Globalized fears, localized securities: ‘Terrorism’ in political polarization in a one-party state

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ABSTRACT

Partisanship has become the dominant ideological incentive to political polarization. Likewise, the analytical association between polarization and the party system in electoral democracies has focused, in most of the existing literature, on political polarization, leaving aside authoritarian or semi-authoritarian contexts where a fair multi-party election is absent or dysfunctional. By collecting and analyzing online posts about international terrorism from Sina Weibo in China, between January 2011 and December 2016, this study proves the existence of opinion polarization on terrorism in China’s digital media sphere. By categorizing the findings into two camps, ‘global war on terror discourse’ and ‘anti-imperialist narrative’, the study elucidates these polarized attitudes in terms of their acceptance, denial and decomposition of the global discourse of fears about terrorism. Drawing on our case study, the study then proposes an alternative explanation for the motivation/driver of mass polarization in digitally networked communication in China, identified as the effect of globalization and localization.

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1. Introduction

The study of political polarization at the mass level in the digital epoch is in a rich period of theoretical and empirical advance. After two decades of development, the literature is flourishing, with theoretical accounts of causal mechanism between digital-facilitated selective media exposure and public’s polarized attitudes (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; Fiorina et al., 2005; Iyengar and Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2010; Prior, 2013), as well as conceptual innovations that capture the changing nature of polarization in digital space including ‘cyberbalkanization’ (Brainard, 2009), ‘echo chamber’ phenomenon (Sunstein, 2001), and ‘filter bubble’ effect (Pariser, 2011). Simultaneously, numerous nuanced empirical analyses have tested the specific configurations of political polarization that are embedded in and have evolved with various socio-political contexts, such as in the US. (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009; Levendusky and Malhotra, 2016), Canada (Gruzd and Roy, 2014), Netherland (Trilling et al., 2016), Norway (Karlsen et al., 2017), Hungary (Enyedi, 2016), and Ecuador (De la Torre and Ortiz Lemos, 2016).

However, two interrelated challenges/gaps lie ahead for future research. The first involves moving beyond the treatment of partisanship as the only ideological incentive to political polarization. Polarization research has focused on the subjectively chosen logic of digital media, making it much easier for individuals to obtain cognitively consistent content, avoid dissonant
information, and therefore solidify their partisan viewpoints and stances along the left-right (or conservative-liberal) axis. Extant studies have rarely addressed how other forms of ideological divide and confrontations could contribute to polarization at the mass level. One prominent exception is Müller and his colleagues’ (2017) recent research that originally proposes that, by means of communication, populism might in fact be able to establish a new societal cleavage, bridging traditional partisan gap. The second challenge/gap is extending the investigation on polarization beyond the democratic context (including emerging democracies in Eastern Europe and Latin America). Because, conventionally, the notion of polarization is closely associated with party system and electoral democracy, this notion has not been explored in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian contexts where a fair multi-party election is absent or dysfunctional. Taking the two challenges/gaps into consideration, questions arise about whether other forms of ideological conflict might result in mass polarization, especially in non-democratic nations where the partisan slant remains at a minimum level. This study, therefore, aims to address and question these matters, through exploring the mass public’s polarized attitudes on political issues in the world’s largest one-party state of China.

The article first briefly reviews the scholarly literature on political polarization in digital spheres, pointing out its predominant focuses on democratic, electoral contexts, as well as the partisan incentive and consequences. Then, it introduces the background and developments of China’s political communication space, in which digitally-enhanced public deliberation and viewpoints, diversification and contestation enable the emergence of mass polarization on certain political issues. Third, the case selection and methodology employed in this study are outlined, followed by results and discussion. Fourth, the article proposes that the results of this study prove the existence of mass polarization within digitally-networked discussion in China on issues of international terrorism. By categorizing the results into two camps, the ‘global war on terror discourse’ and the ‘anti-imperialist narrative’, we elaborate on these polarized attitudes in terms of the acceptance, denial and decomposition of the global discourse of fears about terrorism. Focused on the effect of globalization and localization, the final section draws on our case study, discussing an alternative explanation of the motivation/driver of mass polarization in China. The conceptualization and contextualization conducted throughout this essay contribute to a pluralist understanding of mass polarization in diverse political, social and cultural contexts.

2. Digital communication, selective media exposure and mass polarization

Generally, the concept of polarization may be seen as a situation in which a group or population may be divided into separate ‘clusters’, and there is (a) high within-cluster similarity alongside (b) high between-cluster dissimilarity (Esteban and Ray, 1994). Political polarization, therefore, could be understood as the division of individuals (mass-level), or parties (elite-level), into distant ideological camps positioned at the extremes, while the central position is voided (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008).

The media, as the primary way in which opinions on political issues have been disseminated linearly (in the mass media era) or in a networked way (in the digital epoch), and their role in the formation and intensification of polarization have been widely explored. The concept of selective media exposure, referring to an individual’s tendency to favor information that reinforces their pre-existing views and filters out any contradictory content (Stroud, 2010), has been proposed as an antecedent as well as a consequence of political polarization. Several decades ago, when mainstream media outlets offered a more homogeneous and neutral ‘point-counterpoint’ perspective on most political issues, consuming news was a collective experience (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009). Therefore, from the perspective of selective media exposure, audiences’ selections were relatively few in the mass media era. However, this balanced but ‘selection-deficiency’ media environment has dramatically changed with the advent of the digital epoch.

Deliberation studies usually view digital media as virtual venues for pluralistic and rational communication, whereas scholars researching selective exposure and political polarization have demonstrated a rather balkanized and polarized form of public discussion on digital communication platforms (Lelkes et al., 2017; Prior, 2013; Stroud, 2010; Sunstein, 2001). The Internet, and social media in particular, have been viewed as capable of motivating selective exposure and political polarization because of their features of information explosiveness, viewpoint diversification, and subjectively chosen logic. This makes it far easier for individuals to obtain cognitively consistent content and avoid dissonant information.

Many empirical studies have examined the digitally-enhanced, polarizing effect on the public’s perception in a variety of established and emerging democracies (Gruzd and Roy, 2014; Iyengar and Hahn, 2009; Karlsen et al., 2017; Levendusky and Malhotra, 2016; Trilling et al., 2016). More synoptically, relying on representative surveys in ten countries: Canada, Colombia, Greece, India, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States, the results from Yang and his colleagues’ research (2016) demonstrated that there was a systematic and consistent association between digital media use and perceived political polarization. Furthermore, a few conceptual innovations have been developed to represent the consequences of this digitally-enhanced political polarization. For instance, Brainard (2009) proposed ‘cyberbalkanization’ as a term to refer to an online phenomenon in which “people seek out only like-minded others and thereby close themselves off from ideological opposition, alternative understandings, and uncomfortable discussions” (p. 598). Sunstein (2001) concept of ‘echo chamber’ dynamics presents the idea that people discuss with like-minded people and are therefore exposed to supporting arguments that confirm and reinforce their existing opinions. Pariser (2011) concept of ‘filter bubble’ suggests that the algorithmic personalization of digital platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook’s news feeds, might further promote exposure to biased information, because less preferred information is algorithmically eliminated.
While many scholars have devoted themselves to discussing how the newer media channels could contribute to more polarized public opinion in this ever-evolving era, investigations into the inner motivation of mass polarization remain inertial, with a traditional focus on partisanship (Müller et al., 2017). Because the concept of polarization implies connotations of ‘incompatibility’ and ‘dichotomy’, research on political polarization has usually been conducted under specific ideological oppositions. However, over the past few decades, the incentive of political polarization at the mass level has been automatically and exclusively simplified as ‘partisanship’, emphasizing party differences on a left/right (or conservative/liberal) axis. Fiorina et al. (2005) have even suggested that there is no popular polarization, but simply partisan polarization.

A number of studies have examined the polarizing effect of selective media exposure on intensifying inter-party hostility and incompatibility (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009; Iyengar and Hahn, 2009; Yang et al., 2016). For instance, Pfau and his colleagues’ (2007) findings uncovered significant evidence of differential media use among Republicans and Democrats, highlighting the fact that Republicans gravitated to talk radio, radio news, and television advertising, whereas Democrats avoided talk radio and tuned in to television news (Pfau et al., 2007). Iyengar and Hahn (2009) demonstrated that conservative Republicans in the US tended to read news from the online websites of Fox News and avoid news from CNN and NPR, while liberal Democrats exhibited the opposite preferences. Letkes et al. (2017) also found that access to broadband Internet could increase partisan hostility. While some studies demonstrate an explicit, causal relationship between digitally-enhanced polarization and partisan viewpoints, a few scholars suggest that this causality is conditional and lacks generality. For instance, Prior’s findings (2013) illustrated that one-sided news exposure may be largely confined to a small, but highly involved and influential, segment of the population. However, there is no firm evidence that partisan media are making ordinary Americans more partisan.

Because it is closely related to partisanship, the phenomenon of mass polarization has rarely been explored within authoritarian or semi-authoritarian systems where a fair multi-party election is absent or dysfunctional. Do the general public’s viewpoints on political issues appear to be highly segmented or even polarized in one-party state? If so, how do the two sides of polarization configure, since partisan ideologies exist to a minimum degree within these regimes. In order to answer these questions and to provide a more comprehensive understanding of political polarization within various sociopolitical contexts, this study focuses its research attention on the largest one-party and non-Western nation of China.

3. Public deliberation in China’s political communication space

Polarization research consists of four sub-fields, each of which has subsequently been examined in some influential works. These key areas include the split among politics elites (Hetherington, 2001); the parallelism between the news media and partisan politics (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009); the public’s polarized behaviors (Pfau et al., 2007); and individuals’ polarized attitudes on political issues (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008). Because of China’s political and social contexts, this study focuses its research in particular on the fourth area: the public’s polarized opinions on political issues.

Although China’s one-party system has fundamentally prevented the government institutions, the media and the public from a partisan split, it is by no means to say that Chinese political elites are united as they usually show. Some studies have demonstrated that alongside deepened reforms, disagreements and divisions within China’s leadership have continuously intensified (Fewsmith, 1994). Some studies perceived an unprecedented number of challenging and dissenting voices among Chinese society, painting a conflict-laden picture of state-society dynamics in contemporary China (Chen and Reese, 2015; Huang and Yip, 2012). However, a number of other public opinion surveys showed that the current Chinese regime enjoys a high level of political trust and satisfaction (Esarey et al., 2017; Shi and Lou, 2010; Zhai, 2016; Wang and Shen, 2017). Support for this regime and challenges to it have characterized the divided landscape of public political opinions in contemporary China. More interestingly, some of literature on political attitudes in China found the same distribution of political views along the left/right, liberal/conservative spectrum as in electoral democracies (Ding, 1994; Goldman, 1994; Nathan and Shi, 1996). The division of political orientations between ‘right’ and ‘left’ in China, and the dynamics of the ideologies that divide the Chinese population, have somewhat resembled the dynamics of ideological conflict in the West (Nathan and Shi, 1996). The division of political attitudes in China is also reflected in the public view on foreign policy (Cheng and Smyth, 2016).

Nonetheless, it must be admitted that, due to China’s political culture of emphasizing internal unity and cohesion among authorities, disagreements and conflicts between political elites are difficult for ordinary people to detect. In addition, since the news media are viewed as the primary method through which (polarized) elite opinions are transmitted to the public, it is highly unlikely that the Chinese news media could be considered as ‘polarized’, since they usually strictly follow the unified, coherent political discourses from the central state (Zhao, 1998). Furthermore, as the public’s polarized behaviors mainly refer to partisan-driven voting, a polarized electorate is non-existent in China, where general election is absent. Therefore, China’s sociopolitical contexts limit the research scope of this study to exploring whether or not Chinese people’s perceptions and attitudes polarize on political topics.

This article suggests that opinion polarization among the Chinese public, if it exists, is largely derived from the diversification of political discourses and contestation between various viewpoints in China’s digital media sphere. In the mass media era, opinion polarization was, to a large extent, absent in China because the public followed the official narratives unquestioningly. However, over the past two decades, digitally networked communications have exposed the Chinese public to an unprecedentedly abundant amount of information and alternative viewpoints, complementing, reinforcing and challenging the normative discourses (Chen and Reese, 2015; Denemark and Chubb, 2016; Medaglia and Yang, 2017). These
diversified, competing, contested, and even oppositional discourses have significantly promoted public deliberation, as well as providing the potential for polarized attitudes to develop within China’s political communication space.

Simultaneously, the author of this study argues that because of state-exercised censorship, opinion polarization among the Chinese public, even if it exists, would be restricted to some officially permitted issues. Being scored as very high as 87 (0 = most free to 100 = least free) by Freedom House (2017), China’s cyberspace was considered as one of the least Internet-free nations globally. Employing the world’s most complicated and successful censorship mechanism, the Chinese government is capable of temporarily or even permanently shutting down any websites or user accounts on social media perceived as disseminating ‘unhealthy’ or ‘politically risky’ content (Wu, 2005; Zhou, 2017). Findings from previous research have demonstrated that the Chinese government has opened up topics related to foreign affairs and international issues to public discussion, as well as environmental issues, corruption, and education, and others. (Svensson, 2012). However, for some sensitive topics, such as political reforms, ethnic minorities, religion, human rights, and separatist movements, the mass deliberative sphere has been quite closed to both domestic and international debate, and alternative viewpoints have been and continue to be strictly filtered within the online space (Tai, 2014; Zhou, 2017). Therefore, it is reasonable to propose that the Chinese people’s attitude polarization is more likely to emerge when discussing issues regarding foreign affairs, the environment, corruption, and other topics that the government finds less sensitive. Conversely, it is much less likely to exist on those politically sensitive and restricted areas.

Although the notion of political polarization has yet to be examined in the Chinese context, the competing, antagonistic and hostile dynamics among netizens in China’s cyberspace has been explored by several studies. For instance, Han (2015) analyzed confrontational exchanges between the ‘voluntary fifty-cent army’ (zidai ganliang de wumaodang 自带干粮的五毛党) which refers to the voluntary, pro-state voices, and their opponent who always criticize the Chinese government and policies and call for Western-style democracy. He concluded that China’s digital sphere often ‘serves as frontlines where opponents meet’ (Han, 2015, p.1020). Inspired by Han (2015) findings, this work investigates whether or not the diversified, contested viewpoints in China’s cyberspace might go further toward dichotomous, polarized directions.

Prior to examining if political polarization exists in the Chinese digital communication sphere in regards to terrorism, two contextual explanations are helpful: the first is to understand the importance of the issue to the public (and to the state’s control of the public); and the second is to understand the image(s) of terrorism being stereotyped in Western mainstream media.

4. Terrorism and political opinions

Terrorism emerged as a crucial phenomenon that might radicalize the public’s opinions on certain policies. Terrorism is essentially an ‘epistemological’ power of our times (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2001 p.14; Zulaika, 2009 p.23) that shifts the logic of ‘war’ into the symbolic sphere by exploiting the media representation (Baudrillard, 2012) to disorient people and unhinge their perception in the normative arrangement of government. A milieu of fears amongst social members is created when ‘every train and every airplane and every public gathering is experienced as a potential terrorist attack’ (Ugilt, 2012 p.63). Fueled by the never-ending fears of terrorism, the public’s opinions become increasingly vulnerable to a ‘reactive co-radicalization’—referring to the phenomenon of a public perception of a religious/cultural ‘other’ as manifesting an inherent threat such that, in response, an extreme action is undertaken which is abnormal, relative to the religious or cultural norms of those responding (Pratt, 2015 p.216). The tragic violence of 9/11 resulted in the radicalizing public opinions in the US that support or tolerate the enactment of state terror on Afghanistan and Iraq, which contradicts many of the ethical values the democratic liberal society is said to believe.

Moreover, the issue of terrorism is central for the state’s effort to have control over the public. The problem of terrorism produces the unprecedented predicament of sovereign control that limits the role of state as a primary provider of security, law and order within its territorial boundaries. This control predicament of sovereign state over terrorist threat results in the government crafting a ‘culture of fear’—that is, ‘public policy and private life have become fear-bound’ and, thus, must be administered through fear (Bourke, 2005 p.x). Societies are now governed in a neoliberal state through instilling and manipulating the fears of terrorism in ‘neurotic citizens’ (Isin, 2004).

In the specific context of China, the issue of terrorism is important for the state in order to project its core political values to the public. After the September 11 terrorism attacks, the Chinese government seized the opportunity to reframe its dispute with the Uyghurs as a dimension of the global war against terrorism (Cunningham, 2012 p.12). Terrorism was merely the moving front along which the antagonism among enemies crystallized to secure the legitimacy of PRC in its multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and multi-confessional regions (inter alia, Xinjiang and Tibet), where different forces compete to control the territories. It is the framing of ethnic separatism as terrorism in the state propaganda that spurs the public to accept the PRC’s core political values such as ‘ethnic unification’ (Minzu Tuanjie 民族团结) and ‘stability-maintenance’ (Weiwen 维稳).

5. Terrorism in the media

Shortly after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, US President George W. Bush made the following statement: ‘Every nation in every region now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists’. With these words, he created a new frame for understanding terrorism in the US, displacing the old ‘Cold War frame’, and becoming the primary lens through which the White House would from then on interpret their ‘friends’ and ‘enemies’ around the globe (Norris et al., 2003). This
speech set the tone not only for the new US terrorism narrative, but also for Western media around the world—it bound Western governments’ definitions of terrorism with anti-Muslim biases, alongside a strategy of ‘othering’ (Jackson, 2009).

Numerous studies have shown that through the process of ‘othering’ the Muslim community, the Western media adhere to a dichotomous us/them worldview, based primarily on distinction by religion, which promotes contentious, tribal thinking, and sustains a climate of fear around terrorism (Foley; Hoewe, 2012; Samuel-Azran et al., 2015; Polonska-Kimunguyi and Gillespie, 2016). When reporting the violent acts of non-Muslims, the Western media tend to adopt starkly different narrative strategies; namely, by ‘othering’ non-Muslim terrorists based on reports of mental illness, or ‘lone wolf’ narratives, Western media effectively depoliticizes and isolates said terrorists’ actions (Crenshaw, 2014; Morin, 2016; Powell, 2011; Falkheimer and Olsson, 2015; Samuel-Azran et al., 2015; Liu, 2019). Further, comparative studies have confirmed significant differences between the Western media’s coverage of domestic and international terrorism (Morin, 2016; Powell, 2011).

To examine the effects of the media’s coverage of terrorism, a couple of studies have explored perceptions of terrorism among the American public: their findings showed that there was long-term, routinized, mass anxiety and anger in the American minds (Mueller and Stewart, 2016; Sury et al., 2016). According to Sury et al. (2016)’s nationally representative, quota-based online survey, about 80% of Americans exhibited some anxiety or fear of further terror attacks in the United States, while 88% of respondents felt angry about recent US terror attacks.

6. Method

This study investigates whether the public’s polarized opinions exist in China’s media sphere through a qualitative analysis of digital debates on global terrorism from China’s most popular social networking site, Sina Weibo. Sina Weibo is viewed as the Chinese equivalent of Twitter and has seen explosive growth in terms of registered users and market value since its launch in 2009. As a popular microblogging service that has monopolized the Chinese market, Sina Weibo is a representative platform for examining online public discussions. This study used a data scraping tool to collect and analyze online posts regarding international terrorism on Sina Weibo between the years 2011 and 2016, by mining the keywords ‘terrorist violence’ and ‘global terrorism’. Since the large number of posts on international terrorism prevented close analysis of each individual post, only a random sample of posts was chosen from the microblogging site. Each day, five randomly-sampled posts were collected, totaling 10,950 posts on the topic of terrorism. After removing invalid content, the sample size was reduced to 7745 posts. As the focus of this study concerns the opinions of the Chinese public, rather than news reports, a further 1250 news organizations’ posts were removed, resulting in a final sample of 6495 analyzed posts.

This study uses a qualitative (or ethnographic) analysis method (Altheide and Schneider, 2013) rather than a quantitative one, which is hypothetical-deductive, primarily because the authors’ goal is to discover emergent patterns and concepts that might better portray the mutable nature and specific characteristics of mass deliberation when it comes to global terrorism in Chinese media spheres. Qualitative analysis, being oriented toward concept development and to either supplementing or supplanting prior theoretical claims, moves recursively and reflexively, rather than linearly, between data coding, development, sampling, and interpretation (Berg, 1989). During the qualitative analysis process, ‘categories and variables initially guide the study, but others are allowed and expected to emerge throughout the study, including an orientation toward constant discovery and constant comparison of relevant situations, settings, styles, images, meanings, and nuances’ (Altheide and Schneider, 2013, p.26). When adopting a qualitative approach, clear descriptive information is as important as—if not more important than—the counting and distributing of items and topics into categories.

When the final sample was fixed, the two authors of this study (both, native Chinese speakers) spent two weeks becoming familiar with the data and obtaining a significant amount of background understanding about this issue through reading randomly selected posts on this topic. The two authors then conducted protocol development and worked together to list several items or categories (variables) to guide data collection and drafted a data collection sheet (protocol). Some basic categories included in the protocol were the date, resource, number of reposts and comments, and theme (topic). The protocol was tested by collecting data from a smaller sample of 500 online posts. The coders revised the protocol, selecting several additional cases to further refine it, with one important and recapitulative category emerging—namely, ‘The point of view’. This category comprised three expressions/perceptions and two of them were found to be obviously opposites, specifically the ‘global war on terror discourse’ and the ‘anti-imperialist narrative’. The coding criteria rests on to what extent the texts show agreement or disagreement with the Western-centric discourse of global terrorism (introduced in The Issue of Terrorism in the Mainstream Western Media)—how are the state and Muslims perceived in relation to terrorism? While the ‘Global war on terror discourse’ shows similarities with Western-centric discourses on global terrorism, in terms of the dissociation of state from terrorism, the ‘othering’ of Muslims, and an ahistorical discourse, the ‘anti-imperialist narrative’ reverses the positions of subject-object and victim-perpetrator. Online posts conveying a moderate attitude on this issue—neither demonstrating acceptance, nor rejection, with the Western-centric discourse of global terrorism—were categorized into the third type of ‘The point of view’: the moderate opinions.

Once a protocol was set, coding of the data commenced. Two coders collected the data using preset codes and noting many descriptive examples. During the coding process, the qualitative data analysis software, MAXQDA, was adopted to assist with data coding and storage. The data coding process followed a recursive and reflexive way. About halfway through the sample, the two coders examined the data to permit emergence, refinement, or collapsing of additional categories. Then, the coders made appropriate adjustments to other data and completed the data collection. Because of the adoption of a human coding process, rigorous training and careful coding protocol development were conducted to achieve intercoder reliability. In
addition, reliability checks were executed twice during the coding process: the first was conducted in the protocol development stage, and the second ‘final’ intercoder reliability check occurred during the actual coding process. Each time, both coders coded the same, randomly selected sample (10% of the total sample). Reliability coefficients of percent agreement and Cohen’s kappa were applied with the help of the computer program ConTest. Cohen’s Kappa was high (K = .82).

It should be added that although the majority of posts can be neatly classified into three mutually exclusive groups, there are a few non-exclusive, cross-category responses. We have created a coding rule for these ambiguous cases. For posts that reflected both discourses categories (the ‘global war on terror discourse’ and the ‘anti-imperialist narrative’), the coders created a scale of measurement based on the intensity of expression: in other words, the strength/weakness of their political orientations (based on the key performances we have listed in Table 1 below). Then we measured their performances to determine whether they were more oriented toward either of the political orientations we categorized. Two coders independently coded the same cross-category responses—49 Sina Weibo posts—to ensure intercoder reliability for each category of the protocol.

7. Results

The analysis showed that in the context of China’s digital debates on global terrorism, participants’ perceptions are remarkably polarized. While studies of the Western public’s perceptions of terrorism have shown unified, consistent and long-term anger and anxiety (Mueller and Stewart, 2016; Sury et al., 2016), the results of this study demonstrated largely that the Chinese net users expressed dichotomous attitudes on this issue, involving the ‘anti-imperialist narrative’ and ‘global war on terror discourse’ (although a small part of sampling did not fit both categories, showing a relatively moderate attitude on this topic). Such polarized attitudes (see Table 1) illustrate how the Western discourse, which assumes a globalized fear of terrorism, is reconfigured within the context of Chinese net users. Before introducing the specific characteristic of each attitude, however, the results of the main variables of content analysis are shown in Table 2 and summarized.

In terms of the sources of online posts regarding global terrorism, results showed original posts to be the largest group (52.69%, n = 3422), followed by reposts with original comments (27.53%, n = 1, 788), with reposts without original comments representing the smallest group (19.78%, n = 1285). These results show that the majority of the analyzed Weibo posts contained original content (information, opinion, and sentiment), as opposed to shared, re-disseminated news. This finding illustrates that in the digital debate of global terrorism, a robust public deliberation has emerged in China’s online sphere—people are actively engaging in civic discussion, providing their personal viewpoints on international affairs. However, the results also demonstrate that from the perspective of influence in the online world, Chinese netizen’s voices are bubbles in an ocean of information: the average number of reposts of individual posts was 57 (SD = 3.29), the average number of comments was 0.52 (SD = 2.23).

In terms of the specific themes mentioned in individual Weibo posts, analysis showed that ‘Condemning terrorism and sympathizing the victims’ was the most common (25.33%, n = 1345), followed by ‘The US and its allies represent state terrorism which inflicts suffering on the Middle Eastern people’ (17.43%, n = 1132), and then ‘The US hegemony turns itself into a target of terrorist attacks’ (12.96%, n = 842). Three themes of similar proportions comprised the lower distributions: ‘Terrorism is a global enemy, and therefore, counter-terrorism requires global cooperation’ (10.99%, n = 714), ‘Equating Muslim/Islam with radicalism and terrorism’ (10.92%, n = 709), and ‘The US government cultivates terrorism for its own interests’ (10.61%, n = 689). Finally, a small fraction of participants discussed the notion that ‘Dictatorship or failed states breed terrorism’ (5.39%, n = 350). Posts that did not fall into the aforementioned seven themes/topics occupied less than one sixth of the total sample (10.99%, n = 714) and were labelled as ‘Others’. Such topics included the mention of terrorist attacks in China, and related issues concerning the Uyghur ethnic minority. Although themes were not mutually exclusive (some online posts contained more than one theme), the results showed the average number of themes mentioned in individual

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Two polarized attitudes towards international terrorism in Sina Weibo between January 2011 and December 2016.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Global war on terror discourse</strong></td>
<td><strong>Anti-imperialist narrative</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This represents partial acceptance of a globally-circulated, Western-centric dominant discourse of terrorism in Chinese digital communication, reflected in the othering of Muslims (or Islam and the Middle East) and the discourse of Islamophobia.</td>
<td>It is a discourse used by a group of Chinese netizens against elements of the securitization discourse of global terrorism, including the securitizing actor, the securitizing speech act and the referent object.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key Performances</strong></td>
<td><strong>Key Performances</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● State centric (western sovereign power is exonerated from the use of terror)</td>
<td>● The ‘failed’ or ‘rogue’ states and Muslim communities are victimized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Separating the facts of violence from their temporal historical location</td>
<td>● Portraying the US as state terrorism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Muslims as the ‘evil other’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotions</strong></td>
<td><strong>Emotions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fears of terrorism is prevented or, at least, delayed, leaving only outrage towards terrorist atrocities and hatred of Muslims.</td>
<td>The sense of fear within the global discourse of terrorism disappears, and hatred of Islam and Muslims is deflected towards the initiator or promoter of globalized Islamophobia within counter-terrorism.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: drawn by the authors based on the data analysis
Table 2
Content analysis results of Sina Weibo users’ posts on the issue of global terrorism between 2011 and 2016 (N = 6495).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of themes each Weibo post contained:</th>
<th>M = 1.10, SD = .36</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The point of view:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Global war on terror discourse: 48.00%, n = 3118</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Anti-Imperialist narrative: 40.00%, n = 2663</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Moderate opinions: 10.99%, n = 714</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: drawn by the authors based on the data analysis

posts to be 1.10 (SD = 0.36). This shows that the majority of Weibo posts concerning global terrorism focused on a single theme or topic, rather than several aspects being discussed within a single post.

7.1. Global war on terror discourse

The ‘global war on terror discourse’ represents partial acceptance of a globally-circulated, Western-centric dominant discourse of terrorism in Chinese digital communication, reflected in the othering of Muslims (or Islam and the Middle East) and the discourse of Islamophobia. Almost 41% (n = 2663) of the online posts analyzed can be included in this category. For instance, ‘radical Muslims are little more than terrorism’; ‘Muslim is not radicalism, this is simply terrorism and particularism. As a pagan, I am heavily stressed’; ‘Muslims company terrorism, if not all’; ‘forget about Middle East refugees. [They are] inherently terrorists’; in some more extreme views, ‘blowing up those bastards who have no balls, but have diapers on their head! The root of chaos and terrorism in the world’.

Moreover, we identify three interrelated characteristics (ahistoricity, sovereign prerogative and anti-knowledge) in online posts on international terrorism in Sina Weibo that reinforce the discourse of Islamophobia. Ahistoricity, in this instance, is a mode of understanding that forgoes awareness of the historical development of terrorism as a concept, and fails to place terrorism-related conflicts within their temporal and historical context. In the identification of this attitude, we look for instances of expression phrased with ‘no matter what’, ‘regardless of’ or ‘whatever’ that suggest an absolutist stand and rejection of a context-specific explanation. For example, ‘no matter what kind of target group, no matter what excuse and historical grievance … it is called terrorism’; ‘however high-minded were they [the perpetrators of the Mumbai attack 2008] in their dreaming, they should be eliminated, more than anyone else!’; ‘any attack targeting civilians is a shame and must be eliminated, regardless of the place, the regime and the historical experience’.

Sovereign prerogative, a term coined by Sproat (1991, 1997), refers to a state-centric attitude that denies the connection of terrorism with states: states, Western democracies in particular, cannot engage in terrorism, thus state violence cannot be labelled as a terrorist act. In our analyses of online posts regarding international terrorism in Sina Weibo, we found scant evidence of users mentioning state-organized violence resulting in terrorism; rather, states and certain political systems were largely absolved from responsibility for and the consequences of their organized violence. In turn, this attitude and discourse construct an opposite: a global ‘evil other’ vis-à-vis the sovereign state within a Westphalian system of international politics.

Based on this perspective, some users assume the existence and the threat of ‘terrorist states’, in actuality labelling states in political and ideological disagreement with US-dominated Western democracies. For example, ‘I fully support the strike of the UK and the US on the totalitarian states; fighting against a totalitarian state is fighting against terrorist states, considering our history, no dictator can make the people happy’. Another group of users holds an assumption of ‘failed-states-breed-terrorists’, for instance, ‘Nowadays, in some regions of the Middle East, there is neither dignity, nor love and law, but only jungle law, which is most suited for the growth of terrorism’; ‘Those terrorism-supportive, ratty countries will get what they deserve!’. The attitude of sovereign prerogative is also expressed, using a universalist discourse, explaining terrorism as the ‘common enemy’ or a ‘cancer’ of humanity, international order and civilization. ‘Liberals always love to share the fruit of civilization with people from a different cultural background, yet it is exactly what international terrorism and authoritarian despotism are so hostile against, trying to prevent and anxious about’; ‘Terrorism is a global common enemy, we cannot rest.
as long as ISIS is not eliminated,’ ‘China and the US hold identical positions and interests. [To fight] against extremism and terrorist violence, the world must act together’.

Beyond the discourse of ahistoricity and sovereign prerogative is a tendency towards anti-knowledge, ‘an active refusal of explanation itself’ (Stampnitzky, 2013 p.187). The concept of anti-knowledge suggests that a problem has been removed from the realm of public debate (ibid p.187–188). As Brian Jenkins has said, ‘if you put [terrorism] in too stark terms of good versus evil it becomes anti-analytical’ (ibid p.188). A typical statement in our collection is:

Come and follow me: I oppose all acts of terrorism against civilians. No matter how noble your motivation is, nor how miserable your life has been. When the harming of ordinary people is used as your means, you are the enemy of humanity, shameful cowards and criminals disgusting everyone. I have no interest in listening to any of your stories, nor do I care about your aspiration, nor can I negotiate and compromise. The only thing to do is: kill on the spot, pursue afterwards never forgiving!

It is through the language of evil that people create a ‘black box’ around the terrorist, that forges its own explanation: terrorists commit terrorism because they are evil, therefore seeking to break the black box of ‘evil’ is a profanation, even sacrilege (Stampnitzky, 2013 p.189). As a user comments:

To define terrorism, the cause [of terrorism] must not be considered, let alone the forms and the consequences as the focus. Only in this way can we continue to squeeze the space in which the concrete operations of terrorism win sympathy and even support from certain social groups.

Although there is explicit evidence in the Sina Weibo posts indicating the othering of Muslims, reinforced by ahistorical, state-centric and anti-analytical reasoning in relation to understanding terrorism, little evidence suggests fear of terrorism. The emotion of fear is largely missing from Chinese netizens’ opinions on terrorism and, closely related to this absence of fear, is a sense of the remoteness of terrorism from their everyday lives. Thus, on the one hand, there is a strong emotional attachment to the overseas terrorist attacks, manifested in the netizens’ compassion for the victims of terrorist atrocities and their call for an active role and greater responsibility from the Chinese government in the global war on terror. The following are two typical statements:

Turkey and Bangladesh suffered from terrorist attacks, the US security level was elevated, flights were canceled. Have seen the policeman killed by the attacks, the people injured, as well as the survivors raising a disabled hand, calmly describing their experience, [I] realized deeply that there is nothing happier than ordinary people living a peaceful life!

Terrorist attack again in Mumbai ... you are happy when people around you are happy. The plain truth is calm! Amitabha, my Buddha of compassion. Even after hundreds of rounds of reincarnation the terrorist cannot become a new person. May the innocent dead rest in peace ... support China for actively joining global anti-terror!

On the other hand, few Chinese netizens appear to relate ‘globalized’ terrorism to their everyday lives or to the violence within domestic politics, substituting moral attachment with mental distance from international terrorist incidents. By employing such cognitive distancing from ‘globalized’ terrorism, fears of terrorism are prevented or, at least, delayed in the localized discourse of ‘global war on terror’, leaving only outrage towards terrorist atrocities and hatred of Muslims. The absence of fear displayed in users’ opinions reflects a decomposition of the fear-centered, global discourse of terrorism.

7.2. Anti-imperialist narrative

The globalized and Western-centric discourse on terrorism largely reflects the goal of securitization. By creating parallels between Muslims and the existential threat of terrorism, Western government justifies bureaucratic action, and exceptionalist politics, in order to legitimate its engagement in ‘counter-attacks’. To operate and intensify the process of securitization, the manufacture and growth of fear are indispensable. This can be seen in the many ways that media ‘others’ Muslims, representing them as the source and cause of terrorism. This study shows that the global effort toward securitization has been at least partially successful within the Chinese netizens’ ‘global war on terror discourse’. However, while they accept most elements of the dominant global terrorism discourse, they don’t seem to internalize the intended fear of terrorism. This attitude, to which this study refers to as an ‘anti-imperialist narrative’, accounts for more than half (48%, n = 3118) of the analyzed posts, and presents a counter-securitization discourse that opposes the ‘global war on terror discourse’. Though ‘never fully defined, explicated or applied’, counter-securitization might be explicated as a linguistically regulated process of resistance—delaying, prohibiting/stopping or reversing—crucial elements of the securitization process, that is, securitizing actor, securitizing speech act, referent object or emergency measures (Stritzel and Chang, 2015 p.552; Charrett, 2009 p.25–26; Watson, 2009 p.90–91). The findings of our research concerning the ‘anti-imperialist narrative’ will be further unpacked through the three principle dimensions of counter-securitization: direction (Against whom/what and with which referent object?), method (How?) and result/impact (With what consequence?).

In the dimension of direction, the ‘anti-imperialist narrative’ is utilized by Chinese netizens in opposition to each element of the global securitization discourse; namely, the securitizing actor, the securitizing speech act, and the referent object. Within global terrorism discourse, the securitizing actor refers primarily to the US government; the referent object refers to the group for whom the threat exists, namely, Western states and democracies; the referent subject refers to both the perceived source of and the executor of terrorism, namely, the ‘rogue’ Islamic states—Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, and others. The securitizing speech act, as argued by Waever (1989, p. 42–3), is designed to warn the referent subject and/or to make a promise to protect the designated referent object. In the ‘anti-imperialist narrative’, the subject-object positioning and the moral judgment assigned to the subject-object or victim-perpetrator relationships are reversed. The securitizing actor and
the self-victimized, referent object—the US government—thus are identified as the primary source of terrorism, as a global ‘perpetrator’; conversely, the ‘failed’ or ‘rogue’ state becomes the ‘victim’ of state terrorism.

The US government is described as ‘the greenhouse for terrorism’, ‘state terrorism’, ‘lair of human rights who only sells horse meat as beefsteak’, the ‘world common enemy’, the ‘biggest mafia boss’, the ‘biggest wholesaler of terrorism in the world’, the ‘Nazi state’, ‘the evil axis of global terrorism’, and so on. ‘The US—Terror’; ‘The word “terrorism” simply makes no sense if the invasions of the US in Vietnam, Korea, Afghanistan and Iraq are not counted as terrorism’; ‘In today’s world, there is a country that is the largest terrorist state, the biggest “cult kingdom” and the war initiator of most hegemony wars. Friends, guess who it is!’

Conversely, the ‘rogue’ states are victimized: ‘In the Middle East, women and children and the elderly are killed by the communal conflict. Isn’t America the big push behind the scenes?’; ‘You America already began to fight Afghanistan nine years ago. It was until [2002], terrorism took place. [America] has to confess. You America must write a big historical book to apologize to many people, and you America should do it first’; ‘Pray for the disaster-ridden, Palestinian people! Condemning the real terrorist rogue state, the United States, and its running dogs’; ‘Who are terrorists? … 10 years of American military operation have killed 225 thousand people in the world … including the US government’s military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq and the “counter-terrorism” in Pakistan’; ‘when you *** American have your big feast, have you ever thought of the starved Pakistani children in Central Asia and their slaughtered hearts?’

In this manner, the US government is framed and securitized as an existential threat to humanity, killing the innocent and the weak under the false flag of counter-terrorism. Simultaneously, the ‘rogue’ and ‘failed’ states are desecuritized and victimized, framed as blameless for the tragedies that have befallen them, and unable to respond to insurmountable might and malice of the US military state. In addition to these methods of counter-securitization, delegitimization is also used frequently, with strong anti-imperialist platforms, to challenge the self-proclaimed leadership of the US on pacifying the conflict and violence in the world. ‘Where there is oppression, there will be resistance. Do American want to be the world hero and then purge away their sins? Hegemony! [The crime] cannot be purged away’; ‘Hegemony and terrorism are symbiotic’; ‘Terrorism is the little bastard of American imperialism’. This anti-US and anti-imperialist resentment goes further, towards the Chinese supporters of the global war on terrorism: ‘you American dogs, licking your American dad’s ***; ‘You *** American cents. will you eat shit … you will be fucked by the American terror in the end’.

Likely as a result of this counter-securitization, we found that fear, at least within the global discourse of terrorism, seems not to be apparent in the Chinese context. Further, the hatred of Islam and Muslims which became so entwined in the world. For example, ‘How about the terrorist fruit you planted yourselves? Cool? — surprise, moment by moment’; ‘I oppose any form of terrorism, but in the case of bad luck on Americans, we are normally detached and happy to see it’; ‘You [the US government] made your poor, middle eastern hooker pregnant. Now, take care of your little bastard. You stupid ***. haha-haha!’. Chinese netizens were found, as illustrated, to be supportive of the ‘global war on terror’ discourse.

8. Discussion: globalized fears, localized securities and polarization in China

The results of this study prove the existence of polarization within digitally-networked discussion in China on issues of international terrorism, and further substantiate the presence of opinion polarization, in terms of acceptance, denial and decomposition of the global discourse of fears about terrorism. This final section draws on our case study to discuss an alternative explanation for the motivation/ driver of mass polarization in the authoritarian context of China. Instead of partisan incentives, the effect of globalization and localization of the fear of terrorism as a discourse, emotion and perception appears to contribute a crucial dimension that drives opinion polarization in China.

The globalization of fear is a powerful metanarrative within the public sphere, yet most academic discussions on globalized fears are based on the war on/of terror and the manipulation of fear in Western contexts (Bauman, 2006; Furedi, 2006; Robin, 2004). The Western-centric narrative of globalized fears assumes a universalization of fear, ignoring nuanced understandings of local/global relationships based on emotion, and losing sight of the localized ‘playing out’ of globalized fear in non-Western contexts: they also hierarchize fear, so that global, political forms and transnational processes are at the top, active and in control, leaving the affected, sponge-like and passive ordinary people at the bottom (Pain, 2009 p.427). Hence, Pain (2009 p.474–475) suggests that we should seek a descaling account of globalized fear, where fear is seen as situated and contextual, affected by local places and events, continuously challenged, resisted and reshaped, providing the potential to be transformative and experienced as simultaneously local and global.

The way globalized fears of terrorism are accepted, resisted or negotiated in local contexts is ‘constrained by the pre-existing boundaries of the local security imaginary’ and memory, and adaptive to socio-political contexts (Rythoven, 2015). After the September 11 terrorist attacks, the Chinese government seized the opportunity to reframe its dispute with the Uyghurs as a dimension of the global war against terrorism (Cunningham, 2012 p.12). Since then, counter-terrorism campaigns have gradually moved to center stage in ‘stability-maintenance’. Notably, counter-terrorism in China essentially serves as a mechanism of domestic stability. Stability as a concept and an aspiration is inextricable from the perceived threat.

1 ‘American dogs’ (meigo 美狗) is an abusive term referring to the pro-US and pro-West group of netizens in China.

2 American cents (meifen 美分) is another name for ‘American dogs’ in Chinese digital communication.
of instability, and its counterpart, the assurance of stability (Cliff, 2016 p.86). Indeed, the Chinese government’s efforts to maintain stability have barely succeeded, if at all, in encouraging the Han imagination that the possibility of ethnic violence is ever-present; rather, the government strategizes to sustain stability—the heart of which is to prevent the escalation of ethnic tension and the possibility of ethnic genocide—by downplaying the discourse of instability and fear.

The ‘downplaying’ strategy in China is carried out in multifaceted and government-society coordinated ways, manifested in methods of control, marginalization and replacement. To prevent the proliferation of a ‘culture of fear’, laws and regulations were enacted in China to ban terrorism-related content on social media such as Weibo, Wechat and Baidu Post Bar, criminalize users of such platforms and, in numerous reported cases, have them imprisoned. In this way, China enhances its control over the production of fear in a public arena that is inherently vulnerable to provocation and amplification by circulating information through digital communication. The public broadcasting of relevant news about domestic (counter-)terrorism is not allowed without official consent (Tai, 2014), consequently marginalizing topics, at least quantitatively, related to the domestic threat of terrorism within mass communication. The political elites and public intellectuals in China also promote an anti-imperialist explanation to replace Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ in regard to the cause of terrorism (Li, 2015). The language and historical experiences of anti-imperialism are often the crucial element in the Chinese imaginary of security and, in the case of (counter-)terrorism, provide a symbolic resource to overturn the victim-perpetrator relationship of the mainstream Western discourse of the war on terror and to expel the fear of ‘evil from within’ by reframing terrorism as the product of Western hegemonic powers. As illuminated in the ‘anti-imperialist narrative’, the fear of terrorism is diluted when a sense of the irrelevance and remoteness of terrorism is created, and a historically inscribed hatred of ‘Western imperialism’ is rejuvenated with perceived ‘state terrorism’.

In the global war on terrorism, Western power to control and realize the securitization of Muslims and Islam at the implementation stage was significantly fragmented in China. The local speakers (the Chinese governments, the social elites, intellectuals, and others) and audiences (the Chinese netizens, for instance) of securitization ‘negotiate’ the process of localization in which both resistance and acceptance of the globalized discourse of fear occur, which presupposes a process of mass polarization in China. Notably, this paper contends that polarization does not have to be a society-wide phenomenon that involves substantial portions of the public who hold divergent views on the issue. Even in the ‘partisan’ tradition of polarization studies, polarization can emerge in response to the division of individuals within the group(s) of elites, without assuming the total involvement of societal members. We would like to suggest that future work might explore the alternative frameworks in explaining polarization, and certainly many other possible drivers/forms of polarization, in different socio-political contexts, in order to contribute a more pluralist perspective to the debate on polarization in public opinion.

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