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Opinion – China’s Wolf Warrior Propaganda Versus Western Criticism in the Xinjiang Cotton Crisis

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LIN PU, APR 10 2021

Amid the growing tensions between China and the West, the Chinese propaganda apparatus has found another battlefield to retaliate against the United States and other Western countries. On March 24, the Communist Party’s youth wing denounced H&M on Chinese social media over its sanctions on Xinjiang cotton. Meanwhile, Chinese state-backed media outlets were also calling for consumers, owing to the same reason, to boycott other international clothing brands, including Nike, Adidas, Uniqlo, etc. This boycott campaign against foreign clothing brands has quickly swept into all Chinese social networking platforms and it’s obvious that China is experiencing a new nationalist upsurge in countering the West. In this crisis, the Chinese government has ramped up its propaganda machine in an antagonistic way to fight back against the Western criticism on Xinjiang human rights violations.

From the COVID-19 pandemic to the Xinjiang cotton crisis, China’s diplomatic department and diplomats aggressively hit back against Western criticism in confrontational ways; and this type of diplomatic practice is also known as another name, “Wolf Warrior diplomacy”. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, the Wolf Warrior diplomacy has been guiding the official rhetoric of state propaganda and it is manifest that the practice of Chinese propaganda organs has also served the same rhetoric with the Wolf Warrior style.

Last month, the United States, the European Union, and other allies issued to impose sanctions on Chinese officials over Xinjiang human rights issues respectively. This coordinated effort is not only the first sanctions on China for the US government under the Biden presidency, but also the first time for the EU to impose such punitive measures against Beijing since the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. In response to the Western pressure, the Chinese government strongly rejected the Western countries’ accusations and immediately retaliated to sanction the Western politicians, officials, and scholars. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Hua Chunying, even hit back to denounce the Western human rights records with the examples of US slavery and Western colonialism in history.

Hua’s response to a certain degree shows that the CCP leadership has decided to strongly control the narrative over Xinjiang issues and fight back against the West by resorting to Chinese Wolf Warrior diplomacy; and other party organs and propaganda apparatus quickly follow the direction concurrently. Since the Xinjiang issue is currently the main battlefield and, therefore, the Communist Party’s youth wing and the Chinese media had the incentives to run the boycott campaigns right after the Western sanctions whether their operations were directed by the central party leadership or not.

Although the perspective of boycott campaigns is aligning with the CCP’s stance, it appears that the Chinese government is not willing to lead the campaigns overtly. In fact, China’s focus is still on manipulating the public opinions at home and abroad, in doing so, it put a lot of effort into stepping up the Wolf Warrior propaganda to reframe the Western criticism with multiple toolkits. In particular, the Chinese propaganda apparatus is conducting the hard and soft techniques simultaneously.

As for the hard techniques, the Chinese government has condemned Western criticism aggressively and responded that the international allegations were all based on lies, on the one hand. In a recent press conference, Hua played a YouTube video about a China-based British Youtuber who describes the criticism over Xinjiang issues as the

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narratives of anti-China propaganda and disinformation from the West. She also showed another video clip the other day with a Canadian vlogger, also based in China, giving a speech regarding that the real ambition of the United States is aiming at China’s interests in Xinjiang. Most of these video clips were uploaded again onto the YouTube channel by China Global Television Network (CGTN) and were widely shared by other state-backed media outlets and Chinese officials (including Hua Chunying herself) on social media platforms to amplify the effects of Wolf Warrior propaganda.

On the other hand, the Chinese propaganda apparatus has begun to disseminate the image that every Uyghur person lives a happy life under CCP’s rule. In a joint press conference by the Chinese foreign ministry and Xinjiang local government in February, some Uyghur women claimed that there is neither forced labor nor internment camps in Xinjiang. Besides foreign online influencers, several local Uyghur YouTubers have released some videos to reveal farmers’ daily work and how to harvest cotton in Xinjiang. An Uyghur YouTuber even said, as a local Xinjiang resident, that the Western coverage on Xinjiang is absolutely not true. That is, these narratives and videos reflect the upsurge of Chinese patriotism amid the cotton crisis.

Even though there is no critical evidence to demonstrate that these Western online influencers and YouTubers have close connections with the Chinese authorities, it is not difficult to identify that the Chinese government exactly knows how to take advantage of them to reinforce its official rhetoric.

The strategies by the Chinese propaganda apparatus illustrate an ancient Chinese proverb, “learning from the West in countering them”. In this propaganda war on the Xinjiang issues, the Chinese Wolf Warrior propaganda works in almost all main Western social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube — their messages and video are in English as well as the Westerner online influencers voicing out to support China — and it employs the tactic of labeling all criticism from the international society as fake news, seeking to convince the international audience that the Western accusations are merely based on groundless information.

Most importantly, the Chinese government is reframing the narratives of Western criticism, simplifying the criticism into the defaming of China and all Chinese people to deflect the international accusations over the human rights issues. Moreover, it can further legitimate its rule and repressive policies in Xinjiang via domestic nationalism. In conclusion, China’s framing strategies in the propaganda war demonstrate that it aims at manipulating public opinion at the global level and China’s rhetoric is the true narrative of stories in Xinjiang. The Chinese government wants to emphasize that China has its own definition of human rights and the United States and other Western countries should be more attentive to their human rights records, not intervene in China’s domestic affairs.

About the author:

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