

# BETWEEN NATIONALISM AND PESSIMISM: CHINESE SOCIAL MEDIA DISCOURSE ON THE 2025 U.S.-CHINA TARIFF CONFLICT

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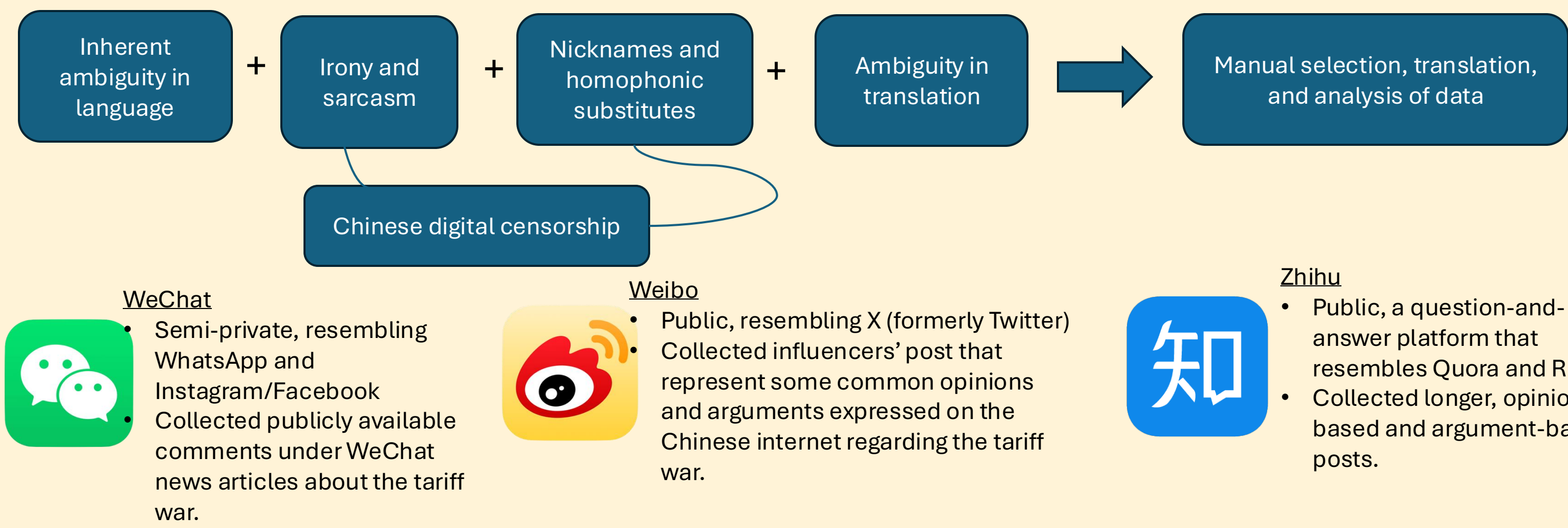
## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the connection between nationalist opinions and rhetorical styles in China through a case study of the public's online response to U.S. President Trump's imposition of tariffs on China 2025. The study observed over 300 posts and comments on three different Chinese social media platforms—Weibo, WeChat, and Zhihu—and selected 70 of them to be analyzed. The study finds that nationalistic posts generally express the opinion that the tariff war will not harm China, or that China has will win/has won. They often use arguments that cite China's economic and manufacturing superiority, Trump's and Americans' stupidity, and China's history. Rhetorically, these posts and comments exhibit a lack of separation between the self and the country and are more emotive. Discourses that express the belief that the US-issued tariffs can hurt China and are unsure if China will win the tariff war are further categorized into a nationalistic sub-group that supports retaliatory tariffs and a non-nationalistic group that does not. In the former group, posts and comments generally suggest that China is in a zero-sum game with the U.S., and many cited Trump's fickleness and unreliability as to why they support Chinese retaliatory tariffs. In this group, the widespread use of combative, zero-sum rhetoric again points to the popularity of nationalism in tariff discourse. In the group that does not support retaliatory tariffs, most users appealed to their personal experience of the Chinese economy to convey pessimism about their livelihood in China. The study finds that expression of strong nationalism is positively correlated with the use of emotive and hyperbolic language. Less nationalistic discourse generally does not support retaliatory tariffs and makes reference to personal experiences of the Chinese economy.

## METHODOLOGY

- Personally examined videos, post, and comments on Chinese social media posted between April to June, 2025.
- Manually selected 70 posts and comments that:
  - Opinion-based: the post/comment must express an opinion about Trump's tariffs, rather than being purely factual or explanatory of the tariff conflict.
  - Timeliness: the post/comment must have been posted between April to June 2025, falling within the U.S.-China tariff war time frame and that of the study.
  - Authentic/personal: the opinion expressed by the post/comment must be an opinion of the user themselves rather than bots (水军).
- Personally translated the 70 selected posts and comments as a native Chinese Mandarin speaker and conducted close-analysis.

## HOW TO UNDERSTAND CHINESE SOCIAL MEDIA & THE CHINESE LANGUAGE



## FINDINGS & CONCLUSION:

### I. Discourses that believe the tariff conflict will not harm China, or that China has won/will win:

- Express strong faith in the new China (新中国): its manufacturing, its superiority over the US (the "stupidity argument"), and its history (specifically the Sino-Japanese war)
- Lack of separation between *self* and the country in rhetoric: more emotive language, prevalent use of personification, hyperbole, multiple exclamation marks, combative language of war
- Overall nationalistic

"中国在美国主导的体系里已经达到发展的天花板，实质性的离开了美国主导的体系的，从美国体系的拥护者成为美国体系最大的威胁，为美国霸权的终结拉开序幕！谁规定没了你美国的订单，就要关了工厂回村里种地！生产玩具的工厂也能生产无人机，生产五金件的工厂也能生产AK47，生产塑料制品的工厂也能生产炸药，封锁我们的贸易，我们就摧毁你的体系"

— 太浪 13/04/25

*TRANSLATION: China has reached the ceiling of its development in the US-led system and has essentially left the US-led system. It has gone from being a supporter of the US system to being the biggest threat to this system, marking the beginning of the end of US hegemony! Who says that if we lose the US orders, we have to close our factories and go back to farming in rural villages? Factories that produce toys can also produce drones, factories that produce hardware can also produce AK47s, and factories that produce plastic products can also produce explosives. If you block our trade, we will destroy your system.*

### II. Discourses that express the belief that the tariff conflict can hurt China and are unsure if China will win:

#### A. Supports retaliatory tariffs

- Express that China is in a zero-sum game with the U.S.: America is personified as a bully
- Trump's fickleness and unreliability
- Combative rhetoric, emphasis on Chinese national dignity
- Overall nationalistic

"对于特朗普这个人而言，任何柔性策略都没有用，因为这个人会后悔。[...]他第一个任期，一开始对其妥协，其来华相谈甚欢、达成一堆协议后，几个月就翻脸了。进行一些妥协让步。随后2018又翻脸。又有了一些妥协让步。再到2020，他为了选举又翻脸了。[...]基于过去经验，妥协三次的结果，依然是步步紧逼，全面围剿。所以，对于特朗普，对抗反而不得不成了理性选择。"

— 滴山 08/04/2025

*TRANSLATION: For Trump, any soft tactics are useless because he'll go back on his word. [...] During his first term, he initially compromised with China and even visited China, reaching a series of agreements that he eventually turned against a few months later. He made some concessions that he again turned against in 2018. He made more concessions, but in 2020, he turned against them again for the sake of the election. [...] Based on past experience, compromising three times has resulted in continued, relentless pressure and a comprehensive encirclement [of China]. Therefore, for Trump, confrontation has become the rational choice.*

### Meta-literary critique:

"总的来说，周围人的反应，符合基本的人性。就是，只要棒子没直接打在自己头上，都特别强硬，特别狂热，立马要灭掉美帝那种；自己做相关行业、出口等相关的人，就冷静许多" — 大是大非不用脑 17/04/2025

*TRANSLATION: In general, the reactions of the people around me are in line with basic human nature. That is, as long as the stick didn't hit them, they are extremely tough and fanatical—like they want to destroy the US immediately. Yet, those who work in related industries, such as exports, are much calmer.*

### B. Against retaliatory tariffs

- Personal experience of the Chinese economy
- Express pessimism about their current or future livelihood in China
- Overall non-nationalistic

"昨天参加一个座谈。在场有本地国企，业务量的80%是出口美国，在对等关税下几乎停摆！如今几千人生计如何解决？这个不是我们说一句“站直了别趴下”，就可以硬挺过去。需要真金白银帮助企业渡过难关。那么配套政策呢？钱从哪里出？财政如何重新分配？远来民生保障尚且捉襟见肘，如今还要保京业。。那么每个国人捐一点？希望伟大的你们愿意吗"

— 云上雪

15/04/2025

*TRANSLATION: I attended a forum yesterday. There were local state-owned enterprises present, 80% of whose business is US exports, and they've all but ground to a halt under the reciprocal tariffs! How are thousands of people going to make a living now? We can't just say, "Stand up straight, don't lie down," and just get through this. Money is needed to help these companies weather the storm. What about supporting policies? Where will the money come from? How will fiscal resources be reallocated? People's livelihoods have already been stretched thin, and now we also have to protect Beijing's economy... So should every Chinese citizen donate a little? Those with big dreams, would you be willing to do so?*

### Conclusion:

- Expression of strong nationalism is positively correlated with the use of emotive and hyperbolic language.
- Less nationalistic discourse generally does not support retaliatory tariffs and make reference to their personal experience of the Chinese economy. These "discourses of the ordinary" tend to be less emotive and exhibit more acknowledgement of the distinction between one's individual identity and their collective identity.
- Nationalistic discourse is more prevalent than non-nationalistic discourse, indicating the significant influence of nationalism in Chinese society.

## DATA & CATEGORIZATION

Can US hurt China?
Yes
China will win
New China as a great power
与全世界做生意的中国卖家，不会就此陷入绝境。“我已经把独立站（注：跨境电商平台）的美国市场关闭了，主攻非美市场。”一名卖家说，毕竟2024年，中国对美出口仅... 当时日本陆军大学的一群高阶将领、教师们看完这本书，说这本书已经把打仗上升到哲学了，日本输定了。放到今天，是不是很像？股债基三杀，外贸哀嚎，一堆人跳出来...
"对等过去，他多少我们就多少，怕个锤子，，不行就开战，西方人嘴都是骗人得鬼，整天吹嘘自己武器多强大，现在连个歼10都打不过，还想开20出手？试试呗"
抗美援朝，是新中国的立国之战！今天的贸易战，是中国重回世界之巅的分水岭！
两败俱伤，总好过大自己一个去死。更何况西大自残一千，伤我们可能就六百。再说谁的血条更厚一点呢？论持久战，东大怕谁？
China has won
Rational
哪个挑事又先认怂的哪个输，这一轮我认为美国输了，就像2016年南海那样，美国无力再挑起比这更大的贸易战。接下来其他战场会更激烈，金融，网络科技，间谍什么...
Irrational
"毛爷爷说得对：“美帝国主义很傲慢，凡是可以不讲理的地方一定不讲理。当它讲理时，一定是被逼得迫不得已了。”这一次，地球独霸黑老大之所以愿意将魔爪缩回去，...
Unsure if China will win
Does not support retaliative tariffs
当然不是白猫，懂王上一任期与拜登时期20%，芬太尼又加20%，全球基本关税10%，是50%而不是30%（经评论区计算实际总关税为43.7%-45%左右），而美国非最惠...
Discourse of the ordinary
First hand pessimism
我有一个朋友真是做外贸的，他支持硬刚，并且表示大不了不做内贸，做生意哪里不是做外贸我不知道，内贸我还可以说道说道，我说内贸现在都有账期，三个月到一个季... 昨天参加一个座谈，在场有本地国企，业务量的80%是出口美国，在对等关税下几乎停摆！如今几千人生计如何解决？这个不是我们说一句“站直了别趴下”，就可以硬... 我是做五星级酒店的说一个我们行业的影响：我们酒店属于会议型酒店所以我们的主要客户群体就是一些大型的企业企业也就是说我们需要开发这种大型的公司客户到...
"肯定不影响啊但是当你的月薪越来越低能做的工作越来越少日常生活成本越来越高水电气油越来越高可选择的越来越拮据那肯定是你自己不努力的问题或者你认为会... 会就算你是公务员、老师这类“铁饭碗”，就算你从没见过中国，这次关税战也绝对能让你感受到比如楼下超市的进口奶粉+突然涨价进口食品+直接有价无市猪脚饭价格直接...
Support retaliative tariffs
Irrational
"生于忧患，死于安乐”，所以感恩祖国的强大。置之死地而后生，奉陪到底，坚决反击~
Rational
对于特朗普这个人而言，任何柔性策略都没有用，因为这个人会反悔，执行妥协方案有两个前提：1、确定不让步，对方会毁灭自己。2、确定让步，对方会放过自己。这... 我看到一个出口商，卖玩具的，是这么说的：如果国家反制，损失就是我们这些出口商来承担，如果找不到出路，就是我破产。跟你们有什么关系？如果国家不反制，那... 如果想听真话的话，可以直接别走了。真实情况是，美国佬提出的规则，并不是什么太过分的要求。说到底，美国要求的是，我买你的货，你也买我的货。大家尽量把这个... 昨天一架曾于4月被退回老美、原在波音舟山工厂等待交付的波音737MAX飞机，从西雅图起飞，经停夏威夷后将继续飞往我国，这是波音4月以来首次恢复向我国交付飞... 支持硬刚的我完全理解！不过，作利益受损的企业或个人，没有一个呼吁减税的。这就很让人惊讶，合着都想着自己承担所有损失？都这么无私的么！而没想过，让政... 我是出口商，做工业品的。美国市场占我总出口额的30%-50%，现在已经变成了0%。手里还有几个柜的订单也直接停了。有一说一，美国那边的利润率还是很不错的。...
Dignity reaction
我我的完全不懂经济，我现在的想法就很简单，不行回家种田，虽然我真的爱钱，但其实没钱也能活，主要是这样晚上能睡着觉，要是有人打我一顿，让我跪下，再给我... “抗战的代价是一代人，投降的代价是世世代代。” 本人做外贸的，如果这50%再加上，中美贸易基本准备彻底脱钩吧，别幻想了，我也做好中年失业转行的准备了。说实话，做这行二十多年了，之前也经历过很多风风...
American as the bully
这个问题相当于问，一个恶霸打你，你会疼吗？答案当然是：会疼。你会教育你的孩子，恶霸打你的时候，因为疼就不反抗，让他继续打，他打累了就好了吗？应对方式... 巨石强森跟你说，别反抗，我扇你三个巴掌就结束了，不然我活活打死你。大多数人都心不甘情不愿的跪下挨三个巴掌。没办法，打不过啊，比起被活活打死，还是挨...
Zero-sum
不可能，以目前地球的生产力来算，不足以维持目前中美的消耗，也就是说，在老本吃完之前，中美至少要死一个，自己不想死，就得拼命让对方死。 那些靠外贸公司说事的，给美国人家涨价是不敢的，给工人涨点工资是不可能的。但是美国的关税大棒一打下来，一个二个要死要活的，反而来怪政府居然不投降。老说什么... 投降派觉得投降了中国就能被美国改造，然后过上日韩的生活，实际上是中国这个体量的国家，只会被肢解成十几个国家，然后再扶持一个类似于以色列的国家，让这... 这不是硬不硬刚的问题首先这关税战是美国挑起的 搞清楚 是他们挑起不是我们挑起的 我们是被打那方既然都被打了 要么反抗要么投降 且不说反抗有什么结果... 矛盾是结构性的、是东西方的、是种族的，所以必然有一方被彻底拆分，只是现在还没有到彻底撕破脸的地步而已，换句话说，各自的既得利益集团还不愿承担损失的风...
No
Irrational
"撕破脸也有好处，很多不好意思做的，现在可以正大光明地做！比如：人民币国际化，援助大毛，石油人民币，抛美元，"
《卧槽，记中美关税战初战告捷》 翻天覆地，烟云如浪涛。春天虽去，琼花别吐蕊。平湖荡漾清波，波动游鱼锦尾。天雷一声欲坠，看东方。特大国怒，特朗普弱跪。全...
Opinion but not an argument - can I analyze this?
Technical / economic
"中美短暂和解，可美媒后知后觉反应过来已经晚了，中国不再回头买美国货了。这回事美失算了，之前中美关税战打得正激烈的时候，咱们把从美国进口的东西大范围转移到... "按理说，广东应该是这次关税战的重灾区。事实是，广东的外贸订单，爆了。无数厂家，都在吃关税战的红利，赚的盆满钵满。所以，中国慌啥呢？找不到理由。.....更新... 如果没这次谈判中美做不成生意，美国在相当长的时间内很难找到替代方案。带来的后果就是进口原材料和商品减少，码头工人和货车司机失业，接下来就是中小企业倒闭，... 是中国不想结束贸易战。美国在至少九十天内，根本离不开中国制造，美国所谓加关税是骗人的套路，中国如果不是对等反击，而是把报复加码，勒令美国停止贸易战，美国... 不会熄火，只会越来越白热化。想想，这么些年贸易战最受伤的是谁？中美好像都没啥事儿，反倒加速了国内产业的升级速度，在人工智能芯片+航空航天军事装备+等尖端... 关税战结束，只用了十天，时间很短，但意义十分巨大，影响深远！中国在美国主导的体系里已经达到发展的天花板，实质性的离开了美国主导的体系的，从美国体系的拥护... 美国国内现在出现一种新声音，认为拿关税威胁中国没用，中国根本不怕，加了几年关税，发现全加在进口商与美国老百姓头上了。关于台湾，他们认为美国地绝对不能参战，... 不得不赞叹美国的愚蠢和毫无执行力。现在美国人都要被迫在中国生产稀土原料的产品，然后再出口到美国。还要被川普收50%的关税。
First hand
"节前我工作的公司被微软突然通知禁用Office365一开始感觉天塌了，尤其是Outlook，用了好多好多年了。。。结果第二天公司就确认了国产替代方案，一周内就可以切换完...
America is stupid
"怎么可以白猫呢？我们还等着内部优化分配机制，搞新质生产力呢，白猫怎么能行！美帝加油，你还能倒！！起来继续" "很多人惊讶东大突然这么刚，其实原因很简单：因为东大已经意识到，川普的第二个任期是必须紧紧抓住并且可以大有作为的重要战略机遇期，这么蠢的总统几百年一遇，过...
"中：我真的没时间陪你闹了"
Historical
新中国从49年建国开始就从来没有输过一直赢，中苏中日中韩中印中越中美，面对世总之无论是那个国家我们都是赢家，因为我们从不让自己输，就是天上神仙下来我们一样...
Meta literary
"国人两千年来思维，不是你跪我，就是我跪你，根本不知道平等是何物，到现在依旧如此，能说出这个字，终究还是在倒退" 天天跪，咱能不能不用老子儿子的思维去看待国际事务呀。国家又没有人格，哪来的跪这一说，一个个跟二狗似的。今天油价涨了，是定价方站起来了，还是加油的司机跪下去了... "美国提高关税，实质上表示:我不买你的东西，你可以回答:不买单了。然而你的回答是:我不跪。别人只是不买你的东西，没有让你下跪，难道之前都是跪着卖货的？" 还活在100多年前的大清王朝吗？满脑子的只有跪文化，动不动就是跪。 "情绪赢麻，现实输麻而且基层发不出真实声音" 总的来说，周围人的反应，符合基本的人性。就是，只要棒子没直接打在自己头上，都特别强硬，特别狂热，立马要灭掉美帝那种；自己做相关行业、出口等相关的人，就冷静许多
Trump-based
"卖国贼也得把国卖出价，得达成交易。宋虽然给辽上供，别管交易不公平，辽国确实履约了。懂王只会毁约然后继续加税，卖国贼都沉默了" 要是没有话语权，特么的直接把美国扬了正当我们是软柿子？特朗普你特么想谈就好好谈，今天谈好明天变，谁相信你？？谁还能和你谈？ 金融业，作为一个小粉红我从来没有在这个行业内看到这么多爱国的。只能说川普真的抽象，本来还有内部矛盾，这下好了，一致对外了，我都不知道怎么输。