

Mapping Chinese Digital Nationalism: A Literature Review

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A growing empirical scholarship examines the rise of Chinese digital nationalism. This scholarship remains scattered across disciplinary and area studies journals, making it difficult to systematize findings and identify knowledge gaps. We review $N = 71$ peer-reviewed articles and book chapters (1990–2021) to map the empirical findings on the (re)production and circulation of official and everyday Chinese nationalist discourses. We note the dominance of single-case textual analyses of online data, the underdeveloped theoretical frameworks, and the unclear research designs across this scholarship. In China, the online (re)production of official nationalism remains driven by the Party state, with netizens' everyday forms of nationalism generally reinforcing or being co-opted by official nationalism. We call for a fuller picture of the ecosystem of state-driven digital nationalism and its influence as well as more attention to the challenges to official nationalism online mounted by everyday nationalism.

Keywords: Chinese nationalism, digital nationalism, Chinese cyberspace, literature review

From the backlash against U.S. singer Lady Gaga following her meeting with the Tibetan religious leader, the Dalai Lama, to calls for boycotting Swedish fashion brand H&M for its expressing concerns over the Xinjiang controversy, the rise of digital nationalism in China has attracted the attention of both journalists and scholars. How does Chinese nationalism manifest itself in cyberspace? Who are the actors engaged in the production and circulation of nationalist discourses in the Chinese cybersphere and beyond? And, to what extent are such discourses contested, and by whom? This article reviews existing research to understand which aspects of digital nationalism are receiving attention, and which ones require further investigation. Existing studies remain spread across different journals and disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities, making it harder for researchers to have an overview and identify areas needing further research.

As a problematic concept (Anderson, 2006), nationalism has been defined as a form of political expression, a political ideology, and a discourse. Traditionally, nationalism has been understood as a political ideology centered on the core idea that "the political and the national unit should be congruent" (Gellner,

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1983, p. 1). However, nationalism combines political ideas (such as the imperative of territorial autonomy for the nation), cultural ideas (such as the superiority of national identity over all other aspects of an individual's identity), and a moral universe elevating the nation as the primary source of justification for both political and individual action (Ignatieff, 1994). Where such definitions tend to focus on the political dimensions of nationalism, cultural approaches have drawn attention to the importance of the imaginary in constructing national communities as spaces of allegedly shared linguistic, cultural, and affective similarities (Anderson, 2006).

In China, nationalism has served an instrumentalist function for the Chinese Communist Party, providing a moral source of legitimacy for its decision-making processes (Gries, 2004; Hughes, 2000; Jiang, 2012). Contemporary Chinese nationalism is a mixture of victory narratives praising China's glorious past and victimization narratives decrying the country's humiliation by foreign powers over the last two centuries. Through these dual narratives, historical events are recovered and remembered as symbols of both glory and humiliation (Gries, 2004). Additionally, contemporary Chinese nationalism constructs the Chinese nation as "a united multi-ethnic country" in which 56 ethnic groups "enjoy equality, unity, and mutual aid" (China, 1999, para 14.). Yet, efforts to develop such an overarching national identity have been increasingly challenged by, on the one hand, Han "aggressive ethnic nationalism" (Friend & Thayer, 2017, p. 92) and, on the other, some ethnic minority groups asking for self-determination and (cultural) autonomy. Territorial sovereignty is another contentious point in Chinese nationalism, institutionalized in the "one country, two systems" policy (particularly concerning Taiwan and Hong Kong).

As spaces where social life is increasingly unfolding, as well as media with their affordances and logic, digital technologies create both opportunities and limitations for the production, circulation, and reception of nationalism. This literature review focuses on "digital nationalism," also referred to as "online nationalism," or "cyber-nationalism" (Ahmad, 2022; Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021). Digital nationalism encompasses forms of nationalism produced by both state and non-state actors and circulated through the Internet (e.g., websites, weblogs, or social media) to articulate specific versions of the nation, mobilize support for particular nationalist agendas, and/or express a sense of belonging to a particular nation (Ahmad, 2022). Actors advocating digital nationalism can both bring offline nationalist discourses into online spaces and generate new discursive articulations that are subsequently taken up in offline spaces.

We report on the results of a literature review of digital nationalism in China performed on 71 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters retrieved from Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, and ProQuest (1990–2021). The literature review aimed to map existing scholarship on digital nationalism in China to synthesize the findings and identify areas for future research. Importantly, our review did not directly engage in a critical evaluation of the research design of these articles although we did map the most common methods of data collection and analysis. Instead, driven by an interest in not only how "a particular version of this or that nation is articulated, by whom, and for what purposes" (Skey, 2022, p. 846) but also how such versions of the nation circulate across social actors, we integrated existing research findings into an overview of the theoretical insights on this topic to date. As such, we clustered the findings of the literature review around the main social actors (from state institutions to citizens) involved in the production and circulation of nationalist tropes on the Internet: State-driven nationalism, everyday forms of nationalism, and the circulation of nationalism across different social actors.

This typology reveals that research on cyber-nationalism in China prioritizes everyday forms of nationalism, followed by state-driven nationalism and the circulation of nationalism online. Overall, this literature suggests that in Chinese cyberspace, powerful social actors (such as state institutions or opinion leaders) shape everyday forms of nationalism, often inciting the use of nationalism to interpret and discuss current events. Furthermore, state actors strategically steer and reappropriate everyday expressions of nationalism for their own purposes.

Methodology: Searching and Selecting the Literature

To identify the relevant literature on Chinese digital nationalism, we developed a set of relevant keywords, which are presented in Table 1. Given the popularization of the Internet around the mid-1990s, we opted for the time span 1990–2021 (the year when the study was undertaken). We performed the first search across three scholarly databases, WoS, Scopus, and ProQuest, restricting the results to titles only. Web of Science fully indexes the most impactful scholarly publications and includes relevant citation indexes to our topic. Scopus and ProQuest were chosen as complementary databases because they include book chapters and books. Furthermore, ProQuest returned additional results compared with WoS and Scopus.

Table 1. Keyword Combinations for the Database Search.

Search 1(by title)
(nationalism OR nation OR nationalist OR nationalistic OR nation-building) AND (Internet OR digital OR cyber OR online OR Weibo OR Twitter OR Facebook OR "social media" OR "new media" OR virtual OR website OR microblog OR cyberspace)
Search 2 (by topic)
(nationalism OR nation-branding OR nationalist OR nationalistic OR nation-building OR "national identity" OR "national image" OR "little pink" OR "fifty-cent army") AND (Internet OR digital OR cyber OR online OR Weibo OR Twitter OR Facebook OR "social media" OR "new media" OR virtual OR website OR cyberspace OR microblog OR WeChat) AND (China OR Chinese)

The integration of the search results, excluding duplicates, led to an initial corpus of 435 unique articles, review articles, book chapters, or books. Based on the titles, keywords, and abstracts, we selected only entries with an explicit focus on Chinese digital nationalism. To make the literature review feasible, we further selected only book chapters and journal articles from journals indexed in SCImago, a publicly available journal ranking index that included the journals' scientific indicators retrieved from information contained in the Scopus database. Books were excluded given that they are more comprehensive and undergo different review criteria compared with journal articles. This resulted in a set of $n_1 = 32$ unique entries.

To ensure a comprehensive set, we searched the three databases again (time span 1990–2021), restricting results by topic. Search by topic is a feature of the databases and looks for the keywords in the fields of [title], [abstract], and author-provided [keywords]. After excluding duplicates, we obtained a slightly more extensive corpus, that is, 536 unique entries. We reproduced the procedure above to narrow the corpus, resulting in a set of $n_2 = 70$ unique entries (including book chapters and articles published in journals indexed in SCImago). When integrating the two sets ($n_1 = 32$ and $n_2 = 70$ entries), 31 entries from

the first search were also present in the second set. This led to a final corpus of $N_{\text{final}} = 71$ journal articles and book chapters (Table 2), which were read and clustered, as described in the next section.

Table 2. Overview of the Reviewed Literature per Cluster and Subcluster.

Cluster	Subclusters	Entries
State-driven digital nationalism	Techno-nationalism	8 entries: Budnitsky and Jia (2018), Ernkvist and Ström (2008), Fung (2014), Jiang and Fung (2019), Jiang and Okamoto (2014), Jinhe Liu (2020), Nie (2013), and Schneider (2018)
	Online propaganda	6 entries: Chen, Valdovinos Kaye, and Zeng (2020), Han (2015b), Kang (2017), Lagerkvist (2008), Pan (2020), and Sánchez-Romera (2021)
Everyday nationalism online	Everyday nationalism among netizens in Mainland China	29 entries: Bislev (2014), Chan and Bridges (2018), Chase (2011, 2019), Cheng (2011), Du (2014), Gan (2020), Gorman (2017), Grant (2014), Han (2015a, 2021), Handing (2011), Herold (2012), Hughes (2000), Ismangil (2019), S. D. Liu (2006), F. Liu (2012), X. Liu (2021), Ma (2018a, 2018b), Ng and Han (2018), Peng and Chen (2021), Wang and Tao (2021), Yang and Zheng (2012), Yongming (2005), Zhang (2013), Zhang (2020), Zhang, Liu, and Wen (2018), and Zhao (2021)
	Everyday forms of ethno-nationalism among ethnic and diasporic groups	13 entries: Chan (2005), Guo (2021), Harris and Isa (2011), Leibold (2010, 2015, 2016), Li (2019), Luqiu and Kang (2021), Petersen (2006), Saunders and Ding (2006), Shichor (2010), Wang (2019), and Zhang and Nyíri (2014)
The circulation of nationalism online	Interactions between the Party state and the netizens	10 entries: Bislev (2015), Cairns and Carlson (2016), Dixon (2014), Fang and Repnikova (2018), Gries, Steiger, and Wang (2016), Guo (2018), Jiacheng Liu (2020), Schneider (2021a, 2021c), and Shan and Chen (2021)
	The role of opinion leaders	2 entries: Chen, Su, and Chen (2019) and Guo (2019)
	Contesting state nationalism	3 entries: Culpepper (2012), Lo (2015), and Schneider (2021b)

Chinese Digital Nationalism: Three Areas of Research

Scholarly research on Chinese digital nationalism is scattered across various area studies and discipline-specific journals, employing a range of cases, data, and research designs. In terms of data collection, more than half of our sample (41 articles) relied on secondary data (e.g., online forums or

social media posts, online news, etc.), two studies only used primary data (i.e., interviews), and 13 studies employed a mix of primary and secondary data. Data analysis was dominated by qualitative analyses such as discourse, content, and textual analysis (24 studies), followed by ethnographic research (11 studies). A few studies did not explicitly clarify the methods for data collection and analysis. Additionally, most articles focused on single cases, with less than one-third of the sample employing multiple cases. A time frame of the published work on Chinese digital nationalism suggests a surge of interest in the topic from 2011 onward (Table 3).

Table 3. Timeline of Publications on Chinese Digital Nationalism Across Our Sample (N = 71).

Period	Number of Published Items
Before 2000	0
2000–2010	10
2011–2021	61

To further delve into this literature's contribution to understanding Chinese digital nationalism, we clustered the articles by the social actors involved in their production and subsequent circulation (Table 2). Critical nationalism studies draw attention to the importance of conceptualizing nationalism not only in the context of controversial political events but also in the context of everyday structures and practices. This is even more relevant in the case of Chinese digital nationalism: On the one hand, the Internet has been hyped as a symbol of globalization rendering nationalism irrelevant (Skey, 2022); on the other, given China's authoritarian political regime, the official discourse on nationalism can easily appear to be more homogenous and less contested than in democratic contexts. Anchored in a critical and discursive effort to bring forth the constructed nature of nations, challenging their taken-for-grantedness in the public sphere (Skey, 2022), this literature review distinguished between top-down (or state-driven) and bottom-up (or everyday) forms of nationalism. Our first two clusters, *state-driven digital nationalism* and *everyday nationalism online*, respectively, show different articulations of nationalism advanced by different social actors in digital spaces. Our third cluster, *the circulation of nationalism online*, looks into the consequences of such articulations being addressed or taken up by different social actors online.

State-Driven Digital Nationalism

State actors drive the official articulations of the nation, often visible in framing and legitimizing policies and decision-making as a reflection of national will. Given the resources at their disposal, state actors have an upper hand in institutionalizing such articulations via various symbolic or coercive apparatuses such as public education curricula, national holidays and public ceremonies, diplomacy, legal frameworks, or governance programs (Chan & Bridges, 2006; Tilly, 1996). Nationalism studies have also drawn attention to the role of supportive actors such as (mass) media, schools, and other public institutions, in the dissemination and popularization of official discourses of nationalism (Gellner, 1983). This is particularly relevant in China, where nationalism has often been used after 1949 to legitimize the government's stance or decisions (Hughes, 2000). From the 1990s onward, patriotic education has become an official policy with the explicit aim of strengthening citizens' sense of nationhood, portraying the Party as the embodiment of the national will, and identifying the regime with the nation (Townsend, 1992; Zhao, 1998). In our review, state-driven nationalism appears to unfold online through two main processes: State

intervention in shaping the information infrastructure as a form of "techno-nationalism" (Edgerton, 2007) and official propaganda. Both lead to a tightly knit and state-controlled cyberspace.

Techno-Nationalism

Techno-nationalism refers to the belief that technological prowess strengthens the power of nation-states in a highly competitive global economy (Edgerton, 2007). This fuels policy investment and intervention in technological innovation within the boundaries of the nation-state and, in the case of China, a thorough control of globally interconnected technologies such as the Internet (Edgerton, 2007).

Eight studies reviewed here focus on how the Party state's intervention in shaping the digital information infrastructure reproduces nationalist narratives via a combination of policy, censorship, and financial investment. Two areas of intervention are prominent across these eight studies: Search engines (Jiang & Okamoto, 2014; Schneider, 2018) and the online gaming industry (Ernkvist & Ström, 2008; Fung, 2014; Jiang & Fung, 2019; Nie, 2013).

In the case of search engines, state actors have restricted access to unofficial information and open interpretation of controversial events; in turn, this has left the propagation of the official narrative of such events unchallenged in Chinese cyberspace (Schneider, 2018). In his study of the articulation of the Nanjing massacre on China's Web, Schneider (2018) argued that discourses are homogeneous across websites, encyclopedias, and hyperlink networks, which are embedded in a media ecosystem dominated by state actors and align with the official nationalist narratives. The Chinese state has also supported the development of local search engines such as Jike that serve as an ideological state apparatus to control information, reproduce dominant ideologies, and reinforce state surveillance (Jiang & Okamoto, 2014). This is also the case with the Baidu corporation, used as a means to promote national culture and advocate for national sovereignty on the Internet (Budnitsky & Jia, 2018).

The online gaming industry is widely regarded as an important contributor to China's economic growth. Nevertheless, it is expected to incorporate patriotic education and official narratives in its products (Ernkvist & Ström, 2008; Fung, 2014; Jiang & Fung, 2019; Nie, 2013). Chinese online games are often culturally specific and promote state-sanctioned cultural elements (e.g., folklore and historical stories) to strengthen cultural identification and national identity among Chinese gamers (Fung, 2014).

Online Propaganda

Six other studies focus on the Party state's online propaganda and the integration of the Internet into the ideological state apparatus. One way of doing so consists of official accounts producing medium-adjusted content promoting the official narrative of the Party state. For example, the Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL) has taken an active role in the reproduction and mobilization of online nationalism (Pan, 2020). The CCYL staff members skillfully employ Weibo and Bilibili to participate in online discussions on topical news and amplify nationalistic content produced and circulated by citizens online. In other cases, the state has recruited agents, be they organizations or individuals, to promote nationalism domestically and transnationally. This is the case of the more well-known Fifty-Cents Army (Han, 2015b), recruited by

the state as paid Internet commentators to produce seemingly spontaneous pro-regime online content. Diasporic associations can also work in this way, as Kang (2017) found in a study of London-based Chinese diasporic communities. In this case, state actors invited online diasporic associations to form a bridge between the government and diasporic communities by amplifying official information while also collecting the personal information of diasporic individuals under the promise of providing them with transnational protection. Such initiatives seek to position the Chinese state as a caring and economically powerful protector of its diasporas.

News outlets and digital platforms that rally behind official narratives represent another component of online propaganda. Sánchez-Romera (2021) argued that the news outlet People Daily Online serves as the mouthpiece of the Chinese Party state, circulating nationalist narratives with populist, anti-American, paternalistic, and neoliberal tropes. Similarly, Lagerkvist (2008) revealed that while state or commercial news media open up more discussion space for the wider public, they also align ideologically with Party state nationalism through what the author calls "ideotainment" (the Party state's strategy of blending ideological propaganda with popular culture). Not only online news but also digital platforms contribute to this process, as Chen and colleagues (2020) showed in the case of the short-video platform Douyin. The platform "encapsulates the values of positive energy [a popular Chinese political slogan] to align with the state's political agenda" (Chen et al., 2020, p. 98) For example, the platform has created a curated section on "positive energy" among its trending topics, promoting playful yet patriotic videos produced by state actors or by users who align with the official narrative.

Everyday Nationalism Online

Where official nationalism is mobilized by and through state institutions, everyday nationalism is understood as individual practices of performing nationhood in everyday life, re-centering "the role human agency plays in reproducing nationalism" (Antonsich, 2016, p. 40). Examples of everyday nationalism range from celebrating national days to culinary or clothing tastes and practices (Sumartojo, 2017). An important question regarding everyday nationalism stems from its relation to official narratives: To what extent do citizens, in their daily practices, draw from and thus reproduce official narratives? And, to what extent are these official narratives challenged or even transformed through mundane practices?

Research on Chinese everyday nationalism online shows that the performance of everyday nationalism online varies with the group in question; thus, while everyday nationalism among netizens in Mainland China generally reinforces the narrative of the Party state, diasporic and ethnic groups remain a source of challenge to official narratives.

Everyday Nationalism Among Netizens in Mainland China

Twenty-nine articles in our sample zoom in on citizens reproducing official nationalist narratives in their daily online practices. Interestingly, while early studies in this cluster were framing the realm of everyday life as a source of challenge to official narratives, more recent ones increasingly highlight the alignment between everyday and official nationalism in China.

In the early 2000s, everyday forms of nationalism among netizens in China appeared independent of official nationalist discourses and, at times, even as challenging the latter; in turn, the state often suppressed them. A study of the Peking University's online forum during the 1998 massacre in Indonesia that had targeted Chinese Indonesians concluded that the Internet helped circulate information, mobilize political movements, and resist an official policy aimed at suppressing offline nationalist movements (Hughes, 2000). Similarly, a study of online discussions on the Strong Nation Forum during anti-Japan protests in 2005 found that the Internet enabled netizens to challenge the official narratives and mobilize nationalistic protest action, which was discouraged by the state (S. D. Liu, 2006). Everyday forms of nationalism online thus seemed to be autonomous, independent, and counter-hegemonic (S. D. Liu, 2006). However, Yongming (2005) argued that even though Chinese netizens actively accessed Western media and searched for diverse sources of information about current affairs, nationalism remained the dominant filter through which they interpreted this information (and particularly Western media). Such netizens, which Yongming (2005) called "informed nationalists," were often well-educated and well-informed.

Recent studies suggest everyday nationalism in China increasingly mirrors the official narrative, strengthening the argument that official nationalism has become a hegemonic lens, particularly when it comes to relating to China's external (i.e., other states perceived as "enemies") "Others," international events and practices, or issues entailing territorial disputes or national sovereignty. For example, the literature covered cases such as the disruption of the Beijing Olympic torch relay (Grant, 2014; Ma, 2018a; Ma, 2018b), the history of Goguryeo (Chase, 2011), news translation of Korean current affairs (Chase, 2019), and the migrant crisis in Europe (Gan, 2020; Zhang, 2020). Across such cases, xenophobia, Sino-centrism, and anti-West attitudes were recurrent. Besides, both netizens defending the regime and those criticizing it adopted a nationalist lens, particularly when discussing China's "Others" (Han, 2021; Zhang et al., 2018).

More recently, this was observed in studies of online discussions around the COVID-19 pandemic, where xenophobic and anti-West attitudes, particularly when engaging with international events or practices, were prevalent across netizen comments (Peng & Chen, 2021; Wang & Tao, 2021; Zhao, 2020). Whether criticizing or praising state actors' management of the pandemic, netizens' support for China and its government remained stable when confronted with perceived Western provocations or criticism (Wang & Tao, 2021; Zhao, 2020). A similar pattern was found in another study examining online discussions over the effectiveness of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) in treating COVID-19, where support for TCM was aligned with pro-state arguments, while skepticism toward TCM was framed as a pro-Western attitude (Peng & Chen, 2021).

The treatment of sexual and racial minorities or female celebrities is another sensitive topic eliciting everyday nationalism performances that reproduce the official narrative. Thus, studies have shown that nationalism is employed in online discussions to justify misogyny (Ng & Han, 2018), homophobia (X. Liu, 2021), and racism (Cheng, 2011). X. Liu's (2021) study of netizen debates on the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan argued that nationalism provides netizens with a discursive repertoire for legitimizing homophobic and anti-West attitudes. Scrutinizing racial discussion in Chinese online forums, Cheng (2011) showed how racist tropes become intertwined with long-standing ethnocentrism, cultural nationalism, and social Darwinism discourses in China.

The reasons why everyday forms of nationalism tend to reproduce official forms of nationalism are attributed to the ideological legacy of the Cultural Revolution, the patriotic education from the 1990s, different forms of information control, disillusionment with Western values, and China's rapid economic growth (Bislev, 2014; Gorman, 2017; Shan & Chen, 2021; Zhang, 2013). Herold (2012) and Yang and Zheng (2012) linked this legacy to the visibility of nationalistic angry youth online, such as the anti-CNN.web (a website created in response to the alleged anti-Chinese attitude of the Western media). Gorman (2017) examined the Red Guard 2.0, a collective of online activists keen to get involved in nationalist "flesh searching" (i.e., publicly expose, shame, or bully) against China's alleged traitors. The Red Guard 2.0 heavily drew from state-sponsored nationalism to cyberbully dissidents and reinforce the homogeneity of nationalist expression online. Han's (2015a) study of the "Voluntary Fifty Cents Army"—whose members present themselves as spontaneous regime defenders—also revealed the uptake of nationalism by citizens when engaging in online spaces to silence the voices of regime challengers. F. Liu (2012) revealed that although Chinese youth lack the interest to engage with the government, they nonetheless actively use the Internet to engage in online nationalistic movements.

Everyday Forms of Ethno-Nationalism Among Ethnic and Diasporic Groups

Where studies of Chinese netizens' online discussions or communities suggest official nationalist tropes have been incorporated into everyday life, 13 studies in our sample bring up the challenge to these official narratives, zooming in on specific ethnic groups and diasporic communities. Despite China's recognition of the multiethnic composition of its population, the official narrative places diversity under the doctrine of "a united multi-ethnic country" (China, 1999, para. 4). Several ethnic groups challenge this doctrine from different directions. Members of the dominant Han group use the Internet to construct alternative historical narratives about the Self/Other, seeking to replace the official multiethnic policy of the Party state with a stronger version of Han nationalism (Leibold, 2010, 2016; Wang, 2019). Some ethnic minority groups—such as the Uyghurs—also employ the Internet to reify ethnic identity and promote ethnic nationalism, contesting the official narrative of Chinese nationalism (Harris & Isa, 2011; Petersen, 2006; Shichor, 2010). However, the impact of such contestations remains challenging to assess, with several studies suggesting they are inconsequential against the powerful authoritarian Party state (Leibold, 2015, 2016; Shichor, 2010).

Diasporic groups online also challenge official Chinese nationalist narratives. Such groups have to negotiate their national identity between their home country and host countries; in turn, this can make diasporic nationalism more complex. Yet, several studies have suggested that Chinese diasporas online actively reify Chinese national identity (Saunders & Ding, 2006) and support the Party state's narrative, particularly around territorial integrity (Guo, 2021; Zhang & Nyíri, 2014). However, that is not always the case, as Chinese diasporas online were also seen to shift back and forth from essentialist and diverse notions of ethnic identity, displaying ambivalent feelings toward Chinese official nationalism (Chan, 2005). To some extent, that depends on the circumstances they encounter in their host country. Luqiu and Kang (2021) showed that the Chinese diaspora's daily use of WeChat enables the state actors to surveil diasporic communication transnationally, compelling the diaspora to practice self-censorship and surrounding them with nationalistic discourse.

The Circulation of Nationalism Online

In our sample, 15 articles foreground the discursive interactions among different social actors (e.g., Party-state structures, news media, citizens) in the circulation of nationalist tropes. The way in which official discourses of nationalism are taken up and incorporated into, or even challenged by, the online practices of other social actors sheds light on both the modularity (Anderson, 2006) and heterogeneity of such discourses, reinforcing “the legitimacy of nationalism as an established and, often taken-for-granted, framework for making sense of the world” (Skey, 2022, p. 847). As an open-ended process, circulation creates conditions for “social imaginaries to be produced and maintained,” during which “power relations can be—and often are—contested and moulded” (Valaskivi & Johanna, 2014, p. 233). Attention to the circulation of discourses foregrounds the ongoing negotiation between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses, drawing attention to the spaces of contestation and challenge opened up in the process (Terdiman, 1985). In the case of our review, studies in this cluster have reconfirmed the ideological might of the Party state (via state institutions or opinion leaders) over everyday forms of nationalism.

Interactions Between the Party State and Netizens

Ten entries emphasize the interactions between the Party state and netizens. Hughes (2000) presciently warned that despite the potential of the Internet to support democratization processes, the Party state would have to increasingly incorporate online nationalist campaigns organized by netizens for its claim of legitimacy. Indeed, subsequent studies have revealed that state actors both stimulate cyber-nationalistic campaigns (see the discussion of Fifty Cents Army above) and reappropriate everyday expressions of cyber-nationalism.

Censorship is strategically deployed to manage online discussions around politically sensitive topics such as territorial disputes. In one case examined by Cairns and Carlson (2016), state actors allowed some contentious discussions and street demonstrations to occur as a safety valve through which netizens’ anger could be vented. In other cases, the Party state reappropriated everyday forms of nationalism with various results. Gries and colleagues (2016) and Schneider (2021c) argued that China’s military policy against Japan in the case of the ongoing dispute over the Diaoyu Islands was toughened because of the pressures of strong nationalistic and anti-Japanese stances of netizens in online discussions.

The reappropriation of everyday forms of nationalism by the Party state also occurs in online fandom communities. Fang and Repnikova (2018) examined the circulation of “Little Pinks” as a label for nationalistic fandom online from its initial emergence among liberals to discredit nationalism to its reappropriation by state actors as a denominator for online youth promoting nationalist narratives. However, the relationship between the state and the “Little Pinks” is one of strategic allyship rather than simple subordination of citizens to state discourses (Shan & Chen, 2021). Guo (2018) scrutinized how the CCYL incites the incorporation of nationalist agendas among online fandom communities, strategically interweaving nationalist tropes with elements of fandom culture and populist themes. In this way, the CCYL cultivates its own fandom and mobilizes the young generations to rally around the national flag (Guo, 2018).

The Party state's reappropriation of online forms of everyday nationalism has also been examined in the context of the recent global COVID-19 pandemic. The start of the pandemic was marked by the online sharing of personal stories of suffering, eliciting public sympathy for fellow citizens, and calls for public accountability from state actors. As the pandemic progressed, the state's crisis communication increasingly veered toward containing public outcry and netizens' criticism against the government, replacing it with narratives of national unity and stability (Jiacheng Liu, 2020). Using a different empirical case, Schneider (2021a) argued that during the pandemic, state actors relied on the socio-technical dynamics and youthful content of Bilibili to make the official narrative viral online and turn the crisis into a success story, thus rallying netizens around the flag.

Where the studies discussed focus on official control and reappropriation of netizen narratives, only one article explicitly engages with the incorporation of the Party state's nationalistic discourse into netizens' discursive practices online. Taking the political slogan "The Chinese Dream" as a case, Bislev (2015) argued its widespread adoption across discursive contexts ranging from commercial appropriations (i.e., marketing and advertising) to the expression of personal views, which builds an imagined community by inviting netizens to take up the political slogan and contribute to its interpretation in imagining China's future.

The Role of Opinion Leaders

Only two articles in our sample highlight the influence of what could be loosely termed "opinion leaders" in circulating official forms of nationalism in cyberspace. Guo (2019) focused on the intervention of Weibo opinion leaders and state media accounts in online discussions of the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Movement. The qualitative analysis of the online discussion showed that Mainland netizens reproduced paternalistic attitudes and nationalistic discourse from opinion leaders and official media, framing the protests as an anti-China conspiracy endorsed by the West.

Similar findings were echoed in a study of the leading voices on Weibo in the context of two related nationalistically framed events (Chen et al., 2019). The authors found that both organizational (media) accounts and influencer accounts were central to setting the agenda for public discussion and disseminating nationalist discourses. In turn, bottom-up nationalist discussions were fed back into the official narratives and influenced how official media reported them.

Contesting State Nationalism

When it comes to the circulation of nationalist discourses across different social actors, minority groups—whether ethnic minorities or inhabitants of territories whose autonomy and self-governance are disputed by the central government—remain visible sources of contestation to official narratives. However, only three studies in our sample zoom in on this contestation. For instance, ethnic groups in China often resort to the Internet to resist hegemonic discourses, contesting prevailing narratives about their history, culture, and identity (Culpepper, 2012; Lo, 2015). Importantly, diasporic ethnic minority communities are freer to contest Mainland Chinese narratives. In a study of the discursive contestation between Uyghur diasporic communities and the Chinese state media, Culpepper (2012) concluded that the nationalist stance of the Chinese state media hardens substate nationalism among the Uyghur diasporas. Similarly, another

study found that the tug-of-war between the central government's attempt to control the Internet and the ethnic minorities' appropriation of new media to resist official discourses "has driven the diaspora community leaders to reify their ethnic identity as a unified whole" (Lo, 2015, p. 355).

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Schneider (2021b) found that while the state actors used established visual resources for emotional governance and promoting nationalism, Hong Kong and Taiwan netizens reappropriated these visuals to criticize the ineffective response of the Chinese government and promote alternative nationalism, which reclaims the independence of Hong Kong and Taiwan, respectively. The circulation paths of these discourses point to the ongoing presence of a discursive struggle over the (visual) representation of the Chinese nation (Schneider, 2021b).

Discussion

The study of Chinese digital nationalism is stretched between two theoretical approaches: A cultural/critical studies approach to online content and a political economy approach to big tech. While the first can shed light on how nationalism is reproduced via online interactions, the second sheds light on how nationalism comes to shape (and becomes embedded within) the socio-technical construction of cyberspace. More often than not, research on Chinese digital nationalism eschews a solid engagement with the theoretical framework underpinning researchers' approach to (and contribution to the unpacking of) nationalism. We recommend the clustering logic we used in this literature review as a theoretical sensitivity that is able to bridge the two approaches by orienting future research toward two overarching questions: How is digital nationalism (re)produced in online interactions across actors with different forms of power? And, how is the nation "flagged" (Billig, 1995) in cyberspace?

Early studies of Chinese digital nationalism focused on the democratic potential of the Internet, emphasizing the possible empowerment of bottom-up expressions of national identity that could challenge the hegemonic narrative (Hughes, 2000; S. D. Liu, 2006; Petersen, 2006). However, more recent studies consistently show that the Party state narratives remain hegemonic in the articulation and circulation of nationalism discourses online. This hegemony is achieved through at least two related mechanisms: The use of policy to shape technological infrastructure (techno-nationalism) and the use of the Internet for official communication (online propaganda). In this way, the Party state has successfully integrated digital technologies into its ideological state apparatuses (Althusser, 2006). As no aspect of Internet-enabled communication and interaction is spared, actors responsible for developing and maintaining the technological infrastructure (from wires and cables to software) become co-opted and bring their products in line with official narratives, naturalizing the "nation" and official nationalism as a social reality.

Our literature review reveals first the need for a fuller picture of how the ecosystem of state-driven online propaganda promotes nationalism as well as how this impacts online discursive spaces. In particular, we need to know more about the Party state's preferred online spaces (whether websites or social media accounts targeting domestic audiences or overseas audiences) and their communicational strategies in the (re)production of nationalism. Second, scholarship needs to shed light on the role of other mediated factors/forces in facilitating cyber-nationalism. Interestingly enough, given the wider theoretical models of the disruptive potential of diasporic communities, Chinese diasporas appear to remain attuned to Party state

nationalist tropes even when away from Mainland China and while being exposed regularly to Western media. These dynamics and the reasons behind them warrant more investigation.

Furthermore, in the Chinese context, everyday forms of nationalism reinforce state nationalism while, in turn, state nationalism tactfully co-opts popular discourse. The literature review suggests that Mainland netizens generally reproduce official forms of nationalism, especially when engaging with issues of (perceived) sovereignty or territorial challenges. However, there are particular moments (e.g., global crises such as COVID-19) when "social order" is breached and resistance may emerge. The window for studying such forms of resistance is limited as the government quickly intervenes to mute critical or undesirable voices in cyberspace (Fang, 2022).

Finally, in terms of challenges to official nationalism, substate ethnic nationalism appears as a promising area of study. Among different forms of ethnic nationalism that remain an important challenge for official nationalism, Han nationalism and Uyghur nationalism are mostly studied, while other forms of ethnic nationalism are missing from the existing scholarship. So far, however, such challenges have remained inconsequential to the hegemony of official discourses. Importantly, the potential for political impact is diminished not just by the Party state's interventions but also by the uptake of the official narrative by Mainland netizens in such online spaces. In other words, when challenges to the official discourse of nationalism arise, other netizens—rather than officials—often intervene to restore their version of the status quo (Gorman, 2017; Han, 2015a). Yet, little is known about spaces of dissent online in Mainland China: Are such spaces entirely lacking, or are they rendered invisible by the combination of censorship and platform affordances privileging official narratives? Could dissent take different forms or take place elsewhere (e.g., offline spaces, online spaces outside Mainland China, etc.)? Answering these questions would require a multi-method analysis of cyberspace and its interweaving with everyday offline spaces inside and outside Mainland China.

Methodologically, the textual analysis of existing online traces remains dominant. Other methods may be able to uncover previously missed forms of resistance. For example, interviews are useful for understanding when and where everyday forms of nationalism may pose their own challenges to official narratives—although such forms of data collection come with their own limitations in authoritarian political contexts.

Overall, there is a paucity of studies that foreground the circulation of nationalism across different social actors. An interesting avenue here is the idea that while the Party state nurtures nationalistic attitudes among its citizens, these attitudes can become radicalized, subsequently putting pressure on the Party state in its handling of international relations. In turn, the Party state appears to carefully monitor online discussions and intervene through a mix of incorporating everyday nationalism dynamics and repressing them. Whether the playful, consumeristic fandom nationalism of recent years represents a challenge to official discourses of nationalism remains an open question. Similarly, the role of online influencers and news media as mediators between the Party state and netizens in producing nationalism warrants more investigation. An interesting question here is how and to what extent bottom-up nationalistic attitudes and tropes are taken up by influencers, news media, and the Party state, and how this process may transform said attitudes and tropes.

Conclusion

This literature review of 71 studies of Chinese digital nationalism was based on a stepwise selection of sources that is common in literature reviews. Our approach has limitations, for example, those stemming from our exclusion of books (see methodology section), but it still allows us to draw conclusions. Our results show that relevant research is scattered across various area studies and discipline-specific journals, which implies that researchers interested in this topic need to expand their search for relevant sources beyond the confines of a single discipline. The study of Chinese digital nationalism remains dominated by single-case textual analyses of online data—often focusing on either netizens' or the state's use of nationalism. Single cases tend to be conflictual in nature (i.e., territorial disputes between China and its neighbors; reactions to perceived Western hegemony; diasporic or ethnic groups vs. the Party state). However, the extent to which such cases dominate everyday cyberspace remains unclear. In that sense, a theoretical sensitivity to the gradations of "heating" and "cooling" of nationalism would prime researchers toward asking "how 'hot' nationalism may cool over time (or, indeed, vice versa) and the possible conditions that might make this possible" (Skey, 2009, p. 340). Accordingly, researchers should also consider the intersections between official and everyday forms of nationalism in non-conflictual situations, especially during significant collective moments (e.g., celebrations) and practices (e.g., rituals).

Methodologically, platforms such as Weibo and online forums have received the most scholarly attention; however, platforms with other technological affordances such as WeChat or TikTok might also be relevant in the circulation of Chinese digital nationalism. The multimodality of Chinese digital nationalism could also be more carefully considered as most scholarship takes a textual approach, with only a handful of studies considering multimedia content. Visuals (e.g., emojis, memes, graphics, photos, videos) are notably understudied in terms of the circulation of nationalism online. Additionally, digital research methods could add more insight into the interconnections among the various platforms and the different social actors behind them, enhancing researchers' ability to foreground the circulation of nationalist tropes online. For example, a clearer picture of the Party state's online presence is still missing (e.g., which websites and social media accounts are being used to promote official nationalism and how? What are their online interactions with state media, other big tech companies, online opinion leaders, and netizens?). Such research could also shed more light on how the national framework shapes the development of artificial intelligence and algorithms in the Chinese context (Skey, 2022), and, in return, whether and how automated bots, artificial intelligence, or machine learning are co-opted in the circulation of official nationalism and monitoring of everyday forms of nationalism in Chinese cyberspace.

Importantly, none of the studies in our sample tackle the important question of the implications of digital divides for Chinese cyber-nationalism, especially how different access to or usage of ICTs impact online nationalistic expressions. More research is urgently needed on the demographical features of those netizens who actively reproduce Chinese nationalist narratives online and what motivates them.

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