Beyond the monkey video: China's evolving information strategy in the Philippines



By Giano Libot

When Chinese state media recently released an AI-generated video depicting Filipinos as monkeys manipulated by the United States and Japan amid tensions in the South China Sea, the backlash was immediate. The video was widely condemned in the Philippines for its racist imagery, dehumanizing portrayal of Filipinos, and inflammatory framing of an already volatile territorial dispute. Yet its significance extends beyond the diplomatic controversy.

More importantly, it offers a glimpse into how China's external communications are evolving, where generative artificial intelligence, state media, diplomacy, and strategic narrative competition are becoming increasingly intertwined.

For much of the past decade, discussions of China's influence operations in Southeast Asia have centered on digital diplomacy through embassy Facebook pages, official statements, state-backed media, and coordinated online engagement. These efforts have sought to project Beijing's preferred image abroad while defending its geopolitical interests, particularly in the South China sea.

Today, however, this framework is becoming insufficient. China's communication efforts increasingly reflect a broader pursuit of discourse power, or *Huayu Quan*, which extends beyond simply persuading foreign audiences. It is also about shaping the information environment itself: influencing which narratives gain legitimacy, whose voices are regarded as credible, and what becomes accepted as common sense. This contest is no longer only over competing narratives. It is also over who has the authority to define reality.

This shift is increasingly visible in the conduct of China's diplomatic missions in the Philippines. In January, the Chinese Embassy in Manila repeatedly targeted Philippine Coast Guard spokesperson for the West Philippine Sea Rear Admiral Jay Tarriela, accusing him of spreading "false narratives" and "attacking and smearing" China. The dispute escalated to the point where Beijing filed diplomatic protests over Tarriela's public statements and the embassy continued to challenge him directly through public communications.

More recently, the Chinese Consulate in Cebu has also become increasingly active in shaping public narratives beyond the narrow confines of consular diplomacy. These interventions illustrate a broader development. Chinese diplomats are no longer communicating solely with the Philippine government. They are increasingly engaging directly with domestic political debates and the public information environment in which Filipinos understand sovereignty, security, and national identity.

This is not, however, unique to the Philippines.

Chinese diplomatic missions have used increasingly confrontational public communication in other democracies for years. In Sweden, the Chinese Embassy threatened journalist Jojje Olsson over critical reporting in 2021, demanding that he stop his coverage of Beijing or "face the consequences." The incident was part of a broader pattern of aggressive rhetoric by Chinese diplomats toward Swedish journalists and politicians.

Canada offers an even broader example of how diplomatic missions can operate within a country's domestic political environment. Canadian government records citing intelligence assessments reported that China's former consul-general in Vancouver had boasted about helping defeat Conservative MPs, while Beijing was pressuring its consulates to develop strategies for leveraging politically active Chinese community members and associations. Canadian authorities have subsequently assessed that the People's Republic of China would likely continue using both overt and covert mechanisms, including social media and AI-enabled tools, to influence Canadian democratic institutions and civil society.

The same evolution can be seen in the way Chinese diplomatic missions have adapted to social media. A Freedom House study of China's media influence in South Africa found Chinese diplomats increasingly active as public commentators, while the Chinese Consulate-General in Johannesburg made a deliberate effort to establish a social-media presence capable of rivaling that of the embassy. The study also found that the Twitter account of the Chinese ambassador benefited substantially from a network of fake accounts amplifying diplomatic posts.

The Philippine experience, therefore, should not be understood as Beijing suddenly discovering confrontational diplomacy or online influence. The tactics themselves are not new. What is significant is the way several of them are now converging within the same Philippine information environment.

Chinese state media have evolved in parallel. Rather than merely defending Beijing's maritime claims, they have increasingly sought to undermine the credibility of the officials responsible for communicating Philippine security policy. Previous investigations into China Daily's Media Unlocked program documented repeated targeting of Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro Jr., Armed Forces Chief General Romeo Brawner Jr., and other senior security officials, portraying them as provocative, misinformed, or acting on behalf of external powers. Rather than debating only the substance of the South China Sea dispute, these productions increasingly questioned the credibility of the institutions shaping Philippine public understanding of it.

China is therefore no longer simply contesting Philippine policy. It is also contesting the people and institutions that communicate it.

And increasingly, these narratives do not remain within the walls of diplomatic missions or state media outlets.

In 2026, the Chinese Embassy's attacks against the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism were rapidly amplified by pro-Duterte influencers and a network of accounts displaying strong signs of inauthentic behavior.

This is an important development because it changes the nature of the information operation. A foreign embassy can inject a narrative into an existing domestic political ecosystem that is already capable of amplifying it. Local influencers, partisan networks, and potentially inauthentic accounts can make a foreign government's messaging appear to be organic domestic outrage.

The boundary between foreign diplomatic communication and domestic political discourse consequently becomes harder to distinguish.

Seen through this trajectory, the AI-generated monkey video is not an aberration. It is another stage in an increasingly platform-native approach to external communication. The technology is new, but the underlying objective is familiar: shape the information environment in ways that advance Beijing's preferred narratives.
This is where the concept of discourse power becomes particularly important.

Influence is no longer exercised primarily through newspapers, television, or official broadcasts. It increasingly operates through the technological systems that mediate public knowledge: social-media algorithms, recommendation systems, search engines, translation tools, and generative AI itself.

For the Philippines, this presents a fundamentally different challenge. Public discourse is no longer mediated only by journalists and traditional media. Increasingly, it is also shaped by technological systems that determine what becomes visible, what is recommended, what is repeated, and, eventually, what begins to feel like common sense.

The challenge, then, is no longer limited to identifying individual instances of disinformation. It is about understanding the information ecosystem through which public understanding is formed.

China's experience elsewhere shows that this is not a uniquely Philippine phenomenon. What makes the current Philippine case important, however, is the convergence. Diplomatic missions are becoming more aggressive participants in public discourse. State media are targeting the credibility of Philippine officials and institutions. Local political actors can amplify foreign narratives. Inauthentic networks can make those narratives appear organic. And generative AI is providing increasingly cheap and flexible tools for turning geopolitical messages into platform-native content.

The monkey video shows how the tools of influence are changing. The question for the Philippines is no longer simply how to rebut China's narratives, but whether it is ready to

confront them. Has the country built enough democratic resilience to recognize, withstand, and respond to this evolving information strategy?

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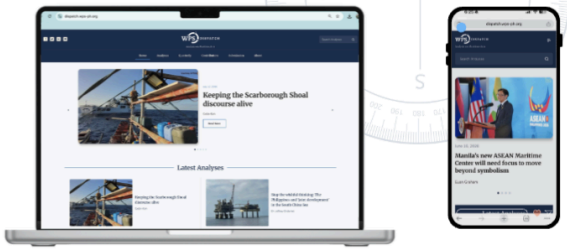

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