

Online Chinese Nationalism in Post-Olympic China

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**Abstract**

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This thesis conducts detailed content and data analysis to explore the influences of online Chinese nationalism on Chinese society and politics in the post-Olympic China. It can be divided into three parts. First, it highlights that the year 2008 is a crucial landmark of the studies of online nationalism in China. Second, it argues the profound influences of online nationalism on Chinese society in two layers: how it shapes the online nationalistic public, and how it affects Chinese politics. Public-wise, two major features are pointed out, which are voluntariness and collective aggressiveness. Politics-wise, Online Chinese nationalism presents its influence in two ways. On one hand, online Chinese nationalism has cast conspicuous impacts on Chinese foreign relations and policymaking: they are complementary to each other in some cases, while online nationalism can be a dilemma faced the Communist Party. On the other hand, the thesis argues that the dissidents who express their criticism under the protection of nationalism have a certain degree of potential of formalizing a digital civil society in China, but its inherited limits could prevent it from functioning properly.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background and Major Tasks

Since the Chinese were officially connected to the virtual community in 1994, the use of the Internet in the country has developed at an incredible rate. By the end of 2008, there were approximately 298 million netizens in China, a number which surpasses that of the United States and ranks China the highest user in the world. Eight years later later, by the end of 2016, this number reached 731 million, with the Internet penetration rate of 53.2%.<sup>1</sup> The rapid development of the online Chinese community since 2008 Beijing Olympic Games has not only flourished the information flow among citizens across the territory, but has also created a new form of social interaction between the state, the media, various professionals and intellectuals, as well as China's ordinary citizens.

Through the lens of online information development, the heated subject of Chinese nationalism implicates how this form of interaction shapes public opinion and affects the party policymaking in the post-Olympic China. Although the debate of whether Chinese nationalism is one a rise does exist in the academia, the interaction between the state and the people under the impacts of online nationalism has attracted wider attention, and this link has been more conspicuous in the past decade than any other historical point. Under this veil, however, one could find that “online Chinese nationalism” contains inconsistent voices that are actually against the party-state, which are usually calls for further opening-up and democratization. Indeed, this new phenomenon of many resentful Chinese people “saying one thing while actually meaning another” with the protection of online nationalism prompts us to wonder whether a Chinese-style civil society is coming into being. This question certainly deserves much further discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> The 39<sup>th</sup> Statistical Report on Internet Development in China, China Internet Network Information Center, January 2017. <https://cnnic.com.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201706/P020170608523740585924.pdf>

This thesis argues that online nationalism has pervasively penetrated into Chinese politics and society in two distinctive ways: first, it plays a critical role in influencing China's foreign relations and policies; and second, by pretending to be nationalistic and adopting certain subtle tricks, the dissidents are forming an online civil society in China.

This thesis proceeds with the following patterns. This introductory section provides a literature review and a methodological discussion. Chapter 2 deals with the background and development of online Chinese nationalism under the context of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. By analyzing how the Games improve China's economic and technological and Internet development, it proves that the year 2008 is a crucial landmark of the studies of online nationalism in China.

Chapter 3 mainly addresses how the Chinese people are shaped into a nationalistic public. It also argues that cyber nationalism has profoundly affected China's foreign relations and its policymaking in two directions: they are complementary to each other in some cases, while they can be a "double-edged" sword in others. By exploring the interaction between the Party and the people, it implies that the CCP might be facing a dilemma between manipulating online nationalism and controlling its growth.

Chapter 4 finds that there are alternative voices embedded in the massive tide of online nationalism. Criticism of the country is actually able to be expressed by adopting certain tricks to avoid being censored and punished. A number of cases where punishment is applied to some netizens will be included to show the necessity of using nationalism as a protective color to express disagreements on the virtual environment. It takes a step further and critically examines this phenomenon from the perspective of civil society. This chapter highlights the potential of an online civil society being formalized, but its inherited limits might be against it from functioning



properly. Chapter 5 concludes the whole thesis.

## **1.2 Literature Review**

The literature in the discussion of the background and development of the Internet and online nationalism in post-Olympic China cannot be reviewed dividedly. Four factors need to be considered holistically: the Beijing Olympic Games, the economic development, Chinese nationalism and the Internet. A large number of firsthand data, such as China's GDP growth in the past decade collected by the World Bank and the Internet access situation reported by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), suggests that the economic soaring since the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, is the fundamental reason why the Internet flourished in China. Aside from the official data of, Kathrin Hille, Ming Ge, Zerui Yang, Enoch Yambilla, Liuqian Huang as well as many other scholars and journalists respectively attribute China's economic booming since 2001 to the Games' impacts and legacies. They also suggest that the development of science and technology is benefitted from the economic thriving, which in turn improves the development of the Internet. Wei Zhou, Simon Shen and Shaun Breslin agree with the idea that the rapid development of the online Chinese community is the basis of the information flow and values interaction. Additionally, Yang suggests that the Beijing Olympics is a turning point from which China and the rest of the world started to mutually open to each other to a new level, which has made Chinese people psychologically more sensitive to criticism.

The literature dealing with how online Chinese nationalism influences China's society has mainly focused on two aspects: its nationalistic public and the state's policymaking. Public-wise, some scholars, like Alastair Iain Johnston directly doubt the rise of Chinese nationalism and argue that it is not systematically tested. Although Johnston deserves credit for carrying out

complicated field research and obtaining plenty of statistics, some disadvantages do appear in his methodology, which goes detailed in later discussion. Jackson Woods and Bruce Dickson prefer to categorize the seemingly nationalistic Chinese public as “victimhood” due to historical humiliation. By disaggregating victims and patriots, they do not deny the sensational phenomenon, yet they emphasize that it should be interpreted separately. More scholars agree that the online Chinese nationalism is shaping its own form of nationalistic public on the Internet. In their respective reports, Lotus Ruan, Yuan Yang, Bethany Ellen-Ebrahimian and Josh Rudolph show China’s online nationalistic public often presents itself in an extreme manner and that the online nationalists are genuine with their willingness instead of being recruited by the government.

Foreign relations-wise, Tok regards online nationalism as demanded by the Party, arguing that the nationalistic public presented online can only selectively participate in certain pre-chosen events based on the government’s preference. As a counterargument, in his chapter, Song-do Hong uses bountiful examples to suggest that nationalistic public has huge influence on China’s Japan policy. Yinan He shows her accordance in this regard, suggesting that the nationalistic public has exacerbated the Sino-Japanese relations. Although literatures as well as series of recent events unfold a much more complicated story of cross-Strait relations and Sino-US relations, certain parallels can be found in them. Although a decade ago some experts argued that CCP would continue on with a pragmatic nationalism which is tempered by diplomatic prudence, the latest analyses of the events currently going on entail further thoughts on this issue. In a word, the latest literature regarding the cross-Strait and Sino-US relations presents a certain degree of variation from the previous work. Interestingly, the divergence found in the literature reflects exactly the dilemma faced by the Communist Party, suggested Samuel Wade in one of

his articles. Quite a few other scholars agree with him. Lucy Hornby argues that the nationalistic activists' volatile response may create uncertainty for Beijing. And in her book *Powerful Patriots*, Jessica Chen Weiss also shows her concern that the overheated online Chinese nationalism is the CCP's "double-edged sword".

In terms of criticism, although many have acknowledged its existence, few has explored how criticism survives without being censored and punished. Some scholars argue that liberal writers and intellectuals are the source of these "alternatives" since the literature and art products they create always indicate anti-CCP inclinations but the themes are advocated as nationalistic so that they can get published, regardless of online or in real life. This argument remains doubted because the increasingly intense censorship in recent years might be against the successful publishing of anti-state inclination. There is an interesting phenomenon that those who do not follow certain "tricks" could be punished in various forms, on which further discussion should be done in the future.

Last but not least, Simon Shen et al. critically evaluate the phenomenon of secret anti-CCP group on the Internet from the perspective of civil society. Following the traditional definition suggested by Muthiah Alagappa, in one of Xiaolong Zhang and Yongnian Zheng's books, Guobin Yang gives the definition of "digital civil society". By examining whether or not this special group meets the standards of a civil society and conditions for it to work, a few scholars have made their assessment of this phenomenon. Their conclusions are divergent. Breslin and Shen express an optimistic view on its future, predicting that it could help pluralizing the one-party rule. Yang, on the other hand, cautiously points out obstacles facing an online civil society than might be slowing down its growth.

### **1.3 Research Methods and Limitations**

In this research, I conduct content and data analysis based on both the primary and secondary sources. I use the World Banks' and CNNIC's data to build the relationship between the post-Olympic economy, technological development and the boosting of online nationalism in china. Then, with specific emphasis, I carry out detailed analysis on the CNNIC's report on different structures of contemporary Chinese netizens to point out two major features of Chinese nationalism on the internet. This process is highlighted with a combination of anecdotal information as well as a rich amount of secondary materials. Similarly, in terms of proving the influence of online nationalism on China's international relations and foreign policymaking, I make use of both statistical evidence and qualitative case studies. I use the searching engine on Sina Weibo's Public Opinion Analysis Center to collect the real-time data to reflect the major trend of the nationalistic public opinions on specific cases, which are the Sino-Japanese, the cross-Strait and the Sino-US relations. At this point, the first-hand materials also feature an important part of content analysis based on the influential social media like Weibo and WeChat.

As suggested in the literature review, there is a relative lack of systematic studies of how criticism functions without being censored and punished by the government. Therefore, I conduct extensive research in gathering examples like posts on Weibo and articles in WeChat, and, most importantly, I group the evidence into certain categories. In this way, I argue that these are the major channels through which the dissidents could survive. At last, a brief evaluation of the potential of a cyber civil society is presented on the data and case studies. Precedent contributions are a necessary source of my conclusion, too.

There are some methodological limitations within this research pattern. For example, it is an extremely hard task to quantify the online nationalistic opinions in China, given its vastness

and contingency.<sup>2</sup> The relatively short research period is subject to the increasing number and changing status of the online nationalistic community. Besides, the censorship could also be influencing the accuracy of the data collected on social media.

## **Chapter 2. Online Chinese Nationalism in post-Olympic China**

### **2.1 The Impacts and Legacies of Beijing Olympics**

Why is it necessary to choose the year 2008 as a landmark when studying China's Internet nationalism? To what extent has Beijing Olympics affected China's development and how is it related to the boom of cyber nationalism? The following sections show that it is necessary to make sense these questions in order to further study online Chinese nationalism. To achieve this, four factors need to be considered holistically: the Beijing Olympic Games, the economic development, the technology, Chinese nationalism and the Internet. Although the Olympics might not directly foster cyber nationalism, the way one factor affects another could explain why the latter has gained conspicuous increase since 2008.

#### *2.1.1 Economy*

It has been widely proved that the Beijing Olympics played a crucial role in accelerating China's economic development since Beijing's successful bid for it in 2001. The Games' influence is especially prominent after 2008, as is shown by the China GDP historical data from World Bank (see figure 2.1).<sup>3</sup> It can be seen that the Olympics stimulated the economic growth to a drastic extent. There are more detailed statistics that can better explain it. For example, according to the Beijing Olympic Economy Research Association, the direct interest brought to

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<sup>2</sup> Lai, Edith., Chinese Nationalism Goes Online, The Heptagon Post, July 18, 2011.  
[http://www.heptagonpost.com/Lai/Chinese\\_Nationalism\\_Goes\\_Online](http://www.heptagonpost.com/Lai/Chinese_Nationalism_Goes_Online)

<sup>3</sup> International Comparison Program Database, World Bank.

China by the Games was over 2 billion dollars, including marketing, promotion, stadium construction, patron, ticketing, revenues on broadcasting rights and so on.<sup>4</sup> Among all the beneficiaries, Beijing unquestionably became the biggest winner. Data from the National Bureau of Statistics shows that, from 2006 to 2010, the Olympic-related factors directly contributed over 3 trillion Yuan (approximate 50 billion dollars) to Beijing's GDP.<sup>5</sup> Compared to the total cost of 40 billion dollars, it is believed that, overall, the economic benefits obtained by both of the city and the country have outweighed their expenses.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, it needs to be highlighted that the economic thriving due to the Beijing Olympics is the fundamental reason for the unfolding of the next stories, without which the online nationalistic sensation could have never been so conspicuous.

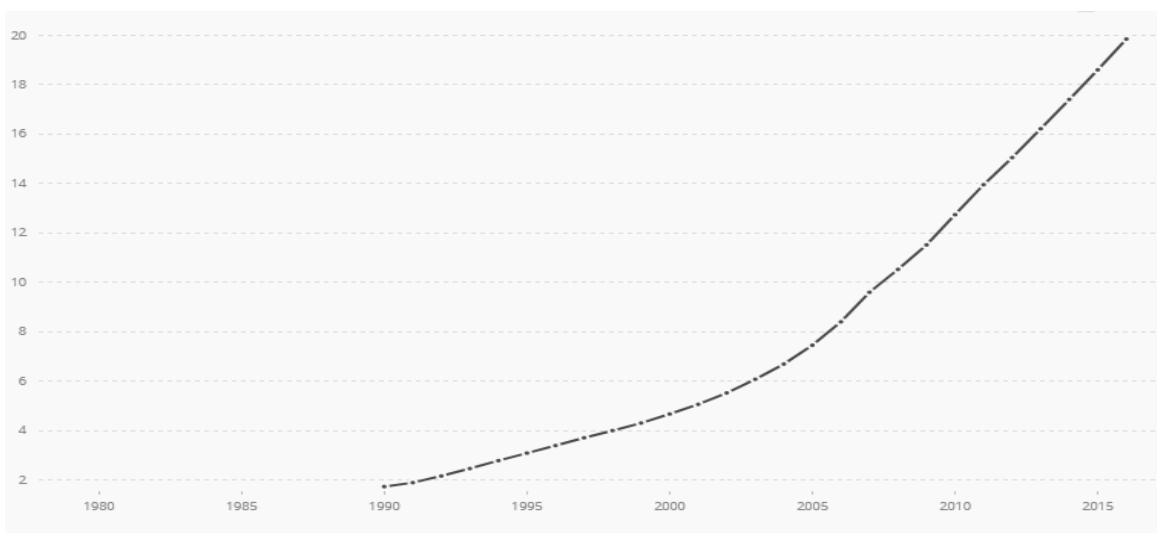


Figure 2.1 China GDP, PPP (constant 2011 international \$), 1978-2016 (trillion)  
Source: World Bank, International Comparison Program database

### 2.1.2 Technology and the Access to the Internet

<sup>4</sup> Ge, Min., *The Olympic Economy in China: a Study of the Beijing Olympic Games*, Doctoral Thesis (unpublished), University of Chester, 2016, 189.

<sup>5</sup> Wang, Hongru., "The Direct Economic Interests of the Beijing Olympic Games for China", Sina, August 31 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Yambilla, Enoch., *Economic Costs and Benefits of Beijing Olympics 2008*, Slide Share, May 11, 2015.  
<https://www.slideshare.net/EnochYambilla/china-48005812>

Since the subject of this thesis is Chinese nationalism on the Internet in the post-Olympic period, it is then necessary to make sense of the relationship between the Games and technological development. As is discussed in the previous section, the Olympics benefited China primarily in economy-wise, yet what substantially makes a difference in the thriving of the Internet lies in the development of science and technology. Figure 2.2 suggests that by holding the Olympic Games, the industrial configuration was upgraded, and the economy has been developed further into a new technology and service-centered economy. The turning point in 2011 when the tertiary industry surpassed the second industry further proved this.<sup>7</sup>

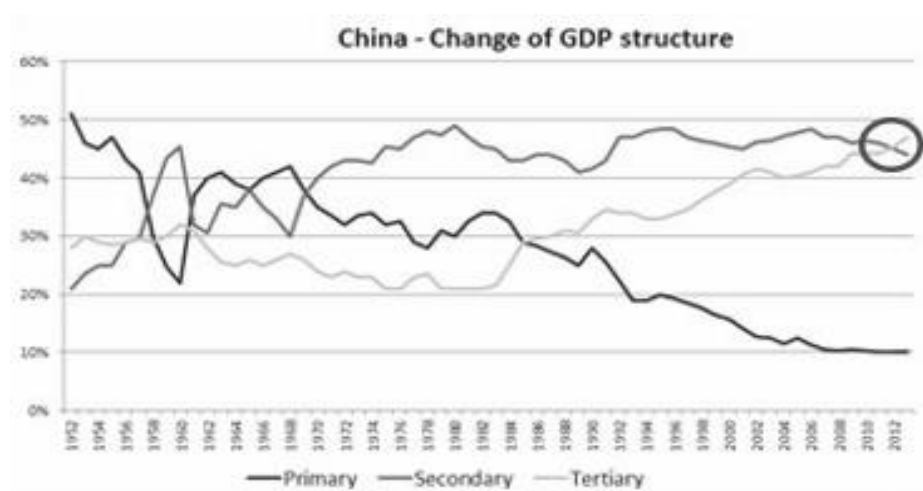


Figure 2.2 China's Change of GDP Structure

Source: China: *Fast Economic Development and Changing Sector Opportunities*, Amundi Datestream: Research Strategy and Analysis

Consequently, the development of new and high technology industry including electronics and information, as well as the innovation in exploiting the Internet resources naturally fertilizes the flourishing of Chinese people's access to the Internet and the ability to create new products in the virtual world.<sup>8</sup> Figure 2.1.2 demonstrates the changes of the size of Chinese Internet users and Internet penetration rate through the years. According to China

<sup>7</sup> Ge, Min., 2016, 169.

<sup>8</sup> Yambilla, Enoch., 2015.

Internet Network Information Center, Up to December 2016 China had 731 million Internet users, up 42.99 million over the previous year. The Internet penetration rate was 53.2%, a growth of 2.9 percentage points compared with the end of 2015. Besides, As of December 2016, the number of mobile Internet users in China reached 695 million, representing an increase of 75.5 million from the end of 2015. The mobile netizens accounted for 95.1% of the total netizen population, while this percentage was 90.1% in 2015. The proportion of mobile netizens further climbed on a high base.<sup>9</sup> Based on this, Simon Shen and Shaun Breslin agree with the idea that the rapid development of the online Chinese community is the basis of the information flow and values interaction.<sup>10</sup>

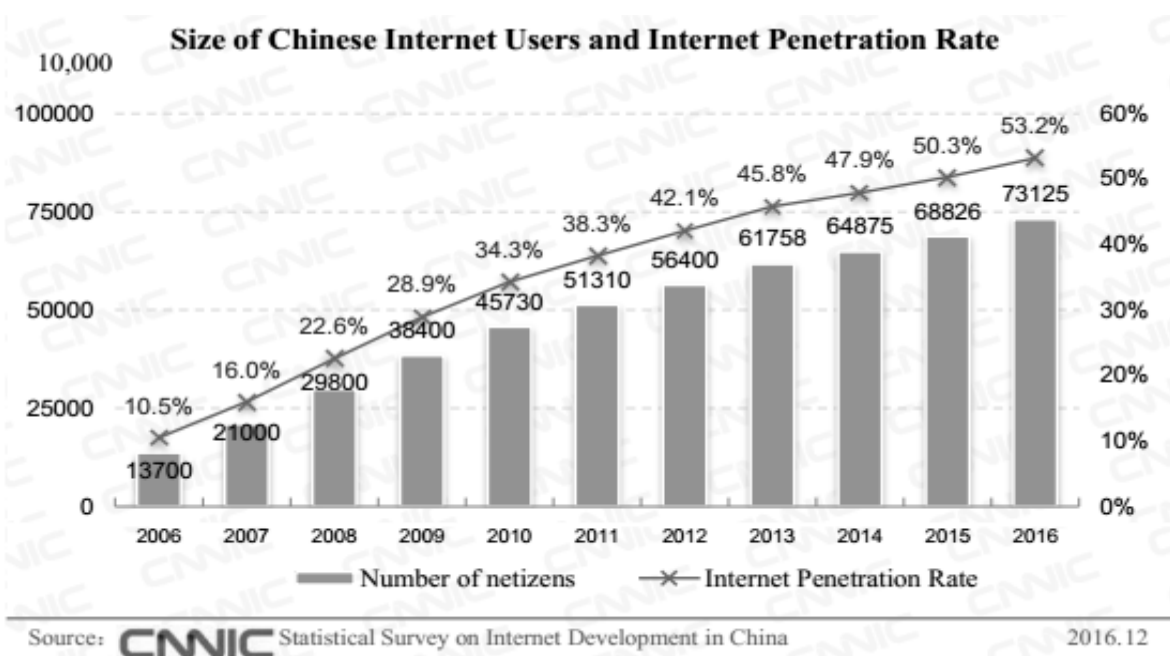


Figure 2.3 Size of Chinese Internet Users and Internet Penetration Rate

### 2.1.3 Psychological Changes

<sup>9</sup> The 39<sup>th</sup> Statistical Report on Internet Development in China, China Internet Network Information Center, January 2017. <https://cnnic.com.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201706/P020170608523740585924.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Shen, Simon and Breslin, Shaun et al., *Online Chinese Nationalism and China's Bilateral Relations*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010, 14.



Apart from the official statistics of concrete development, many of the scholars acknowledge the legacies of the Olympics for the host country are dual-layered and have enormous impacts on the country's economic development. For example, Ge highlights that there are tangible and intangible legacies among all the Olympic impacts. While tangible legacies mainly include the economic and technological development which are addressed previously, intangible legacies usually generate national pride and image.<sup>11</sup> This observation shares accordance with Yambilla, who thinks that for a country like China, hosting a major sporting event can be a way to gain greater international acceptance, wider recognition and self-confidence.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Zerui Yang and Hongru Wang both respectively point out that the Olympics effectively improved the mutual understanding as well as interactions between China and the rest of the world by boosting China's further opening-up.<sup>13</sup> To sum up, it is crucial to emphasize the second layer of the Olympic legacies, which is a subtle yet important change of Chinese people's psychological status in terms of interpreting the terms like national identity and international community. Intrinsicly, this psychological change provides the motivation for conventional public nationalistic sentiments going online, which is to be covered in the next section.

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<sup>11</sup> Ge, Min., 2016, 160.

<sup>12</sup> Yambilla, Enoch., 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Wang, Hongru., 2008.

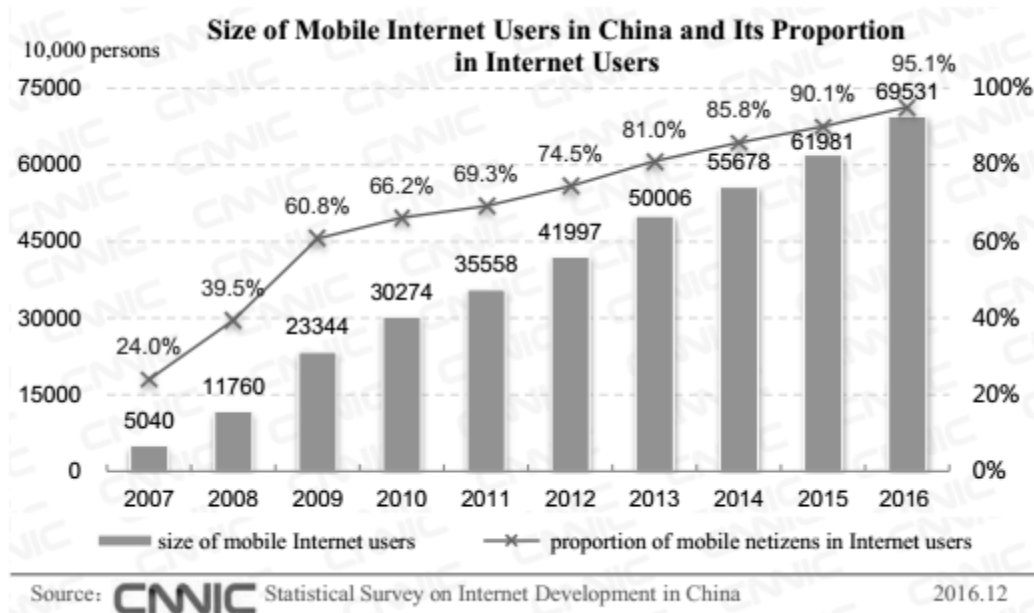


Figure 2.4 Size of Mobile Internet Users in China and Its Proportion in Internet Users

## 2.2 Why Nationalism Goes Online

### 2.2.1 Sovereignty Alertness in Historical Context

So far, the correlation between the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and the rise of Chinese nationalism has been built, and the next question is to explore why the non-online nationalistic discourse has gone online and shown such pervasiveness.

As is implied in the question, it takes two factors to be considered to explain this phenomenon, the first one being the conventional (non-online) Chinese nationalism. In his chapter of Shen et al.'s volume, Sok Keat Tok argues that what we call contemporary Chinese nationalism has its indispensable roots in China's historical and political experiences with sovereignty.<sup>14</sup> Echoing Townsend's argument that "Chinese nationalism" is a Western conception imported in late nineteenth century, it is believed that "Chinese sovereignty" is also

<sup>14</sup> Tok, Sok Keat., "Nationalism-On-Demand? When Chinese Sovereignty Goes Online," in Breslin and Shen et al.'s volume, 2010, 24. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/washington/reader.action?docID=500924&ppg=10>

an imported notion with even later threshold of being conceived by the Chinese.<sup>15</sup> In fact, it is through the efforts made by those who struggled for dominating the country (i.e. Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek, Mao Zedong, etc.) in structuring the relationship between Chinese nationalism and Chinese sovereignty that the latter is firmly conceived as a sacred and indispensable mission to save, establish and improve China. At the same time, the shame-inspired nationalism, definable in the context of Chinese sovereignty, is the foundation of all political mobilizations in China for the succeeding century facing foreign imperialisms and their encroachments. Finally, the structure of the relationship between the Chinese nation and its sovereignty, hitherto in flux, contested, and contingent, was finally cast in stone.<sup>16</sup>

Although this theory could be subject to overly simplify the constitution of Chinese nationalism, it deserves credit because it helps a great deal in explaining why it was pivotal for the CCP to go out of its way to promote and enhance Chinese nationalism after June Fourth, and why such state propaganda reached success despite the trauma of this incident. Precisely speaking, the necessity of the utilization of nationalism can be interpreted as the following facets.

First, as Tok highlighted, the CCP had been attempting to boost its flagging political legitimacy by stressing its nationalist credentials to offset the erosion of its ideological appeal since 1949, especially after the end of the Cold War when either Marxism or Communism started losing its credibility.<sup>17</sup> The weak ideological appeal pushed the CCP to advocate a remedy so that

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<sup>15</sup> Townsend, James., “Chinese Nationalism,” *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 27, January 1992, pp. 97-130.

<sup>16</sup> Callahan, William., “National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism,” *Alternatives*, No. 29, 2004, pp. 199– 218.

<sup>17</sup> *inter alia*, Metzger, Thomas A., and Myers, Ramon H., “Chinese Nationalism and American Policy,” *Orbis*, No. 42, 1998, pp. 21– 36;

Christensen, Thomas., “Chinese Realpolitik: Reading Beijing’s World View,” *Foreign Affairs*, No. 75, 1996, pp. 37– 52;

Zhao, Suisheng., “Chinese Nationalism and Its International Orientations,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 115, No. 1, 2000, pp. 1– 33;

people's fear of the humiliation to be repeated could be mitigated in a sense that the sovereignty could still be maintained. At this point, this remedy had to be the state promotion of Chinese nationalism. He and Guo agree that the state nationalism plays a crucial role in igniting Chinese people's congruence.<sup>18</sup> Second, due to this common anxiety, the nature of Tiananmen Square Movement was convicted by the CCP as a pro-secessionist activity fostered by Western conspiracy that aimed to invade China once again. He and Guo describe this strategy as scare tactics which successfully aroused among the public a sense of fear, under which, according to Tok, China was portrayed by the state media as a "crisis-ridden nation" with immense coverage of heightened international tensions, such as the Sino-US conflicts and the pressures brought by Hong Kong and Taiwan issues.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, although the sovereignty alertness and sensitivity of this country being threatened cannot comprehensively represent Chinese nationalism, they provide an effectively way of capturing the major contexts and features of it. As discussed in the following paragraphs, the majority of nationalistic rhetoric is presented in this pattern.

### 2.2.2 Online Politics

As Andrew Chadwick comments in *Internet Politics*, "the issue is no longer whether politics is online, but in what form and with what consequences."<sup>20</sup> Breslin and Shen agree with this view and argue that this has become a globalized phenomenon applicable to almost all nations in the world. The launching of Web 2.0, which has enabled the evolution from static web pages to multimedia and interactive websites, has also furthered politics on the Internet. In their

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Kluver, Alan R ., *Legitimizing the Chinese Economic Reforms: A Rhetoric of Myth and Orthodoxy*, Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1996;

Misra, Kalpana ., *From Post-Maoism to Post-Marxism: The Erosion of Official Ideology in Deng's China*, New York: Routledge, 1998.

<sup>18</sup> He, Baogang and Gao, Yingjie., *Nationalism, National Identity and Democratization in China*, Ashgate, 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Tok in Shen et al., 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Chadwick, Andrew., *Internet Politics: States, Citizens and New Communication Technologies*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

*Handbook of Internet Politics*, Andrew Chadwick and Philip Howard have observed some features of how Internet politics function in the developed world, some of which are certainly also applicable to China, albeit in a rather different manner.<sup>21</sup> Above all, the Internet serves as a platform for political discourse. In China, the party state has attempted to disseminate information online in a top-down manner. The censorship of the party-state, however, results in more pro-government messages being found online.

Furthermore, regardless of whether it is in an authoritarian manner or a democratic manner, this platform enables information to be shared, opinions to be expressed and rhetoric powers to be accumulated. It meanwhile enables what used to be only physically disseminated, the nationalistic sentiment fueled since 2008, to appear and spread smoothly in the Internet world with lower expense and higher efficiency. Consequently, the so-called “online nationalism” has come into being and has been gaining growth in China since the past years, which casts enormous influence on multiple facets of Chinese politics and Chinese people. Therefore, the next chapter deals with how the nationalistic public performs and its interaction with the state-policy making.

## **Chapter 3. China under Online Nationalism**

### **3.1 The Nationalistic Public**

#### *3.1.1 The Debate of the Rise of Chinese Nationalism*

On the topic of how online Chinese nationalism shapes the nationalistic public, there are disagreements among scholars. Some scholars, represented by Alastair Iain Johnston, directly

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<sup>21</sup> Chadwick, Andrew and Howard, Philip N., “Introduction: New Directions in Internet Politics Research,” in Andrew Chadwick and Philip N. Howard, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics*, Oxon: Routledge, 2009, pp. 1– 10.

doubt the rise of Chinese nationalism and argue that it is not systematically tested. According to Johnston, the data collected by Beijing Area Studies (BAS), there has not been a continuously rising level of nationalism with even a decline since 2009.<sup>22</sup> Although Johnston deserves credit for examining to what extent has Chinese nationalism raised or declined by carrying out complicated field research and obtaining plenty of statistics, some disadvantages do appear in his methodology. For example, the uniqueness of Beijing area could never be overly emphasized when attempts are made to generalize it for the whole situation. Besides, his research did not focus on the realm of online nationalism but predominantly collected data based on the real life of those people living in Beijing. As was addressed in the previous chapter, when it is considered easier to express nationalistic sentiments on the Internet, it might not be wise to only put emphasis on physical demonstration.

Similarly, Jackson Woods and Bruce Dickson prefer to categorize the seemingly nationalistic Chinese public as “victimhood” due to historical humiliation. By disaggregating victims and patriots based on research results collected in urban area, they do not deny the sensational phenomenon, yet they maintain that it should be interpreted separately.<sup>23</sup> At this point, what might be concerned is also a methodological issue: to what extent is situation in urban China can be applicable to the whole country? Unless these methodological deficiencies are tackled, one should be cautious when it comes to the rise of Chinese nationalism. More importantly, although the debate does exist in the academia, it is the inter-influence between the state and the people that should catch one’s attention, and this link has been more conspicuous in the past decade than any other historical point.

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<sup>22</sup> Johnston, Alastair I., “Is Chinese Nationalism Rising? Evidence from Beijing,” *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 3, Winter 2016-2017, pp. 7-43.

<sup>23</sup> Woods, Jackson and Dickson, Bruce., “Victims and Patriots: Disaggregating Nationalism in Urban China”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 26, 2016, pp. 167-182.

### 3.1.2 *The Hyper-Nationalistic Chinese on the Internet*

As a statistical background of the examples that are going to be discussed in this section, the data from CNNIC provides reports on the age, education, gender, occupational and urban-rural structures of Chinese netizens.<sup>24</sup> For illustrative purposes, only the age structure is demonstrated at this point (see Figure 3.1). It can be seen that an overwhelming majority of Chinese netizens were aged 10-39. Up to December 2016, of Chinese Internet users, 73.7% aged 10-39, and 30.3% aged 20-29, the largest part.<sup>25</sup> It has to be pointed out that this evidence helps in later understanding why the young generation is the most frequent constitution in the political blogosphere in China.

There are two major features in terms of the performance of nationalism on the Internet. First, as opposed to what Tok's concern that many of the nationalistic opinions are sponsored by the government to showcase the power, it is now gradually acknowledged that the majority of the online nationalists are full of pride and sometimes even arrogance of being Chinese and pro-Communist. "China's become a strong nation and I want the whole world to see this," said a 23-year-old graduate, one of millions of young nationalists.<sup>26</sup> Josh Rudolph points out that the major difference between the well-known "50 cent Party" and "the Little Pink" group is that the members of the former may actually work for the government and get paid for the public support for the government guidelines, while the latter genuinely believe that they have a sense of

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<sup>24</sup> The 39<sup>th</sup> Statistical Report on Internet Development in China, China Internet Network Information Center, January 2017. <https://cnnic.com.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201706/P020170608523740585924.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Yang, Yuan., "China's Communist Party Raises Armies of Nationalist Trolls", *Financial Times*, December 2017. <https://www.ft.com/content/9ef9f592-e2bd-11e7-97e2-916d4fbac0da>

responsibility to “guard their country against unwelcome opinions or criticism”.<sup>27</sup> At this point, it is noteworthy that there is a misunderstanding of the term “Little Pink”, which does not necessarily refer to a female nationalist.

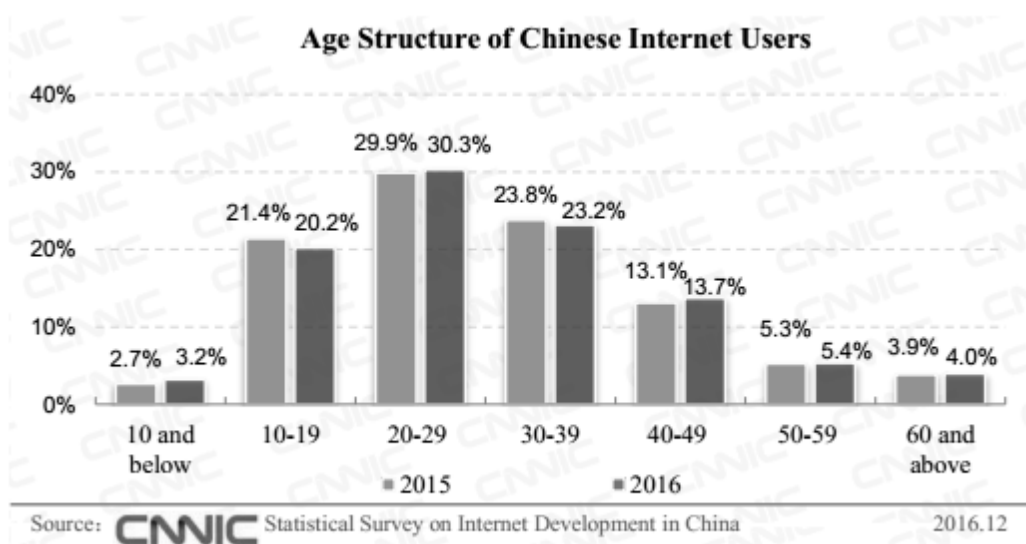


Figure 3.1 Age Structure of Chinese Internet Users

The second feature of online Chinese nationalism is their aggressive collective actions. Interestingly, in spite of the debate of whether Chinese nationalism is rising, it appears from a number of examples and ongoing events that there is not only a nationalistic public in China, but it can be a hyper-nationalistic one. This feature is embedded in three major methods. First, as was indicated above, the online nationalists tend to prowl social media to rebut criticism of their homeland. This does not only refer to the patriotic speech on Chinese social media, but also the intimidating bombarding toward many overseas social media accounts. These big attacks will have pre-agreed slogans, memes and a start time, and labor will be divided into groups, such as teams for enforcing Internet discipline and teams for helping people get access to censored

<sup>27</sup> Rudolph, Josh., “Little Pinks: The New Face of Chinese Nationalism”, *China Digital Times*, August 2016. <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2016/08/little-pinks-new-face-chinese-nationalism/>



websites like Facebook.<sup>28</sup> Typical examples are bountiful, such as during the 2016 Rio Olympic Games, the Chinese netizens' flooding into the Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts of an Australian gold medalist swimmer Mack Horton who called Chinese competitor Sun Yang a "drug cheat".<sup>29</sup> There were so many aggressive comments and memes that Horton's accounts were paralyzed. Similar things happened to Lady Gaga's Instagram account after she met with Dalai Lama, who is the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader whom Beijing denounces as a separatist. And their targets vary, from Taiwan's pro-independence president to a "treasonous" Taiwan-born pop singer and to international airlines accused of mistreating Chinese customers.<sup>30</sup>

Second, grassroots nationalism is a potent force in China today, which can also be supported by the occupational structure reported by CNNIC. As suggested in Figure 3.2, students are the largest group of Internet users. By December 2016, 25.0% of Chinese netizens were students; 22.7% were self-employed persons/freelancers, up by 0.6 percentage points from the end of 2015; and 14.7% were enterprise managers/ordinary staff members. The proportions of these three groups remained relatively stable.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Yang, Yuan., 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Ruan, Lotus., "The New Faces of Chinese Nationalism", *Foreign Policy*, August 2016.  
<http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/25/the-new-face-of-chinese-nationalism/>

<sup>30</sup> Yang, Yuan, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> The 39<sup>th</sup> Statistical Report on Internet Development in China, China Internet Network Information Center, January 2017. <https://cnnic.com.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201706/P020170608523740585924.pdf>

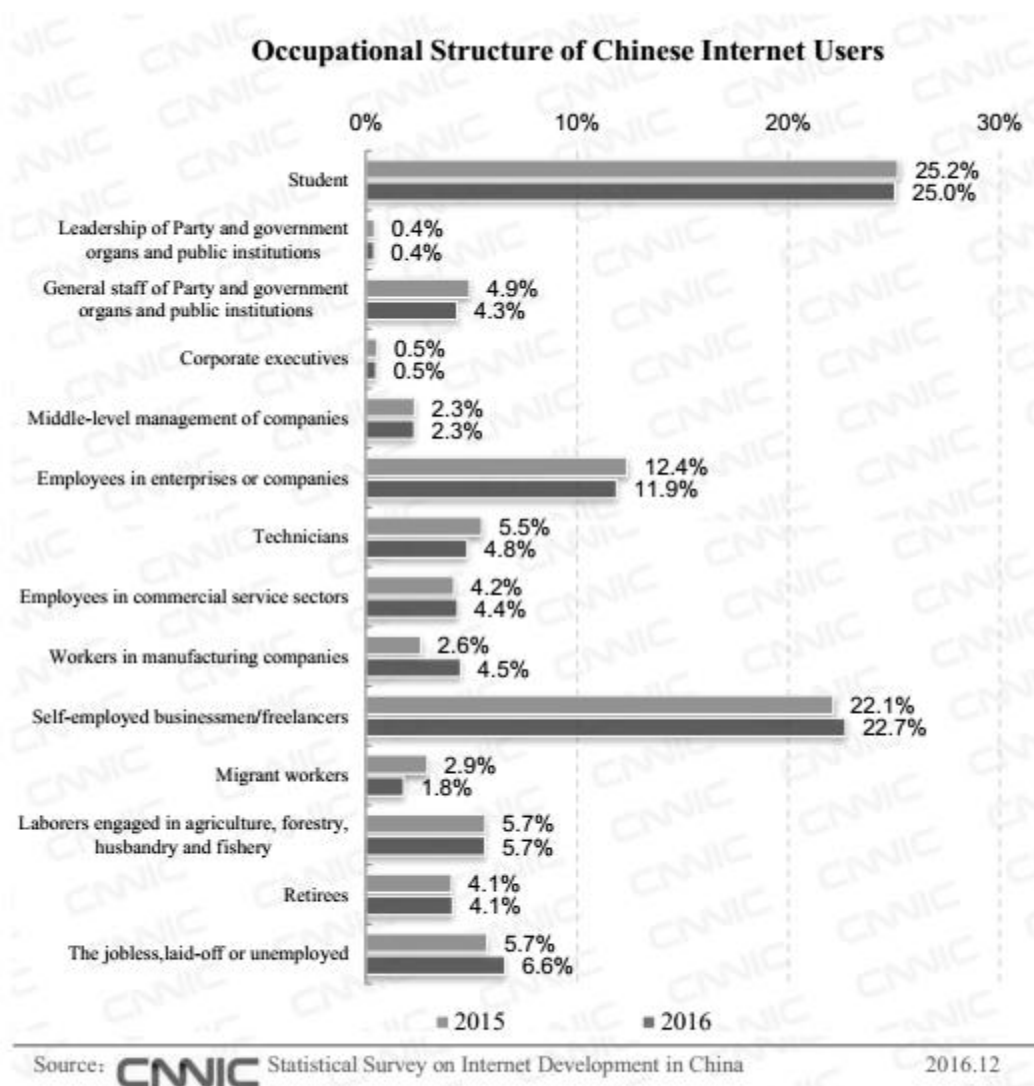


Figure 3.2 Occupational Structure of Chinese Internet Users

The case of a teenage boy from Shandong Province, Hou Jusen, exemplifies the phenomenon of grassroots nationalism. According to Hou's narration in the interview with *Foreign Policy*, originally, he was just interested in military affairs and usually went on Baidu Tieba (a popular web forum) to browse military crafts. When he saw other people in the Forum say all good things about Japanese colonialism and bad things about the Chinese Communist Party, he was extremely irritated. This was when he started the next three years of cursing them and calling people like them "dog traitors". Taking a retrospective perspective of his experience

from a casual netizen to a digital vigilant, Hou did not regret insulting his dissidents online: “I look with disdain upon the liberals’ moral high ground, and I despise them. Their behavior is that of traitors and no one should think highly of traitors.”<sup>32</sup> The truth is that there are millions of grassroots Little Pinks just like Hou, who rigorously go out of their way to defend their country and promote it, even though it is highly unlikely to achieve by verbally insulting others.

Thirdly, the ethnic pride has gained momentum such that the Han chauvinism starts to spread among the Chinese people. Among the 56 officially recognized ethnic groups in China, the Han is by far the largest and influential one. It represents 92% of the Chinese population and has dominated the culture and politics for most of China’s 5,000-year long history. In the current China, Han are in full control of China’s politics, economy, and socio-cultural values. Han consider their way of life and culture superior to others, resulting in them having strong chauvinistic tendencies.<sup>33</sup>

This sense of ethnic superiority was gradually fermented into boiling national pride against the international backdrop, a perfect example being the top-grossing film of all time in China, “Wolf Warrior 2”, which is regarded as an explosion of patriotic feelings among all Chinese, according to Wu Jing, the director and leading actor of this movie. This hero single-handedly routs pirates off the African coast and wiped out the mercenaries led by a swaggering and sneering American soldier of fortune. In the end, he is saved by a Chinese flag wrapped around his arm. The Chinese audience’s fever of this movie does not only come from the admiration of the individual superhero, but also the complete resonance of the ancient phrase that is used to promote it: “Whoever offends the (Han) Chinese will be wiped out no matter how far

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<sup>32</sup> Allen-Ebrahimian, Bethany., “The Making of a Chinese Nationalist Internet User”, *Foreign Policy*, August 2015. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/10/the-making-of-a-chinese-nationalist-internet-user/>

<sup>33</sup> Meyer, Patrick., “Could Han Chauvinism Turn the ‘Chinese Dream’ into a ‘Chinese Nightmare’?”, *The Diplomat*, June 2016. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/could-han-chauvinism-turn-the-chinese-dream-into-a-chinese-nightmare/>

away (fan wo zhong hua zhe, sui yuan bi zhu)".<sup>34</sup> "Wolf Warrior 2" has grossed 5.7 billion dollars in China alone.<sup>35</sup> According to the analysis of the most trading topic over 72 hours on Weibo, there was a surge of 1.76 million searching results containing this phrase, as well as other key words and phrases like "patriotism", "super power", "extremely proud of and grateful for being Chinese and living in China rather than any other country in the world". The total reposts regarding the promotion of this movie reached over 600 thousand within three days since its release on July 27, 2017, and comments nearly one million, of which 82% of the users aged 19-34.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, this movie can be seen as a pointer to the national mood after almost five years under President Xi Jinping, who has promoted a spirit of hawkish patriotism and explicitly claimed that Chinese will never tolerate any humiliation from the Westerners.<sup>37</sup>

So far, this section has analyzed two major traits of today's Chinese cyber nationalism, which are the voluntariness and aggressiveness of the Internet users. To take it further, there is an inextricable factor that goes hand in hand with Chinese public's nationalistic sentiment, which is China's foreign relations. Whether and how has online Chinese nationalism affected China's major relations with and the CCP's foreign policymaking towards Japan, Taiwan and the US will be explored in the following section.

## **3.2 Online Nationalism and China's Foreign Relations**

### *3.2.1 The Sino-Japanese Relations*

In his chapter of the volume *Online Chinese Nationalism and China's Bilateral Relations* by Breslin and Shen et al., Tok argues that there are inherited limits of online nationalism. He

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<sup>34</sup> Ban, Gu., Vol. 70., *Book of Han.*, Han Dynasty (82 AD).

<sup>35</sup> Real-time Statistics from Chinese Box Office. <http://www.cbooo.cn/>

<sup>36</sup> Searching results from Sina Weibo Public Opinion Analysis Center. <http://wyq.sina.com>

<sup>37</sup> Buckley, Chris., "In China, an Action Hero Beats Box Office Records (and Arrogant Westerners)", *The New York Times*, August 2017. <https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20170817/china-wolf-warrior-2-film/>

comments that its eyes are cast upon a limited agenda, its targets are manipulated by the decision makers who are adept at steering people's attention, and, consequently, the nationalistic public presented online can only selectively participate in certain pre-chosen events based on the government's preference. Moreover, the participants are confined to a faction of the whole nation, mainly IT-savvy youths living in cities. Due to these limits, Tok suggests that scholars in this field should not overstate online Chinese nationalism's influence because it is "nationalism-on-demand".<sup>38</sup> As mentioned in last section, Woods and Dickson argue that there are possible links between public opinion and foreign policy, but it is not "nationalism" as a whole that influences the latter. They suggest that there is conceptual and categorical distinctiveness between patriotism (showing pride for the identity and blind support for the government) and victimization (bearing grievances due to the "century of humiliations"), both of which have different causes and effects. These differences classify the two into different categories of Chinese nationalism, and thereby it is problematic to assume that the patriotic pride translates directly into popular support for anti-foreign violence and assertive foreign policy behavior.<sup>39</sup> This perceptive can best summarize the Sino-Japanese relations.

Indeed, the case of Sino-Japanese relations shows that it might be too early to debase the influence of online Chinese nationalism at this point. In her analysis of history, Chinese nationalism and the emerging Sin-Japanese conflict, Yinan He's shows an overt and direct relationship between Chinese nationalism and the Sino-Japanese conflicts: the increasingly heated nationalist sentiment of hatred toward Japan, which is a combination of historical myths entrenched in the education and propaganda, has exacerbated and will continue to exacerbate

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<sup>38</sup> Tok, Sok Keat., in Breslin and Shen et al., 2010, 36.

<sup>39</sup> Woods and Dickson, 2016, 179.

their relationship.<sup>40</sup> Although He's research was done before 2008, other exploration proves that this conclusion is still applicable to the situation since then. The China-Japan relationship, which has been deteriorating due to Japan's recognition of historical issues and territorial disputes, continues to grow apart from normalization. Besides, it is unlikely that the relationship will dramatically improve anytime soon. For example, in 2016, with the 79<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Nanjing Massacre approaching, Chinese people's anti-Japanese sentiments as it prepares a massive commemoration on the day of the massacre of 300 thousand Chinese on record who were killed by the Imperial Japanese Army during the Sino-Japanese War in 1937 were accumulating furiously.<sup>41</sup> Chinese people blatantly expressed their anger on the Internet by means of reposting public reminders, commenting with criticism and disgust on some pro-Japanese web communities like Bilibili and refusing to purchase Japanese productions online. There can be a long list of examples.

At the same time, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lu Kang said that Prime Minister Shinzo Abe should visit the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall to apologize for the huge trauma Japan had brought to the Chinese people, instead of the Pearl Harbor, while Abe went to Pearl Harbor in Hawaii later to mourn the victims of the Japanese attack during the WWII. Moreover, military conflicts on the East Sea, the South China Sea, the Diaoyu Island and some other marine areas have been going on throughout these years, and sometimes the tension reached a point of an armed conflict, which triggers tantrum among both of the Chinese people and the official.<sup>42</sup> The relations between China and Japan are then described as "the ice that

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<sup>40</sup> He, Yinan., "History, Chinese Nationalism and the Emerging Sino-Japanese Conflict", *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 16, No. 50, March 2007, pp. 1-24.

<sup>41</sup> Hong, Song-do., "China-Japan Relations Worsen Ahead of 79<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Nanjing Massacre", *Asia Today*, December 2016. [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/asiatoday/china-japan-relations-wor\\_b\\_13573456.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/asiatoday/china-japan-relations-wor_b_13573456.html)

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*

won't melt".<sup>43</sup> Consequently, under the pervasive anti-Japanese sentiments, even though there could be more benefits from a normalized relationship, the overall official foreign policy toward Japan is rather contingent with any tensions between the two.

### 3.2.2 *The Cross-Strait and Sino-US Relations*

Unlike the clean correlation of online nationalism and the relations with Japan, the case of cross-Strait relations can be a little more complicated due to the current fluctuation. Since most of the related evidence comes from the latest events, in which Taiwan and the US go hand in hand, this section addresses the two pairs of relations in a combined manner.

Over the years, the CCP has practiced a pragmatic nationalism which is tempered by diplomatic prudence, even though it also exploits nationalistic sentiment when it suits its purpose. In the case of Taiwan, prescribing conditions for possible use of force, the Anti-Secession Law has not essentially wiped away Beijing's rationality. This seemingly contradictory strategy of talking tough but acting in a calculated manner shows that pragmatic leaders are aware of the danger of falling into victim of emotional nationalism. China's Taiwan Policy has not been dictated by the emotional voice of nationalism but based on careful calculation of China's national interests.<sup>44</sup>

But that was a decade ago. The most recent trend under the leadership of President Xi Jinping denotes another possibility. In March 2018, the US President Donald Trump signed the Taiwan Travel Act into law, allowing US officials to visit the island. This legislation angers China more when the earlier trade tension earlier has not been mediated. To make it even worse,

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<sup>43</sup> Hagström, Linus., "Sino-Japanese Relations: The Ice That Won't Melt", *International Journal*, March, 2009, 223.

<sup>44</sup> Zhao, Suisheng., "Chinese Nationalism and Beijing's Policy toward Taiwan: The Making of the Anti-Secession Law", in I Yuan, *Is There a Greater China Identity? Security and Economic Dilemma*, Institute of International Relations, National Chengchi University, Taipei, 2007, pp. 173-191.

Taiwan's Foreign Ministry expresses its appreciation of the "friendly move" by the Trump administration.<sup>45</sup> As discussed in last section, the two main features of online Chinese nationalism today are genuine spontaneity and aggressive collective actions with ethnocentric superiority. Thereby, it is not without expectation to observe a wide range of kindled outcries among Chinese netizens when they are faced with another round of trilateral tensions.

I typed "Taiwan" into the searching engine of Weibo 24-Hour Public Opinion Analysis Center, and it automatically showed the next key phrase "to start the war". Then I selected the time series as "April 26-27, 2018". The final result of the trend index of these two phrases that were mentioned in people's posts is presented in Figure 3.4.<sup>46</sup> Since the data is generated by manual input and it is presented in Chinese originally, please be noted that the upper line refers to the trending index of the word "Taiwan", and the bottom line refers to "starting the war". It can be seen that, the trend "Taiwan" maintains its high frequency (except for the bedtime), and most importantly, its tendency is exactly followed by the trend "starting the war". Although the latter's trending index is not as high as the former, what really matters is that, Chinese netizens show a strong inclination toward military resort when it comes to Taiwan's independence.

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<sup>45</sup> Brunnstrom, David., "Trump Signs U.S.-Taiwan Travel Bill, Angering China," Reuters, March 16, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-taiwan-china/trump-signs-u-s-taiwan-travel-bill-angering-china-idUSKCN1GS2SN>

<sup>46</sup> Data is collected based on Beijing time.



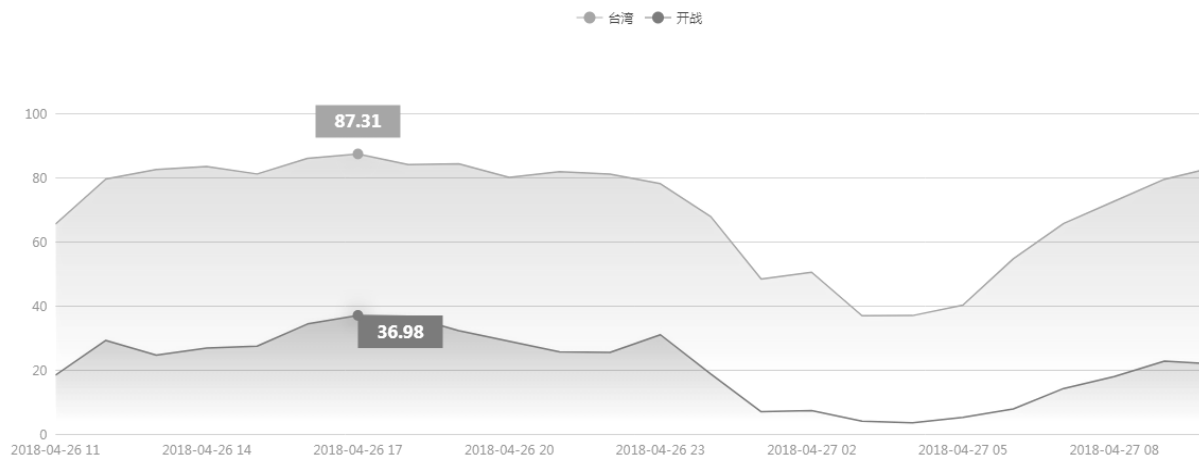


Figure 3.3 Sina Weibo 24-Hour Trending Words Index<sup>47</sup>

Source: data from Sina Weibo Public Opinion Analysis Center, collected by author

Almost at the same time, in his closing address of the 13<sup>th</sup> National People’s Congress, President Xi has vowed to crush any attempt to divide China, especially those plots to separate the motherland. Besides, he confronted some criticism against China that China would never be a threat to any country in the world, and that only those actually are threats to others will see others as a threat to them.<sup>48</sup> Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang reiterated that Beijing was opposed by this legislation and urged the US to abide by the “One China” policy, and cease any exchanges with Taiwan on the official level.<sup>49</sup> Shortly after this, the Chinese Ambassador to the United States, Cui Tianqi, said in a dedicated interview that peaceful reunification is certainly the best way to solve the Taiwan issue, but it is not the only one. “We shall see what the future holds,” said Cui in the interview on whether the violation of the “One China” principle could be the trigger for the war to happen.

<sup>47</sup> Since the results are presented in Chinese, please note that the line on top refers to the trending index of the word “Taiwan”, and the bottom line “starting the war”.

<sup>48</sup> Ma, Josephina., Xi Jinping Tries to Rally Support for Chinese Dream in Nationalist Speech, *South China Morning Post*, March 20, 2018. <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2138112/xi-jinping-tries-rally-support-chinese-dream>

<sup>49</sup> Brunnstrom, David., “Trump Signs U.S.-Taiwan Travel Bill, Angering China,” Reuters, March 16, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-taiwan-china/trump-signs-u-s-taiwan-travel-bill-angering-china-idUSKCN1GS2SN>

In no time, followed by the report that China placed communication-jamming equipment in the South China Sea to be prepared for adopting military force against Taiwan if feeling threatened, Chinese aircraft flew around Taiwan in a military drill on April 27, and has warned that more military actions are awaiting Taiwan's separatists.<sup>50</sup> Special attention needs to be paid to the way the Chinese official media reports this move. Figure 3.4 is a screenshot that shows a sample of how People's Daily, one of the most influential state-run media in China, informs the public of the news through its official account on Sina Weibo (see the left column Figure 3.4). It is noteworthy that the official media starts the title by an exclamation "Mind-blowing!" with an actual exclamation mark. Then it briefly introduces that the People's Liberation Army's Air Force dispatched multiple fighter aircrafts to circling over the "treasure island" of China, Taiwan. The rest of this report is nothing but elaboration on PLA's steadfast will, enormous confidence and capability to implement this sacred mission of protecting the "treasure island" that is in the arms of Motherland, and thereby defending the state sovereignty and territorial integrity. Multiple photos shot during this mission complement this post.

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<sup>50</sup> Blanchard, Ben and Yu, Jess Macy., "China Warns of More Action after Military Drills near Taiwan.," Reuters, April 24, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-taiwan/china-warns-of-more-action-after-military-drills-near-taiwan-idUSKBN1HW07W>



Figure 3.4 People's Daily's Report on PLA's Aircraft Circling Taiwan on Weibo and Netizens' Comments (sample)<sup>51</sup>

Source: Sina Weibo, screenshot taken and processed by author

The comments below this post (see the middle and right columns in Figure 3.4) can be divided into four categories. The first kind of them predominantly despises Taiwan with overt discrimination, saying that Taiwan has become a shame of the Chinese ethnicity by acting like a hilarious clown. They also joke about Tsai Ing-wen's policies that are too counterproductive to get close to their goal. The second group firmly supports military attack in order to solve this problem as soon as possible. The third kind of comments expresses their admiration and appreciation for the Motherland, as well the support for the state sovereignty and territorial integrity.<sup>52</sup> It not hard to notice that the ongoing affairs addressed here take place in the trilateral relations, in which mainland China, Taiwan and the United States are intricately involved

<sup>51</sup> This is a screenshot of a People's Daily's post and only a small part of users' comments on Sina Weibo. The original language was Chinese and could not generate any translated version. Please see the context for detailed translation and discussion regarding the contents in this picture. For privacy protection, users' names have been erased with special process. Commercial promotions have been covered, too.

<sup>52</sup> For illustrative purpose, not every character is translated into English in the thesis.

together. Therefore, certain parallels in the Sino-US relations in these events can be observed, too.

Although intrinsically the Taiwan Travel Act is non-binding, meaning this act did not change anything real in this regard, it has stimulated the fury among the Chinese netizens, not to mention that the trade war rekindled their hostility toward the “evil imperial power” and “greedy capitalist”. I searched the key phrase “the United States” on the analysis center, and the default following entry showed up as “to fail/the failure (in the trade war).” Figure 3.5 is the result that provides the trending index of the key phrases “the United States” and “to fail (in the trade war)” on Weibo over the 24 hours since April 26 to 27, 2018.<sup>53</sup> Like Figure 3.4, since the data is generated by manual input and it is presented in Chinese, please be noted that the upper line refers to the trending index of “the United States”, and the bottom line refers to “to fail (in the trade war)”. It clearly shows that the mentioning of “the United States” stays in top trend overall (except for bedtime), and so does “the failure”. More importantly, the fact that the trend of the two phrases goes hand in hand during those 24 hours suggests that a large number of Chinese netizens believe that the trade war, which was initiated by the United States in the first place, it shall pay in the end.<sup>54</sup> This is consistent with the official attitude: China’s vice minister of finance, Zhu Guangyao, declared at a news conference to discuss the backup plans that “China is not afraid of a trade war.”<sup>55</sup> Additionally, I tried to make the system analyze “people’s feelings when they mentioned the key phrases in their posts”, but it only said “your searching content contains sensitive words ‘the United states’, and the result can only be seen after you revise it”.

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<sup>53</sup> Data is collected based on Beijing time.

<sup>54</sup> Myers, Steven Lee., “Why China Is Confident It Can Beat Trump in a Trade War”, *The New York Times*, April 5, 2018.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*

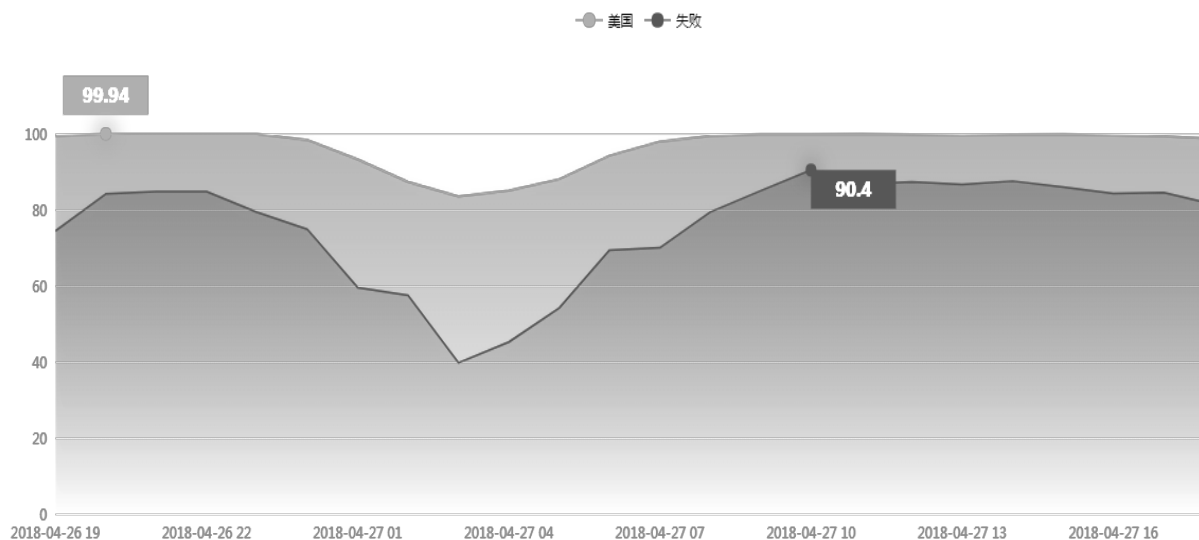


Figure 3.5 Sina Weibo 24-Hour Trending Index for the US Failing the Trade War<sup>56</sup>  
 Source: data manually collected from Sina Weibo Public Opinion Analysis Center

To summarize it, through the content and data analysis above, this thesis argues that China's online nationalism, foreign relations and state policies are complementary to each other. On one hand, as suggested in all of these three cases, the central leaders have the anticipation that the public would get angry about the “undeserved treatment” to China, and would be excited to see some tough measures taken by the government, such as military intimidations to Taiwan and unbending policies on the Sino-US trade war announced by the official. By doing so, the Party's policies and the state's attitude appear to be more hardline and convincing, which ultimately helps the CCP to maintain its stability and legitimacy.

On the other hand, the online nationalistic public gains even higher morale when they realize that their collective outcries are encouraged and supported by the central government. In this way, as a nation, the internal cohesion of China has been significantly enhanced.

<sup>56</sup> Since the results are presented in Chinese, please note that the line on top refers to the trending index of the word “the United States”, and the bottom line “failure”.

### 3.2.3 *The Double-edged Sword*

Nonetheless, this is not always true. In other cases, the CCP has found online nationalism more contradictory than complementary. Take the Chinese netizens' bombarding attacks toward Taiwanese Facebook accounts as an example. On January 20, 2016, over 100,000 Chinese netizens from an influential online forum gathered and scheduled a massive plan. They broke away from the Great Firewall set by the government and flooded many Taiwanese social media accounts with an enormous amount of comments in various forms of literal replies, pictures and mems, all of which had one theme of anti-Taiwan independence. These social media accounts included Taiwan's President Tsai-Ing-wen's homepage on Facebook, as well as some major news media, such Apple Daily and Sanlih News. At the end of that day, many accounts were forced to disable their comment function to avoid Internet paralysis.<sup>57</sup>

At first glance, this is another successful collective attack to overseas Internet in the name of nationalism, and it thoroughly shows the intimidating power of the online nationalistic community in China. Intrinsicly, however, the way it achieves its patriotic "sacred mission" is by jumping over the Great Firewall, which violates the Cybersecurity Law of the People's Republic of China. Yet it seemed that the central leaders did not have the time to realize the contradiction of this move. I searched within the communist Youth League's Weibo posts, and found that there was one post that was dedicated to acknowledge and praise this group of patriotic netizens. It is presented in the form of screenshot below.

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<sup>57</sup> Huang, Marco., Chinese Netizens Flood Tsai Ing-wen's Facebook Page with Anti-Taiwan Independence Posts, *The Wall Street Journal*, January 21, 2016. <https://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2016/01/21/chinese-netizens-flood-tsai-ing-wens-facebook-page-with-anti-taiwan-independence-posts/>



Figure 3.6 Communist Youth League's Weibo Post Praising Chinese Netizens  
Source: Sina Weibo, screenshot taken and processed by author.

The Communist Youth League says that the 90's generation, who are the major participants in this move, has won the trust and support from the Party and the state. The young nationalists are full of positive energy and striding with fearlessness and confidence on the way to wipe out the strand of pro-Taiwan independence from history. To the officials' surprise, some comments requested the government to demolish the Great Firewall, or at least to provide a government-approved virtual private network (VPN) so that they could continue with more nationalistic movements like this one (see Figure 3.6).

Besides, after breaking through the Great Firewall, some Chinese netizens said on the Taiwanese Facebooks pages that they were just a group of curious people who were eager to see the world outside. Moreover, a Chinese student who participated in this move compared their

breach in the virtual firewall to the physical destruction of the Berlin Wall 26 years ago. He said he would be honored to leave his handprint on the wall as they pushed it to the ground.<sup>58</sup>

Consequently, the CCP has sensed the potential uncertainty caused by volatile behaviors like this, even though they are in the name of nationalism. President Xi has made up his mind to holistically co-opt nationalism by means of advocating the “great national rejuvenation” and the “Chinese Dream”. It is believed that Xi’s nationalistic rhetoric has effectively hollowed out online movements organized by individuals or groups that are independent from the central government.<sup>59</sup> What’s more, the newly announced regulations for Internet Audio-Visual Services says all VPNs should be banned, be they personal or for business. However, it is impractical for China to completely suppress this phenomenon, because banning VPNs directly affects the economic ties with other countries, of which the loss could outweigh the gains.

Therefore, it is overly simplistic to regard online nationalism as a political tool that is manipulated by the CCP, even though it does function in this way in many cases. The unpredictable side effects brought by independent nationalistic groups on the Internet has become another concern of the Party. As Kevin Carrico points out, “the dangers of the government’s embrace and cultivation of nationalist government, often summed up with the proverb: when you ride a tiger, it is hard to dismount.”<sup>60</sup> For the CCP, it is a big question to decide the extent, to which the unofficial nationalism could be controlled and, meanwhile, these people do not feel suppressed.

## Chapter 4. Dissidents in Disguise

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<sup>58</sup> Hornby, Lucy., “China Battles to Control the Growing Online Nationalism,” *Financial Times*, January 8, 2017. <https://www.ft.com/content/5ae7b358-ce3c-11e6-864f-20dcb35cede2>

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Wade, Samuel., “Is There a Backlash Against Online Nationalism?” *China Digital Times*, September 29, 2016. <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2016/09/backlash-online-chinese-nationalism/>



#### 4.1 Those Who Are Banned

Although online nationalism enjoys its pervasive and influential status, there is a counterpart that directly confronts it by criticizing its aggressiveness and irrationality. Generally speaking, these are often people who make comments on current affairs and vocalize critical views on the government and public authorities. They are known as public intellectual “Big Vs” who own millions of followers on Weibo. From the perspective of the CCP, these people are nothing but subversive to its stability and legitimacy. In order to cope with undesirable voices, one major method is to surveil the online information and band illegal speech that is in violation of the regulations of Internet services. From January 1 to March 25, 2018, there are already 467 Weibo accounts closed, 66 “Big Vs” banned from posting for 60 days and 25 WeChat Subscription Accounts shut down permanently. WeChat says it will remove any such account that is “distorting party and national history.”<sup>61</sup>

It is not novel for the CCP to adopt this policy. More than one scholars have listed banned words, which are used to control information flow.<sup>62</sup> The new finding in this thesis, however, is that the banned words are subject to timeliness. For example, the words like “disagree” “lifetime term” “Brave New World” “Ascend the throne” “1984” “Animal Farm” were banned from the end of February to early March, when Xi’s term limit was abolished on the 13<sup>th</sup> National People’s Congress. However, I searched all of the once banned words one by one on Weibo, Baidu, WeChat and Bilibili, and there is no censorship on these words anymore. I even typed “Winnie the Pooh” in Weibo, and there are all kinds of pictures with normal reposting and commenting functions. This used to be strictly banned from searching and using because this character resembles Xi in appearance. Therefore, the purpose of this section is to

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<sup>61</sup> Yoo, Eva., “WeChat Says It Will Remove Any Official Account ‘Distorting Party and National History,’” Technode, January 22, 2018. <https://technode.com/2018/01/22/wechat-oa-china-history/>

<sup>62</sup> Jiang, Ying., *Cyber-Nationalism in China*, University of Adelaide Press, 2012, pp. 36-38.

show that, in the most recent context, word censorship is only effective for a certain period of time. Two most controversial events that happened recently are studied here to denote what punishment one might be facing if he/she is, or accused of being, explicitly unnationalistic and anti-Party.

The first event attracted most attention. In early March, 2018, former classmates of a literature student at Peking University who committed suicide 20 years ago came forward say that this girl had been raped by her professor, Shen Yang. The professor denied the allegation, which led the students to file a petition to the university to hand over all documents related to the case. One student who signed the petition, Yue Xin, a senior student of foreign languages, published an open letter alleging harassment and intimidation from the university on April 23, which had called her in in for multiple times with school officials and forced her to delete all the documents from her computer related to this petition. They told her that she might not be able to graduate before they intimidated her mother and grandmother. The officials and all of her families urged Yue to sign an announcement that she had been back to school and that everything had been solved. The announcement contained a lot of information that went against the truth, and Yue insisted telling the truth and refused to sign on it. Then her mother threatened her with killing herself, which made Yue finally have her name on the fake announcement, but she required leaving blank space on what she rejected to admit. A week later, Yue posted everything she had experienced in the past week on Weibo, but soon it was forcefully deleted and then banned throughout the Internet. No results were shown if the name “Yue Xin” was searched on Weibo, Baidu Forum and other major media outlets. People’s Daily published a commentary earlier, saying that it was a problem of administration that caused misunderstanding

between the university and the students, trying to distract public's attention. This commentary was deleted by People's Daily itself one day later.

But this is never an administrative problem. There are too many details in this event in various aspects, on which it is impractical to elaborate in this thesis. At this point, it is crucial to assert one thing: this letter written by a university student is political. The year 2018 is the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Peking University, which is the alma mater of a great number of Chinese central leaders, and has been a symbol of not only academic but also cultural and political capability. It also witnessed many student protests in China's modern history, mostly known as May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement in 1919 and the Tiananmen Square Protest in 1989. At this glorious moment of this university, no scandals are allowed to get into the public's sight because it is closely connected with the university's dignity, its famous alumni's dignity, and, most importantly, the state's dignity. Under this context, any failure in doing so would be considered as anti-Party and unpatriotic.<sup>63</sup>

The second one was started from online criticism over a Marvel China promotion for its upcoming sequel of *Avengers: Infinity Wars*. An event was held on April 26, 2018, at Shanghai Disneyland to mark the 10-year anniversary of Iron Man, which was attended by many well-known Hollywood actors and two Chinese singers Zhang Jie and Eason Chan, who were also famous but "irrelevant" to this event. Then there occurred a fierce confrontation between the fans of the two groups of stars, after which a number of trash was left behind. A victim of the backlash called fans who left trash at the venue "uncivilized" in a Weibo post under the online handle "Jiejiliang". She continued saying that "Zhina is filthy with trash all around", in which "Zhina" is an extremely insulting word for China in history when it was invaded by Japan. In no time, this post attracted many responses reminding "Jiejiliang" that this was inappropriate, but

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<sup>63</sup> Chen, Gongtai., "Why Yue Xin's Letter Make the Peking University Panic?", *The Guardian*, April 27, 2018.

she refused to apologize and said she did this on purpose. Later, she was reported to the authorities of her university, Xiamen University, and was put under investigation, after which she could be expelled from school.

It is not this thesis's task to evaluate the two people on their morality and values, though they did generate completely different public responses. It is noteworthy that both of them received sanctions by the officials for posting what was interpreted as not defending the country. Therefore, I argue that those who are banned are not necessarily banned because violating the literal regulations, but also based on shared knowledge and information flow. For example, in the Jiejiliang case, the shared knowledge is that any literal Chinese netizen who sees her post knows that it is insulting, and the information flow refers to the online platform as a way of information dissemination to attract wide attention. According to my research, the lack of either one of these two factors makes it possible to effectively avoid the Party's censorship and punishment. The following studies prove this argument.

#### **4.2 Criticism under Nationalist Color**

When criticism is gaining acknowledgement among many observers, journalists, scholars and the average netizens as a counterpart confronting nationalism on the Internet, few has explored its pattern.<sup>64</sup> As argued in last section, only when “shared knowledge” and “information flow” are satisfied at the same time, can online criticism come into the official's sight and then get censored. The reason why there exists a considerable proportion of dissidents who have not received any censorship is that their posts do not show their oppositions in an explicit way. That is to say, their opinions do not contain the “shared knowledge” that makes sense to the majority of the society, or the “information flow” that captures the public's attention. Based on my

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<sup>64</sup> Jiang, Ying., 2012.

research, which is predominantly focusing on Weibo posts and WeChat articles, I found that there are two major ways that can serve as the dissidents' haven to protect them from being censored and punished.

The first method to do so is sarcasm. A typical example is the meme of "this age, as you wish." Originally, this is a line in memory of the former Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, who was actually highly respected and paid tribute to by the Chinese people. On September 3, 2015, a military parade was held on the Tiananmen Square to commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Victory of the Chinese People's Anti-Japanese War and the World Anti-Fascist War. This line firstly appeared in the comments of the online live stream of this parade to express people's respect to Prime Minister Zhou, as well as the patriotic emotion of the pride as Chinese who have witnessed the national rejuvenation. Gradually, this line could be seen in the comments of almost every post related to China's achievements. At the same time, however, negative events in the past three years have disappointed a great number of people. These events often include miscarriage of justice, discrimination to the socially vulnerable groups (e.g. naming them "low-end people" and restricting their activities in big cities) and further Internet insulation from the outside. Therefore, some netizens figure out that using "this age, as you wish" could be a way to express their resentment and devastation, because, currently, this line is still a compliment to the Party and the state in the official's eyes.

One of the most recent announcement can best exemplify how it works as a sarcasm. On April 13, 2018, the new Regulations of the Internet Audio-Visual Services, published by the China Netcasting Association (CNSA), bans any display of "abnormal sexual behaviors" in online content, including homosexuality. This, of course, irritates many people. I searched

Weibo content that includes “this age, as you wish” on that day, and screenshot some examples, as shown by Figure 3.7.



Figure 3.7 Weibo Posts and Comments Using Sarcasm  
Source: Sina Weibo, Screenshot taken and processed by author

There are three posts shown as “Weibo Content” in Figure 3.7. The first one says: “This country is amazing! This age, as you all wish! This is what the great rejuvenation looks like! Here we stand! Here we rule the world!” This message is accompanied by this user’s repost of an original post that expressed strong opposition and protest against the Regulation. The second post says: “This age, as you wish! Never regret being Chinese (\*laughing\*)!” It is commented with laughing, too. The third post is a little bit more explicit by saying “404 not found”, which is a notification shown on the government-banned webpages. But this user managed to make tis

post relatively more implicit by adding “this age, as you wish” in the end. At this point, it has to be noted that the vastness of all posts on Weibo makes it impractical to quantify these sarcastic posts. Indeed, they are drowned in the billions of posts that might be actually praising the government. However, it also means that it is equally difficult for the officials to differentiate sarcasm from the sea of various posts.

Another outlet is metaphor, which is not used as frequently as sarcasm but still proves effective. Shortly after the new Regulation was released, a WeChat subscription account (also known as public platform), “Hogwarts News”, published an article titled “Umbridge, Harry and Quidditch.” It describes a villain in the novel *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Delores Umbridge, who peremptorily imposes hundreds of unpopular regulations, bans all kinds of entertainment activities and brutally suppresses student protests in the wizarding world. Up to now, this article has only received less than 1,000 views and only those who have read the book can understand the metaphor hidden in this article. It is still available on this public platform and is perfectly safe to repost.<sup>65</sup>

However, another article called “It Is Dangerous to Drive a Car in Reverse on the Expressway” received over one million views. All who read this article immediately recognized that it meant to criticize that the government’s Internet insulation behavior was a backward move in this information era. Consequently, it was forcefully deleted only six hours after published.

As the two examples above suggest, as long as criticism does not provide its readers with commonly shared knowledge, it only makes sense to a limited amount of people. Therefore, the channel to disseminate the information does not exist. In this way, the values of criticism are only acknowledged by certain groups, which shields the dissidents from being censored or punished by the government.

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<sup>65</sup> See WeChat Subscription Account “Hogwarts News” for full article.

### 4.3 A Cyber Civil Society?

So far, this thesis has proved that there is no singularity in online Chinese nationalism, because there is criticism that is disguised under the nationalist umbrella. Although it appears “underground” to some degree, it does represent a nascent power that is free from the government’s infringement in a way. This then prompts people to wonder to what extent the online criticism can resemble a civil society.

Guobin Yang put forward an idea of “digital society”, and defines it as encompassing “a large number of online communities, web-based social networks and loose organizations, as well as the active online presence of offline civic associations.”<sup>66</sup> Again, it is impractical to quantify the dissidents, be they explicitly disapprove the government or implicitly criticize the party by means of sarcasm and metaphor. However, as Yang suggests, a better way to examine online criticism is to see whether it has formed a connection with offline non-governmental organizations that are engaged in active online activities. When the government decides to implement restrictions on the socially vulnerable groups, many organizations keep their accounts updated with support for the latter as well as suggestions for the leaders to make reconsideration on the situation. Once more, take the Regulations on the Internet Services as an example. Multiple NGOs, such as Beijing LGBTQ Center, Rainbow Space, Danlan Organizations, in line with many other organizations, euphemistically requested online information disclosure from CNSA through their Weibo accounts. This online “protest” covered all walks of people, which formed a considerable degree of strength. In the end, to most Chinese netizens’ surprise, the Weibo Administration Center, on behalf of the CNSA, posted a public clarification on April 15,

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<sup>66</sup> Yang, Guobin, “The Internet and the Civil Society in China: A Preliminary Assessment,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 12, No. 36, 2003.



highlighting that the LGBTQ content will not be banned on the Internet. It is noteworthy that, unlike traditional protest, the online criticism does not explicitly confront the government, but is often under nationalistic protective color. At this point, the Internet can facilitate the negotiation with the government, as long as these socially vulnerable groups conduct the negotiation with the premise of nationalism and pro-Communist.

Yet the challenges and obstacles should not be overlooked, either. Since the situation of NGOs in China is not very optimistic, it is a question for the alliance of online criticism and organizations. While there are 1.37 million registered non-governmental organizations, there are 6.7 million Government-Organized NGOs (GONGO) in China that are led by the government. And although most of them have Weibo accounts and WeChat public platforms, 56% owns less than 10 regular members, and 72% rely on international patronage. The fact that the Party interprets the organizations as autonomous civic entities that are independent from the central's control might be against the further coalition between online criticism and the offline organizations.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, no matter how much nationalistic rhetoric is adopted by the online protests, it is too optimistic to assert that online criticism contributes to pluralize China's one-party rule.<sup>68</sup>

## **Chapter 5. Conclusion**

I begin this thesis with clarifying the critical role of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games in studying online Chinese nationalism. By building the relationship between the post-Olympic economy, the technological development, the thriving of the Internet and Chinese people's

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<sup>67</sup> Shieh, Shawn and Brwon-Inz, Amanda., "NGO Directory Archive," *China Development Brief*, January 14, 2013. <http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.cn/directory/>

<sup>68</sup> Breslin, Shen et al., 2010.

psychological changes, I emphasize that the year 2008 is a crucial landmark of the studies of online nationalism in China.

This thesis mainly argues the profound influences of online nationalism on Chinese society in two layers: how it shapes the online nationalistic public, and how it affects Chinese politics. Public-wise, I point out that, under the impact of online nationalism, there are two major features of nationalistic Chinese netizens. First, the majority of nationalistic Chinese netizens are voluntarily engaged in promoting the government rather than being sponsored by it. Second, they tend to initiate aggressive collective actions, such as attacking overseas social media, debating with and often insulting the dissidents online and demonstrating a certain degree of Han chauvinism.

I elaborate on the influences of online Chinese nationalism on Chinese politics in two aspects, too. On one hand, online nationalism has cast conspicuous impacts on Chinese foreign relations and policymaking. By means of searching in two most influential social media in China, Sina Weibo and WeChat, I collect real-time data that reflects netizens' opinions regarding recent events. By analyzing the relationship between the online nationalistic public and the Party's foreign policymaking, I argue that in some cases, such as the Sino-Japanese, the cross-Strait and the Sino-US relations, online Chinese nationalism and China's foreign policymaking are complementary to each other. The central leaders have the anticipation that the public would get angry about the "undeserved treatment" to China, and would be excited to see some tough measures taken by the government, such as military intimidations to Taiwan and unbending policies on the Sino-US trade war announced by the official. By doing so, the Party's policies and the state's attitude appear to be more hardline and convincing, which ultimately helps the CCP to maintain its stability and legitimacy. In turn, the online nationalistic public gains even

higher morale when they realize that their collective outcries are encouraged and supported by the central government. In this way, as a nation, the internal cohesion of China has been significantly enhanced. However, in other cases, online nationalism is more contradictory than complementary to the CCP. The undesirable outcomes that are caused by group or individual-organized activities in the name of “nationalism” have brought unpredictable side effects, which has been a concern of the CCP. Therefore, online nationalism has created a dilemma for the Party: it is a big question to decide the extent, to which the unofficial nationalism could be controlled and, meanwhile, these people do not feel suppressed.

On the other hand, there are dissidents who are disguised under the nationalist umbrella. I found that two methods, sarcasm and metaphor, are adopted by the objectors to express their oppositions and avoid being censored and punished by the government. Based on this, I further note that the potential of an online civil society coming into being can be seen, but its inherited limits might be against it from functioning properly.

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