledge sharing, education, public service, and to engage in one-way communication with the public (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Oliveira & Welch, 2013; Waters & Jamal, 2011).

Men and Tsai (2016) identified five antecedents of internal (employees) and external (potential customers) engagement on social media: content strategy, message appeal, messaging tactic, functional interactivity, and vividness. *Content strategy* refers to how organizations disseminate information to suit stakeholders' needs and interests (Men & Tsai, 2016). Organizations update their social media to disseminate information, encourage the participation of stakeholders, and create dialogue (Saxton & Waters, 2014); this can help organizations attract public attention and strengthen relationships (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). Message appeals can be emotional or functional. Men and Tsai (2016) also discovered that in terms of messaging tactics, personal and conversational tones can create a unique corporate character and ensure stakeholder engagement. In terms of functional interactivity, tech-based interactivity can facilitate strong engagement and the development of relationships between the senders and receivers of information (Guillory & Sundar, 2013). Coyle and Thorson (2001) determined that high vividness ensures positive attitudes toward a website. Because WeChat is an emerging and popular social media platform, using the framework from Men and Tsai (2016) to determine which of its indicators apply to WeChat would yield meaningful results. On this basis, this study proposed the following research questions:

Researchers have explored various ways to measure public engagement on social media. For example, to explore socially mediated strategic communication, Chen et al. (2017) proposed a typology based on the inherent matrix of social media platforms, namely likes, shares, and comments. Similarly, Saxton and Waters (2014) used the number of likes to assess viewing and positive emotion, the number of shares to measure endorsement of messages, and the number of comments to measure engagement. As "reading" is a unique engagement indicator on WeChat, we will also use it to measure WeChat engagement, which

could contribute to the literature on public engagement on social media. Adapted from Chen et al.'s (2017) engagement scale, this study will sum up the number of views, comments, likes, and reading to measure public engagement on WeChat.

From the above literature, this study proposed three research questions:

**RQ1:** What strategies have the Chinese military used in its WeChat account to engage publics?

**RQ2:** What is the public engagement level for the Chinese military's WeChat accounts?

**RQ3:** How do Chinese military's WeChat strategies affect public engagement?

### **Method**

#### **Sampling and Data Collection**

This study conducted content analysis to examine how the Chinese military used WeChat and public engagement on WeChat. Because content analysis is an effective way to study the content of social media and message characteristics (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014). We used purposive sampling to identify official WeChat accounts affiliated with the five theater commands. Obtaining a full list of all official Chinese military accounts would have been impossible because the military has never released the total number of accounts or their names. In addition, searching for keywords such as "military" on WeChat does not result in a complete list of official accounts, and yields results like military hospitals or personal accounts that have no direct linkage with the Chinese military.

The researchers thus identified accounts affiliated with the five theater commands: Eastern Theater Command; Southern Theater Command; Western Theater Command; Northern Theater Command; and Central Theater Command. These commands are highly representative of the military because they are the highest-level branches directly under the control of the highest Chinese leadership and thus have the most resources and personnel

operating official WeChat accounts. They are also located in five mutually exclusive regions that collectively represent all of China and its regional characteristics. Through close observation of their accounts, the researchers discovered that the Northern Theater Command did not have its own WeChat account but that its air force branch, the only of its branches run by the military, had an official account, which we used to represent this command.

To analyze articles posted by their accounts, the researchers conducted constructed unit sampling from November 8, 2020, to November 7, 2021, a period of approximately an entire year (2021) that marked the centenary of the Chinese Communist Party, leader of the Chinese military. We labelled all the weeks from 1 to 52 and then randomly generated numbers between 1 and 52 for each day of the week. For example, if 23 was randomly generated for Monday, we selected the Monday of the 23rd week of this period. Finally, six weeks were constructed to obtain a representative sample. The randomly generated dates were shown in Appendix A. According to Riffe et al. (2019) and Luke et al. (2011), this timeframe was sufficient to represent an entire year of content of daily publication. We collected all articles published by the official accounts in these six weeks to create the initial sample. If an account did not publish any articles on a selected date, the articles published on the nearest date were collected instead. A total of 786 articles were collected from this step.

### **Coding Scheme**

We designed the codebook in English and then conducted back translation. More specifically, we translated the codebook into Chinese first and then back into English as well as compared the two English versions (Brislin, 1970). We also numbered the articles and noted the affiliated accounts, titles, dates, total number of articles published by the same account on the same day, the order in which the articles were posted, and whether the articles were original or reposted. After that, we read part of the articles to identify the main ideas and then coded them on the basis of the methods used in other studies (Chen et al., 2017;

Men & Tsai, 2016; Saxton & Waters, 2014). Content strategies were information dissemination, promotion, mobilization, social listening, thought leadership, or the use of content unrelated to the military (Chen et al., 2017); articles were coded for only the primary strategy. Message appeal was coded as either functional, emotional, fear, humor, or vision; only the primary appeal was used. Table 1 details the coding of content strategies and message appeal; the Appendix provides a complete codebook.

[Insert Table 1 here]

To evaluate messaging tactics, we coded each article on the basis of tone (e.g., conversational). To assess functional interactivity, we coded each article on the basis of whether it included at least one external link. To measure vividness, we counted the number of photos, videos, and emojis used in each article. Adapted from Chen et al.'s (2017), to measure public engagement, we counted the number of views, comments, likes, and reading for each article, and all these numbers were summed up as the article's engagement level.

### **Coding Procedure and Intercoder Reliability**

Two independent coders proficient in Chinese who had never followed the accounts were recruited to code the articles to eliminate bias. The coders underwent training, during which the researcher introduced the categories, before a trial exercise in which they coded a subset of 305 articles, 38.8% of the sample, from all five theater command accounts to test intercoder reliability. The Cohen's kappa scores for originality, content strategies, promotion, mobilization, message appeal, messaging tactics, functional interactivity, pictures, videos, and emojis were .82, .66, .77, .81, .65, .68, .79, .86, .90, and .85, respectively, all higher than .65, suggesting acceptable intercoder reliability (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014). To ensure intercoder consensus, inconsistencies were resolved through discussion. Afterwards, the first coder then coded oddly numbered articles, and the second coder coded the evenly numbered articles.

### Results

The Eastern Theater Command published the most articles ( $n = 258$ , 32.8%), followed by the Southern Theater Command ( $n = 217$ , 27.6%) and the Central Theater Command ( $n = 145$ , 18.4%). Most of the articles were original and written by the military ( $n = 546$ , 69.5%).

### Communication Strategies

The most frequently used strategy was information dissemination ( $n = 319$ , 40.6%). For example, the Eastern Theatre Command posted that “The command has organized a training session for new platoon leaders before they start their duties” (October 4, 2021). The second most frequently used strategy was promotion ( $n = 311$ , 39.6%), and the service personnel were the main target for promotion ( $n = 140$ , 45.1%). For instance, the South Theatre Command posted an article on February 16, 2021 to praise the sacrifice of servicemen who were unable to reunite with their family members during the Chinese New Year for the sake of safeguarding national peace and stability. Following servicemen, the next frequently prompted subject was the Chinese Communist Party ( $n = 108$ , 34.8%). For example, the Eastern Theatre Command reposted a front-page article titled “Why Can We Succeed” on September 27, 2021, indicating that the history has proven that the Chinese Communist Party is the most reliable backbone and anchor for the Chinese people when storms strike. This indicates the military’s effort to construct a positive image of its service personnel and China’s ruling party (Figure 1). We also analyzed the words and phrases used in the headlines of the articles, which readers see before clicking on and reading the rest of the articles. The phrase most frequently used in the headlines was “party history” ( $n = 78$ ), followed by “theater command” ( $n = 42$ ).

[Insert Figure 1 around here]

The third most popular content strategy was mobilization ( $n = 76$ , 9.7%). Service personnel were the group most frequently targeted when the mobilization strategy was used

( $n = 48, 63.2\%$ ), followed by the public ( $n = 26, 34.1\%$ ) and other ( $n = 2, 2.6\%$ ). For instance, the Eastern Theatre Command encouraged the servicemen to take photos with the Chinese national flag on the national day in 2021. In another article posted on June 26, 2021, the Eastern Theatre Command asked readers to repost a conscription notice that the conscription for female soldiers has started. This indicates that service personnel (i.e., the internal audience of the Chinese military), rather than the general public, are the main target audience.

Thought leadership ( $n = 35, 4.5\%$ ) and social listening ( $n = 9, 1.1\%$ ) were less frequently used strategies. Through the articles in the thought leadership category, the Chinese military attempted to instill positive thoughts about various challenges and the future of China by describing the sacrifices and vision of the Chinese Communist Party.

Functional appeal was the most used type of appeal ( $n = 477, 60.7\%$ ), followed by emotional appeal ( $n = 244, 31\%$ ) and vision ( $n = 43, 5.5\%$ ). Most articles used formal and non-conversational tones ( $n = 673, 85.6\%$ ), probably because of the formal nature of most military organizations. In terms of functional interactivity, most articles did not include external links ( $n = 660, 84\%$ ), although some articles included at least one link ( $n = 123, 16\%$ ) directing readers to older articles published by the same account. In terms of vividness, the accounts preferred pictures ( $M = 8.83, SD = 9.89$ ) over videos ( $M = 0.42, SD = .756$ ) and emojis ( $M = 0.06, SD = .457$ ).

Regarding possible differences in communication strategies among the theater commands, we conducted a series of Chi-square tests. We observed significant differences in content strategies [ $\chi^2(20, N = 786) = 41.42, p < .01$ ], functional interactivity [ $\chi^2(4, N = 786) = 89.37, p < .001$ ], and vividness [ $\chi^2(184, N = 786) = 261.02, p < .001$ ] among the commands. However, we noted no significant differences in terms of message appeal [ $\chi^2(16, N = 786) = 20.24, p > .05$ ] and messaging tactics [ $\chi^2(4, N = 786) = 7.88, p > .05$ ]. Figure 2

presents the frequency with which the commands used the content strategies. Mobilization was most frequently used by the Eastern Theater Command ( $n = 109, 42.2\%$ ), Southern Theater Command ( $n = 97, 44.7\%$ ), and Central Theater Command ( $n = 59, 40.7\%$ ), whereas promotion was most frequently used by the Western Theater Command ( $n = 48, 49\%$ ) and Northern Theater Command (Air Force;  $n = 34, 50\%$ ).

[Insert Figure 2 around here]

### **Engagement and Effectiveness of Communication Strategies**

The second research question addressed the how publics engaged with the Chinese military on WeChat in terms of views, likes, reading, and comments. On average, each WeChat article received 7,070.3 views ( $SD = 10,418.19$ ), 138.08 likes ( $SD = 597.73$ ), 59.07 reading ( $SD = 222.02$ ), and 14.73 comments ( $SD = 17.22$ ) during the six constructed weeks.

The third research question focused on the relationship between social media strategies and public engagement. We conducted a series of ANOVA to assess this research question and displayed the results in Table 2. Regarding content strategies, there were significant relationships between information dissemination and the numbers of likes [ $F(1, 784) = 5.525, p = .019$ ], reading [ $F(1, 784) = 5.877, p = .016$ ], and comments [ $F(1, 784) = 4.587, p = .033$ ]. However, WeChat articles that used the information dissemination strategy generated a smaller number of likes ( $M = 78.16, SD = 82.43$ ), reading ( $M = 36.07, SD = 41.96$ ) and comments ( $M = 13.15, SD = 13.09$ ). There were also significant relationships between the promotion strategy and the numbers of reading [ $F(1, 784) = 5.114, p = .024$ ] and comments [ $F(1, 784) = 3.910, p = .048$ ]. WeChat articles that used the promotion strategy generated a significantly larger number of reading ( $M = 81.18, SD = 324.75$ ) and comments ( $M = 16.23, SD = 20.59$ ) than those without using this strategy. Furthermore, there were significant relationships between the promoted subjects and the numbers of views [ $F(5, 302) = 8.388, p < .001$ ], likes [ $F(5, 302) = 2.578, p = .026$ ], reading [ $F(5, 302) = 2.612, p = .025$ ],



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and comments [ $F(5, 302) = 18.047, p < .001$ ]. More specifically, articles that promoted China generated the largest number of views ( $M = 15,221.50, SD = 17,505.34$ ), likes ( $M = 751.67, SD = 1,333.04$ ), reading ( $M = 341.83, SD = 581.49$ ), and comments ( $M = 33.75, SD = 39.84$ ), compared with other promoted subjects (e.g., servicemen and Chinese military).

[Insert Table 2 around here]

In terms of message appeals, there were significant relationships between the emotional appeal and the numbers of views [ $F(1, 784) = 13.714, p < .001$ ], likes [ $F(1, 784) = 8.266, p = .004$ ], reading [ $F(1, 784) = 19.235, p < .001$ ], and comments [ $F(1, 784) = 36.219, p < .001$ ]. WeChat articles that used the functional appeal generated a significantly smaller number of views ( $M = 5,970.21, SD = 5,953.67$ ), likes ( $M = 88.89, SD = 437.21$ ), reading ( $M = 31.35, SD = 28.96$ ), and comments ( $M = 11.81, SD = 12.32$ ). There were also significant relationships between the emotional appeal and the numbers of views [ $F(1, 784) = 12.654, p < .001$ ], likes [ $F(1, 784) = 6.599, p = .010$ ], reading [ $F(1, 784) = 12.714, p < .001$ ], and comments [ $F(1, 784) = 27.481, p < .001$ ]. WeChat articles that used the emotional appeal generated a significantly larger number of views ( $M = 9,018.88, SD = 15,014.36$ ), likes ( $M = 219.09, SD = 826.68$ ), reading ( $M = 100.64, SD = 346.42$ ), and comments ( $M = 19.43, SD = 22.40$ ), compared with those that did not use this strategy. Similarly, there were significant relationships between the fear appeal and the numbers of views [ $F(1, 784) = 4.575, p = .033$ ], reading [ $F(1, 784) = 5.743, p = .017$ ], and comments [ $F(1, 784) = 4.378, p = .037$ ]. WeChat articles that adopted the fear appeal led to a significantly larger number of views ( $M = 12,107.52, SD = 22,033.29$ ), reading ( $M = 179.21, SD = 566.71$ ), and comments ( $M = 22.87, SD = 23.45$ ). Regarding messaging tactics, there was a significant relationship between messaging tactics and the number of comments [ $F(1, 784) = 5.088, p = .024$ ]. WeChat articles that used this strategy generated a significantly larger number of comments ( $M = 18.09, SD = 17.59$ ). In addition, we conducted linear regression analysis and

found that the vividness strategy significantly positively influenced the number of views ( $\beta = .184, p < .001$ ) and comments ( $\beta = .253, p < .001$ ). In sum, we found that WeChat articles that used the promotion strategy, emotional appeal, fear appeal, messaging tactics, and vividness strategy generated significantly higher levels of public engagement, whereas those using the information dissemination strategy and functional appeal entailed significantly lower engagement levels.

### Discussion

Military's public relations practice is not a hot topic in the communication discipline. But signs of militaries' changing mindset in how to communicate with targeted audiences, i.e., from the traditional tightly controlled one-way communication to the interactive one-to-many communication, deserves more scholarly attention. This study is probably one of the first communication study that specifically focused on how militaries in the 21st century are using social media to engage intended publics. Focusing on the Chinese military's use of WeChat, this study generates insights into militaries' use of social media regarding content pattern, article feature and engagement result.

Militaries, though not close to everybody's daily life, need as much public relations as other more visible players in the societies like profit-seeking companies and none-profit organizations. These needs stem from the root that any military worldwide has to bolster *esprit de corps*, and build an enormous support base, both home and abroad, to perform duties, publicize victories, shape narratives, and build good images. This study, though only analyzed one military's use of one social media platform, reflects a growing trend that the militaries are changing their traditional communication mindsets, adopting more modern communication technologies to engage targeted audiences, and becoming skilled at crafting attractive content that mingled texts, pictures, and even emojis in the digital space. The creation and spreading of rich content on social media can help militaries improve

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transparency and facilitate higher engagement, which can bring the public closer to them (Phillips & Young, 2009). This trend can be also supported by the U.S. military's use of and research into Twitter (Quinn & Ball, 2014), and also Israeli military's use of Pinterest and Instagram (Ungerleider, 2012), both of which have strategically utilized social media to spread information and control emotions. This growing trend deserves more scholarly attention given today's volatile diplomatic and political situations.

In the context of the Chinese military, this study found that the Chinese military often published its own articles rather than reposting those from other sources (e.g., state media articles), which indicates that the Chinese military uses WeChat proactively to communicate with intended audiences, including internal audiences such as service personnel and external audiences such as the public. WeChat was believed to be used to circumvent the restrictions of traditional Chinese media (e.g., state media broadcaster Xinhua News Agency). Although articles published on WeChat are still subject to censorship within the app and by the Chinese government, the Chinese military can reach wider audiences because of the app's large user base across the world, at a time when foreign countries strictly monitor Chinese state media.

On the whole, this study found the Chinese military primarily used its official WeChat accounts to spread objective information regarding topics such as its training programs and the arrival of new soldiers, and focused on the functional appeal of articles rather than hyperbolic or sensationalized language. It appears that the Chinese military was largely restrained in its use of WeChat, with only a few articles being published as a part of the mobilization strategy. This is counterintuitive because the media often frame the Chinese military relying on warlike rhetoric (Jennings, 2021), but this result is consistent with those of other studies reporting that information dissemination is the main purpose of organizations' use of social media (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014; Waters & Jamal, 2011). In addition, the less frequently used social listening strategy by the Chinese military

echoed the study of Limor and Nossek (2006), which found that non-democratic regimes and the military do not take public opinion into account as they alone can determine security policies and activate the armed forces.

The Chinese military used WeChat to promote its service personnel, the Chinese Communist Party, and itself, as indicated by the numerous articles on these topics rather than war narratives. This result is similar to the values conveyed by a speech Xi delivered during an inspection of the military's official news agency in 2017, in which he stated that the military should follow the lead of the Chinese Communist Party and strengthen itself through publishing. This finding also implies that the Chinese military mainly used WeChat as a tool of propaganda, which is common in China's media ecosystem, where information is tightly controlled to advance the government's agenda (Zhu & Wang, 2020). In addition, we collected the data in late 2021, which also marked the centenary of the Chinese Communist Party. However, this study found that the Chinese military posted fewer WeChat articles to promote the Chinese Communist Party than those promoting servicemen. Thus, the content of the WeChat articles posted by the Chinese military might not be strongly affected by the centenary of the Chinese Communist Party.

This study also found that the Chinese military used its official WeChat accounts to communicate with its service personnel more frequently than with external audiences. This finding corresponds to the practice of the United States Department of Defence, as Pentagon's public affairs function was revealed to communicate primarily for the country's domestic audiences (Rugh, 2014). The accounts were a channel through which the highest-ranking military authorities directly manipulated its soldiers' thoughts and behaviors to ensure their loyalty, cohesion, and efficiency (Connor et al., 2019). However, the Chinese military has not yet utilized the full potential of WeChat to propagate its preferred narratives outside the military. Whether the Chinese military will adopt a different strategy to engage

with external audiences needs further investigation. When the Chinese military requires support from the entire Chinese population, it is expected to use WeChat to update the public as to its actions and plans.

After separately examining the relationships between social media strategies and each engagement indicator (i.e., view, like, reading, and comment), this study found that WeChat articles using the promotion strategy generated more reading and comments. It implied that content strategy that aimed to boost the servicemen's morale can engage the target publics more effectively. In particular, WeChat articles that promoted China and servicemen led to higher public engagement than those promoting the Chinese Communist Party and other subjects. This finding suggested that the public might be more interested in the WeChat content related to a glorious picture of the country and the servicemen. Another possible reason was that servicemen may have other channels (e.g., television, newspapers, and the Internet) to obtain news and information about the Chinese Communist Party, making them not necessarily be interested in reading and reacting to the WeChat articles that promoted the Party. This study also found that WeChat articles that used the emotional appeal generated a higher level of public engagement, indicating that the public may be more likely to react to the Chinese military's WeChat articles that can stimulate their emotions (e.g., excitement and happiness). We also found that WeChat articles including conversational elements entailed a larger number of comments, though they did not generate more other engagement indicators. Because such articles seem to encourage readers to share their opinions and interact with the authors by leaving comments under those articles. This finding was similar to that of Men and Tsai (2016) documenting that corporate leaders' social media pages that used a conversational tone could create a unique character and ensure stakeholder engagement. In addition, this study found that WeChat articles with vivid elements (e.g., photos, videos, and emojis) were more likely to generate more views and comments. This

finding was consistent with those of other studies indicating that vividness can facilitate public engagement on social media because visual content can capture attention (Harlow et al., 2017).

It was worth noting that some findings in the context of the Chinese military's usage of WeChat were different from those of past studies on social media communication and public engagement in other contexts (e.g., corporations and nonprofit organizations) and countries (e.g., the U.S.). For example, this study found that WeChat articles focusing on disseminating information generated fewer likes, reading, and comments than their counterparts. It was inconsistent from Wang and Yang's (2020) finding that companies and nonprofit organizations whose tweets included useful information received more retweets and likes on Twitter. One possible reason was that some target publics of the Chinese military's WeChat accounts might not want to read or react to its regular updates on WeChat, which was different from those of corporations and non-profit organizations.

### **Theoretical and Practical Implications**

Theoretically, this study contributed to the growing body of scholarship on military public relations (e.g., Jenni et al., 2015), social media engagement (e.g., Chen et al., 2017; Wang & Yang, 2020), and political communication (e.g., Khan & Pratt, 2022). It was one of the first studies to examine military organizations' social media use for public relations and public engagement, which was largely neglected in the previous communication literature. It extended the application of organization–public engagement framework to the context of military organizations' WeChat use. The study provided insights into what content armed forces try to disseminate via social media and what effects the content can achieve from the military's perspective. We found that the Chinese military's WeChat articles that used the promotion strategy, emotional appeal, fear appeal, messaging tactics, and vividness strategy generated higher levels of public engagement, which could be used to evaluate the

effectiveness of social media strategies. Furthermore, this study developed a framework of content and message strategies to examine the Chinese military's social media use, which can be used to analyze social media posts from military organizations in other countries and even other types of organizations (e.g., nonprofit organizations), a stepping stone to assess the features, impacts, and effectiveness of different social media platforms used by military organizations worldwide.

In terms of practical implications, this study provided empirical evidence on the effectiveness of the communication strategies used by the Chinese military on social media. Communication professionals working in military organizations can use effective strategies when creating social media content, such as promoting servicemen and the country, targeting the public's psychological and emotional needs, discussing the negative outcomes of potential risks, adopting a conversational tone, and interacting with audiences, because these strategies have been proved to generate a higher level of public engagement in terms of views, likes, reading, and comments. Social media officers in military organizations should consider crafting more visually appealing content by using pictures, videos, and emojis in their social media posts. In addition, this study investigated the unique social media landscape in China, in which localized platforms (e.g., WeChat and Weibo) are commonly adopted by various organizations and their publics (Chen et al., 2017; Luo & Jiang, 2012).

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

This study had several limitations to note. First, despite the pioneering work of this study on military's public relations practices on social media, it was largely descriptive. Second, this study only focused on WeChat use of five theater commands in China. Thus, its finding may not be generalizable to the military organizations in other countries and other types of organizations (e.g., corporations and nonprofit organizations). Third, this study can indicate but not sufficiently explain the motivations behind the Chinese military's use of

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WeChat, which might need a qualitative research preferably with the public officers from the military. Fourth, although we counted the number of comments posted under each WeChat article in the sample, we did not provide an in-depth analysis of the content of those comments, which could reflect how internal and external publics reacted to them. One major reason was that WeChat operators have the power to censor comments and make only selected comments visible to the public.

Regarding future research, researchers can apply the communication strategy scale used in this study to military organizations in other nations (e.g., the United States and Russia) or refine the scale to analyze other aspects of military communications (e.g., how country or cultural differences would prompt militaries to use different message appeals). Researchers should also examine the effects of military communications on the public's attitudes and behaviors toward the military through surveys and experiments. Researchers could also conduct qualitative studies and discourse analysis to examine the implicit messages in seemingly objective and straightforward articles or use in-depth interviews and focus groups with high-level Chinese military officers and social media managers to identify the motivations behind the military's use of social media.



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## Appendix A

### Dates Included in the Six Constructed Weeks

Mon	2021- 4 -12	2021 - 5 - 3	2021 - 10 - 4	2021 - 8 - 2	2021-9-27	2021-4-19
Tue	2021 - 2 - 16	2021 - 2 - 23	2021 - 6 - 15	2021 - 9 - 21	2021-10-26	2021-7-6
Wed	2021- 4 - 14	2021 - 6 - 9	2021 - 3 - 17	2021 - 1 - 6	2021-10-5	2021-2-3
Thur	2021 - 4 - 1	2021 - 5 - 20	2021 - 2 - 4	2020 - 12 - 10	2021-11-4	2021-5-13
Fri	2021 - 6 - 11	2021 - 10 - 1	2021 - 1 - 22	2021 - 2 - 19	2021-8-27	2021-3-26
Sat	2021 - 5 - 22	2021 - 2 - 20	2021 - 6 - 26	2021 - 9 - 4	2021-9-18	2021-1-30
Sun	2020 - 11 - 8	2021 - 6 - 27	2021 - 8 - 8	2021 - 7 - 11	2021-10-31	2021-4-11

**Table 1**

*Coding of Content Strategies and Message Appeal Used by the Chinese military*

Category	Subcategory	Explanation	Example
Content Strategy	Information dissemination	Factual description of the organization and its activities to educate the public about the organization	<i>The Zibo destroyer, from the Eastern Theater Command, recently completed a live-fire exercise.</i> Source: <a href="#">Eastern Theater Command</a> Date: May 3, 2021
	Promotion	Encouraging readers to like or support objects or entities such as the Chinese Communist Party, China, service personnel, the Chinese people, or the military (or its branches)	<i>There is a feeling called “China Red.” There is a types of pride called the “Chinese flag.” There is a confession called “I love you China.”</i> Promoted subject: China Source: <a href="#">Eastern Theater Command</a> Date: October 1, 2021
	Mobilization	Incorporating an explicit or inexplicit call for target audiences such as service personnel and the public, to act	<i>Love the muscles shown in this competition? If you want to have the perfect shape and powerful muscles, join the military today!</i> Mobilized subject: The public Source: <a href="#">Eastern Theater Command</a> Date: October 1, 2021
	Social listening	Encouraging two-way communication and participation to enable the organization to understand the public’s beliefs and attitudes	<i>The draft of Pensions and Preferential Treatments for service personnel as been published, and feedback from the community is now required. Please leave your comments online or send letters to the Ministry of Veteran Affairs.</i> Source: <a href="#">Southern Theater Command</a> Date: July 6, 2021
	Thought leadership	Opinion piece used to provoke thought among readers	<i>People need faith, because it is a love that touches the soul, a correct attitude toward life, and a reflection of one’s spirit.</i> Source: <a href="#">Central Theater Command</a> Date: June 11, 2021
	Use of content unrelated to military	Covering topics such as child protection and gender equality	<i>Military barracks on your tongue. Recipe for the spicy Chinese dish Mao Xue Wang.</i> Source: <a href="#">Central Theater Command</a>



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			Date: May 22, 2021
Message Appeal	Functional	Straightforward presentation of factual information characterized by objectivity (Stafford & Day, 1995)	<i>Yang Limeng, a prosecutor of the military procuratorate of the Eastern Theater Command, has won a national award.</i> Source: <a href="#">Eastern Theater Command</a> Date: October 1, 2021
	Emotional	Targeting psychological, social, or symbolic needs and using affect to evoke certain emotions	<i>They stuck to their original aspiration; they persistently performed their duties; they dedicated themselves to safeguarding peace and happiness. Salute Air Force Signal Corps.</i> Source: <a href="#">Eastern Theater Command</a> Date: July 11, 2021
	Fear	Describing the negative consequences of risk	<i>The transit of the UK warship Richmond frigate in the Taiwan Strait on September 27...destabilized peace and fully exposed ulterior motives and speculative mentality. The Eastern Theater Command is always on high alert and resolutely opposes any threat or provocation.</i> Source: <a href="#">Eastern Theater Command</a> Date: September 27, 2021
	Humor	Using humor or a positive tone to attract attention (Lee & Ferguson, 2002)	<i>Here comes a massive event to treat our fans! To thank those who are followers of our theater command's Toutiao account, we are holding a lucky draw. And all the prizes are models of PLA military equipment! Surprised? Amazed? Want to know more. Read on and find out how to participate!</i> Source: <a href="#">Eastern Theater Command</a> Date: February 4, 2021 (Note: Toutiao, or Jinri Toutiao, is a Chinese news and information content platform)
	Vision	Using positive language to describe the future (Conger, 1991; Holladay & Coombs, 1994)	<i>The army is a melting pot. No one starts out strong and brave. Only those who dare to challenge difficulties can be the ultimate winners.</i> Source: <a href="#">Central Theater Command</a> Date: September 27, 2021

**Table 2**

*The Results of ANOVA on the Relationships between Social Media Strategies and*

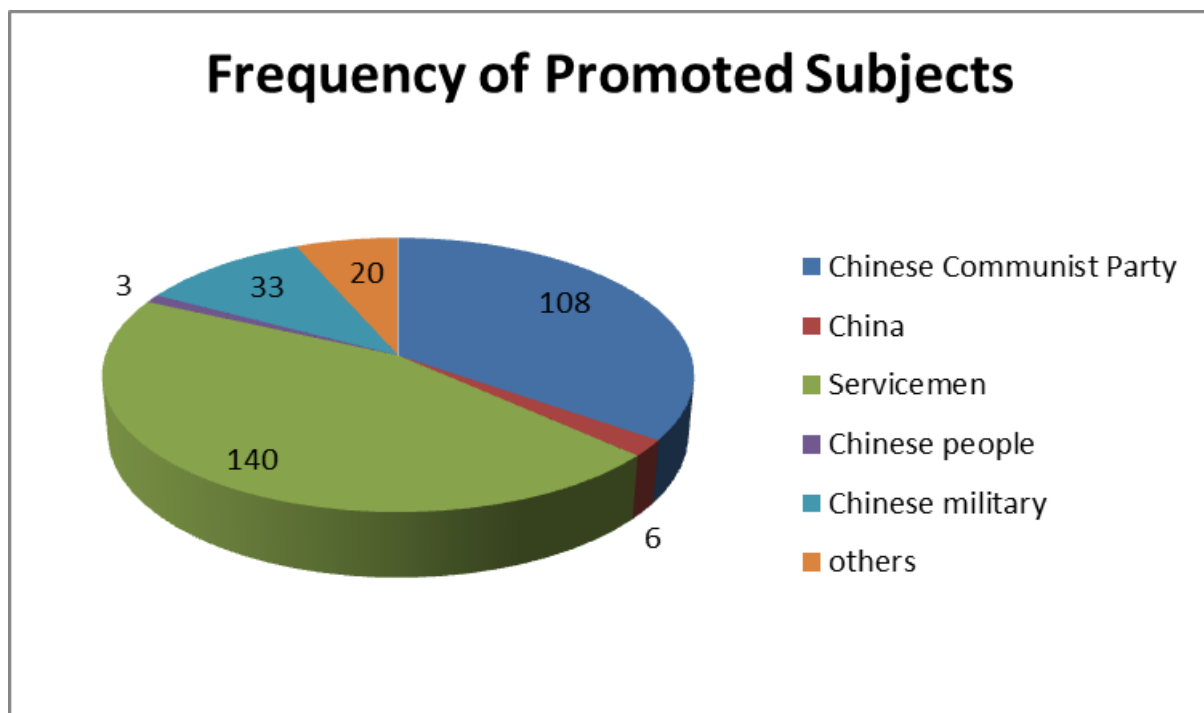
*Engagement*

<b>Content and Message Strategy</b>	<b>View</b>	<b>Like</b>	<b>Reading</b>	<b>Comment</b>
<b>Content strategy</b>				
Information dissemination	.022	5.525*	5.877*	4.587*
Promotion	.082	3.361	5.114*	3.910*
Mobilization	.696	1.370	.016	.096
Social listening	.310	.171	.187	.157
Thought leadership	.552	.064	.552	2.324
Unrelated to military	.280	.246	.094	1.740
<b>Promoted subjects</b>	8.388***	2.578*	2.612*	18.047***
<b>Mobilized target</b>				
Mobilize servicemen	.002	2.734	.031	.129
Mobilize public	.744	.131	.043	.191
Mobilize others	.020	.035	.044	.020
<b>Message appeal</b>				
Functional	13.714***	8.266**	19.235***	36.219***
Emotional	12.654***	6.599*	12.714***	27.481***
Fear	4.575*	.803	5.743*	4.378*
Humor	.318	.033	.023	.400
Vision	.356	.145	.288	.323
<b>Messaging tactics</b>	.019	.447	.034	5.088*
<b>Functional interactivity</b>	2.604	.030	.011	3.080

*Note.* The F-values of ANOVA results were reported. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Figure 1**

*The Frequency of Promoted Subjects in the Article Headings*



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**Figure 2**

*The Frequency of Content Strategies Used by Each Theater Command*

