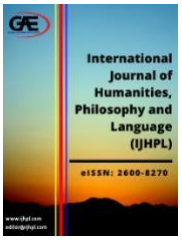
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RIGHTEOUS SELF, PROVOCATIVE OTHERS: CHINA-ALIGNED X USERS AND THE DIGITAL CONSTRUCTION OF STATE IDENTITY IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTES

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Abstract:

The South China Sea (SCS) disputes are among the world's most complex sovereignty contests. While substantial research has investigated the discourse of political elites and mass media, ordinary users' discursive representations of the states involved in the disputes remain underexplored. This study centres on networked publics aligned with China's stance to examine how they discursively construct and negotiate the role identities of China, co-claimant countries and extra-regional states, and how these identity constructions are mobilised to legitimise China's claims and actions in the SCS disputes. The study integrates discourse-centred online ethnography, Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS) and the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) to analyse 312 posts tagged with #SouthChinaSea on X between September 2023 and July 2024. The findings show that these users construct a morally polarised identity constellation in which China is represented as a righteous, victimised and defensive Self, while co-claimant countries and extra-regional states, particularly the Philippines and the United States, are represented as provocative, dependent, interventionist or destabilising Others. It contributes to research on digital political communication by showing how state identity, geopolitical legitimacy and digitally mediated nationalist discourse are co-constructed in online public debates over maritime disputes.

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Introduction

Indeed, the South China Sea (SCS) has never been a fully governed or regulated space; rather, one may describe it as "a transitory and heterodox space crisscrossed by overlapping intentions, designs, and dreams" (Hartnett & Reckard, 2017, p. 292). In that regard, the claims to sovereignty in the area may be seen as a constructed fiction, that is, an attempt to become constituent by means of denying other claims to the constituent status. The claim to constitute is sustained through the discourses, where certain representations of territory, history, entitlements, and identity are articulated, distributed, and legitimized. The position above fits in well with the approach used in the critical discourse analysis, according to which the discourse cannot be seen merely as a means of representing the social reality but should be regarded as the very practice of producing such a reality (Fairclough, 1992; de Cillia et al., 1999). Consequently, the contest over the SCS is also a contest over the discursive construction of state identities and the legitimacy of competing geopolitical claims.

Mass media play a dual role in this process of advancing both claimants' material objectives and symbolic claims: they report and represent the conflict, while simultaneously shaping and enacting it (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2020). Yet, in the era of social media, the production of geopolitical discourse is no longer monopolised by institutional actors. As increasingly important participants in the discursive construction of international politics (Tretiak et al., 2022), ordinary users are no longer merely passive recipients of media narratives but also active producers and circulators of discourse (KhosraviNik & Zia, 2014). The language they use in online discussions contributes to different interpretation patterns for the understanding of the events, relations and identity (Van Dijk, 2015), which consequently influence the audiences' attitudes towards the states involved in the disputes through networked interaction. Digital platforms, particularly X (formerly Twitter), have emerged as central spaces where ordinary users articulate support, resistance, concern and antagonism toward competing sovereignty claims, state actions and stances in the SCS disputes (KhosraviNik, 2022; KhosraviNik & Amer, 2022).

Research on discourse surrounding the SCS disputes has extensively examined elite discourse, including policy documents and mainstream media representations (Gildore & Syting, 2022; Sukarno, 2022). Although Meyer et al. (2019) examined Indonesian public reactions to mainstream news on social media through a quantitative keyword-based survey, systematic analysis of how publics linguistically and discursively represent the states involved in the disputes remains relatively limited. Even less is known about how China-aligned users discursively interpret and represent the SCS dispute against a backdrop in which the outside

world and the international mainstream media consider China's maritime behavior increasingly aggressive and assertive (Deluao & Baradillo, 2026; Lin et al., 2026).

This study addresses this gap by conducting a discourse analysis of examining China-aligned users' posts on X surrounding the SCS disputes. Drawing on discourse-centred online ethnography (Androutsopoulos, 2008), Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (KhosraviNik, 2017) and Discourse-Historical Approach (Wodak, 2001), we investigate how these users construct the identity of Self, co-claimant countries and extra-regional states, and how these identity constructions legitimise China's claims and actions while delegitimising competing claims and external intervention. This micro-level focus enables a nuanced understanding of how China's state identity is negotiated in transnational online discussions of the SCS disputes, shaped not only by the immediate dynamics of maritime confrontation but also by competing Self–Other representations, geopolitical alignments and the platform-mediated conditions of digital public discourse. It asks two central questions:

RQ1: What state identities do China-aligned X users construct for the Self, co-claimant countries and extra-regional states in posts tagged with #SouthChinaSea?
RQ2: How are these identities linguistically and discursively constructed and justified?

By examining China-aligned users' identity discourse, this study contributes to research on digital political communication and the discursive construction of geopolitical legitimacy. Theoretically, it advances a discourse-analytic understanding of how state identity, legitimation and delegitimation are interconnected in online public discourse, showing how representations of the Self and Others help render particular claims and actions legitimate, necessary, provocative or threatening. Empirically, it provides a rare account of pro-China discourse on X, a transnational platform space that lies largely outside China's nationally bounded and state-regulated internet ecology (Bolsover, 2017).

Background and State Identity

The South China Sea Dispute

The South China Sea (SCS) ranks as one of the most strategically and economically important bodies of water in the world. Geographically located at the heart of the Indo-Pacific, the SCS acts as a connecting channel between the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. Every year, over half of the world's total ship traffic passes through the SCS (Noer & Gregory, 1996). Furthermore, the SCS boasts of significant fishery resources, a diverse marine life population, and an abundance of oil and natural gas deposits (U.S. Energy Information Administration). These physical factors partly explain why the SCS has become a contested region for geopolitical rivalry among overlapping claimant countries such as China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei.

China has stated that it was the first nation that discovered, named and administered the islands in the South China Sea (SCS). The most visible cartographic representation of China's historic claim in the form of the U-shaped or 'nine-dash line' claim is thus significant (Chung, 2016). In this context, sovereignty in the South China Sea is associated with historical memories and national revival making it difficult to make any territorial concessions (Li, 2021). Co-claimant nations use different legal and historical justifications. Like China, Vietnam also makes historical claims of having administered the islands during the time of the Nguyen dynasty

along with claiming rights passed down to Vietnam from France after the period of decolonization while also claiming maritime entitlements under UNCLOS (Furtado, 1999; Poling, 2013). Conversely, the Philippines have made its case in terms of UNCLOS-based maritime entitlements and invalidity of China's nine-dash-line claim. As far as Malaysia and Brunei are concerned, both countries have mainly focused on defending their exclusive economic zone and continental shelf entitlements and their approach towards diplomacy has been quieter as compared to that of the Philippines (Putra, 2024; Storey, 2020). In addition to claimant states, there have been extra-regional and non-claimants powers such as the US getting involved in the dispute in terms of freedom of navigation operations, defense cooperation, joint exercises, arms sales and capacity building programs (e.g.,Kesavan, 2020; Shambaugh, 2013; Zhu & Li, 2021; Zou, 2021). Their involvement has further internationalised the dispute and intensified competing interpretations of legality, security and regional order.

Although the SCS disputes first emerged in the late 1960s and escalated during the 1970s–1990s (Fang, 2014), tensions have become especially acute since the early 2010s. More recently, however, Second Thomas Shoal has become an obvious area of confrontation due to several encounters between China and Philippines occurring in 2023-early 2024 involving accusations of laser attacks, water cannons usage, and ramming incidents (Butts, 2024; Lendon, 2023; Mangosing, 2023). All this is indicative of a shift from long-term disputes over sovereignty to increasing maritime confrontations. In this regard, the above incidents require some justification in public, determination of responsibility for them and interpretation of their legality and threat. Thus, the South China Sea disputes cannot be considered as disputes only over sovereignty and rights at sea (Buszynski & Do, 2020), but as battles over narratives and legitimacy as well.

State Identity

This study understands state identity from a constructivist perspective. In constructivism, identity is not a fixed attribute possessed by an actor in isolation, but a socially and intersubjectively constituted understanding of the Self and Others (Wendt, 1999). Broadly, identity refers to the social positioning of the self and others (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), while constructivists treat state identity as "a property of intentional actors that generates motivational and behavioral dispositions" (Wendt, 1999, p. 224). Crucially, state identity is relational and role-based: a state may be represented as a defender, victim, aggressor, protector or outsider only in relation to corresponding representations of other actors. For this reason, this study treats state identity as the role-based meanings assigned to states within Self–Other relations in the SCS disputes.

The issue of identity is important in the context that it constrains the understanding of interests and behavior of the state. In the case of Wendt, identity and interests are linked in such a way that "without interests, identities have no motivational force; without identities, interests have no direction" (Wendt, 1999, p. 231). As such, identity is used as a basis for understanding not only a certain representation of the actor but also what kinds of interests it has and what it can or should do in certain situations. In other words, the issue of identity-interests-behavior relationship is central to this research in the sense that depending on how an actor is represented its interests and therefore the legitimacy, necessity, danger, and legality of actions can be judged. This link between identity and legitimacy is mediated through discourse. In discourse studies, identities are not treated as innate or stable essences, but as fluid, open to change (de

Cillia et al., 1999; Miller, 2000; Pittam, 1999) and ideological formations articulated and reproduced through language (Fairclough, 1992; Fowler, 1991). On this basis, this study operationalises state identity as the role-based meanings assigned to the Self, co-claimant countries and extra-regional actors in the SCS disputes, as realised through discursive resources and linguistic devices.

Recent scholarship on the SCS disputes has expanded considerably across the fields of communication, linguistics, and political communication. Within the linguistic strand, studies drawing primarily on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) have examined how lexical choices, transitivity patterns, quotation practices, naming strategies, and evaluative language construct ideological positions, distribute agency, and legitimise or delegitimise competing sovereignty claims (Zhang, 2017; Pradana & Suprayogi, 2021; Gildore & Syting, 2022; Sukarno, 2022). While these studies have significantly advanced understanding of media representations and discourse surrounding the SCS disputes, several limitations remain. First, most research has concentrated on mainstream media coverage, particularly Chinese, Philippine, and U.S. news media, with comparatively limited attention paid to discourse produced by ordinary social media users (Guo et al., 2017; Nip & Sun, 2018). Second, although discourse-oriented studies have successfully identified linguistic and ideological patterns through CDA and SFL, many remain primarily descriptive, focusing on textual features without sufficiently explaining their broader political significance through theories of international relations or identity construction. Third, the datasets employed in much of the existing research are temporally concentrated in the mid-2010s. For example, Vujakovic (2018) examines data collected between 2014 and 2017, while Ballesteros-Lintao (2018) focuses on the period from 2013 to 2016. With relatively few studies extending their datasets into the early 2020s and beyond, recent developments in platform practices, digital participation, and online discourse surrounding the SCS disputes remain underexplored.

Data and Methodology

Data Description

This study employs discourse-centred online ethnography (Androutsopoulos, 2008; Herring, 2004), Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (KhosraviNik, 2017; KhosraviNik & Unger, 2016) and Discourse-Historical Approach (Wodak, 2001). Following the end of Rodrigo Duterte's presidency and the assumption of office by Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. in 2022, Philippine policy toward China changed markedly (De Castro, 2024), and the SCS disputes entered a period of intensified geopolitical contestation. Against this background, Google Trends was used to trace changes in public search interest related to the SCS disputes after 2022. The period from 17 September 2023 to 6 July 2024 was selected for data collection because it corresponded to a series of major dispute-related events and offered a focused window for examining recent online discourse surrounding the SCS disputes. This period was marked by intensified geopolitical contestation and recurring maritime confrontations, including water-cannoning, ramming, law-enforcement actions and reclamation in the disputed waters.

Guided by a discourse-centred online ethnographic orientation, we conducted systematic observation of public online communication across various platforms, primarily X, Facebook and YouTube. Compared with Facebook and YouTube, X displayed the highest level of relevant discussion and posting activity during the observation process. X was therefore

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selected as the primary site of data collection, not only because of the volume and visibility of SCS-related posts, but also because X has been identified as one of the fastest and most critical tools for reaching and mobilising publics in political communication (Parker, 2012; Vergeer & Hermans, 2013). This systematic observation was essential because it provided the broader discursive and ideological context necessary for interpreting individual posts within an evolving political situation.

The study adopted a topic-based approach to data retrieval (Stieglitz et al., 2014). Specifically, data were collected through hashtag-based searching by entering #SouthChinaSea into X's search function, rather than through broader keyword combinations such as South China Sea. This strategy was chosen because hashtags function as user-generated markers of topical relevance: posts tagged with #SouthChinaSea were explicitly positioned by their authors as part of the wider online discussion of the SCS disputes. #SouthChinaSea was selected as the primary entry point because it appeared more frequently than other dispute-related hashtags identified during the preliminary observation, including #WestPhilippineSea. This choice is also supported by Huang and Wang's (2019) finding that #SouthChinaSea was among the ten most frequently used hashtags by China's diplomatic accounts, indicating its salience in SCS-related political communication.

The next stage involved data cleaning, account-affiliation screening and stance verification. Because this study focuses on ordinary users' public attitudes rather than institutional discourse, user affiliation was carefully reviewed. Drawing on Meraz and Papacharissi's (2013) rubric for coding the affiliation of individuals tweeting about the Egyptian uprisings, only posts produced by ordinary users, including activists, bloggers and citizen journalists, were retained for analysis, while posts published by news agencies, official institutions, academics and government officials were excluded. In addition, a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria was developed to ensure the relevance, consistency and reliability of the final dataset (see Table 1).

Table 1. Inclusion And Exclusion Criteria For Data Screening

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	English-language posts	Non-English posts
User affiliation	Posts by ordinary users	Posts by institutional or elite actors

Table 1. Inclusion And Exclusion Criteria For Data Screening (continued)

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Post type	Original posts	Replies and comments
Duplication	Unique posts, including multiple distinct posts by the same user	Duplicate or near-identical posts published by the same user at different times
Topical relevance	Posts related to the SCS disputes	Posts unrelated to the SCS disputes

Source: Author's own compilation based on the corpus data.

After this preliminary screening, user accounts were manually examined to determine both affiliation and stance. This involved a close review of users' digital activities, including profile information, posting histories, reposts, hashtags, mentions, comments, debates, interactions with other actors, and the content of embedded images or videos. Posts were retained only

when they were relevant to the SCS disputes and expressed positive evaluations of China's positions, actions or interests. Following this screening procedure, the cleaned corpus comprised 312 English-language posts produced by China-aligned ordinary users.

Method

Critical Discourse Analysis/Studies (CDA/CDS) provides the broader critical orientation for this study because it examines how power relations and ideological formations are constructed, naturalised, institutionalised and transformed through and within discourse, as well as how access to and control over discourse are socially organized (Van Dijk, 2001). However, because this study examines discourse produced on social media, it draws on Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS), which extends CDS to digitally mediated environments. SM-CDS pays particular attention to the affordances and sociotechnological contexts that shape social media discourse, with the aim of critically examining how social power inequalities are (re)produced through digital meaning-making and practices in relevant public spheres (KhosraviNik, 2017; KhosraviNik & Amer, 2022; KhosraviNik & Unger, 2016). Rather than treating social media posts as isolated texts, SM-CDS calls for an approach that combines observation of screen-based data, such as online ethnography, with an expanded CDS toolkit capable of addressing new meaning-making artefacts and practices in digital communication, including hashtags, reposts, likes, images and other platform-specific resources (KhosraviNik, 2017)

Informed by the SM-CDS framework, the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) provides the main analytical framework for identifying the discursive strategies through which state identities are constructed and legitimised or delegitimized (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). DHA is particularly suitable for this study because it has been widely used to examine the representation of Self–Other identities and the construction of national identities (see e.g. Wodak et al., 2009 for a classic example). Building on this framework, we first conduct an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to identify and categorise the identity types that emerge from the data. The analysis then moves to the level of textual surface structures, where a deductive approach is applied to examine referential and predicational strategies. At this stage, particular attention is paid to the presence of social actors and actions, as well as to the qualities attributed to them (KhosraviNik, 2010). In data processing and analysis, the DHA analysis was supported by keyword, collocate and KWIC searches using AntConc (Anthony, 2013). Collocational patterns around key actor-related node words were identified using Mutual Information (MI), which helped locate salient lexical associations in the corpus. These patterns were then examined through close contextual reading of KWIC concordance lines to determine how particular nominations and predications contributed to the construction of state identities. After examining these two linguistic strategies, the analysis further explores the argumentative moves of the posts by identifying the topoi through which particular identity constructions are justified. Finally, intensification strategies are examined to show how evaluations, claims and identity positions are strengthened through linguistic or multimodal resources. In the discussion section, the findings are interpreted in relation to their broader social and political implications.

To reduce the potential influence of a single researcher's interpretation and enhance the reliability of the observations (Denzin, 2017, p. 303), this study employed investigator triangulation during the coding process. First, the first author developed a preliminary coding framework through repeated reading of the corpus in conjunction with the analytical

International Journal of Humanities, Philosophy and Language
IJHPL
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framework adopted in this study. The framework specified the coding criteria for identity themes, referential strategies, predicational strategies, topoi, and intensification strategies. The two authors then discussed and refined the coding framework to establish a shared understanding of the analytical categories and coding criteria. Based on the agreed framework, both authors independently coded a randomly selected sample of 100 posts and subsequently compared their coding results. Any discrepancies were discussed through several rounds of consultation until consensus was reached, and the coding framework was further refined where necessary. The final coding framework was then applied consistently to the remaining corpus. This process provided investigator triangulation and theme validation, thereby enhancing the transparency, consistency, and trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis.

Analysis and Findings

The Classification Of State Identities Constructed By ASEAN-Aligned X Users

China-aligned users construct two antagonistic identity groups: a justified Self and a provocative Others composed of certain co-claimant countries and extra-regional powers. As shown in Table 2, China is constructed through a range of positive identities that legitimise its claims and actions in the SCS disputes by framing them as historically grounded, legally justified and defensive. Not all of these positive identities are explicitly antagonistic: identities such as driver for negotiations, humanitarian aid provider and exemplar of restraint serve to construct China in more conciliatory and stabilising terms. By contrast, the Philippines and Vietnam are represented as provocateurs of escalating tensions and geopolitical pawns of the United States, while extra-regional states, particularly the United States, are constructed as outsiders, illegal interlopers, provocateurs of instability or instigators manipulating regional claimants to confront China.

Positive Self-representation is largely predicated on the negative construction of Others. This pattern is reflected in the dominant topics of the posts, which centre on events involving the Philippines and the United States, including the U.S.–Philippines Balikatan military exercises, Philippine resupply missions to the grounded BRP Sierra Madre at Ren'ai Jiao/Second Thomas Shoal, embedded media coverage of maritime confrontations, the deployment of the U.S. Mid-Range Capability system in the Asia-Pacific, and alleged "illegal" entries by U.S. naval vessels into disputed waters. The analysis now shifts from these broad thematic patterns to specific linguistic evidence to trace how state identities are discursively constructed to legitimise interests and actions.

Table 2. State Identities Constructed By China-Aligned X Users

Social Actors	Constructed State Identities
China	defender of territorial sovereignty and interests victim a rightful and indisputable sovereign over the South China Sea islands driver for negotiations protector of natural resources exemplar of restraint humanitarian aid provider

International Journal of Humanities, Philosophy and Language
IJHPL
EISSN : 2600-8270
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 01-22

Co-claimants (Philippines, Vietnam)	provocateur of the escalating SCS territorial disputes geopolitical pawn of the United States
Extra-regional states (United States)	illegal interloper or provocateur of disputes and instability outsiders interfering in the SCS issue or instigator manipulating regional claimants to confront China

Source: Author's own compilation based on the corpus data.

Nomination Strategies

Referential strategies for Self-presentation are dominated by national naming (i.e., China), functionalisation (e.g., China Coast Guard) and toponymic metonymy (i.e., Beijing), where the capital city metonymically stands for the Chinese government (see Table 3). These referential strategies construct China as a unified, institutionalised and territorially anchored sovereign actor with clear state agency. Unlike many studies of migration, refugees, nationalism identity, where deictic pronouns such as we and they often play a salient role in constructing an Us/Them division (e.g., Erdogan-Ozturk & Isik-Guler, 2020), such pronouns are not the most prominent naming technique in this corpus. This may be related to the communicative conditions of X: the #SouthChinaSea discussion is not a bounded Facebook Page or a closed community of like-minded users, but an open and transnational hashtag public. In this context, users address a more heterogeneous and potentially dispersed audience, and national names and institutional labels provide clearer referential anchoring than repeated use of we and they, which could otherwise remain ambiguous.

By contrast, in the representation of Others, national names such as Philippines, the United States, as well as functional labels such as Philippine vessel and U.S. warship, are also used. However, the negative representation of co-claimant countries and extra-regional states is constructed substantially through a series of random evaluative, criminalising and metaphorical references with little argumentative content. For the Philippines and Vietnam, referential strategies associate them with illegal possession, intrusion and dishonesty through labels such as thieves, squatters, liar, provocateur and trespasser. At the same time, metaphorical constructs such as pawn, puppet, lackeys and sacrificial lambs further reduce the agency of these states by representing them as geopolitical instruments manipulated, exploited or sacrificed by the United States. For extra-regional states, especially the United States, negative nomination clusters around semantic fields of external intervention, imperialism and war-making. Evaluative and ideological labels such as colonial puppet master, warmonger, American imperialism and outside interventionists construct extra-regional actors as external forces that manipulate regional states, fuel conflict and destabilise the SCS.

Table 3 Nomination Strategies

China	**Co-claimants**	**Extra-regional States**
National name: China Functionalization : The China Coast Guard/ CCG Toponym: Beijing	National name: Philippines, Vietnam, Functionalization : Philippine ship/vessel/troops Other: a lead attack dog, the next sacrificial lambs,	National name: the United States Functionalization: U.S. warship Other: colonial puppet master, coach, slaver, warmonger, western bosses, big brother, big bombs, Zionist

International Journal of Humanities, Philosophy and Language
IJHPL
EISSN : 2600-8270
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 01-22

	pawn, chess pieces/a small chess, drudge, puppet, lackeys, thieves, burglar, squatters, crook, liar, provocateur, trespasser	Military complex, American imperialism, disruptor of peace, western venture capitalists, outside interventionists, aggressor, extra-regional country, foreign forces, outsider, others

Source: Author's own compilation based on the corpus data.

Predication Strategies

The predicational strategies employed in Self-representation can be categorised into defensive, victimising, diplomatic/restraint-oriented and humanitarian action attributions (see Table 4). The most salient theme is the representation of China as a defender of territorial sovereignty and maritime interests. This is realised through action verbs such as defend, refuse to back down, conduct patrols and deploy forces, which predicate China's actions as necessary responses to external provocation rather than as aggression. Victimising predications are realised largely through passive and agent-backgrounding constructions, such as was accused, was misunderstood and was maliciously clipped. In these clauses, China is grammatically foregrounded as the subject, but not as the agent of a problematic action. Instead, it is positioned as the affected participant upon whom accusations, misunderstandings and distortions are imposed. In addition, China is positively predicated as a diplomatic, restrained and humanitarian actor through expressions such as hold talks to defuse tensions, show restraint and rescue a wounded Philippine fisherman.

Table 4 Predication Strategies (Ranked By MI Effect ≥3)

China	Co-claimants	Extra-regional states
• Defender: defend, refuse to back down, conduct patrol/exercise, deploy/send forces • Victim: was accused, was misunderstood, was maliciously clipped • Driver for negotiations: hold/engage in talks to defuse the tension • Protector of natural resources: protect natural resources, • Exemplar of restraint: show restraint in keeping the tensions from boiling • Humanitarian aid provider: assists Filipino fishermen injured in SCS, rescued a wounded Philippine fisherman	• Provocateurs: steal, damage, occupy, blame • Pawns: lined up behind Washington, moved closer to the U.S., open military bases to the United States, is encouraged by U.S., rely on U.S. support, collude, leverage benefits from the U.S.	• Interlopers or provocateurs: intrude into, enter, violate, infringe upon, threaten, play the victim, flexes muscle, display hard power, want war with China, encircle • Outsiders: intervene, interfere, get involved, meddle, challenge, create a crisis • Instigators: use/take full advantage of the Philippines/allies as pawns, collude, exploit, embolden, prop, push, support, select, fund NGOs/civic group, fuel tensions

Source: Author's own compilation based on the corpus data.

International Journal of Humanities, Philosophy and Language
IJHPL
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In addition to above action-oriented predications, there is a substantial theme around the discursive construction of territorial belonging. This theme underpins another salient Self-identity, namely China as the rightful and indisputable sovereign over the SCS islands, and is realised through relational processes, possessivation and toponymic negation (see Excerpts 1–3).

1. Really bizarre, upside down, South China Sea has been part of #Chinese civilization since time immemorial! US is outsider! How can Biden or anyone in the West ever lectures China on #SouthChinaSea? 🤪 Just open the world map and learn WHERE is #China and the #USA located 😂

2. Vietnam occupied a huge amount of Chinese territorial waters between the 1970s and 1980s.

3. the South China Sea, not the "West Philippine Sea."

In Excerpt 1, references to historical continuity (e.g., "has been part of") and civilizational ties (e.g., "Chinese civilization") frame sovereignty as inherent and unquestionable. In Excerpt 2, possessivation, via grammatical or lexical markers of ownership like "China's" or "Chinese," asserts control as self-evident and commonsensical. By directly linking "territory" to "China" without any supporting justification, such legitimacy is derived linguistically through the act of naming, instead of through explicit reasoning. In Excerpt 3, negation removes competing toponyms (e.g., rejecting West Philippine Sea), delegitimizing rival narratives and reinforcing China's discursive dominance.

Predicational strategies for co-claimant countries and extra-regional states work together to construct a two-level causal structure of the SCS disputes. At the immediate level, co-claimants, the Philippines and Vietnam, are predicated as direct violators of an already legitimate Chinese territorial order. Verbs such as steal, damage and occupy do not simply describe disputed maritime actions; they presuppose prior Chinese ownership of the relevant islands or waters. In this sense, these predicates naturalise Chinese sovereignty at the level of predication by transforming competing sovereignty claims into acts of intrusion, appropriation and violation. At the deeper causal level, however, the agency of co-claimants is simultaneously weakened through predications that tie their actions to U.S. power. Expressions such as lined up behind Washington, moved closer to the U.S., relied on U.S. support and colluded with the U.S. recontextualise the SCS disputes from a regional sovereignty conflict into a U.S.-orchestrated geopolitical confrontation. This causal framing is reinforced by the predication of extra-regional actors through verbs such as interfere, meddle, encircle, exploit, embolden, push, fund and fuel tensions, which assign them responsibility not merely for participating in the dispute, but for producing the conditions of confrontation. Through this distribution of agency, co-claimants are positioned as proximate agents of violation, while the United States and its allies are constructed as the ultimate instigators behind regional instability. The effect is to delegitimise both resistance to China's claims and external intervention by representing them as two parts of the same anti-China geopolitical strategy.

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IJHPL
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Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 01-22

Argumentation Strategies

While referential and predicational strategies show how China, co-claimants and extra-regional states are named and evaluated, argumentation strategies reveal the warrants (i.e., topoi) that link these evaluations to broader conclusions about who is a rational, restrained and legitimate, who is a provocative, and who is intrusive, interventionist and manipulative. Topoi can be made explicit through conditional or causal formulations such as "if x, then y" or "y, because x" (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 110). While this study formalizes the identification of topoi through such paraphrastic structures to reveal the underlying argumentative logic. Whereas, merely reconstructing the logical argument form is not enough for an adequate evaluation of argumentation (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992). Therefore, the study draws on van Eemeren and Grootendorst's Pragma-Dialectical Argumentation Theory (van Eemeren et al., 2014) to evaluate whether the identified argumentation strategies adhere to the rules of rational discourse. Particular attention is paid to potential violations such as strategic maneuvering, suppression of opposing views, or distortion of standpoints. By assessing whether these argumentative moves breach the normative discussion rules, the study is able to identify fallacious reasoning embedded in the discourse. The most salient argumentation schemes repeatedly employed by China-aligned users are the topoi of authority and comparison, both of which are formally driven.

Topos of Authority

The topos of authority (argumentum ad verecundiam) is a subtype of symptomatic argumentation, which aims to secure acceptance of a conclusion based on its endorsement by persons whose views are held in general respect. Its argumentation scheme typically follows the pattern: something is true or false because X says so. This reasoning pattern is exemplified in Excerpt 4 to 5, where references to official documents, historical archives, and expert opinions to legitimize China's territorial claims in the SCS.

1) **"#USNationalArchive document from mid '50s: US under-secretary of state** says that, while the #Filipinos have no claim to the #Spratlys, it is in the #US interest to encourage them to make a claim anyway to keep Communist #China out of the area."
2) **"(UK & French) archives** demonstrate, taken as a whole, that it is the view of the British & French legal experts that as a matter of the international law, the #XishaIslands & the #NanshaIslands [aka #SpratlyIslands] are Chinese territory."
3) **"Letter from France's ambassador to #Beijing in 1974, to the French PM**, saying unrest in the #SouthChinaSea is due to French interference in the region to the #Americans inciting the #Vietnamese to make claims for the purpose of embarrassing #China."
4) The disputed islands in #SouthChinaSea #SCS belong to #China, according to **U.S., French & British insitutional memory**.@StateDept My exclusive with **Prof. Anthony Carty** on his findings. #Nansha #Xisha ...(sic)

Excerpts 4 and 5 illustrate the topos of authority, whereby China's sovereignty claim is legitimised through reference to U.S. National Archive documents, British and French archives, diplomatic correspondence, "institutional memory" and Prof. Anthony Carty's interpretation of declassified governmental records. In both excerpts, authority functions as an epistemic warrant: the claim that the Xisha and Nansha Islands are Chinese territory is

International Journal of Humanities, Philosophy and Language
IJHPL
EISSN : 2600-8270
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 01-22

presented as credible because it is attributed to historically or legally authoritative sources, rather than being argued through detailed legal reasoning within the posts themselves.

From a pragma-dialectical perspective, such appeals to authority do not in themselves constitute formal fallacies, since they can be reconstructed as authority-based argument schemes. Their weakness lies instead in the dialectical status of the unexpressed premises on which they depend. In Excerpt 4, the appeal to "British and French legal experts" risks violating the Relevance Rule (Rule 4) (van Eemeren et al., 2014), because authoritative labels substitute for substantive legal reasoning, and the Language Use Rule (Rule 10), because the post does not specify which experts are invoked, which documents contain their views, or how these views directly support the conclusion. The authority claim is therefore made persuasive while remaining difficult to verify.

Excerpt 5 involves a more complex "archive–interpretation" structure, in which official archives are mediated through academic authority. From a pragma-dialectical perspective, this argument violates Rule 6, the Starting Point Rule, which prohibits a party from falsely presenting a disputed proposition as an accepted starting point (van Eemeren et al., 2014). The problem lies in the implicit presupposition that the principle of historical rights is a mutually accepted premise in the debate. However, this very notion is one of the most contested issues in the SCS disputes. In fact, other claimant states, such as the Philippines, explicitly reject historic rights as a valid legal basis. Therefore, this strategy constitutes a fallacy of making unfair use of presuppositions in making assertions, as it distorts the foundation of the discussion by shifting the substantive issue of whether historic rights have legal validity into whether historical archives support such rights. In this sense, opponents are pushed into the arguer's preferred framework, for instance by disputing the interpretation of the archives, rather than challenging the legitimacy of the underlying premise itself.

Topos of Comparison

In pragma-dialectics, the formal topos of comparison falls under the category of comparison argumentation, which is based on a relation of similarity that connects the premises of the argument to the standpoint (van Eemeren et al., 2014). This type of reasoning typically follows conditional patterns such as "X is comparable to Y," "X corresponds to Y," or "X is just like Y." The most frequent form of comparison argumentation constructs the Philippines' identity as a geopolitical pawn of the United States by drawing a parallel between the Philippines and Ukraine (see Excerpts 6-7).

1) **Zelenskyy Teaching Philippine Pres. Marcos Jr**. How to be **the Next Ukraine** #Zelenskyy #Ukraine #Marcos #Manila #Philippines
2) ***like #Russia,*** #China will have no choice. In summary, the #USA and #NATO have selected #Philippines to play the same role in the #SouthChinaSea ***as #Ukraine*** is playing in the Black Sea. (sic)

Excerpts 6 and 7 centres on the perceived similarity of weaker states being exploited by stronger powers. The comparison triggers and connects with the assumed "old shared knowledge" surrounding Ukraine, namely a comprehensive humanitarian catastrophe marked by extensive loss of life, mass displacement, severe damage to essential infrastructure, and long-term health, environmental and societal impacts (Haque et al., 2022). In this way, it invites

International Journal of Humanities, Philosophy and Language
IJHPL
EISSN : 2600-8270
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 01-22

readers to infer that, if the Philippines follows a similar U.S.-backed path, it may face a comparable geopolitical and humanitarian fate.

From a pragma-dialectical perspective, the problem is not the use of comparison per se, since comparison argumentation can be reasonable when relevant similarities are established. Rather, the argument violates the Argument Scheme Rule (Rule 8), according to which "a party may only use arguments that are logically valid or capable of being validated by making explicit one or more unexpressed premises" (van Eemeren et al., 2014). This violation is reflected in two related fallacies. First, Excerpts 6 and 7 commit the fallacy of false analogy: the Russia–Ukraine war and the China–Philippines dispute are treated as structurally equivalent despite major differences in historical relations, legal contexts, regional institutions and conflict dynamics. Second, Excerpt 7 also involves hasty generalisation. It implicitly assumes that China will adopt military measures comparable to Russia's, thereby ignoring the strategic, historical and diplomatic differences between the two cases. The argument therefore extrapolates a context-specific framing of Russia as having "no choice" into a universal and unconditional conclusion that China will likewise have "no choice" in the SCS. This move draws an overly broad conclusion from a specific and highly qualified premise without acknowledging the contextual distinctions that weaken the analogy.

Intensification Strategies

While certain communicative contexts, particularly institutional or normatively constrained settings, may require speakers to soften or conceal personal opinions through disclaimers in order to make prejudicial claims appear more acceptable (Van Dijk, 1993), the informal, online public settings, on the contrary, might provide multiple users to explicitly construct an hostile discourse strengthened with intensifiers and circulate it freely. The foremost and unique intensification strategy in our study is found to be the use of orthography as exemplified in excerpts 8 and 9.

1) For many years, there were no problem for Filipino fishermen fishing in #SouthChinaSea. These guys, pretending to protect fishermen's rights, are US proxy to destroy peace and stability in Asia. ***THEY ARE DESTROYING FISHERMEN'S LIFE.***
2) It's joking ***SO*** many Chinese products are used in "Atin Ito" actions! #Philippines & #China have been getting along for centuries. Filipinos ***SHOULD NOT*** be used as US proxy against China #SouthChinaSea

In Excerpts 8 and 9, capital letters create a strong visual impact and reinforce tones of anger, accusation and ridicule, evoking an emotional reaction from the reader similar to a rhetorical shout. This orthographic intensification not only frames the United States as the real manipulator and U.S.-aligned actors as proxy instruments of regional instability but also constructs a clear in-group/out-group division. The use of the pronoun "*They*" excludes the opponents from the imagined Asian community, reinforcing their identity as external aggressors who threaten regional peace and solidarity. Moreover, ending the sentence in Excerpt 9 "*It's a joke...!*" with an exclamation mark intensifies the tone of mockery and disdain, making the statement read as open ridicule rather than a neutral commentary.

International Journal of Humanities, Philosophy and Language
IJHPL
EISSN : 2600-8270
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 01-22

In addition to linguistic markers, intensification in this dataset is also realised through multimodal resources. On social media, identity construction is rarely purely verbal; images, colour, layout and typography may reinforce, supplement or reshape the evaluative meanings carried by the written text (Koller, 2012). In the China-aligned posts, pictorial metonymy and metaphor, frame size, typeface and colour function as semiotic indicators of intensification: they explicitly interact with nomination by visually identifying social actors, while implicitly reinforcing predicational strategies by amplifying the evaluative meanings attached to these actors as exemplified in Figure 1-2.

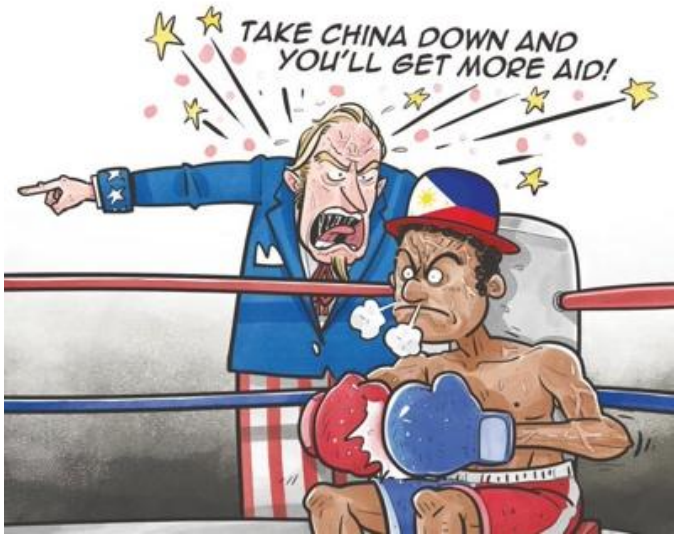


Figure 1

Source: Screenshot from an X post in the #SouthChinaSea corpus.

In Figure 1, pictorial metonymy and metaphor visually intensify the construction of the United States as manipulator and the Philippines as proxy. The coach's blue jacket with stars and red-striped pants metonymically nominates him as the United States, while the boxer's cap bearing the Philippine flag nominates him as the Philippines. The scene further maps the SCS dispute onto a boxing ring: the United States is positioned as the strategist outside the fight, whereas the Philippines appears as the subordinate fighter pushed into confrontation. This metaphorical reading is intensified through the action processes and compositional meaning depicted in the image (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). The coach is assigned the role of Actor, while the boxer takes on the role of Goal. The coach's exaggerated facial expression and commanding gesture visually convey instruction or coercion, whereas the boxer's weary posture intensifies a sense of passivity and compliance. Moreover, the coach occupies a higher and more central position within the composition, visually dominating the boxer. This spatial arrangement constructs a visual power relation, metaphorically underscoring the United States' control over the Philippines in the geopolitical context.

International Journal of Humanities, Philosophy and Language
IJHPL
EISSN : 2600-8270
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 01-22



Figure 2

Source: Screenshot from an X post in the #SouthChinaSea corpus.

Figure 2 is a screenshot taken from a video, in which the black typeface on a yellow background and the red typeface embedded in the image function as prominent textual elements that enhance visual salience. Yellow and red are listed as examples of "highest modality" colors in visual communication, meaning they are highly effective in conveying both sensory and emotional intensity. Yellow is commonly associated with caution or urgency, while red signals warning and danger (Ledin & Machin, 2020). This deliberate colour combination amplifies the salience of the message and directs viewers' attention to the intended evaluative content. The use of multimodal elements serves as a strong intensification strategy that heightens affective alignment and reinforces antagonistic identity construction.

Discussion

Through an analysis of selected posts tagged with **#SouthChinaSea** produced by China-aligned users, this study examines how the state identities of China, co-claimant countries, and extra-regional states are constructed on X, and how these identity representations are mobilised to legitimise or delegitimise particular sovereignty claims, state actions, and extra-regional intervention. The findings show that China-aligned users primarily construct a markedly dichotomous identity framework of "sovereignty defender–provocateur–intervener." This framework stands in sharp contrast to the "victim–perpetrator–protector" framework constructed by users aligned with the positions of Co-claimant countries. These users typically portray the other claimant states as innocent victims of Chinese coercion, construct China as a perpetrator that violates international law and threatens regional stability, and position extra-regional states such as the United States, Japan, and Australia as protectors that provide security and uphold regional order. Correspondingly, the discursive objectives of the two groups also differ markedly. Users aligned with the other claimant states are more inclined to construct the SCS disputes as issues of security, law, and justice confronting the international community as a whole, thereby seeking international sympathy, mobilising domestic and transnational publics, and calling for support from allies. By contrast, the discourse of China-aligned users is more defensive and rebuttal-oriented, aiming primarily to justify China's actions, refute accusations advanced by the Philippines and the United States, and resist extra-regional intervention in the disputes.

International Journal of Humanities, Philosophy and Language
IJHPL
EISSN : 2600-8270
Volume 9 Issue 35 (September 2026) PP. 01-22

Although China's maritime behaviour has often been represented in mainstream international media and policy discourse as increasingly assertive or aggressive, China-aligned users reverse this interpretive frame by constructing China not as an aggressor, but as a victimised and defensive actor whose actions are necessary responses to provocation and threats to sovereignty. This reversal is realised through asymmetrical representations of Self and Other. Rather than legitimising China primarily through explicit self-glorification, the posts achieve legitimation largely through the derogation of Others. This derogation is realised not only through denigrating and metaphorical nominations, but also through the unequal distribution of discursive space. Co-claimant countries and extra-regional states are given greater discursive space and are elaborated through contextual details concerning political motives, historical provocations, military interference or U.S. manipulation. However, this dichotomous framing helps legitimise China's geopolitical stance by simplifying complex territorial dynamics into morally polarised categories, it also risks normalising a more antagonistic mode of online geopolitical discourse. The overreliance on emotionally charged narratives may narrow the space for deliberative public discussion, intensify hostility toward out-group actors and reinforce polarisation of nationalist identity construction in the digital public sphere. This risk is further shaped by the platformed conditions of social media communication. Rather than functioning as a neutral channel for discourse circulation, social media may act as a "force multiplier" (KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018, p. 47) in terms of both the volume and affective intensity of interaction. X's digital features and communicative affordances, such as hashtagging, repostability, visual embedding, condensed textual formats and image–text juxtaposition, play a key role in making nationalist identity narratives more easily compressed, amplified, repeated and foregrounded. In this platformed process, the complex territorial dynamics of the SCS disputes are transformed into more circulable Self/Other narratives, which may further contribute to ideological intensification (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017) and fragmentation within the digital public sphere (Poell & Van Dijck, 2015).

It is also worth noting that China-aligned users construct China through several less confrontational identities, including a driver for negotiations, an exemplar of restraint and a humanitarian aid provider. These identities introduce discursive resources for imagining peaceful dispute management, since they foreground dialogue, restraint and humanitarian concern rather than direct confrontation. However, their de-escalatory potential remains limited because they are embedded within an asymmetrical Self–Other framework. China is represented as already rational, restrained and constructive, while responsibility for conflict is attributed primarily to provocative co-claimants and interventionist external powers. As a result, these non-antagonistic identities do not fully open space for mutual recognition or compromise; rather, they construct peace as conditional upon Others ceasing provocation, external interference or challenges to China's sovereignty.

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IJHPL
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