

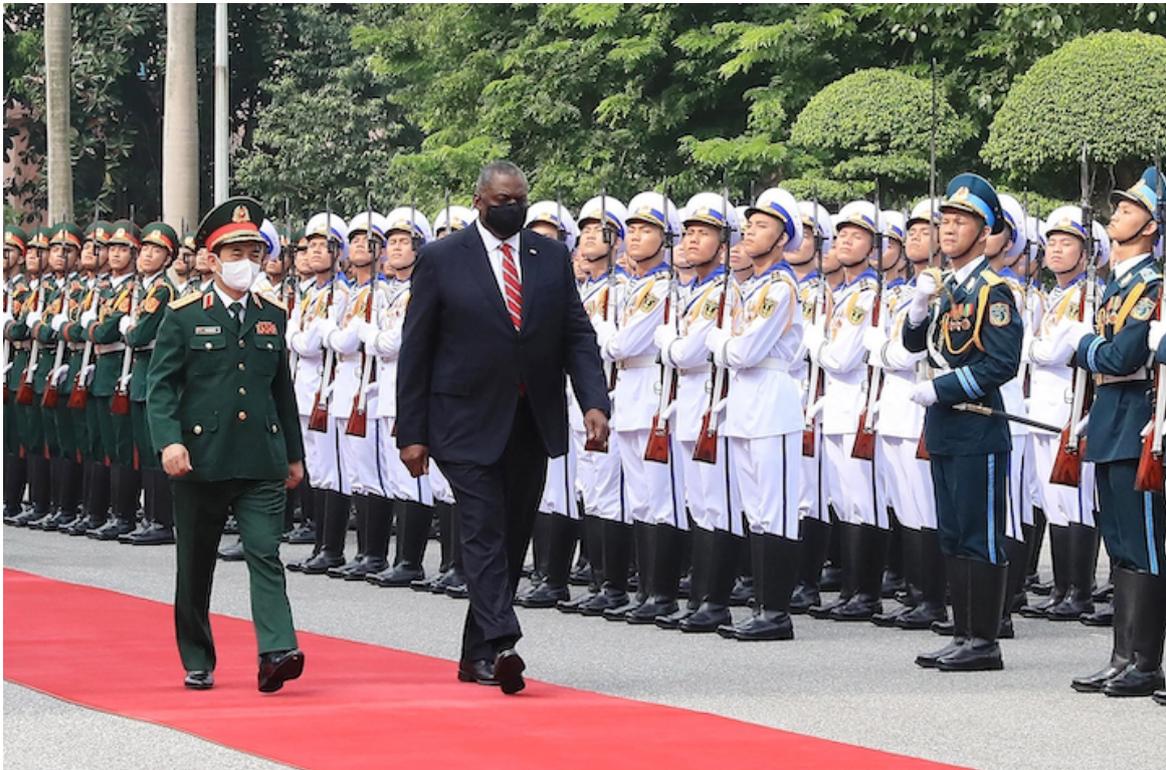
PERSPECTIVE

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Comparing Vietnamese Responses to Chinese and American Public Diplomacy Efforts on Social Media

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By and large, the Vietnamese public have shown a tendency to appear more receptive to U.S. rather than Chinese narratives. This picture taken and released by the Vietnam News Agency on July 29, 2021 shows U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin (C) inspecting a guard of honour along with Vietnam's Defence Minister Phan Van Giang (L) during a welcoming ceremony in Hanoi. Picture: STR/Vietnam News Agency/AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In a bid to offer a counter narrative to Western media, China has cranked up its efforts to propagate its own views on various fronts abroad. Armed with ample resources and muscular capacity, Beijing has orchestrated a well-coordinated campaign to shape narratives on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. It also marshals different sophisticated methods such as the use of an army of fake accounts to amplify the narratives dictated at home.
- But where Vietnam is concerned, China has found it challenging to sway the local media and information landscape. Several factors account for this, including the entrenched anti-China sentiments within Vietnam, the ownership, control structure and censorship of the Vietnamese media, and characteristics of Vietnam's social media landscape that are not conducive for China's efforts to weaponize Twitter, which is otherwise its main platform for online messaging.
- Facebook has thus become the platform of choice for China to shape its online messaging and to conduct its public diplomacy engagement efforts in Vietnam
- In comparing Facebook posts by the Chinese embassy and consulate with the U.S. embassy and consulate over a seven-month period, several intriguing observations emerge. A key tenet of China's public diplomacy efforts in Vietnam has been to peddle anti-America narratives. Meanwhile, the U.S. has been more inclined to highlight issues such as education and culture. Also, whenever Washington did trade verbal barbs with Beijing on social media, the former often prevailed, as Vietnamese public sentiments show.
- Findings from the comparative analysis of all those Facebook posts suggest that it would be a risky bet for China to continue dialling up its blistering anti-America indictment in Vietnamese cyberspace, even when it adopts a more engaging approach to communicate its messages. By and large, the Vietnamese public shows a tendency to appear more receptive to U.S. narratives.

INTRODUCTION

As the U.S.-China rivalry for global public opinion heats up,¹ Beijing has constantly had to walk a very fine line between toughing out Western criticism and sprucing up a “credible, lovable and respectable” image.² That undertaking means China has to placate a nationalist domestic audience while avoiding estranging foreign supporters abroad.

In 2009, China reportedly began to pump billions of dollars into boosting its global state media presence.³ The ultimate goal is to shape a narrative in foreign countries that benefits China. 2013 was considered a critical juncture as President Xi Jinping launched a multi-pronged campaign designed to “tell China’s story well” globally.⁴ Xi has also since then stressed that China needs to “increase [its] soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China’s messages to the world.”⁵

But in recent years, China’s authoritarianism, its treatment of the Uyghurs, its crackdown on dissent in Hong Kong, and the Covid-19 pandemic have all combined to send global views of Beijing plummeting to unprecedented lows.⁶ This is the context in which China has doubled down on its efforts to propagate its own version of the story on various fronts in a bid to offer a counter narrative to Western media. That was reiterated in a speech Xi made in early June where he stressed that China needed to build a “credible, lovable and respectable” image abroad, adding that the country was engaged in a “public opinion struggle.”⁷

As part of the state-orchestrated campaign to “tell China’s story well” to the world,⁸ a bevy of Chinese diplomats, state media outlets and academics have become increasingly vocal and frequent in defending China’s policies in cyberspace. They have focused on excoriating the ills and double standards in the U.S. and its allies, and pushing back against what is perceived to be Western prejudices and stereotypes of their country. Such “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy, named after two Rambo-style Chinese box offices,⁹ has drawn widespread ire for what critics call an abrasive, defiant and combative approach. The message is crystal clear, however: China is set to take up the gauntlet of standing up to the U.S.

But perhaps beset by hubris, China has blended its domestic and foreign propaganda policies even though the target audiences could not be more different. The blistering anti-America approach appears to be working well at home, but whether it sells abroad is another story. That question looms all the more large in Vietnam, where one poll after the next have shown that Washington is favoured over Beijing.¹⁰ In that context, even though its criticism of the American agenda is not always utterly groundless, China’s messages risk being a hard sell in Vietnam.

This paper addresses these questions: How has Beijing propagated its narrative in a country where anti-China sentiments have not only permeated public discourse but are also deeply embedded in the Vietnamese psyche?¹¹ How receptive are social media-savvy Vietnamese netizens to China’s online messaging, compared with U.S. online messaging? What observations can we make of China and U.S. online public diplomacy strategies in winning over the hearts and minds of Vietnamese?

HOW CHINA SELLS

It is social media that has become China's key battlefield for public opinion. Beijing's propaganda machine has sought to make the most of Western media platforms, which are otherwise banned at home, to telegraph and amplify its official line on global affairs and current events to a broader international audience.¹² Such manipulation of online discourse has become more or less institutionalized with Twitter, Facebook and YouTube becoming China's platforms of choice since 2017.¹³ China's global propaganda machine has functioned around this modus operandi: The party line dictated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and state media outlets is picked up and spread by Chinese diplomats and diplomatic missions around the world.

China has been able to deliver some results on both the mainstream media landscape and the cybersphere. Two surveys by the Brussels-based International Federation of Journalists attest to how China has significantly escalated its global media outreach. According to the first survey which was released in 2020, a total of 58 journalist unions polled from 58 different countries said the most widely reported form of Chinese outreach was journalistic exchanges and training schemes.¹⁴ Those programmes were overwhelmingly described as "a positive experience."

The other survey, released last May, also found journalist unions in more than half of 50 different countries confirming that coverage of China in their national media had been more positive since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.¹⁵ In other words, as the pandemic started to spread, China marshalled its existing media dissemination channels in developing countries to burnish its image as a reliable partner there. That mission has been accomplished apparently with a sleight of hand, however. According to the latest survey, besides propaganda, China has also sought to cultivate and shape its own narratives through the use of new tactics such as disinformation and misinformation. Many pro-China pundits have also raised hackles for allegedly resorting to conspiracy theories or disinformation to peddle Beijing-sanctioned narratives. To China and its cheerleaders, in the battle to massage public thinking, "relying on logic and facts does not always work."¹⁶

Such dynamic came to the fore in cyberspace. A seven-month investigation by the Associated Press and the Oxford Internet Institute found that an army of fake accounts have been most active in retweeting Chinese diplomats and state media to the tune of "thousands of times."¹⁷ In doing so, those accounts have played a crucial role in amplifying China's propaganda to an audience that could reach the size of hundreds of millions. More importantly, they did so without necessarily divulging that the content is state-sponsored. According to the joint study, the investigation marked for the first time the large-scale inauthentic amplification that has "broadly driven engagement across official government and state media accounts." Key issues that Beijing sought to highlight to sway public opinion included its core strategic interests such as Taiwan, Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

But against that backdrop, Beijing's recipe for success elsewhere could risk turning out to be a debacle in Vietnam, where anti-China sentiments have percolated and been amplified in public discourse.

IS THE VIETNAM PUBLIC BUYING IT?

In fact, anti-China sentiments have thwarted Beijing's repeated attempts to shape its narrative in Vietnam's mainstream media, according to a 2020 study by the Washington-based Center for Naval Analysis.¹⁸ The reasons: Anti-China sentiments, compounded by a "hostile media environment" that was fuelled chiefly by historical Sino-Vietnamese conflicts, contemporary grievances and a genuine lack of public interest in Chinese propaganda, have blunted the promotion of China's narratives in Vietnam, according to key findings of the study. Vietnamese authorities sometimes even calibrated media coverage to exhibit a harder stance on China with regards to maritime territorial disputes, the study said.

Deep anti-China sentiments aside, another stumbling block to China's efforts to shape the media environment in Vietnam is ironically the structural similarities between the two ideological allies. Internet censorship, strict media controls and ownership limitations have shut major avenues for Chinese companies to penetrate the Vietnamese market. Chinese-language editions have been subject to state control and censorship. Government policies and regulations have neutered China's largesse, weaponized in many other countries to sway editorial decisions and agendas. Licensing requirements have also constrained the number of foreign journalists and media bureaus – Chinese included - in the country. In a nutshell, China's playbook is more limited in Vietnam than elsewhere.

In the online sphere, while much of Beijing's "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy has played out on Twitter,¹⁹ Vietnam's social media landscape has throttled China's efforts to weaponize the platform to propagate its messages. Various statistics confirm that Facebook, Google's YouTube and Zalo have been the most popular social media platforms in Vietnam.²⁰ (Zalo is Vietnam's premier chatting app, launched in 2012 and currently boasting around 64 million users).²¹ In that context, Facebook has become the only remaining platform available for China to shape its online messaging in Vietnam.

U.S.-CHINA RIVALRY FOR PUBLIC OPINION ONLINE

Like Chinese diplomats, the U.S. diplomatic corps has also turned to Facebook, which has between 60 to 70 million active users in Vietnam,²² as the main venue for engaging with the Vietnamese public. This section examines the issues and key messages that the U.S. and China have telegraphed to the Vietnamese audience in the online sphere by analysing the contents of all posts on the Facebook pages of both diplomatic missions during the first seven months of this year. It also examines how receptive the Vietnamese public has been to such public diplomacy efforts by both superpowers. The topics of discussion are classified into five categories: Diplomacy & Politics, Economy & Trade, Education & Culture, Recruitment, and Vaccine Diplomacy.

An analysis of those Facebook posts and their public engagements suggests the following characteristics:

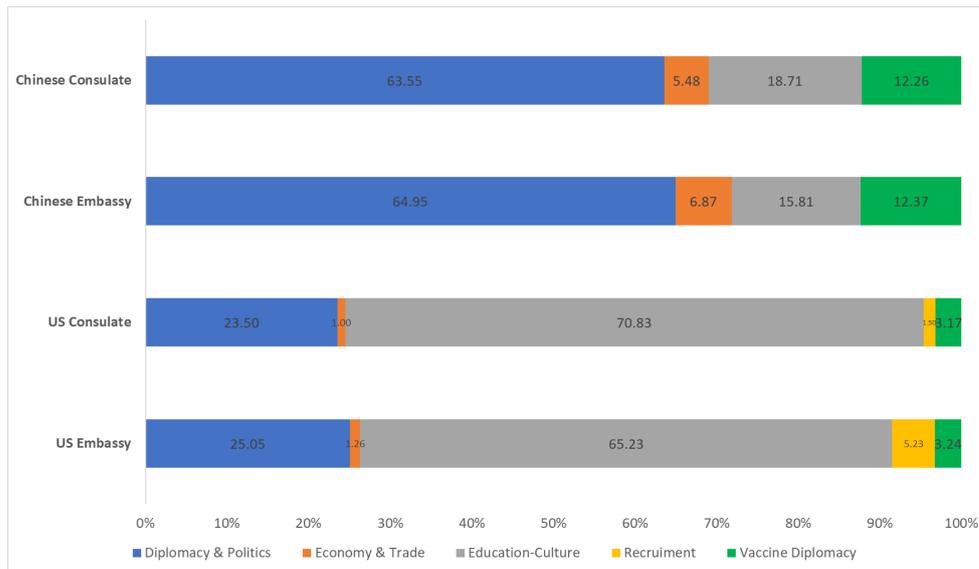
- Between January to July, the U.S. embassy and consulate had a total of 1,155 posts covering five topics, nearly double those on the Facebook pages of the Chinese embassy and consulate (601).

- China's public diplomacy narratives in Vietnam have mostly peddled anti-America messages, focusing on reinforcing centrally directed messages from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and state news outlets. Meanwhile, the U.S. employed a different tack, focusing less on U.S.-China tensions than on promoting a range of other issues with the Vietnamese. But when Washington did trade verbal barbs with Beijing on social media, the former often prevailed, going by Vietnamese public sentiments.
- The dominant theme the U.S. sought to highlight was Education & Culture, accounting for 68% of the total number of online posts. On the other hand, Diplomacy and Politics makes up the major chunk (64%) of the total number of China's Facebook posts (Figure 1).
- But even though the U.S. generated the most content on Education & Culture issues, public eyeballs lay elsewhere. An analysis of the top three most-engaged posts during the seven-month period showed that Facebook posts by the U.S. that attracted the most attention belonged to the Diplomacy & Politics category. Interestingly, public engagements zeroed in on the very theme China sought to propagate its narratives on: the anti-American trope.

The focus on the Education & Culture theme crystalizes how the U.S. has sought to cash in on its soft power to win public hearts and minds in Vietnam, a move that dovetails with facts on the ground. One poll after the next has attested to the strong positive sentiments among Vietnamese toward the U.S. and its image – no matter who the U.S. president is. For instance, while – according to a 2017 Pew survey²³ – the image of the U.S. deteriorated sharply across the globe during the first year of the presidency of Donald Trump, popularity ratings only increased in Vietnam and Russia.

That positive perception has barely changed. The desire to live, study and settle down in the U.S. has remained palpable among ordinary Vietnamese. According to most recent data from the U.S. Student and Exchange Visitor Program, Vietnam had sent nearly 26,000 students to the U.S., ranked fifth among countries with the most students at American educational institutions.²⁴ This has enabled Vietnam to distinguish itself from Southeast Asian peers to be the top source of students in the region for the U.S.. Vietnamese, along with the Chinese and Indians,²⁵ have formed the biggest chunk of applicants for the EB-5 visa scheme, which offers foreign investors a fast path to a green card by investing at least \$500,000 to finance a business employing at least 10 American workers. Meanwhile, Vietnamese megacities such as Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh are awash with Americano-philia: A get-together at Starbucks or an overnight queue just to get the latest iPhone version is considered emblems of chic Americanism and a tech-savvy lifestyle.

FIGURE 1. KEY THEMES PROMOTED ONLINE BY THE U.S. AND CHINA



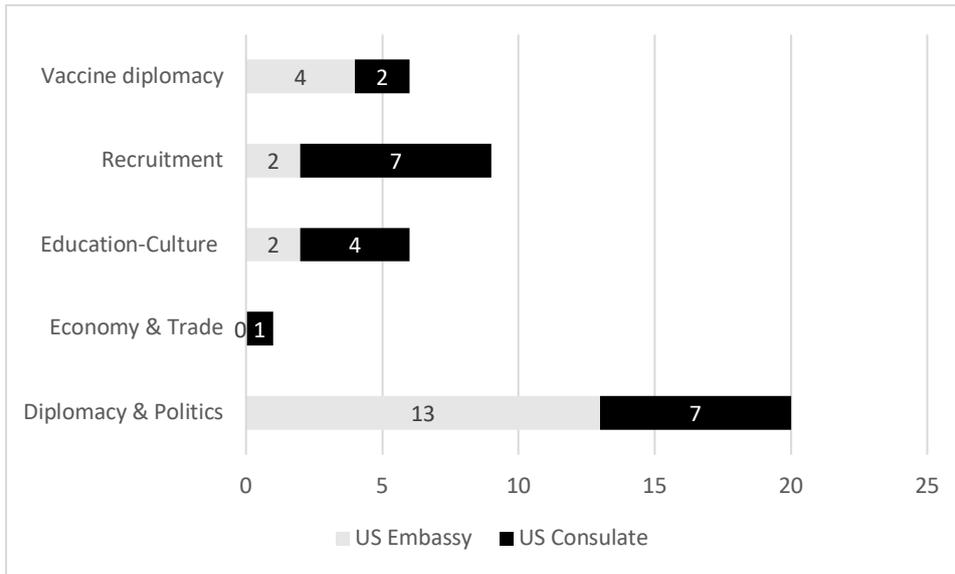
(Source: compiled by the author)

That is the context to which U.S. online messaging hones in on how crucial a role education and culture can play in boosting bilateral ties. The “master narrative” comprises three key messages:

- The United States is a prosperous, democratic and modern country, buttressed by a developed economy and an advanced education system.
- The U.S. provides ample resources and opportunities for those who seek to hone their soft skills or further their studies in the States. America has always played an instrumental role in helping Vietnamese youth compare notes with their peers from all over the world on various fronts.
- Educational and cultural exchanges have proven to be and will always be a welcome and useful bridge between the U.S. and Vietnam.

But based on the analysis of the top three most engaged Facebook posts by the U.S. from January to July this year, it was the category of Diplomacy & Politics that attracted the most public attention. The engagements in the Education & Culture category even trailed behind Recruitment (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. MOST ENGAGED FACEBOOK POSTS BY THE U.S.



(Source: Socialinsider)

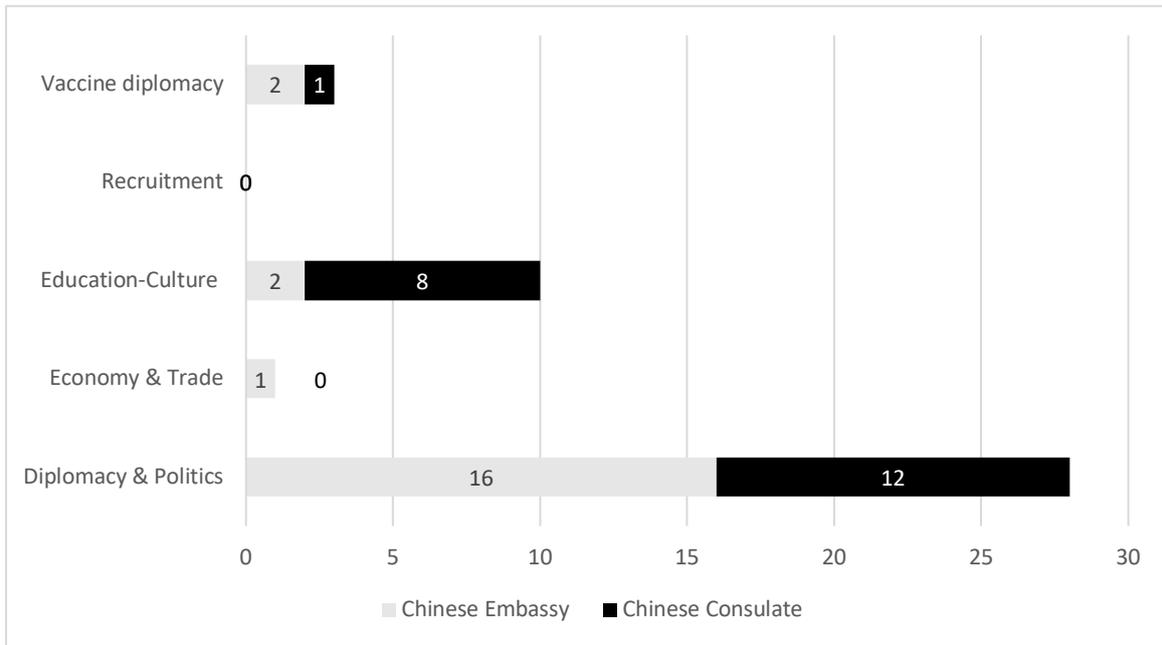
While the contents on the Facebook pages of the U.S. embassy and consulate have been almost identical, that is not the case when it comes to how China has allocated its resources for online messaging. Since last year, the Chinese embassy has refrained from posting provocative statements that are vulnerable to popular backlash. Meanwhile, the Chinese consulate has made the most of satirical illustrations, parodies, memes and sarcastic language to practice “whataboutism” to serve a dual purpose: defend China’s official line and castigate the American agenda. Practically, “whataboutism” means “raising a supposedly analogous issue in response to a perceived hypocrisy or inconsistency.”²⁶ This tactic is part and parcel of a uniform bandwagon that Chinese officials have jumped on to deflect Western criticism.²⁷

Several prominent issues in which Beijing looked to hammer home the party line and ramp up condemnation of the U.S. and its allies include: (i) China’s stance on the U.S. presidential election,²⁸ (ii) China seizing on the mob attack at the U.S. Capitol on January 6 to mock America’s support of global protest movements including those in Hong Kong in mid-2019,²⁹ and (iii) China bristling at U.S. criticism of its treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang.³⁰ The “master narrative” of those posts consists of three key messages:

- On the world stage, China is a more responsible and constructive player than the U.S., including in the fight against Covid-19.
- It is the U.S., not China, that has been the purveyor of most humanitarian disasters with its “aggressive wars” and military interventions over many decades.³¹
- America’s domestic and foreign policies are a travesty of what it has been trying to preach to the rest of the world about freedom, dignity and human rights.³² The U.S. does not have the qualification to lecture China from a position of strength.³³ Neither do its allies.

The Diplomacy & Politics category also elicited the most online engagements from January to July. (Figure 3)

FIGURE 3. MOST ENGAGED FACEBOOK POSTS BY CHINA

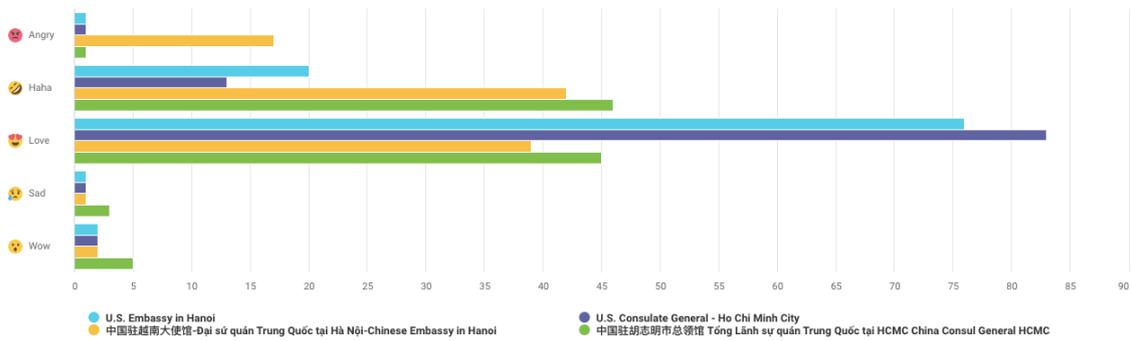


(Source: Socialinsider)

Based on an analysis of the degree of public reactions to all Facebook posts by the U.S. and China during the January-July period, two key takeaways are distilled (Figure 4):

- The Chinese embassy incurred the most “Angry” emojis while its consulate had the most “Haha” ones, even though they both sought to propagate the same narratives. One possible explanation for this discrepancy perhaps lies in the fact that the online messaging employed by the Chinese consulate was more engaging to social media-savvy users.
- The U.S. embassy and consulate attracted the most “Love” emojis, suggesting the public found their messages more appealing than those from their Chinese counterparts.

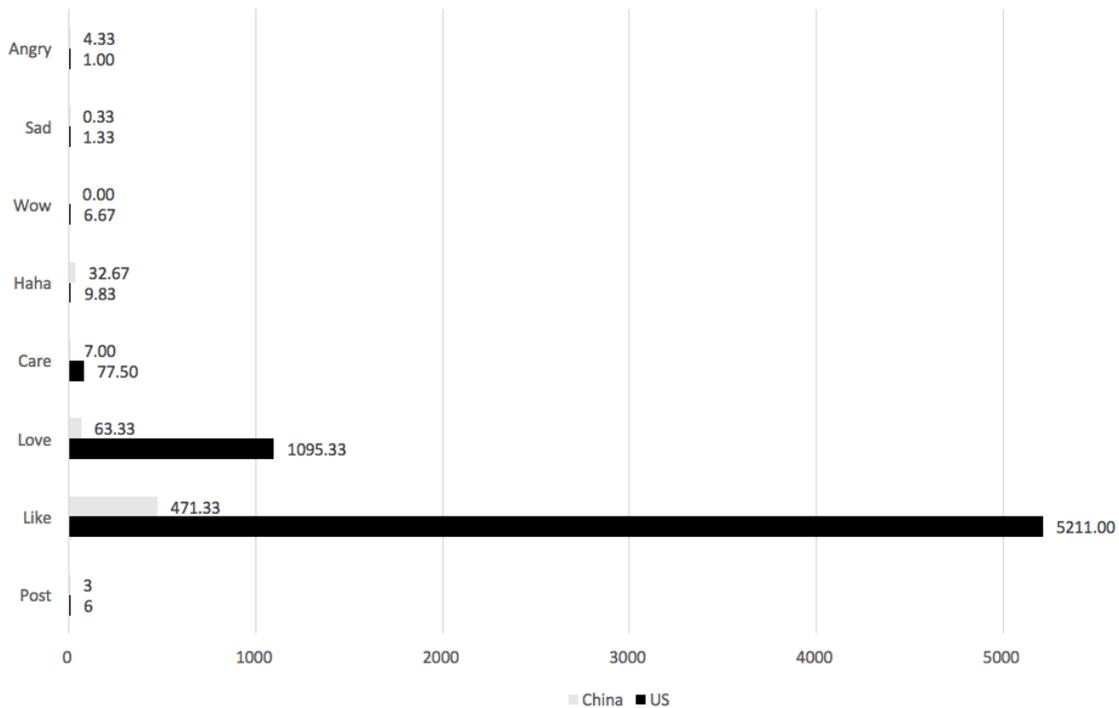
FIGURE 4. Public reactions to U.S. and China’s online messaging



(Source: BuzzSumo)

When both countries seek to burnish their vaccine diplomacy campaigns on Vietnamese cyberspace, the U.S. beat China by a wide margin in terms of positive public reactions, emblematic of how the Vietnamese public prizes American vaccines over Chinese shots.³⁴ Such sentiments were reflected in an analysis of Facebook posts and their average engagements on vaccine diplomacy which were among the most engaged content from January to July (Figure 5).

FIGURE 5. PUBLIC SENTIMENTS ON U.S.-CHINA VACCINE DIPLOMACY



(Source: compiled by the author)

A BITTER PILL FOR CHINA

Findings from the comparative analysis of Facebook posts suggest that it would be a risky bet for China to continue dialling up its blistering anti-America indictment in Vietnamese cyberspace. Souring Sino-Vietnamese ties in recent years, fuelled chiefly by Beijing's muscle-flexing moves in the South China Sea³⁵ and its damming of the Mekong River³⁶, has exacerbated anti-China sentiments in Vietnam. This dynamic has whetted Vietnam's appetite for closer defence and economic ties with the U.S..³⁷ Poll after poll have also corroborated that the Vietnamese public overwhelmingly favour Washington as a hedge against Beijing. In the State of Southeast Asia 2021 survey, published in February by Singapore's ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Vietnamese – along with Filipinos – register the most palpable levels of distrust toward China in the region.³⁸ Those who distrust China think Beijing could wield its economic and military power to threaten their country's interests and sovereignty. According to the same survey, Vietnamese are most leery of China's growing strategic clout, yet most supportive of American influence in Southeast Asia.

Two waves of online backlash against China's anti-America narrative in Vietnamese cyberspace last year are likely to have served as a bitter pill for Beijing to swallow.

In July 2020, the Facebook page of the Chinese embassy in Hanoi caused an online stir after posting a note from the Global Times editor Hu Xijin, sternly warning Vietnam not to side with the U.S. to contain China.³⁹ In the note, which appeared on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of U.S.-Vietnam bilateral ties, Hu minced no words in pointing to the U.S.'s "malicious intent" on pitching Hanoi against Beijing. The note also reminded the Vietnamese people of how the U.S. could pull the rug out from under Vietnam's feet. In the wake of a public furor, the note was soon taken down.⁴⁰

In what amounted to an ideological confrontation four months later,⁴¹ the U.S. and China posted statements that accused each other of destabilizing the global order on the Facebook pages of their respective embassies.⁴² What stood out was how the online community reacted to the diplomatic brickbat. In the comment sections of those Facebook posts, those who appeared to be Vietnamese Internet users overwhelmingly cheered on the U.S. statement while sneering at China's response to it. This was reflected in the most-used keywords in all comments on both Facebook posts. Online reaction to the U.S. post centred on either pro-America or anti-China sentiments, such as "God bless America", "Thank you, President Trump", "China is the nightmare of the world" or "[China] robbed Vietnam of its islands." Meanwhile, China-bashing comments dominated the online response to the Chinese statement, such as "No one believes in China", "China is a hypocrite" or "China, shut up."

A "LOVEABLE" CHINA IN VIETNAM? NOT SO FAST

China is unlikely to dial back its nationalistic rhetoric on foreign policy, for various reasons. Chief among them is that any effort to do so could be crippled by the nationalist fervour at home. In a speech that marked the centenary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party on July 1, Xi Jinping reiterated that the country would not back down from any fight

where China's sovereignty and interests were threatened, warning against "foreign forces" that stand in the way.⁴³

But as this study has shown, China might at some point wish to tone down its "chest-thumping" stance, as this seems to have been counter-productive at least where the Vietnamese audience is concerned. When it comes to the goal of making its image more "loveable" in Vietnam, it seems that Beijing still has a long way to go.

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