

Being Chinese Online – Discursive (Re)production of Internet-Mediated Chinese National Identity

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Abstract:

Objective(s):

My research assesses how Chinese national identity is discursively (re)generated by socio-political actors (especially ordinary users) on China's Internet. It aims at altering the focus of Chinese digital nationalism studies from merely fervent and political-charged online expressions of Chinese national sentiments to the discursive (re)shaping of the Chinese-ness via multiple socio-political actors' everyday national(ist) discussions on China's web. Moreover, by making sense of how Chinese digital technologies' affordances inform Chinese national(ist) discourses and their embodied national identities' (re)production online, this study will be useful to both Chinese ICTs and nationalism researchers. This investigation will also uncover the underlying socio-political patterns and trends within the socio-technical context where significances of the Chinese nation are discursively (re)shaped online. Overall, it will offer significant implications for entities like the governments, corporations, news media and international organisations both in China and abroad concerned about socio-political impact of Chinese digital nationalism.

Research Questions:

- 1) What Chinese national(ist) discourses are quotidianly mediated on Chinese digital platforms?
- 2) What are the roles of socio-political actors especially ordinary users in discursively (re)generating Chinese national identity/-ies on the Chinese Internet? To what extent are understandings of the Chinese-ness by socio-political actors especially ordinary users different or even mutually conflicting?
- 3) What socio-political relations, structures and mechanisms are revealed from the discursive (re)production of Chinese national identity/-ies online? When and how may they help transmute the everyday Chinese-ness into outbursts of nationalistic passions and vice versa?

Theoretical Framework:

The first part of theoretical framework is Jon E. Fox and Cynthia Miller-Idriss's (2008) 'everyday nationhood' paradigm. It contains four dimensions – *talking*, *choosing*, *performing* and *consuming* the nation (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008). The second element of theoretical outline is Umut Özkırmılı's (2005) and Michael Skey's (2011) respective theorisation of 'national(ist) discourses'. Özkırmılı (2005) argues for four dimensions of national(ist) discourses – the *spatial*, *temporal*, *symbolic* and *everyday*. Skey (2011), based on Özkırmılı's

(2005) taxonomy, proposes five dimensions of national(ist) discourses – the *spatial, temporal, cultural, political* and *self/other*. The third part of theoretical structure is the “‘carnavalesque’ (Chinese) Internet’ thesis proposed by David Kurt Herold and Peter Marolt (2011), which has three dimensions – *creating, celebrating* and *instrumentalising* the ‘carnival’.

Methods:

I propose an ethnographic methodology, with Sina Weibo (a Twitter-like microblogging site) and bilibili (a YouTube-like video-streaming platform) as ‘fieldsites’. The data collection method is virtual ethnographic observation on everyday national(ist) discussions on both platforms. On each ‘fieldsite’, I observe how socio-political actors contribute to the discursive (re)generation of Chinese national identity on a day-to-day basis with attention to forms and content of national(ist) accounts that they publicise on each ‘fieldsite’, contextual factors of their posting and reposting of and commenting on national(ist) narratives and their interactions with other users about certain national(ist) discourses on each platform. I mobilise *critical discourse analysis* to analyse data. It is a critical textual analysis method which gauges the dynamic interplay between *texts, discourses* and *socio-political structures* like *ideology* and *power relations*, while accentuating the essential role of the researcher’s ‘reflexivity’ (Wodak & Meyer, 2016, p. 8).

Preliminary Findings:

From November 2021 to December 2022, I conducted 36 weeks’ digital ethnographic observations with 36 sets of fieldnotes. Based on fieldnotes of the first week’s observations, I obtained some coding themes. On Sina Weibo, the coding themes that I generalised included ‘China’s childbearing policy’, ‘inheritance of outstanding traditional Chinese culture’, ‘attitudes towards the government’, ‘fan communities’, ‘sunshine credit’¹, ‘Taiwan issue’ and ‘COVID-19 vaccine’. On bilibili, the coding themes that I worked out were ‘mocking Taiwan’, ‘preaching China’s national superiority’, ‘appealing for national confidence’, ‘seeming related to fan communities’, ‘seeming essentially irrelevant to the video played’, ‘exaggerating the length of the Chinese civilisational history’, ‘associating content of the video played with other things’, ‘criticising content of the video played’, ‘criticising modern Chinese people’, ‘emphasising the “militancy” of the Chinese nation’, ‘concerning Chinese official discourses on ethnicity’, ‘mentioning “the West”’, ‘mentioning the “Chinese spirit”’, ‘mentioning other countries, ethnicities or nations’, ‘mentioning the real life’, ‘mentioning the origin of the

¹ ‘Sunshine credit’ is also a system used by Sina Weibo to measure users’ credit based on their behaviour. If users’ behaviours violate relevant regulations, their ‘sunshine credit’ mark will be deducted. If this mark is too low, Sina Weibo will limit relevant users’ activities on the platform, with being banned from posting as the most serious punishment. However, users with a low ‘sunshine credit’ mark can increase their mark by publishing ‘positive energy’ content and interacting with others in a ‘benign’ way. Sina Weibo’s relevant official links: <https://service.account.weibo.com/sunshine/guize> and <https://service.account.weibo.com/roles/guize>.

Chinese civilisation’, ‘recommending other bilibili content’, ‘intending to complement or “correct” the content of the video played’ and ‘at least seeming rational and objective’.

The coding themes and initial analyses can to some extent answer research questions. First, I found multifarious national(ist) discourses on Sina Weibo and bilibili, targeted both at national ‘Others’ and ‘Us’, both on the historical and real-world dimension, both aligning with and differing from or even conflicting with official discourses, both direct national(ist) expressions and articulations of sentiments in the name of presentation of national(ist) attachments but for other purposes. Second, Sina Weibo and bilibili users have agency in interpreting and deploying concrete national(ist) discourses despite the leading role played by the government and two platforms in deciding on the basic framework of national expressions. Besides, there are also disputes and even quarrels between users in terms of explanations for concrete components of ‘nation-ness’ and (in)direct dissent to officially defined ‘mainstream’ discourses to some extent, though expressed more mundanely, discursively and playfully. Third, national(ist) discourses’ (re)production process on Sina Weibo and bilibili depends upon not only technical affordances and limitations of the two sites but also, to a larger degree, some established socio-political mechanisms and conventions in offline China, e.g., the authorities’ acquiescence of citizens’ freedom in understanding and explaining concrete elements of national discourses while setting the basic framework of national narratives to the extent that citizens’ own national(ist) expressions do not reach political bottom lines and develop into mobilising power to shake social stability.

Keywords: National identity, national(ist) discourse(s), everyday nationhood/nationalism, Chinese nationalism, digital media

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