Chapter 7

How the People's Liberation Army Uses Social Media for Propaganda

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I. Introduction

Mind control and public opinion guidance are the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) tactics to hold on to power. Since the advent of the Internet and digital media, the CCP has stepped up its efforts to turn cyberspace into a battleground for public opinion by applying new technologies and approaches to seize the initiative from the battlefield of public opinion. For the People's Liberation Army (PLA), how to capitalize on the Internet to dominate public opinion, to have a say over public affairs, and even to wage information warfare and cyber warfare against its enemy is one of the key means to win what it calls "information-based local wars." In recent years, the PLA has registered a plethora of official accounts on Weibo and WeChat, utilizing these new channels to enhance the reach and penetration of its propaganda. Compared to traditional military news dissemination, the new form of Chinese military media has become a warfare force with "a neo-type military soft power that is politically motivated, opinion-led propaganda and psychological influence."[1] With the borderless nature of information dissemination,

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[1] Hui-ming Tung, PRC's Military Media Propaganda and Dissemination Strategy, *Fu Hsing Kang Academic Journal*, Vol. 113, December 2018, p. 4.

even when we are on the island of Taiwan, we often receive news of the Chinese fleet circling Taiwan carrying out long-distance training over the sea, the Chinese military aircraft flying around the island, the Dongfeng missiles launch test by the PLA Rocket Force, or the organization of military drills surrrounding the Taiwan Strait.[2] The PLA's social media campaign is designed to maximize the spread of its warfare training, combining physical, physiological and psychological elements in "fusion warfare" to reinforce the deterrent effect.[3]

Since the PLA made the "three warfares" (psychological warfare, public opinion warfare and legal warfare) a priority in 2003, it has recently made efforts to develop software, hardware and tactics that affect the cognitive abilities of its opponents, indicating that the PLA sees information as the most crucial element for success in future wars.[4] Given the CCP's emphasis on the role of information in warfare, more and more research has begun to look at the PLA's social media operations, propaganda strategies and disinformation campaigns. To date, however, few studies have systematically analyzed the PLA's social media postings, leaving U.S. unclear as to what propaganda the PLA engages in through social media. Is there a temporal and spatial pattern to the frequency of different types of propaganda? Is the content on different official accounts like a set meal served from a central kitchen, or is it a customized one to suit the audience’s taste? Clarifying the logic of the PLA’s social media propaganda will not only help us to understand its weaponized propaganda model, but also boost our immunity to information manipulation.

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[2] There are numerous cases of the PLA releasing drills against Taiwan through its official Weibo account, such as "MND Keeps Tabs on and Responds to the PLA Eastern Theater Command's Air and Sea Exercises," *Central News Agency*, August 17, 2021, https://reurl.cc/a9Q4nZ; "PLA 80th Group Army Official's Microblogging Site Post 'Preparing for war' as Drills of Various Military Types Taking Place in June," *ETtoday*, June 10, 2021, https://reurl.cc/Q90ZW5; "PLA Eastern Theater Command Assault Drill, Rocket Force Midnight Multi-round Fire Strike," *ETtoday*, September 14, 2020, https://reurl.cc/Ldlj6K; "Another Provocation! PLA Releases 'If War Broke out Today' Video, Threatening to Defend 'Every Inch of the Motherland," *Apple Daily*, September 22, 2020, https://reurl.cc/Q3Enep; "Breaking News: PLA Nighttime Drill Video 'Dongfeng Missiles,' Netizens Threaten: Liberate Taiwan at Dawn!" *Formosa TV News*, September 22, 2020, https://reurl.cc/zzDglN; "Aimed at Taiwan? PLA Eastern Theater Command Releases Video of "Dozens of Dongfeng Missiles Fired in Rapid Succession," *Apple Daily*, September 25, 2020, https://reurl.cc/Q3EnEZ.

[3] For more information on the physical, physiological and psychological elements in fusion warfare, see Jianwei Wang, *All Victory: The Way to Win in the Information Network Era* (Wuhan: Changjiang Wenyi Press, 2017), p. 108.

[4] For research on the three warfares, see Pan, C.C., "The Development of the PLA's Political Endeavors in the New Century," *Prospect & Exploration*, Vol. 3, No. 9, September 2005, pp. 69-82; For the PLA's development of a concept of warfare in the cognitive domain, see Huafeng Zeng and Haiming Shi, *Mental Dominance: The Laws of War in the Global Media Age and National Security Strategy* (Beijing: People's Liberation Army Press, 2014), pp. 180-196; Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, "Cognitive Domain Operations: The PLA's New Holistic Concept for Influence Operations," *China Brief*, Vol. 19, No. 16, September 2019, https:// reurl.cc/yEx4ny.

In view of this, this paper collected data from four official Weibo accounts of the PLA, including PLA Eastern Theater Command (ETC), PLA Southern Theater Command (STC), PLA Central Theater Command (CTC), and PLA Western Theater Command (WTC) from August 1, 2020 to August 25, 2021, for 5,033 Weibo posts altogether.[5] Through text mining and the structural topic model (STM), the postings were examined,[6] in order to ascertain the pattern and development of the spread of public opinion on social media by the PLA and to probe its implications. In the subsequent sections, Part II deals with the PLA’s communication strategy on social media and presents the types and themes of its propaganda with empirical data; Part III provides insights into the logic behind the PLA’s propaganda by looking into the chronological changes in the frequency of postings on different topics; then, the differences in the content of posts on the official Weibo accounts from different theater commands are compared to highlight their customized spreading patterns. Finally, the conclusion of this chapter is drawn based on the arguments put forward in each section.

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[5] The PLA ETC official Weibo account was created on August 1, 2020 and has been followed by more than 550,000 fans since then at https://reurl.cc/pyvnvb; the PLA STC official Weibo account was registered on August 1, 2020 and has been followed by more than 470,000 fans since then at https://reurl.cc/ogO48D; the PLA CTC official Weibo account posted its first message on February 1, 2020 and has over 1.01 million followers since then at https://reurl.cc/yEx4Ra; Xi-lu-qiang-jun-hao (西陸強軍號) is the official Weibo account of the PLA WTC, which was officially established on August 1, 2020 and has over 250,000 followers at https://reurl.cc/ R0aEE9.

[6] The structural topic model, a follow-on to the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) model, is used in the field of unsupervised machine learning and natural language processing, primarily to uncover statistical models of latent topics in a range of documents. For related methods and applications, see Margaret E. Roberts et al., “stm: R Package for Structural Topic Models,” *Journal of Statistical Software*, Vol. 91, No. 2, October 2019, pp. 1-40; Margaret E. Roberts et al., “Structural Topic Models for Open-Ended Survey Questions,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 58, No. 4, October 2014, pp. 1064-1082.

II. PLA Propaganda Strategy and Topic Distribution on Weibo

With the rapid growth of social networking sites, both the Chinese government and the PLA have recently registered a proliferation of Weibo and WeChat official accounts. Generally speaking, authenticated official accounts not only contain abundant information pertaining to government policies, but are also highly authoritative and can target specific groups to deliver real-time information, thus becoming a new tool for CCP propaganda. According to long-term research on the Chinese government's propaganda campaigns, its propaganda departments at all levels are gradually phasing out the traditional rigid doctrinal propaganda in an effort to attain its performance targets. The new mode of propaganda often involves the participation of netizens by sharing practical information, rewarding retweets, collaborating with patriotic celebrities or "following in the footsteps of President Xi" at his visits.[7] In addition, official government accounts have even introduced a commercial model, resorting to clickbait to draw views and gradually heighten public awareness of, familiarity with and reliance on official accounts, supplemented by algorithms that feed similar messages, and ultimately achieving the effect of political propaganda.[8] This means that the Chinese government's control of information has gone beyond censorship and propaganda and has evolved from an emphasis on "winning hearts and minds" to "shaping hearts and minds."

In terms of the PLA's propaganda efforts, the basic mission of PLA propaganda is nominally to "tell the story of the army and spread the voice of the army," i.e. to keep tabs on military affairs and defense voices in the emerging media space on the Internet.[9] In fact, according to Harold et al, the PLA's propaganda exercises on social media serves two interrelated purposes: "overt messaging" and "covert manipulation." Regarding overt messaging, the PLA deploys three tactics to reach its target audience: rapid response, agenda setting and adaptive narratives. As for covert manipulation, the PLA focuses on denigrating the leadership of its opponents, undermining enemy morale and swaying their public opinion. To be specific, related measures include the use of online media to create rumors, disseminate false information, or manipulate information by posing as or working with local collaborators in enemy countries.[10] Although overt messaging and covert manipulation may seem to be targeted at quite different audiences, the distinction between target groups in a digital age has become blurred and internal propaganda can be spilled over through the media. Studies have shown that the CCP's military media brands on Weibo and WeChat are expanding the dissemination of messages to specific target groups, while also reinforcing the audience's reliance on and identification with military media feeds. Further, they have also mounted various campaigns on social media to increase the inclusion and participation of netizens, thereby raising the online visibility and competitiveness of the military media outlets.[11] An overview of the above literature reveals a degree of similarity in the propaganda ploys and modus operandi across social media sites between both the Chinese government and the PLA, but it is noteworthy that their tactics are becoming increasingly sophisticated and diverse.

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[7] For the CCP's innovative approaches to propaganda, see Maria Repnikova and Kecheng Fang, "Authoritarian Participatory Persuasion 2.0: Netizens as Thought Work Collaborators in China," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 27, No. 113, April 2018, pp. 763-779.

[8] For the introduction of a business model for propaganda mounted by the Chinese government, see Yingdan Lu and Jennifer Pan, "Capturing Clicks: How the Chinese Government Uses Clickbait to Compete for Visibility," *Political Communication*, Vol. 38, No. 1-2, January 2021, pp. 23-54.

This research then employed the structural topic model (STM) to analyze the posts on the official Weibo accounts of the four PLA theater commands from August 1, 2020, to August 25, 2021, to gain insight into the types of posts made by the PLA on social media, and whether there are variations in the weight of propaganda themes among them. To determine the number of topics, this study first set up models with 5 to 40 topics and compared these models by examining model statistics such as held-out likelihood, residual and semantic coherence.[12] The statistics indicated that the most intuitive model was that with the 14 themes, making it a focus for subsequent analysis. We marked each theme by perusing documents related to the topic, looking at the words that appeared most frequently in the theme, and examining the terms that came up often in the topic. The 14 topics are: learning to strengthen the military, model recognition, celebrations, Taiwan strait situation, officer promotion, paying tribute to military personnel, constant readiness for war, remembering veterans, military diplomacy, combat exercises, disaster relief by troops, food and welfare, training in the field and miscellaneous news. With the four themes as examples, the posting templates of the PLA on Weibo are given in Table 7-1 below:

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[9] Yuanchao Zhang, "Exploring the Development Path of Military WeChat Official Accounts – A Case Study of the Official WeChat Accounts of Military Correspondents," *Military Correspondent*, Vol. 10, October, 2017, pp. 53-54; Xinping Jiao and Feng Ao, "A Study of Military Weibo Discourse Based on a Corpus – A Case Study of @ Military Correspondents," *Foreign Languages Research*, Vol. 167, January, 2018, pp. 8-12.

[10] Scott W. Harold et al., *Chinese Disinformation Efforts on Socia Media* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2021), pp. 16-25.

[11] Hui-ming Tung, *PRC's Military Media Propaganda and Dissemination Strategy*, p. 15.

Table 7-1 Examples of Documents Highly Relevant to Topics 1, 4, 10 and 13

Topic 1: Learning to Strengthen the Military	**Topic 4: Taiwan Strait Situation**
# A New Journey after a Century of Struggle #[Online + Offline, eLearning party history] In the past few days, a certain department of the Rocket Force has been promoting the learning and education of party history through various forms and channels, so that the officers and soldiers can absorb the red gene and hold on to their revolutionary beliefs in the process of sharing the learning.	[#PLA Eastern Theater Command spokesman speaks on U.S. ships sailing through Taiwan Strait #] PLA Eastern Theater Command (ETC) spokesman Senior Colonel Zhang Chunhui spoke on the USS Barry sailing through the Taiwan Strait: The USS Barry destroyer on Oct 14 passed through the Taiwan Strait while the PLA ETC organized naval and air forces to follow and monitor the U.S. ship throughout the trip. Recently, the United States has frequently sent wrong signals to the "Taiwan independence" forces on Taiwan-related issues, seriously damaging ......

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[12] For the benchmark and methodology for determining the number of themes, see Margaret E. Roberts et al., "stm: R Package for Structural Topic Models," pp. 9-12.

Topic 1: Learning to Strengthen the Military	Topic 4: Taiwan Strait Situation
[This game brings the audience to tears"] Recently, a brigade of the 77th Group Army held a speech contest entitled "Red Stories to accompany me in my struggle to strengthen the army" on the theme of "learning history to be sensible, learning history to be trustworthy, learning history to be virtuous and learning history to be practical" to guide officers and soldiers to learn red stories and inherit red genes in a strong atmosphere of party history learning and education.	[#Defense Ministry responds to U.S. sale of drones to Taiwan#] In response to the U.S. approval of the sale of four MQ-9 drones to Taiwan, Defense Ministry spokesman Wu Qian responded today: The U.S. sale of arms to Taiwan is a gross violation of the One-China Principle and the provisions of the Three Joint Communiqués, seriously jeopardizing China's sovereignty, security and territorial integrity; gravely challenging China's core interests and undermining the relationship between China and the U.S. and the peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. The Chinese side expresses its firm opposition and strong condemnation of this move......
Topic 10: Combat exercises	**Topic 13: Miscellaneous News**
[Anti-aircraft missiles, fire!] Recently, a brigade of the 77th Group Army has been fighting in one place after another for hundreds of kilometers, conducting a total-factor, high-intensity live-fire exercise in the northwest desert, setting up multiple groups of targets for surprise attacks, strong electromagnetic interference throughout, comprehensively testing the ability of air defense firepower to react quickly, coordinate efficiently and destroy accurately. In the drill, this brigade conducted a deep integration of elements such as reconnaissance and early warning, information perception and firepower striking, and continued to undertake multi-channel intelligence reconnaissance and multi-means firepower interception	[#What would you most like to say to yourself if you were 20 years old again?] Do you remember what it was like to be 20 years old? Were you young and enthusiastic or confused and uncertain? There may be bumps in the road, but there is also infinite hope. If you had the chance to be 20 years old again, what would you say to yourself? Take a look at the video, click↓↓↓, to hear the Dongfeng dispatcher tell his story of being 20 years old.

Topic 10: Combat exercises	Topic 13: Miscellaneous News
[Glimpse of training ground – # Armed helicopters shooting live rounds across day and night#] Recently, an air assault brigade of the 75th Group Army carried out cross-day and night live-fire training with armed helicopters in a sea area in eastern Guangdong. The live-fire training highlighted the characteristics of multi-direction, multi-munition, and multi-subjects, implemented three-dimensional, full-depth, and mechanized operations, strengthened the joint training of detachments, collaborated on combat capabilities, and improved combat-oriented military training.	[The belle of the military camp! Comic wallpaper of female soldiers is available!] There is such a group of people who do not love makeup, but love the military life; they are brave and resolute, dedicating their most beautiful youth to the troops dressed in camouflage. A wave of heroic female soldiers comic wallpaper is now available, first come, first served↓↓.

Source: Compiled by the author.

Figure 7-1 shows the distribution of the 14 topics, with the y-axis being the topics of PLA Weibo posts, the x-axis being the percentage of topics, and the text behind the bar concerning the high-frequency words appearing in the topic. Among the Weibo posts by the four PLA theater commands, the highest proportion of posts falls under the category of "miscellaneous news," followed by "combat exercises," "food and welfare," "officer promotion," "paying tribute to military personnel," "constant readiness for war," "learning to strengthen the military," "model recognition," "disaster relief by troops," "celebrations," "remembering veterans," "training in the field," "military diplomacy," and "Taiwan Strait Situation." In the logic of Chinese propaganda, seemingly meaningless miscellaneous postings actually have far-reaching political connotations. For example, King et al. analyzed the posting patterns of the CCP's online comment writers (50 Cent Party, wumao 五毛) and found that their primary role is not to defend the Chinese government, but to churn out non-political posts across social media in a bid to distract netizens from government or political events; in Internet terms, the CCP avoids online opinion from going to extremes by "straying from the topic in forum replies." (wailou, 歪樓)[13] In the cases covered in this paper, the miscellaneous PLA Weibo posts include greetings for festivals, combat art and literature, or the glamor of female soldiers, as well as lucky draws, in line with recent literature that suggests the CCP spreads "positive energy" to penetrate popular culture and the private sphere, and to engage netizens in propaganda tactics.[14] All in all, the miscellaneous articles on the PLA's Weibo account are not meaningless; on the contrary, through such posts, the audience is often unwittingly led into the propaganda channels of the military media, which is why they account for the highest proportion of all the posts.

The second highest percentage of posts among all topics is related to combat exercises. As the barrel of a gun for the Chinese regime, the PLA is in dire need of what it can do to consolidate the CCP regime and defend national security. As such, one of the principal purposes of posting articles on combat-oriented military training on social media is to convey to the Party and the people the PLA's determination to prepare for war, and to create the impression that the PLA is capable of managing crises, deterring war, and even winning wars. Moreover, the CCP often resorts to military threat to respond to changes in the external environment, and this logic holds true for the propaganda efforts of its military media. Studies have shown that the PLA tends to flex its muscles more frequently in the media when there is a rise in conflict or a change in the situation between China and its neighbors.[15] The aim and intended effect of the PLA's propaganda is that, irrespective of the authenticity of its muscle-flexing content, the PLA's Weibo posts help to strengthen the regime and rally public support internally, while externally they serve as a deterrent in military drills.

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[13] See Gary King et al. "How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, Not Engaged Argument," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 111, No. 3, July 2017, pp. 484-501.

[14] See Zifeng Chen and Clyde Yicheng Wang, "The Discipline of Happiness: The Foucauldian Use of the 'Positive Energy' Discourse in China's Ideological Works," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol. 48, No. 2, February 2020, pp. 201-225 and Maria Repnikova and Kecheng Fang, "Authoritarian Participatory Persuasion 2.0: Netizens as Thought Work Collaborators in China," pp. 772-775.

[15] For details, see Kuan-chen Lee, "The Logic of PLA's Muscle-Flexing on Social Media: Observations on the Official Sina Weibo Account of the PLA Eastern Theater Command," *Defense Security Biweekly*, No. 13, October 8, 2020, pp. 13-19, https://reurl.cc/6ap1Y6.

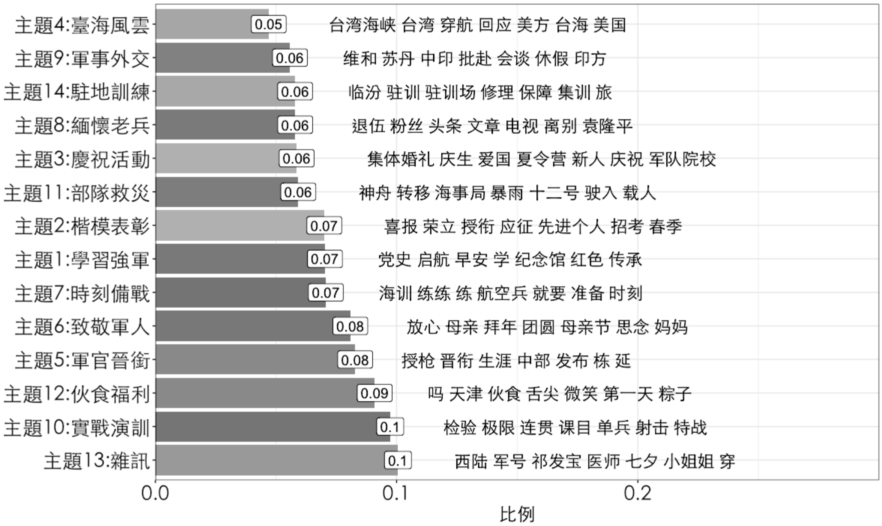

Figure 7-1 The Rate of Appearance of Topics Posted by the PLA on Weibo

Note: The simplified Chinese characters in the figure are high-frequency words that appear in the various topics and are taken from the original data files.
Source: Drawn by the author.

Next, the third most prevalent theme is food and welfare, followed by officer promotions and tributes to soldiers. As Weibo’s audience is mainly young Chinese netizens, the focus of publicity is not only on the impression of a strong military, but also on attracting the target group to join the military by highlighting the benefits, treatment and glory of military personnel, which is why the proportion of posts on such topics is high.

Lastly, Taiwan-related posts are identified by statistical models as a separate theme in the posts on the four official Weibo accounts of the PLA. Notwithstanding its low percentage, the Taiwan strait situation theme is more relevant than other propaganda messages on military strength, recruitment, civil-military relations or political education. This paper argues that the PLA’s intention to highlight Taiwan is twofold. Firstly, the PLA is seeking to use Weibo to frame to the general public that the Taiwan Strait issue is attributable to the provocations of Taiwan independence elements and foreign forces, and to declare its resolve to defend the country's territorial sovereignty. In addition, the PLA attempts to take advantage of the borderless nature of information dissemination to spread these hard-line ideas against Taiwan, in order to shape public opinion and disrupt the morale of Taiwan's military and civilians.

III. Changes in the Topics of the PLA's Weibo Campaign over Time

Those well-versed in media manipulation agree in principle that the timing of a message can have greater visibility and impact than the content of the message itself; in other words, sending the right information at the right time can help increase the breadth and depth of the message. As a result, message distributors have a strong incentive to choose the right time to publish messages that are relevant to them, and this provides the researcher with an opportunity to observe the inter-temporal variation among different types of messages, and thus to grasp the regularity of various modes of publicity. In view of this, this section gives insights into the logic behind the propaganda by looking at the chronological changes in the proportion of postings on different topics on the PLA's Weibo account.

In past studies of the Chinese media outlets, Roberts et al.'s model captured the timing of important events and the differences in the description of the same events between newspapers. During the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections in Taiwan, for instance, there was a marked upsurge in coverage of Taiwan. Moreover, while the Xinhua News Agency reported on Taiwan more frequently with terms such as "One-China," "province" or "unification," the Associated Press used the terms "democracy," "election" or "vote" more often to depict the presidential election on the island.[16] Further, when examining the PLA Eastern Theater Command's Weibo posts, Lee found that the timing of the posting of military drills articles coincided with changes in the external situation. For example, the proportion of military drills posts on Weibo increased significantly after the China–India skirmishes and the U.S. Secretary of State's visit to Taiwan.[17] Unfortunately, the time frame covered by that study is relatively short, and the topics addressed are relatively homogeneous. In the following, this paper looks at the tendencies of the four PLA theater commands' Weibo posts in 14 themes throughout a year.

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[16] See Margaret E. Roberts et al., "The Structural Topic Model and Applied Social Science," *Advances in Neural Information Processing Systems Workshop on Topic Models: Computation, Application, and Evaluation*, 2013, pp. 3-4, https://reurl.cc/WXa3lZ.

Figure 7-2 depicts the trend of the expected percentage of the 14 topics posted by the PLA on Weibo between August 1, 2020 and August 25, 2021, with the x-axis denoting the time and the y-axis denoting the expected percentage, while the solid black line represents the estimated percentage of occurrence of each topic and the dashed line is the 95% confidence interval. The first thing to notice is that among the 14 types of posts, there are seven themes that fluctuate markedly up and down: Learning to strengthen the military, combat exercises, disaster relief by troops, miscellaneous news, celebrations, tributes to soldiers and Taiwan strait situation. The other half of the themes, such as model recognition, food and welfare, officer promotion, constant readiness for war, training in the field, remembering veterans and military diplomacy, vary less dramatically across time, implying that posting articles on these topics is a routine task.

In terms of post themes over time, the first thing to notice is that the highest proportion of posts in the category of miscellaneous news started to drop considerably in late June this year (2021) and reached its lowest point in mid-July, before returning to its normal percentage. Posts in the miscellaneous news category declined at this time for two reasons: firstly, in anticipation of the 100th anniversary of the CCP's founding, the PLA' Weibo accounts began to post numerous articles pertaining to the party's centenary, so the rate of celebrations (Topic 3) picked up gradually from June onwards and reached a peak in early July; secondly, the decrease in the number of miscellaneous news articles was also associated with the sudden heavy rainfall and flooding in Henan Province in mid-July. Experts who have long observed the CCP pointed out that the official media attributed the blame for the floods in Henan to the "once-in-a-thousand-year" extreme weather, and that the focus of the reports revolved around the results of the authorities' rescue efforts or news of donations from private enterprises, deliberately covering up the specific disaster situation.[18] In the case of the PLA's Weibo account, posts regarding the army's disaster relief efforts (Topic 11) also saw a sharp rise in July. The PLA seized this opportunity to take to social media to publicize the troops' risky rescue work, showcasing their mobilizing capabilities on the one hand and polishing up their positive image of loving and protecting the people on the other.

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[17] For details, see Kuan-chen Lee, "The Logic of PLA's Muscle-Flexing on Social Media: Observations on the Official Sina Weibo Account of the PLA Eastern Theater Command," pp. 17-18.

Secondly, posts on the PLA's Weibo account that show a marked ups and downs in number are in the categories of learning to strengthen the military (Topic 1) and paying tribute to military personnel (Topic 6). Posts concerning learning to strengthen the military began to rise in late March this year when Xi Jinping visited Fujian, during which he inspected the 2nd Mobile Corps under the Chinese People's Armed Police Force (PAP) in Fuzhou and stressed the importance of Party history learning and education, and guiding officers and soldiers to remember their original aspiration. On April 1, the Qiushi (lit. "Seeking Truth") magazine published an important article on Xi Jinping's "Speech at the Party History Learning and Education Mobilization Conference," and thus posts on the PLA's Weibo accounts about learning to strengthen the army reached their first peak at this point in time. The proportion of posts on learning to strengthen the forces declined slightly afterwards, but climbed to a second peak at the end of June when the 31st collective study session of the Politburo of the CCP kicked off, at which Xi Jinping laid emphasis on "making good use of red resources and renewing the red bloodline."

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[18] For details, see, "Zhengzhou Floods: Official Media Propagates 'God Blesses Zhengzhou' by Only Reporting Rescue but not Disaster, Officials and People React Very Differently," *Radio Free Asia*, July 21, 2021, https://reurl.cc/pxDMX4; Qinglian He, "He Qinglian: A Look at the Chinese Government's Disaster Response Model in the Light of the Zhengzhou Floods," *UP Media*, July 28, 2021, https://reurl. cc/em5O7M.

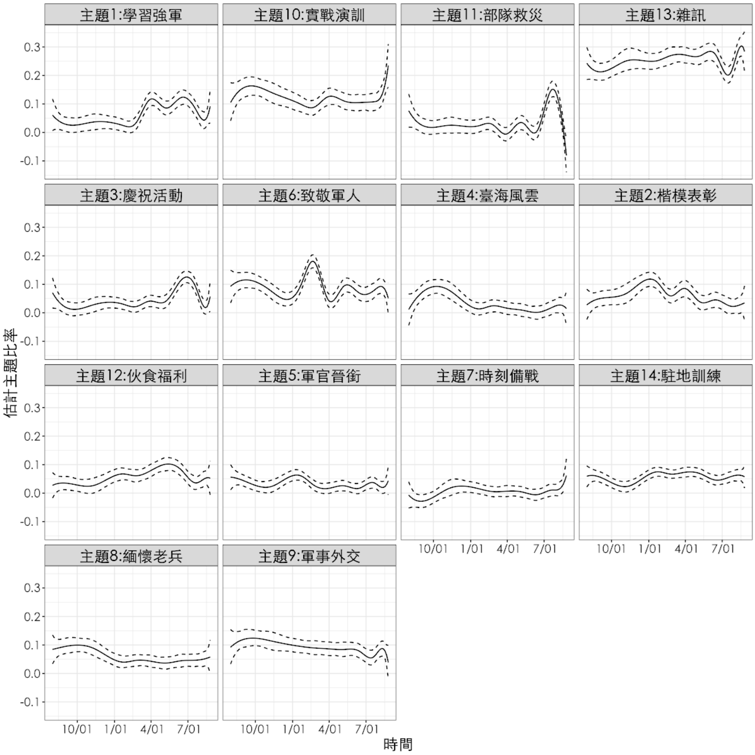

Figure 7-2 The Trend of the Topics Posted by the PLA on Weibo Over Time

Source: Drawn by the author.

Also, the theme of paying tribute to military personnel on the PLA's Weibo postings exhibited inter-temporal fluctuations, the most obvious being the peak in early March, when the PLA promoted learning from Lei Feng and encouraged netizens to pay tribute to military personnel in commemoration of Lei Feng Day.[19]

Finally, the PLA's Weibo accounts also trend to adjust the proportion of posts on combat exercises (Topic 10) and Taiwan Strait situation (Topic 4) on different occasions, and this paper finds some degree of covariation between the two topics in terms of fluctuations, with the magnitude of change being higher for combat exercises than for the Taiwan Strait situation. With regard to covariation, the first wave of both themes peaked around the end of September last year (2020), when the U.S. broke the tacit agreement since the severance of diplomatic ties with the Republic of China (ROC) and sent Undersecretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy and the Environment Keith Krach to Taiwan on September 17, prompting Beijing to announce the organization of combat-oriented military drills near the Taiwan Strait. On September 18 and 19, the Chinese government dispatched 18 and 19 military aircraft into the Taiwan Strait in multiple layers, aircraft types and batches, with 12 of them crossing over the median line.[20] The PLA's Weibo accounts were apparently capitalizing on this timing to disseminate more news about the Taiwan Strait situation and combat-based drills, and to deter Taiwan by "exposing" military exercises on a large scale. Since then, the proportion of posts on the topics of combat exercises and the Taiwan Strait situation had gradually returned to normal, although a second wave of combat exercises posts hit a peak level at the end of March this year on the PLA's Weibo pages, which coincided with the signing of a memorandum of understanding to establish a Coast Guard Working Group (CGWG) by Taiwan and the U.S. On March 26, the PLA carried out 20 sorties to intrude into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ), including H-6K bombers and anti-submarine warfare (ASW) aircraft crossing the Bashi Channel into Taiwan's southeastern waters.[21] The PLA's social media campaign on Weibo for strategic intimidation proved to be quite obvious. The last wave of the PLA's Weibo posts about combat drills fell at the end of July this year, and it is worth noting that the percentage of such posts was growing even more than the previous two waves. It is possible that part of the increase in posts on the topic of combat-oriented drills was associated with the fact that the PLA mostly holds military exercises in the summer, but if we follow this logic we should have also noticed an uptick in the number of military drills postings last summer, although the empirical data has refuted this hypothesis. Consequently, based on the effort of the posting and the increase in the percentage, this paper deduces that the sharp hike in the proportion of combat exercise posts on the PLA's Weibo accounts this year aimed primarily at responding to the U.S. Japan Orient Shield training exercise, the U.S.-Australia Talisman Sabre 2021 joint military exercise, and the U.S. Large Scale Global Exercise 2021, which carried strong implications for the counteraction of China.

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[19] For details, see Wenliang Zhang, "Lei Feng, the Great Ordinary Soldier," *Central Institute of Party History and Literature of China*, March 2, 2021, https://reurl.cc/Rbdyyr.

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[20] For details, see Che-cheng Hung and Chin-hung Lai, "U.S. Undersecretary Visits Taiwan, Chinese Military Aircraft Harassing Taiwan Again with 12 Crossing Median Line," *udn.com*, September 19, 2020, https://reurl.cc/em5zZx. On top of the Taiwan-U.S. engagement, the China–India skirmishes was also responsible for the increase in the proportion of combat exercises posts on the PLA's Weibo pages in September 2020.

[21] For details, see Wei-chen Hsu et al, "Taiwan and U.S. Sign MOU on Coastal Patrols, Chinese Military Aircraft Harassing Taiwan," *udn.com*, March 27, 2021, https://reurl.cc/Rbder9.

In summary, the PLA's propaganda efforts were not regular and routine. Through repeated operations, they have learnt that a rigid approach to publicity campaigns is not only unconvincing, but also fails to deliver strategic intimidation. As a result, the PLA's Weibo accounts put a premium on the timing of information dissemination, stressing the importance of releasing messages at the right time to guide public opinion internally and to shape the PLA's image as a powerful army that loves its people, while maximizing the deterrent effect externally.

IV. A Comparison of the Differences in the Propaganda Content on the PLA Weibo Pages

China's military reforms in 2015 reorganized the original seven military regions into five major theater commands: Eastern, Southern, Western, Northern and Central. Such restructuring, in addition to forming a joint theater command mechanism, also sets out clear objectives for each theater command. The PLA Eastern Theater Command is responsible for the Taiwan Strait, the PLA Southern Theater Command for the South China Sea and Southeast Asia, the PLA Western Theater Command for Central and South Asia, the PLA Northern Theater Command for Northeast Asia, and the PLA Central Theater Command for guarding the political and economic hub of Zhongnanhai. Should the PLA wish to reinforce its strategic deterrent effect, its military propaganda efforts should be adjusted according to its geographical area of responsibility in order to bring out its targeted nature; in other words, we should be able to observe the varying degrees of focus in the dissemination of news on each PLA theater command's Weibo accounts.[22]

Figure 7-3 presents a difference in the estimated proportion of topics posted on the Weibo accounts of the PLA's theater commands, with the control group being the PLA's PLA Western Theater Command account (xi-lu-qiang-jun-hao, 西陸強軍號), the y-axis being the 14 topics among the PLA's Weibo posts, the x-axis being the difference in the proportion of topics in the posts, and the circle marking the mean of the difference. The 95% confidence interval is indicated by the extended line at each end, with red representing a statistically significant non-zero difference in the percentage of posting topics and black representing a non-significant difference. In the case of PLA Eastern Theater Command (ETC) field training, for example, the percentage of posts on field training was slightly higher in the ETC than in the WTC, but the difference was not statistically significant.

Firstly, in terms of similarities, the PLA ETC, STC and CTC Weibo accounts posted fewer miscellaneous articles than that of the PLA WTC (xi-lu-qiang-jun-hao). Conversely, the PLA WTC's Weibo account was the most frequently posting miscellaneous items compared to other accounts. In addition, Figure 7-3 indicates that the proportion of posts on military diplomacy topics by each theater command is all considerably lower than that by the WTC. A further look at the posts made under the military diplomacy theme reveals that many of the postings are about China-India military chiefs' talks or a consensus reached between the two countries. Since India is one of the targets at the Western Theater Command, the PLA WTC's Weibo account has devoted a high proportion of its posts to highlighting China's strong military and diplomatic stance in the recent Sino-Indian border conflict, in a bid to attract and convince its target group.

In addition to the two themes noted above, Figure 7-3 shows that there are clear differences and specificity in the posting themes across the theater commands. A significantly higher proportion of the PLA Eastern Theater Command's (ETC) Weibo posts are about the Taiwan Strait situation, in line with the PLA ETC's deployment against Taiwan. As a result, the PLA ETC's Weibo posts often contain news of U.S. ships crossing the Taiwan Strait and the Taiwan Affairs Office and the Ministry of National Defense of the PRC taking a strong stance against Taiwan. Despite the relatively fewer posts on the PLA ETC's combat drills, a high percentage of them are devoted to constant readiness for war, putting across the message of the PLA ETC's readiness and determination to fight and win, while intimidating Taiwan via its combat readiness images and texts. It is also observed in Figure 7-3 that a higher number of PLA ETC posts involve disaster relief by troops, which is judged to be linked to the annual flood season of the Yangtze River, whereby the PLA ETC garners public support by posting such posts. On the other hand, posts on the PLA Southern Theater Command's (STC) Weibo page center on topics such as combat drills and constant readiness for war. In the past year, the U.S. has been frequently conducting Freedom of Navigation Operations in the South China Sea, and U.S. aircraft carrier battle groups have also been carrying out military drills in the South China Sea in defense of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy." In response to the U.S. action and to demonstrate the PLA's combat capability to the target group, the PLA Southern Theater Command (STC) Weibo postings focused on exercises and preparedness for war. Lastly, the PLA Central Theater Command's (CTC) Weibo posts deal with topics such as learning to strengthen the military, officer promotion, food and welfare, and disaster relief by troops. As the central guard, it is not surprising that the PLA Central Theater Command's (CTC) Weibo page places emphasis on learning and education on Xi Jinping Thought, or frequently releases news about the promotion of military officers, while its high proportion of disaster relief postings are assumed to be associated with the floods in Henan province, in which it deliberately revealed news of the PLA's heroic relief efforts and the official doublespeak to obscure the disaster and evade accountability for the floods.

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[22] The content released on different theater command's Weibo account may vary depending on the style of the department head or social media editor. For example, the Hunan Armed Police WeChat official account sticks to the approachable route, with an emphasis on thoughtful, warm and quality communication, see "Making trouble! Hunan Armed Police social media editors' collectively breaking news ..." *Hunan Armed Police WeChat official account*, July, 7, 2018, https://reurl.cc/953eoV.

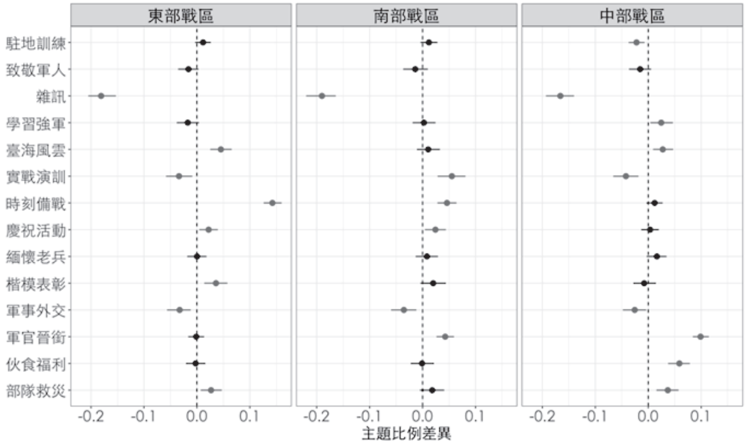

Figure 7-3 Differences in the Proportion of Topics Among the Posts on the PLA Theater Commands' Weibo Accounts

Note: The reference category for comparison is the PLA WTC's Weibo account, where red indicates a significant difference in the percentage of topics, while black does not.
Source: Drawn by the author.

V. Conclusion

The communiqué of the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee proposed "ensuring the achievement of the 2027 centennial military building goal." Experts point out that the goal is to build a modern PLA with "mechanization, informatization and intelligence," and to achieve intelligence on the basis of mechanization and informatization, so as to shorten the gap in the military strength between China and the U.S.[23] To win "information-based local wars," the PLA has not only stepped up the hard power of its high-tech armaments and weapons, but has also steadily upgraded the soft power of its military communications in an attempt to bring together physical, physiological and psychological offensives to maximize the effect of strategic deterrence.

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[23] Ming-shih Shen, "Commentary on Ensuring the Achievement of the Military's Centenary Goal by 2027," *Mainland and Cross-Strait Briefing*, December, 2020, p. 24, https://reurl.cc/aNrKWG.

Despite a number of studies that have focused on the PLA's propaganda tactics in the past, systematic analyses of its propaganda content are not commonly found. In light of this, this paper probes the logic of the PLA's social media propaganda by examining the content of posts from the four PLA theater commands' Weibo accounts. The research findings suggest that the PLA's publicity campaigns on Weibo are highly strategic, excelling in using seemingly random posts to draw audiences into the PLA's propaganda channels and implant the military's ideas and positions. In addition, the PLA's Weibo propaganda tends to place relevant messages at the right time to optimize the effectiveness of the messages disseminated. Finally, this paper also found that the proportion of different types of articles on Weibo is tailored by the PLA theater commands to the areas they are responsible for, in order to bring out their specificity. Overall, the PLA's propaganda on social media is strategic, timely and targeted, moving towards informatization and enhanced strategic deterrence. The PLA's propaganda through social media is also amassing a wealth of information, and in the future there is a high probability that it will be weaponized with artificial intelligence (AI) to undermine enemy morale in wartime, which warrants our utmost vigilance.