




RESEARCH ARTICLE

Justifying the use of excessive force: A critical discourse analysis of Chinese police individual WeChat Subscription Accounts

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(Received 15 February 2023; revised 22 September 2023; accepted 25 September 2023)

Abstract

This article examines how individual police officers in China interpret and justify the use of excessive force on social media through their WeChat Subscription Accounts (WSAs). Existing research examines how the police department uses social media to justify deadly force, but overlooks individual officers' online justifications. Adopting a critical discourse analysis approach, this study analyses 211 articles commenting on a prominent case of police violence in China. The findings shed light on the online voice of Chinese frontline officers, revealing an ideology that defends the use of excessive force. The articles published in WSAs displayed strong empathy towards the involved officer; contested the characterization of the incident as police brutality by police officials, the public, and the media; and employed various strategies to justify the officer's actions. The discussion section expands on these findings by drawing comparisons to justifications in the United States, emphasizing the distinctive dynamic between individual officers' online expression and official police discourse in China, and offering insights for scholars examining online expression and digital nationalism in the Chinese context.

Keywords: Police use of force; legitimacy; police violence; social media; critical discourse analysis

Introduction

On 13 December 2014, Zhou Xiuyun, the mother of a migrant worker, died in police custody in Taiyuan, China. The incident started with a dispute between Zhou's son and security guards at a construction site where he worked. Zhou and Zhou's son, who were eager to enter the construction site to pack their belongings, were stopped by the security guards as they were not wearing helmets.¹ As the dispute became heated, the

¹Taiyuan Police Department, 'Announcement on "12.13" unnatural death incident (in Chinese)', published online on 26 December 2014, available at http://gaj.taiyuan.gov.cn/site/page/news_xq.html?id=2014122620212468960101&titname=%E8%AD%A6%E6%96%B9%E6%97%B6%E8%AE%AF, [accessed 10 October 2023].

security guards called the police. When the police officer, Wang Wenjun, was trying to take Zhou's son to the police station, Zhou attempted to stop him by holding onto his leg. After several warnings to Zhou to stay back and being ignored by her, Officer Wang held Zhou's head down and pinned her to the ground. While Zhou lost consciousness and was lying on the ground, Officer Wang stepped on her hair for 23 minutes to control her. A few hours later, the hospital announced Zhou's death. The autopsy showed that she died of respiratory failure caused by a force-induced neck fracture.²

This is the '12.13' case, one of the most famous and representative incidents involving police use of excessive force in China. After the photo of Officer Wang stepping on Zhou's hair went viral, a firestorm of criticism concerning the use of deadly force by police in China was sparked.³ On 2 January 2015, 20 days after Zhou's death, the chief of the Taiyuan Police Department apologized publicly to the victim's family and society at large, claiming that Officer Wang's behaviour was execrable and should be punished severely. The chief declared every December 13th a 'warning day' for police forces, with this case serving as a typical cautionary tale of police brutality.⁴ After five months of investigation, on 18 May 2015, the Taiyuan Procuratorate prosecuted Officer Wang Wenjun for abuse of power and intentional injury.

However, the police department's announcement triggered further controversy and a special voice: social media accounts run by police officers in their individual capacity. For instance, on 9 February 2015, 'A Sir', a police individual WeChat Subscription Account (WSA), with more than 500,000 followers, posted an article titled 'According to the law, Officer Wang of Taiyuan should be found innocent'. The article was viewed more than 60,700 times.⁵ Despite the voices defending Officer Wang, on 10 November 2016 the Taiyuan Intermediate People's Court convicted him of negligent homicide and abuse of power. The verdict reads,

Zhou Xiuyun hold Wang Wenjun's trouser pockets for 7 minutes, which was an act of obstructing law enforcement by mild violence. According to Article 19 in the Operational Procedures for Police to Stop Criminal Activities, Wang can use empty hand control. However, Wang improperly used the restraint measure

²Guozheng Yan, 'The cause of death of female worker Zhou Xiuyun was found out, and the police involved were suspected of intentional injury (in Chinese)', *Xinhua News*, published online on 30 January 2015, available at <http://news.sohu.com/20150130/n408249146.shtml>, [accessed 10 October 2023].

³On 11 January 2015, the incident was first reported by the province's top official media, with the headline 'Shocking death of a migrant worker, trampled by police (in Chinese)', available at https://web.archive.org/web/20150116175000/http://zzwb.zynews.com/html/2015-01/07/content_626890.htm, [accessed 10 October 2023]. On *Sina Weibo* (one of China's largest social media platforms), a search for 'Wang Wenjun from Taiyuan' yielded two relevant posts with 488 comments overwhelmingly condemning his actions, perceiving him as a murderer, available at <https://weibo.com/2995936710/4791802218939465> and <https://weibo.com/5220711693/4708050986861450>, [both accessed 10 October 2023].

⁴Chief of Taiyuan Police Department apologized to victims of "12.13" (in Chinese), *The Paper*, published online on 3 January 2015, available at http://m.thepaper.cn/kuaibao_detail.jsp?contid=1290913&from=kuaibao, [accessed 10 October 2023].

⁵'Officer Wang should be found innocent (in Chinese)', 'A Sir', published online on 9 February 2015, available at <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/bybDq1iij3jco1k3WSWSw>, [accessed 10 October 2023].

of twisting and pressing Zhou's head, which obviously exceeded the reasonable limit and violated Article 3 and 20 in The Operational Procedures. Wang's action caused Zhou's death, and Wang should be held criminally responsible. His action constituted the crime of negligent homicide. Wang stepped on Zhou's hair, which seriously insulted Zhou's dignity and constituted the crime of abuse of power.⁶

While the court found Officer Wang guilty, it remains unknown why his use of excessive force was understood as legitimate by many police individual WSAs. Existing research suggests that police agencies attempt to manage their legitimacy on social media after contested police violence;⁷ however, few studies have shown how an unofficial police voice, namely, social media accounts run by officers as individuals, construct their perceptions of police violence and legitimacy on social media. Adopting a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach, this study aims to analyse how Chinese police individual WSAs justify the use of excessive force by the officer in the '12.13' incident. Corresponding to the three levels of CDA, this article aims to explore: (1) at the level of texts, how did the texts published in police individual WSAs construct the incident?, (2) at the level of discursive practice, why were the texts produced and which audience were they aimed at?, and (3) at the level of social practice, what legitimation strategies were employed by these texts? By answering these questions, this study highlights this unofficial police voice on social media which presents unique patterns when justifying police violence. The findings of this study not only reveal how social media accounts run by individual police officers express opinions and pursue legitimation in an increasingly digital environment, but also provides practical implications for regulating police use of force.

Literature review

Police use of force is an indispensable aspect of policing that often occupies the centre of public scrutiny and debates.⁸ Extensive literature has studied the conceptualization of police use of force,⁹ the varying forms and frequencies of the phenomenon,¹⁰ and the wide range of factors that influence police use of force, including officers' role

⁶Taiyuan Intermediate People's Court, 'The case of female migrant worker dead in police station was sentenced: Wang Wenjun was sentenced to five years in prison for the crime of causing death by negligence (in Chinese)', *The Paper*, published on 10 November 2016, available at https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1558903, [accessed 10 October 2023].

⁷Tony Cheng, 'Social media, socialization, and pursuing legitimation of police violence', *Criminology*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2021, pp. 391–418.

⁸Egon Bittner, *The functions of the police in modern society* (Bethesda: National Institutes of Mental Health, 1971).

⁹Joel H. Garner et al., 'Measuring the continuum of force used by and against the police', *Criminal Justice Review*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1995, pp. 146–168; Charles Frank Klahm IV, James Frank and John Liederbach, 'Understanding police use of force: Rethinking the link between conceptualization and measurement', *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies and Management*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2014, pp. 558–578.

¹⁰William Terrill, 'Police use of force: A transactional approach', *Justice Quarterly*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2005, pp. 107–138; William Terrill and Eugene A. Paoline III, 'Police use of less lethal force: Does administrative policy matter?', *Justice Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2017, pp. 193–216.

orientation,¹¹ situational contexts,¹² organizational features,¹³ the public perception of police use of force,¹⁴ and so on.

Police use of force in China

When an officer uses more force than is allowed by the law and regulations to achieve citizen compliance, the officer is using excessive force.¹⁵ In China, legal doctrine dictating police use of force is similar to that in literature written in English.¹⁶ According to the Operational Procedures for Police to Stop Criminal Activities¹⁷ developed by the Chinese Ministry of Public Security in 2010, officers may use reasonable force to stop ongoing crimes; however, the level of force must be proportional to the level of resistance of the non-compliant citizen, and officers are prohibited from attacking a suspect's head, genitals, or other body parts which may result in life-threatening injury, unless necessary.

The legal doctrines, however, are often at odds with the views of frontline police officers.¹⁸ Scholars have found that Chinese police officers generally support the use of more force than the law and regulations permit in the face of a resisting citizen¹⁹ and often consider the legal rules on use of force as too restrictive.²⁰ In a survey of over 900 police officers in China, Liu and Zhang found that about 45 per cent of respondents agree or strongly agree that an officer may use any level of force to deal with a resisting suspect.²¹ Such an aggressive approach to non-compliant citizens must be understood

¹¹Paul Chevigny, *Police power: Police abuses in New York City* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969); Jerome H. Skolnick and James J. Fyfe, *Above the law: Police and the excessive use of force* (New York: Free Press, 1993).

¹²Terrill, 'Police use of force', pp. 107–138; William Terrill and Stephen D. Mastrofski, 'Situational and officer-based determinants of police coercion', *Justice Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2002, pp. 215–248.

¹³Geoffrey P. Alpert and John M. MacDonald, 'Police use of force: An analysis of organizational characteristics', *Justice Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2001, pp. 393–409.

¹⁴Monica M. Gerber and Jonathan Jackson, 'Justifying violence: Legitimacy, ideology and public support for police use of force', *Psychology, Crime and Law*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2017, pp. 79–95; M. Gau Jacinta, A. Paoline Eugene III and D. Paul Nicholas, 'De-policing as a result of public scrutiny: Examining officers' perceptions of negative media attention and willingness to engage in self-initiated activity', *Journal of Crime and Justice*, vol. 45, no. 5, 2022, pp. 539–551.

¹⁵Robert E. Worden, 'The "causes" of police brutality: Theory and evidence on police use of force', in *Criminal justice theory: Explaining the nature and behavior of criminal justice*, (eds) Edward R. Marguire and David E. Duffee (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 149–204.

¹⁶Shelley Liu and Lening Zhang, 'Police attitudes toward the use of inappropriate force in China', *International Journal of Police Science and Management*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2021, pp. 358–371.

¹⁷Ministry of Public Security, 'Operational procedures for police to stop criminal activities (in Chinese)', published in 2010, available at https://www.sohu.com/a/313342509_472534, [accessed 10 October 2023].

¹⁸Loren T. Atherley and Matthew J. Hickman, 'Controlling use of force: Identifying police use of excessive force through analysis of administrative records', *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2014, pp. 123–134.

¹⁹Shelley Liu, 'Citizen provoking behavior and police attitudes toward the use of force: A scenario-based study in China', *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2023, pp. 210–218; Liu and Zhang, 'Police attitudes toward the use of inappropriate force in China', pp. 358–371.

²⁰Jianhong Liu et al., 'Police supervisors' work-related attitudes in China', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2017, pp. 419–438; Ivan Y. Sun et al., 'A comparison of Chinese and the US police cadets' occupational attitudes', *Journal of Criminal Justice*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2010, pp. 640–647.

²¹Liu and Zhang, 'Police attitudes toward the use of inappropriate force in China', pp. 358–371.

against the backdrop of China's distinctive social and political background. 'Stability maintenance' (*weiwen*) has been one of the main political agendas that guide policing in China, and the view of the police as a 'knife handle' for the Chinese Communist Party emphasizes the police's role in the Party's plan for stabilizing society and consolidating power.²² Protests and resistance displayed by suspects are often described as threats to national security and social stability, leading to the tolerance of police use of excessive force to maintain order.²³

Nevertheless, the '12.13' incident and other high-profile cases involving police use of excessive force in China have sparked fierce public outrage concerning police violence in recent years. With incidents of police violence going viral on social media, it is now vital to examine how the police, as an institution and as individual officers, respond to negative media attention and criticism from the public for pursuing legitimacy.

Strategies for legitimating police excessive force

Legitimacy is at the heart of any debate about police use of force. The officer's practice must be justified not only by laws and regulations but also by professional standards and societal expectations of morally appropriate conduct.²⁴ From the literature, I identify five key strategies for legitimizing excessive use of force, which are mainly based on Thompson's framework of legitimacy²⁵ and Hirschfield and Simon's framework of legitimizing police violence.²⁶

Rationalization

Persuading the audience by constructing a chain of reasoning is rationalization.²⁷ Van Leeuwen further divides this strategy into two categories: instrumental rationalization and theoretical rationalization.²⁸ Instrumental rationalization represents the action as a tool to achieve a goal, arguing that the action is purposeful or effective or has the potential to serve specific purposes. 'The end justifies the means.' Theoretical rationalization, on the other hand, neutralizes the action as legal and rational, arguing that the action conforms to formalized procedure, common-sense, or scientific knowledge. A review of the literature indicates that rationalization is the dominant strategy used in American society to justify police violence. It involves presenting the officer's actions

²²Susan Trevaske, 'Using Mao to package criminal justice discourse in 21st-century China', *The China Quarterly*, vol. 226, 2016, pp. 299–318.

²³Liu and Zhang, 'Police attitudes toward the use of inappropriate force in China', pp. 358–371.

²⁴Gerber and Jackson, 'Justifying violence', pp. 79–95.

²⁵John B. Thompson, *Ideology and modern culture: Critical social theory in the era of mass communication* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

²⁶The framework developed by Hirschfield and Simon was based on Thompson's framework of legitimacy. Paul J. Hirschfield and Daniella Simon, 'Legitimizing police violence: Newspaper narratives of deadly force', *Theoretical Criminology*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2010; Thompson, *Ideology and modern culture*.

²⁷Thompson, *Ideology and modern culture*.

²⁸Theo Van Leeuwen, 'Legitimation in discourse and communication', *Discourse and Communication*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2007, pp. 91–112.

as a legal and reasonable response to physical threats posed by suspects. It is prevalent in media narratives,²⁹ police department statements,³⁰ and accounts of officers who have used force.³¹ For example, in their study, Hirschfield and Simon reported a 69.5 per cent usage of it. Rojek et al. observed through interviews that the officers' statements seek to rationalize their actions as lawful and appropriate responses to the suspects' aggressive behaviour.³²

Universalization

Universalization refers to the legitimization strategy of representing the action that serves the interests of some individuals as serving the interests of all.³³ For instance, when facing the public as an audience, the police department would emphasize that the police practices serve the ends of the interest of the public, when, in fact, police may use violence as a personal resource for their collective interest.³⁴

Unification

The strategy of unification involves the construction of symbols of unity, representing the actor in a collective identity, irrespective of the differences that may separate them.³⁵ This strategy is specified by Hirschfield and Simon as 'inclusion of police', i.e. representing the police officer who used excessive force as a member of the community by attaching a positive image, affectionate labels, or laudable personal qualities to them. In Hirschfield and Simon's study, compared with other strategies, this strategy is found to be used the least frequently (below 20 per cent).³⁶

Moral evaluation

The strategy of moral evaluation is based on common-sense values, labelling key actors and actions as 'good' or 'bad'.³⁷ Three techniques are found in previous studies of justifying police violence. The first is the expurgation of the victim. According to Thompson, the expurgation of the 'other' refers to constructing the 'other' as a scapegoat that must be resisted or purged.³⁸ By constructing the victim as evil, strange,

²⁹Hirschfield and Simon, 'Legitimizing police violence', pp. 155–182.

³⁰Cheng, 'Social media, socialization, and pursuing legitimization of police violence', pp. 391–418.

³¹Jeff Rojek, Geoffrey P. Smith and Hayden P. Smith, 'Examining officer and citizen accounts of police use-of-force incidents', *Crime and Delinquency*, vol. 58, no. 2, 2012, pp. 301–327; Otwin Marenin, 'Cheapening death: Danger, police street culture, and the use of deadly force', *Police Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2016, pp. 461–487.

³²Hirschfield and Simon, 'Legitimizing police violence'; Rojek, Alpert and Smith, 'Examining officer and citizen accounts', pp. 301–327.

³³Thompson, *Ideology and modern culture*.

³⁴William B. Waegel, 'How police justify the use of deadly force', *Social Problems*, vol. 32, no. 2, 1984, pp. 144–155; William A. Westley, 'Violence and the police', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 59, no. 1, 1953, pp. 34–41.

³⁵Thompson, *Ideology and modern culture*.

³⁶Hirschfield and Simon, 'Legitimizing police violence', pp. 155–182.

³⁷Van Leeuwen, 'Legitimation in discourse and communication', pp. 91–112.

³⁸Thompson, *Ideology and modern culture*.

or threatening; mentioning their criminal history; or even derogating the victim as a person, police actions are justified.³⁹

Euphemization is another type of moral evaluation that elicits a positive valuation for the actor.⁴⁰ When employing euphemisms to depict lethal police actions, words that minimize the gravity of police action (e.g. 'overreact') were used instead of words such as 'kill', 'murder', or 'brutality'. Hirschfield and Simon found that nearly half of the newspaper articles they collected employed euphemization for lethal police actions, framing the police's act 'as a deviation from legitimate procedures rather than as violence'.⁴¹ Emphasizing that the police must be appreciated is the third type of moral evaluation. In his study Cheng found that among online approval of police fatal shootings, approximately 20 per cent emphasized that the police must be appreciated for their removal of social threats.⁴²

Narrativization

The strategy of narrativization claims legitimization by telling stories that serve to justify the exercise of power.⁴³ Van Leeuwen differentiates two types of narrativization: moral tales that reward the actors engaging in legitimate practices with pleasant consequences, and cautionary tales that convey what will happen if actors do not conform to the norms.⁴⁴ Waegel found that stories involving officers who hesitated when using lethal force and ended up injured or dead were prominent aspects of the folklore of police work.⁴⁵ Such stories justify police using lethal force as self-defence.

Police use of social media for legitimating excessive force

Social media offers police institutions the technical ability to seek legitimacy in the wake of controversial police violence, as it represents an independent channel to publish information that is not filtered by traditional mass media.⁴⁶ Missing from the studies is how police officers, as individuals who run social media accounts in their own names, publish information and opinions that may enhance or compromise police legitimacy. The way police officers use social media is distinct from the way in which police institutions do. As individuals, officers receive less supervision from their leaders when managing their personal social media accounts,⁴⁷ and the way they interact with the public is much more diverse and flexible.

While police officers use social media in their own names, in the eyes of the public they still represent the official. Meanwhile, value conflicts can emerge between social

³⁹Hirschfield and Simon, 'Legitimizing police violence', pp. 155–182; Phil Scraton and Kathryn Chadwick, 'Speaking ill of the dead: Institutionalised responses to deaths in custody', *Journal of Law and Society*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1986, pp. 93–115.

⁴⁰Thompson, *Ideology and modern culture*.

⁴¹Hirschfield and Simon, 'Legitimizing police violence', p. 170.

⁴²Cheng, 'Social media, socialization, and pursuing legitimation of police violence', pp. 155–182.

⁴³Thompson, *Ideology and modern culture*.

⁴⁴Van Leeuwen, 'Legitimation in discourse and communication', pp. 91–112.

⁴⁵Waegel, 'How police justify the use of deadly force', pp. 144–155.

⁴⁶Cheng, 'Social media, socialization, and pursuing legitimation of police violence', pp. 391–418.

⁴⁷Andrew Goldsmith, 'Disgracebook policing: Social media and the rise of police indiscretion', *Policing and Society*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2015, pp. 249–267.

media use by individual officers and police institutions, posing a risk to police integrity. Officers may gossip, leak information, or express extreme, prejudiced views.⁴⁸ Official media in China argued that police individual WSA posts in defence of police officers who used inappropriate force would spark public outrage, posing risks to police integrity.⁴⁹ The *People's Daily*, the most authoritative Chinese state media that sets the tone for other media, has posted an article titled 'Why there are always voices justifying problems in law enforcement?', warning that articles in defence of problematic law enforcement published by police individual WSAs have 'formed a completely different voice from that of the police department. This makes a very bad impression: the police's attitudes towards use of force are deeply divided.'⁵⁰

Also, personal social media channels enable police officers to express opinions that they cannot express on official occasions. Li and Han found that WSAs run by officers often express quick and direct criticism of extreme views against the police.⁵¹ The push notification function of WSAs enables police officers to pass on their most updated opinions to the public. Based on 216 articles collected from police individual WSAs, Li found that WSAs run by officers often remain active as the event unfolds, from the exposure of incidents involving police violence to the release of official investigation results.⁵² Li also identified four strategies that facilitate the reframing of public discourse in the aftermath of contested police use of force: (1) explaining what happened in the incidents to the public; (2) interpreting the actors' behaviour based on law and regulations; (3) criticizing extreme opinions; and (4) calling on the public to obey the law.⁵³ The analysis, however, is merely illustrative. As influential police individual WSAs have far more followers than official accounts run by police agencies in China, it is important to explore the pattern of these WSAs using strategies to pursue police legitimacy. Until now, no studies have examined the pattern of how these WSAs use strategies to pursue police legitimacy for police use of excessive force. To fulfil this research gap, this study applied the critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach to analyse the articles published in the police individual WSAs in defence of the '12.13' case.

Method

Data collection

WeChat, known in Chinese as *weixin*, is the most popular smartphone-based social media platform in China. At the end of 2015 its monthly active user accounts

⁴⁸Ibid., pp. 249–267.

⁴⁹Qian Ye and Yizhu Mao, 'Solving the "knot" of law enforcement disputes (in Chinese)', *Xinhua Net*, published online on 15 June 2016, available at <https://kknews.cc/society/593elbl.html>, [last accessed 25 July 2023].

⁵⁰Xuesong Liu, 'Why there are always voices justifying problems in law enforcement? (in Chinese)', *People's Daily*, published online on 12 June 2016, available at <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0612/c1003-28425871.html>, [accessed 11 October 2023].

⁵¹Xiaobo Li and Chunmei Han, 'A study on the development of Chinese police personal WeChat Subscription Accounts (in Chinese)', *Journal of Shandong Police College*, vol. 29, no. 06, 2017, pp. 139–144.

⁵²Xiaobo Li, 'A research on the strategies and influencing factors of police WeChat public platform intervention in major police-related incidences on social media (in Chinese)', *Journal of Intelligence*, vol. 39, no. 05, 2020, pp. 137–141.

⁵³Ibid., pp. 137–141.

had reached 697 million.⁵⁴ WeChat combines many of the functions of WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, and Pay Pal and has been called a super all-in-one app and mega platform.⁵⁵ It has become a new focus of research due to its dominance in the Chinese social media space.⁵⁶ The WeChat Subscription Account (WSA) provides an interface for an organization or individual to send push notifications to followers and interact with them.⁵⁷ In contrast to regular WeChat users, whose sent messages are only visible to their contacts, WSA users can post articles for public viewing, and those who have subscribed to the app will be notified of new articles as soon as they are posted. The way that WSAs send push notifications to followers is similar to that of YouTube, except that they provide followers with articles instead of videos. Studies have shown that WSAs have become a very important source for people to access information.⁵⁸

A police individual WSA is one registered by a police officer, who uses it when off-duty and not as an official account. Police individual WSAs selected as the data source in this study must (1) have more than 100,000 followers to ensure their popularity and high representativeness; (2) be certified as a personal account, not as an official or organization account; and (3) position itself as a channel on behalf of the police, publishing articles concerning the private and professional lives of the Chinese police. Previous studies on police individual WSAs have also adopted such inclusion criteria.⁵⁹

Only eight WSAs met the above criteria and were selected: 'Police', 'Jingjie (police)', 'A Sir', 'Xiaojing zhijia (home of the police)', 'Guajia', 'Jingdi (siren)', 'Sixth Jinwei', and 'Lanchenshan men (blue uniform)'. By 8 February 2022 when data were collected, according to the New Rank Index, which is an indicator of the popularity of the WSAs,⁶⁰ four of these eight WSAs were among the 500 most popular WSAs in China, with more than 1,000,000 followers. 'Wang Wenjun', 'Zhou Xiuyun', '12.13', and 'Taiyuan police' were used as keywords to search for articles published in these eight WSAs that discussed the '12.13' case.

Analytical procedures and technique

Two independent researchers coded all the articles using NVivo12. Only codes agreed by both coders were retained. The analysis used in this article is developed from

⁵⁴Tencent, '2015 Tencent annual financial report', published online in 2015, available at <https://static.www.tencent.com/storage/uploads/2019/11/09/7ff11f32cb38df8cacc59374c0e94b84.pdf>, [accessed 11 October 2023].

⁵⁵Yujie Chen, Zhifei Mao and Jack Linchuan Qiu, *Super-sticky WeChat and Chinese society* (Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing, 2018).

⁵⁶Jean-Christophe Plantin and Gabriele De Seta, 'WeChat as infrastructure: The techno-nationalist shaping of Chinese digital platforms', *Chinese Journal of Communication*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2019, pp. 257–273.

⁵⁷Yiqiong Zhang, Min Wang and Ying Li, 'More than playfulness: Emojis in the comments of a WeChat official account', *Internet Pragmatics*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2021, pp. 247–271.

⁵⁸Haiqing Yu and Wanning Sun, 'WeChat Subscription Accounts (WSAs) in Australia: A political economy account of Chinese-language digital/social media', *Media International Australia*, vol. 179, no. 1, 2021, pp. 96–112.

⁵⁹Li, 'A research on the strategies and influencing factors of police WeChat public platform', pp. 137–141.

⁶⁰The New List, 2021, available at <https://www.newrank.cn/ranklist/weixin>, [accessed 23 October 2023].

Table 1: The stance of the articles (N=211)

Stance	Keywords	Before court decision n=183 n (%)	After court decision n=28 n (%)	Total n=211 n (%)
Accusing	brutal, disrespectful, extremely inappropriate, guilty	1 (15.30)	2 (21.43)	3 (1.42)
Empathic	understandable, afraid, helpless, confused, pity, sad	46 (25.14)	16 (57.14)	62 (29.38)
Challenging the prosecution	wronged, legitimate, nonintentional	43 (23.50)	0 (0.00)	43 (20.38)
Not guilty of any crime	innocent, totally justified	51 (27.87)	3 (10.71)	54 (25.59)
Praising	responsible, dedicated, good police	14 (7.65)	1 (3.57)	15 (7.11)
No stance	N/A	28 (15.30)	6 (21.43)	34 (16.11)

Note: Articles that remained neutral and contained no keywords that expressed support or disapproval of Officer Wang's actions were coded as 'no stance'.

Fairclough's framework of critical discourse analysis (CDA), in which discourse is analysed as text, discursive practice, and social practice.⁶¹ A similar analytical procedure has been adopted by previous CDA studies.⁶² We adopted CDA's core assumption that a critical attitude necessitates interpreting latent meanings in texts and social context,⁶³ enabling more holistic interpretations than quantitative content analysis allows.⁶⁴

Text

How did the texts construct the incident? Text is the analytic level that helps answer this question by examining what words and phrases are used and what propositions are made. Fairclough referred to this as the 'force' of the text.⁶⁵ In the present study, we (1) explored the stance of the articles by coding the keywords in texts that expressed the author's attitude towards Officer Wang's action of using force (see Table 1 for results); (2) investigated the characterization of the main actors by examining the most commonly used verbs and adjectives associated with them (in sentences as subjects) (see Table 2 for results); and (3) examined how the articles define

⁶¹Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and social change* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

⁶²Hirschfield and Simon, 'Legitimizing police violence', pp. 155-182; Samantha Cooper et al., 'Media coverage of refugees and asylum seekers in regional Australia: A critical discourse analysis', *Media International Australia*, vol. 162, no. 1, 2017, pp. 78-89.

⁶³Teun A. Van Dijk, 'Socio-cognitive discourse studies', in *The Routledge handbook of critical discourse studies* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), pp. 26-43.

⁶⁴Hirschfield and Simon, 'Legitimizing police violence', pp. 155-182.

⁶⁵Fairclough, *Discourse and social change*.

Table 2: Top five verbs and adjectives that are associated with the actors

Verbs	Frequency	Adjectives	Frequency
Officer Wang			
执法 (enforced)	93	徒手 (unarmed)	50
制服 (controlled)	51	依法 (legal)	22
制止 (stopped)	38	正当 (justified)	20
执行 (implemented)	33	无罪 (innocent)	17
出警 (police acted)	32	合法 (legitimate)	14
Zhou			
死亡 (died)	56	暴力 (violent)	27
妨害 (hindered)	37	意外 (accidental)	18
阻拦 (blocked)	16	非正常 (unnatural)	9
阻碍 (impeded)	15	受伤 (injured)	7
阻挠 (obstructed)	13	违法 (illegal)	7

Table 3: Keywords that define the nature of '12.13' (N=211)

Keywords	N (%)
case with far-reaching consequences	61 (28.91)
unruly people hindering police	42 (19.91)
unsupportive police supervisors	38 (18.01)
accident	25 (11.85)
ordinary legal case	9 (4.27)
tragedy	7 (3.32)
N/A	29 (13.74)

the nature of the '12.13' incident by coding the keywords in texts that express such definition (see Table 3 for results). This process is helpful in exploring the texts' meaning potential.⁶⁶

Discursive practice

Why were the texts produced and which audience did the texts target? Discursive practice is the analytic level that examines such context and process of text production and reception.⁶⁷ In this study, we (1) generated the timeframe of the articles to show how the number of articles has changed over time; (2) coded the sentences that state the

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Ibid.

Table 4: The reason for writing the article stated by the author (N=211)

Reason	N (%)
other incidents of citizen hindering police	73 (34.60)
legal proceedings of '12.13' case	48 (22.75)
to respond to media's negative comments	24 (11.37)
to challenge public criticism of police	22 (10.43)
anniversary of '12.13' incident	6 (2.84)
did not mention the reason	38 (18.01)

articles' targeted audience; and (3) coded the sentences that state the reasons why the author wrote the article (see [Table 4](#) for results).

Social practice

What legitimating strategies did the texts apply? Social practice is the analytic level that helps answer this question. It focuses on the ideology, belief system, and identity embedded in the texts that attempt to shape sociocultural practice.⁶⁸ At this level of analysis, we coded the legitimating strategies employed in the articles, which are rationalization, universalization, unification, moral evaluation, and narrativization. In each article, sentences that reflect a specific strategy were extracted and coded after a thorough read-through was conducted (see [Table 5](#) for results).

Findings

Altogether, 211 articles were collected. The time frame of the sample is 2015 to 2020, with the first article that mentioned '12.13' published on 16 January 2015 and the latest article published on 6 November 2020. The sample has a total of 195,185 words, with each article having 925.05 words on average. Averagely, each article was 'liked' by viewers 856.51 times, and was viewed approximately 36,076 times. The top 100 words depict the prominent theme of the sample: police officers' law enforcement behaviours (see [Figure 1](#) for the translated version).

Text dimension: How did the texts construct the incident?

To begin with, analysis of the stance of the texts showed a strong sympathy towards Officer Wang and a reluctant acceptance of the court's decision. As [Table 1](#) shows, more than one-third of the articles explicitly claimed that Officer Wang's actions were completely justified or even commendable. Among them, about 25 per cent stated that he should not be charged with any crime, and 7 per cent argued that he was not only innocent but should be praised as a responsible police officer. Twenty per cent of the articles defended Officer Wang by challenging the prosecution, arguing that he should

⁶⁸Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, *Methods of critical discourse studies* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2015); Fairclough, *Discourse and social change*.

Table 5: Legitimizing strategies employed in the articles (N=174)

Legitimizing strategy	Before court decision n=154 n (%)	After court decision n=20 n (%)	Total n=174 n (%)
Rationalization*	63 (40.91)	3 (15.00)	66 (37.93)
Theoretical rationalization*	59 (38.31)	2 (10.00)	61 (35.09)
Instrumental rationalization	19 (12.34)	1 (5.00)	20 (11.49)
Universalization**	41 (26.62)	0 (0.00)	41 (23.56)
The rule of law*	26 (16.88)	0 (0.00)	26 (14.94)
Order maintenance	24 (15.58)	0 (0.00)	24 (13.79)
Unification	74 (48.05)	13 (65.00)	87 (50.00)
Include the officer in the community	18 (11.69)	0 (0.00)	18 (10.34)
Include the officer in the police*	62 (40.26)	13 (65.00)	75 (43.10)
Moral evaluation	56 (36.36)	10 (50.00)	66 (37.93)
Expurgation of victim	22 (14.29)	6 (30.00)	28 (16.09)
Euphemization of officer's act	28 (18.18)	6 (30.00)	34 (19.54)
Police must be appreciated	17 (11.04)	0 (0.00)	17 (9.77)
Narrativization	35 (22.73)	2 (10.00)	37 (21.26)
Moral tale	13 (8.44)	1 (5.00)	14 (8.05)
Cautionary tale	24 (15.58)	1 (5.00)	25 (14.37)

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Note: The per cent represents column per cent. The sum of the percentage of subcategories does not equal the percentage of the main category, as one article may employ multiple strategies.

not be charged with intentional injury, as he did not intend to hurt Zhou but was simply performing his duties. About 29 per cent of articles did not directly judge his behaviour, but expressed sympathy for him with keywords such as ‘[his actions were] understandable’, with authors saying they were ‘sad’ or ‘confused’ when they learnt that Officer Wang was suspected of abuse of power and were ‘afraid’ of being charged with crimes similar to his in the future. Only three articles accused Officer Wang of use of excessive force using keywords such as ‘brutal’ or ‘disrespectful’, with two of the articles published after the court convicted him of abuse of power. After the court decision, the percentage of articles sympathizing with Officer Wang increased from 25 per cent to 57 per cent, and four articles claimed that he should be declared innocent.

For the description of the main actors, as shown in Table 2, the five verbs most associated with Officer Wang focused on his act of performing his official duties, while verbs describing Zhou categorized her actions as hindering the police. The top five adjectives depicting Officer Wang emphasized that he did not use any weapon, and

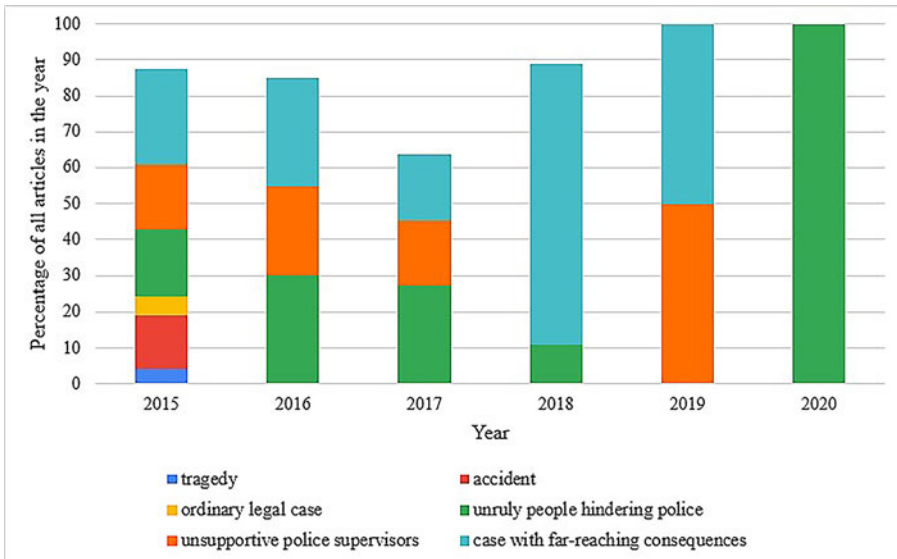


Figure 2. Definitions of the incident.

Many of the articles also denied the relationship between Zhou’s death and Wang’s actions, with 3 per cent simply depicting Zhou’s death as a ‘tragedy’ and nearly 10 per cent arguing that her death should be considered an ‘accident’ during police enforcement. But 29 per cent of the articles depicted the incident more neutrally, i.e. as a case with far-reaching consequences. The authors argued that the verdict against Officer Wang would have a profound impact on the enforcement actions of the Chinese police. Of the articles, 4 per cent regarded ‘12.13’ as an ‘ordinary legal case’ that should not have received much public attention. While definitions varied in the first year after the incident, as time went by, one can see that ‘unruly people hindering police’, ‘police departments being unsupportive of frontline officers’, and ‘case with far-reaching consequences’ gradually came to dominate the narratives of the articles (see Figure 2).

Discursive practice dimension: Why were the texts produced?

After the incident occurred in 2014, it did not fade away with time. Rather, it has been mentioned and reviewed continuously over the past few years until 2020 (see Figure 3). While the chief of the Taiyuan Public Security Bureau had apologized for Zhou’s death and concluded that Officer Wang’s behaviour was execrable on 2 January 2015, just two weeks later, a police individual WSA published the first article commenting on ‘12.13’, calling for a full investigation of the facts before coming to a conclusion. The first peak in the number of articles came in March 2015, just after Taiyuan Procuratorate announced that Officer Wang was suspected of abuse of power and intentional injury in February. The highest point emerged in May 2015, when Officer Wang first stood for trial on the 18th of that month. The end of 2015 also witnessed a wave of posts commemorating the first anniversary of the ‘12.13’ incident.

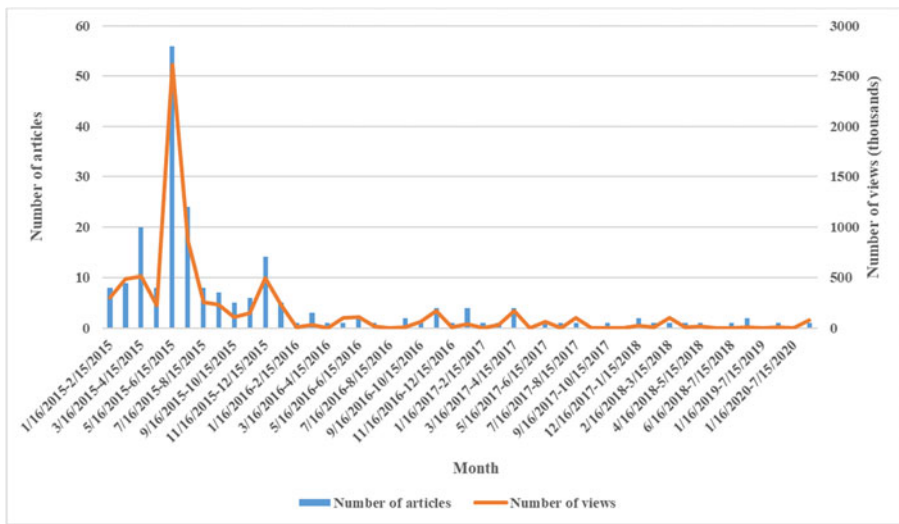


Figure 3. Time of texts' production.

The dominant reason for the production of the texts was linking '12.13' with other incidents involving a citizen resisting or hindering the police (see Table 4). 'Officers got attacked when performing their duties. This reminds me of the "12.13" case.' Such statements were found in 84 per cent of articles that were published from 2016 to 2020. This indicates that '12.13' was inscribed in the discourse of police individual WSAs, not as a representative case of police violence as defined in official statements, but as an iconic case of an officer facing resistance from citizens when performing his duties. The legal proceedings of the '12.13' case (i.e. news of prosecution, trial, trial delayed, and court's final decision) was only the second common reason for bringing up this case again.

The authors' eagerness to rebut media or public criticism on police use of force was another important reason for text production (about 22 per cent). Authors strongly criticized the media or the public for using words such as 'police kills' or 'police beat a migrant worker to death' in their reports, arguing that such remarks distorted the facts. Eight articles directly refuted China Central Television's (China's state media) criticism of police violence, claiming that the media's report was biased and could damage the police's image. Ten per cent of the articles were written by authors to challenge public criticism of police use of force. They argued that public criticism and outrage against police enforcement was disrespectful to the police. According to these authors, most of those who condemned and accused the police were morally corrupt and unpatriotic. 'What kind of people would accuse the police?' one author wrote, 'They are hurting the hearts of the heroes who are guarding this country.' Another example is:

To deny the contribution of the police to this country is national nihilism. Nowadays, many people only look at the negative things of our county and society. They view the people's police in the same way, only looking at the

shortcomings of this force. Using a very few bad cops to discredit all police officers is just not the right thing to do! The loss of trust in the Chinese police, the loss of national self-esteem, self-confidence, pride, the thought of denying the cultural traditions of the nation, and the blind worship of foreign countries are all signs of losing national self-esteem.

Also, six articles were written on the anniversary of '12.13': five in 2015 and one in 2017, which was a side note on the far-reaching impact of the incident.

In terms of text reception, 62 articles (29 per cent) explicitly called on frontline police officers as the primary audience. These articles addressed officers by using the pronoun 'we' and 'us' (e.g. 'us police') or appellations such as 'brothers' and 'comrade in arms'. Identifying themselves as frontline officers, the authors seek support from their peers when commenting on '12.13' or provide suggestions for other officers regarding how to use force. The following excerpt, from an article with more than 41,200 views, is an example:

Comrades in arms, stand up and speak. We don't have to kneel to enforce the law. Comrades in arms, don't run. You dare to face criminals, dare to face the sword, dare to sacrifice, why dare not face the media? Comrades in arms, unite and speak out. Officer Wang Wenjun will sing the praise of us!

Also, police individual WSAs would use the second person when questioning police supervisors' denouncement of Officer Wang's use of force, as if they were communicating with the supervisors. Of the sample, 17 per cent of the articles appeal to officials and police supervisors, calling for a full investigation of '12.13' and a fair trial for Officer Wang. Among them, 16 articles explicitly express dissatisfaction with the police agency's criticism of Officer Wang before the court decision. The following excerpt represents such claims:

How can this [the action of Officer Wang] be called intentional injury? Do you leaders of the public security organs even know the law? Don't you know, what kind of punishment will the police officer face in such a prosecution? Shouldn't you defend state power or at least defend the police officer's rights by following the legal procedures?

Social practice dimension: How did the texts justify police violence?

In this section, I focus on the 174 articles that applied legitimating strategies when commenting on the '12.13' case. Articles that accused Officer Wang of abuse of power and articles that did not contain any judgement on his behaviour were excluded. The results are presented in [Table 5](#).

Rationalization

Nearly 40 per cent of the articles provided rationalization of Officer Wang's action of holding Zhou's head down or stepping on her hair. The Operational Procedures for Police to Stop Criminal Activities were quoted to emphasize that Officer Wang was controlling Zhou with empty hands and thus did not use excessive force. Articles also

argued that stepping on Zhou's hair was a rational decision, as it was inappropriate for a male officer to touch other parts of the body of a female suspect. For instrumental rationalization, articles described Officer Wang's actions as necessary to control Zhou, to stop her from grabbing his leg, and prevent her from attacking him further. Chi-square test results show that the percentage using rationalization dropped from 41 per cent to 15 per cent after the court decision ($p < .05$).

Universalization

About 24 per cent of the articles represented Officer Wang's actions as upholding law and order, arguing that the prosecution against him directly threatened the sanctity of law and the maintenance of social order, which would damage the interests of every citizen. In an article that argued Officer Wang should be innocent, the author wrote:

This case is not only a matter of Officer Wang but also related to the construction of the legal system...Just imagine that the police enforce the law with fear. It will inevitably paralyze the police in terms of law enforcement. Those who flout the law and challenge the authority of the state will do whatever they want. If things go on like this, how can there be any national security at all? If Officer Wang was found guilty, it will be a tragedy of the law.

Thus, using more force than the law and regulations permit when facing a resisting suspect was associated with the need to uphold social order and national security. The resistance displayed by the suspect was perceived as a blatant defiance of police authority and the integrity of the law. After the court convicted Officer Wang, the percentage of such arguments dropped to zero ($p < .01$).

Unification

Against previous studies' finding that the mention of police is infrequent (often less than 20 per cent), half of the articles apply the strategy of unification, representing the officer as operating within a collective identity as a community member or a frontline officer. About 10 per cent of the articles attached affectionate labels ('a veteran with more than 10 years of service', 'a hardworking frontline police officer', 'brother of the people') to Officer Wang, whereas nearly 40 per cent directly represented him as 'one of us'. In such example statements, 'To help Officer Wang is to help millions of frontline officers' and 'the one behind bars is not Officer Wang, but millions of frontline officers', the officer was viewed as a representative of frontline officers. Articles claimed that every frontline officer could have used force in the way he did to handle a suspect, and the prosecution he faced was the same prosecution that every frontline officer could face. After the court decision, the percentage of such a proposition even increased ($p < .05$). Chi-square analysis further showed that the percentage of those using unification increased from 40 per cent to 71 per cent when the article specifically addressed frontline officers ($p < .001$).

Moral evaluation

Nearly 50 per cent of the articles presented Zhou's attempt to hinder Officer Wang as the reason that led up to his action of holding her head down. About 16 per cent of the articles manifested expurgation through using derogatory words (e.g. 'unruly people',

'vixen', 'cunning', 'vicious', 'indecent', 'shrew') when describing Zhou and her family, claiming and emphasizing that they bullied other workers and attacked the police savagely. Eight articles claimed that Zhou attacked Officer Wang's genitals, which was not supported by the findings of the court. About 20 per cent employed euphemisms for Officer Wang's actions. 'Controlling her with empty hands' was the most common phrasing. Nearly 10 per cent specifically emphasized that the officer should be appreciated, as he had performed his duty regardless of being attacked by Zhou. The court decision did not affect the articles' moral evaluation of the involved actors ($p > .05$).

Narrativization

One-fifth of the articles applied this strategy. Fourteen articles narrated the decisive use of force by police to maintain order as moral tales, 13 of which were of American police killings of suspects. In such tales, police in the United States used lethal force against anyone who attempted to attack them and were found not guilty by the courts, which provided an illustration of the rule of law, according to the authors. 'No matter how many black suspects the U.S. police killed, without video evidence, the court will always rule in favor of the police, knowing that the police serve the country.'⁶⁹ On the other hand, 14.37 per cent of the articles referenced reports of Chinese police fearing to use force in the face of a suspect's attack as cautionary tales, warning that this hesitation would lead to chaos and the prevalence of crime. The employment of narrativization was found to be irrelevant to the court decision ($p > .05$).

Discussion

Scholars have found that police departments use social media to legitimize themselves after incidents of contested police violence.⁷⁰ Absent from these studies is how off-duty individual officers employ social media to justify excessive force. This article, drawing on a CDA approach, examines how police individual WSAs interpreted one of the most representative police-citizen deadly force incidents in China. The findings highlight the voice of Chinese individual officers online, revealing an ideology that justifies the use of excessive force. This section expands on these findings, comparing them to justifications in the United States, highlighting the unique dynamic between individual officers' online expression and police official discourse in China, and providing insights for scholars studying online expression and digital nationalism in the Chinese context.

Chinese officers' justifications, when compared to their American counterparts, more frequently incorporate political agendas and moral norms. In principle, the law should serve as the primary criterion for determining whether officers have used excessive force. This is why both Chinese and American officers resort to rationalization, placing the officer's behaviour within a legal framework and casting the suspect as lawless. However, while American police are committed to portraying police

⁶⁹Powerful police, the sign of a great country (in Chinese)', *Guaerjia*, published online on 12 January 2017, available at <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/RVioUwn3a1py9684u8GClg>, [accessed 11 October 2023].

⁷⁰Cheng, 'Social media, socialization, and pursuing legitimation of police violence', pp. 391-418; Kevin Walby and Babatunde Alabi, 'Examining press conference and press release accounts of Canadian police shootings', *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, vol. 61, no. 1, 2021, pp. 30-52.

behaviour as complying with legal procedures, Chinese officers incorporate political and moral content in their justifications. This involves depicting suspects as threats to social stability and state authority, linking citizen noncompliance to societal moral corruption, and invoking nationalism to counter criticism of police excessive force.

The weight given to political agendas and moral norms in Chinese officers' justifications is consistent with the role of the police in Chinese society. Apart from law enforcers and crime fighters, Chinese officers assume the political role of maintaining social stability, which is the core and primary task of police force under CCP's leadership.⁷¹ Hence, it is unsurprising that when applying the universalization strategy, Chinese officers perceived the suspect's resistance as blatant defiance of police authority as well as a threat to state authority. Nationalism, a discourse strategy utilized by the ruling party to reinforce its legitimacy,⁷² was also employed to dismiss criticism of the police's excessive use of force, claiming it smeared the image of China's police and reflected blind worship of the Western legal system. Also, compared with their American counterparts, Chinese police officers are officially mandated to educate the public as moral authorities,⁷³ which gives them an advantage in linking citizen noncompliance with moral corruption. Moreover, scholars found that Chinese officers show less respect for legal restrictions on police power and value crime control over legal process.⁷⁴ This explains why a relatively low percentage of Chinese police officers use rationalization strategy compared to their American counterparts. These findings provide valuable insights for scholars studying legitimacy in the Chinese context, emphasizing the necessity of analysing this concept within its specific Chinese framework. In contrast to American society, where legality and procedural correctness greatly contribute to the legitimacy of police behaviour,⁷⁵ political agendas and moral norms function as key factors in determining legitimacy in China, as reflected in officers' justifications.

This study also sheds light on the intricate dynamics between the expressions of Chinese individual officers and the police official discourse in the online sphere. The findings reveal a significant disparity between frontline officers' discourse and the official stance of the police. Officers openly criticized the police chief's statements, expressed mistrust towards police supervisors, and frequently complained about restrictions on the use of force. Frontline officers typically have a separate subculture from police management.⁷⁶ However, this marked the first instance of Chinese officers expressing collective dissent and dissatisfaction with official conclusions on

⁷¹Suzanne E. Scoggins, 'Authoritarian policing under Xi Jinping', *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2023, pp. 251–271.

⁷²Yifan Yang and Xuechen Chen, 'Globalism or nationalism? The paradox of Chinese official discourse in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak', *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, vol. 26, 2021, pp. 89–113.

⁷³Allan Y. Jiao, 'Police and culture: A comparison between China and the United States', *Police Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2001, pp. 156–189.

⁷⁴Liu et al., 'Police supervisors' work-related attitudes in China', pp. 419–438.

⁷⁵Tom R. Tyler, 'Procedural justice, legitimacy, and the effective rule of law', *Crime and Justice*, vol. 30, 2003, pp. 283–357.

⁷⁶Elizabeth Reuss-Ianni, *Two cultures of policing: Street cops and management cops* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2011).

social media. This contrasts with their American counterparts, who typically conceal the subculture of justifying excessive force from public display.⁷⁷

In China, speaking out against official conclusions can be perilous, particularly for individual police officers. Strict online censorship in the country makes it challenging for individuals to express alternative viewpoints diverging from the official narrative.⁷⁸ Openly disagreeing with official conclusions may result in deleted posts and banned or cancelled social media accounts, which would be a significant loss for individuals who have amassed a substantial number of followers. Moreover, Chinese police organization is characterized by its hierarchy and strong political control⁷⁹ and officers are chronically exposed to a paramilitary top-down command chain and a cultural emphasis on collectivism.⁸⁰ The stress of maintaining uniformity in police organization makes it difficult for officers to publicly oppose official statements and decisions.

The reason why Chinese officers would take the risk to publicize their opposing views may be due to the unique characteristics of China's criminal justice system. Compared to their American counterparts, Chinese officers may face a higher risk of imprisonment if they are formally prosecuted for excessive use of force. The country has a known high conviction rate,⁸¹ and the police union, lacking independence and ability to represent its members' legal interests like other unions,⁸² contributes to this risk. Furthermore, Chinese court decisions are notably influenced by public opinion,⁸³ which explains why police officers resort to media publications to garner public support and defend cases of excessive force.

To mitigate the mentioned risk, Chinese officers demonstrated loyalty by aligning themselves with the official political discourse. This includes the application of nationalism mentioned above, as well as emphasizing the role of the police in maintaining social stability and national security. When opposing the statements of the police chief, they argued that a lack of support from police supervisors discouraged front-line officers from fulfilling their duty to maintain order. By constructing resonating frames with the official political discourse,⁸⁴ individual police officers effectively criticize police supervisors and justify instances of excessive force. This reminds scholars

⁷⁷Waegel, 'How police justify the use of deadly force', pp. 144–155.

⁷⁸Ki Deuk Hyun and Jinhee Kim, 'The role of new media in sustaining the status quo: Online political expression, nationalism, and system support in China', *Information, Communication and Society*, vol. 18, no. 7, 2015, pp. 766–781.

⁷⁹Jiao, 'Police and culture', pp. 156–189.

⁸⁰Zheng Chen, 'Job satisfaction among frontline police officers in China: The role of demographic, work-related, organizational and social factors', *Psychology, Crime and Law*, vol. 24, no. 9, 2018, pp. 895–914.

⁸¹Li Li, 'High rates of prosecution and conviction in China: The use of passive coping strategies', *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2014, pp. 271–285.

⁸²Feng Chen and Mengxiao Tang, 'Labor conflicts in China: Typologies and their implications', *Asian Survey*, vol. 53, no. 3, 2013, pp. 559–583.

⁸³Susan Trevasques, *Courts and criminal justice in contemporary China* (Blue Ridge Summit, PA: Lexington Books, 2007).

⁸⁴Qiongyou Pu and Stephen J. Scanlan, 'Communicating injustice? Framing and online protest against Chinese government land expropriation', *Information, Communication and Society*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2012, pp. 572–590.

of the influence of official political discourse on legitimating strategies in China, as individuals need to avoid censorship.

Last but not least, this study offers valuable insights for scholars researching Chinese online discourse and digital nationalism, proposing two key perspectives for future research in the field. First, this article calls for giving more attention to the WSA platform when studying online expression. The dissemination mechanism of WSA, unlike other social platforms (e.g. *weibo*), operates through a one-to-many communication model.⁸⁵ This design limits broad and multidirectional discussions,⁸⁶ allowing WSA operators to construct echo chamber views and minimize the risk of dissenting criticism.⁸⁷ The findings of this study support scholars' hypothesis that WSAs create an environment of inner conformity⁸⁸ and aggressive discourse.⁸⁹ Officers' perception of their audience as collective members or like-minded individuals may have contributed to their expression of endorsing excessive force. Despite criticism from police officials and the public, the relatively confined platform of WSAs helped maintain and spread a consensus among frontline officers regarding the use of excessive force.

Second, this article sheds light on a less-explored actor of online expressions: Chinese grassroots government employees. According to the role theory,⁹⁰ people display different characteristic attitudes and behaviours by role-taking associated with their positions. Previous studies focused on leaders⁹¹ and ordinary netizens⁹² regarding online nationalism, overlooking grassroots officials who may simultaneously represent and express complaints about the government. Officers in the study dismissed public criticism as police officers, but at the same time expressed dissatisfaction with government statements about restricting the use of force. This dual identity led them to exhibit pragmatic tendencies and inconsistencies in their use of nationalism. Officers labelled criticism of excessive force as 'unpatriotic' and 'blind worship of Western legal system', yet paradoxically use American police cases to advocate strong policing. Such imprudent, inconsistent, and pragmatic nationalism may undermine the professional image of the police force. Future research should explore its impact on public perceptions of the police and the government's legitimacy.

This study has limitations. While the analysis technique is developed from Fairclough's framework, the analysis in the present study was mainly exploratory

⁸⁵Eric Harwit, 'WeChat: Social and political development of China's dominant messaging app', *Chinese Journal of Communication*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2017, pp. 312–327.

⁸⁶Mark Bo Chen and Wilfred Yang Wang, 'Governing via platform during crisis: People's Daily WeChat Subscription Account (SA) and the discursive production of COVID-19', *Communication Research and Practice*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2022, pp. 166–180.

⁸⁷Florian Schneider, *China's digital nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁸⁸Chen and Wang, 'Governing via platform during crisis', pp. 166–180.

⁸⁹Florian Schneider, 'Emergent nationalism in China's sociotechnical networks: How technological affordance and complexity amplify digital nationalism', *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2022, pp. 267–285.

⁹⁰Bruce J. Biddle, 'Recent developments in role theory', *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1986, pp. 67–92.

⁹¹Schneider, 'Emergent nationalism in China's sociotechnical networks', pp. 267–285.

⁹²Chenchen Zhang, 'Right-wing populism with Chinese characteristics? Identity, otherness and global imaginaries in debating world politics online', *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2020, pp. 88–115; Tabitha Speelman, 'How China's online nationalists constrain policymaking—the case of foreigners' permanent residency reform', *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 32, no. 144, 2023, pp. 1–18.

and basic. It remains unknown how readers may react to the content of the police individual WSAs. For future studies, a more comprehensive approach to this topic should analyse the potential influence of justifications made by police individual WSAs, specifically, whether the legitimating strategies examined in this study expectedly influence readers' perceptions of the contested incident and of police use of force.

Conclusion

Existing research examines how police use social media to justify deadly force, but overlooks individual officers' online justifications. This study fills this gap by investigating how police individual WSAs interpreted a typical police-citizen deadly force incident in China. By employing a CDA approach, the study reveals an ideology among Chinese frontline officers that justifies the use of excessive force. The articles published in WSAs demonstrated strong sympathy towards the involved officer; contested the police official, public, and media characterization of the incident as police brutality; and employed various strategies to legitimize the officer's actions.

The implications of these findings are significant. Chinese officers, in comparison to their American counterparts, more frequently incorporate political agendas and moral norms in their justifications for the use of excessive force. This disparity reflects the divergent roles of the police in the two societies. The study also sheds light on the complex dynamic between the official discourse and that of individual officers. While officers are able to express dissenting views online, they are still expected to demonstrate loyalty by aligning themselves with the dominant ideology. This tension between individual expression and conformity to official discourse adds an intriguing dimension to the analysis. Moreover, this study makes valuable contributions to our understanding of online expression and digital nationalism. By examining the unique characteristics of WSAs as a distinct online platform and exploring the perspectives of grassroots officers, it enhances our understanding of the multifaceted voices present in the online discourse surrounding police conduct. It is hoped that this study will add to the literature on legitimacy and online expression in the Chinese context, and hopefully inspire future research on the relationship between social media, legitimacy, and the dynamics of police culture in China.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

Cite this article: Wang, Han. 2024. 'Justifying the use of excessive force: A critical discourse analysis of Chinese police individual WeChat Subscription Accounts'. *Modern Asian Studies* 58(2), pp. 631–653. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X2300032X>