

## Nationalism for Sale? Transnational Capital, Gender Politics, and Policing the Patriots in Digital Platform

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This study investigates the intersection of digital nationalism, platform economy, geopolitics, and gender dynamics, particularly sexist and misogynistic cultures online, in contemporary China. We focus on the mediated nationalism writ largely on the digital platform Weibo, where the Internet public actively contests the meaning of patriotism in connection with transnational capital in a gendered, sexist, and racialized way. By analyzing an Internet dispute between six self-branded patriotic influencers and other users on Weibo, we demonstrate how the political economy of digital platforms complicates the understanding of nationalism and the construction of “true” patriotic subjects. In unpacking this controversy, we argue that gender politics are deeply embedded in the construction of the ideal subject of the nation, where misogynistic discourses are part and parcel of the patriarchal structure of nationalism. In addition, the Internet public is actively appropriating the technological and discursive affordances of the digital platform to use nationalism for sale and to fight for the discursive authority of being a patriot.

*Keywords: digital nationalism, nation for sale, gender politics, political economy of platforms, attention economy, China*

On August 15, 2022, six self-branded patriotic influencers were called out on Weibo, China’s most popular microblogging site, for denouncing a woman who had been arrested for wearing a kimono-style costume in the Sino-Japanese business district of Suzhou, China, five days earlier.<sup>1</sup> Their criticism of the woman for wearing inappropriate clothing at an inappropriate time—five days before the seventy-seventh anniversary of the emperor’s announcement of Japan’s surrender at the end of World War II—drew pushback from the Internet, with online commenters accusing them of using nationalistic sentiments to drive online

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<sup>1</sup> The costume, according to some observers, is a yukata (*yu yi*, 浴衣)—casual cotton summer kimono (*he fu*, 和服)—rather than kimono as a formal traditional garment in Japan. Since most of the discussion regard this costume as kimono, we remain this usage throughout the article.

traffic and monetize the attention economy. The influencers received the nickname “Okamoto Six (岡本六郎; henceforth simply ‘the Six’)” because they had previously endorsed the Japanese condom brand of that name on Weibo; the pun pointed to their profit-driven behavior in the service of transnational capital while conveying sexual slurs associated with the condom brand in a gendered and racialized way. This case is significant in the ongoing debate about digital nationalism in China, deeply entangled with platform economy and geopolitics, and rooted in sexist and misogynistic technocultures in contemporary China.

The controversy opens a fresh chapter of digital nationalism, where the Internet public actively contests the meaning of patriotism in connection with the platform economy, specifically on Weibo. The political economy of the platform—where the market logic of digital platforms prioritizes the design, mechanisms, and practices that can best generate profit—and the governing logic of the state—how top-down policies and guidelines influence platform development and users’ practices—work hand in hand to enable and limit Weibo’s discussion about the nation and individuals’ efforts to contest its meanings. Nowadays, nationalistic sentiments and expressions online in China are highly subject to these logics. Media users strive to strike a balance between them. As a result, some “key opinion leaders (KOLs),” such as the Six, who create, navigate, and monetize their attention-driven and relation-rich networks, successfully market themselves as “patriotic bloggers” for more commercial opportunities like brand endorsement and relational selling for individual gain.

Here, we use the term “mediated nationalism” to capture these multifaceted aspects evolving around nationalistic sentiments and expressions on digital platforms. In Schneider’s (2018) analysis of the mediated massacre, he explicates where “digital technologies and political prerogatives intersect with human psychology” (p. 109) to reproduce an authoritarian info-web of mainstream, official historiography about the Nanjing Massacre and national discourse that is chauvinistic and antagonistic, though with ruptures and ambiguities that make the process less straightforward. Our conceptualization of mediated nationalism is inspired by Schneider’s study, in which national ideas in the debate surrounding the Six are heavily informed by official historiography and mediated by available symbolic, discursive, and affective resources, both online and offline.

Besides the Sino-Japanese historical “truth” as the basis for nationalistic sentiments, other cultural repertoires and digital productions surrounding gender, sex, and sexuality are also important resources being mediated in the debate, especially considering that the controversy was evoked because a Chinese woman was detained for wearing a Japanese costume in China. Of importance, our study responds to the urgent call for much-needed research on the intersection of gender and nationalism in China, where the masculine nature of digital nationalism intersects with gender power relations and influences gender politics (Y. Huang, 2016; Peng, 2022). The mediated nationalism extends what feminist scholars have long observed as the centrality of gender to nationalism (e.g., Ueno, 2004; Yuval-Davis & Anthias, 1989). Our case study not only exemplifies the long-existing debate but also highlights how digital nationalism expands the digital manosphere, the network of interconnected online communities promoting men’s rights, antifeminism, and misogynistic and sexist beliefs. Gender politics are deeply embedded in the nation’s subject-making, with sexist and misogynistic discourses being fundamental to patriarchal nationalism online.

In our case, mediated nationalism also highlights ruptures and nuances in the process of reproducing the nation, where historical “truth” is both static and interactive, venerated yet contested, and

linearly progressive and multifacetedly interpreted. While the official historiography about Sino-Japanese relations remains intact in the debate, the active contestation of discursive authority over nationalism among netizens is not haphazard. This echoes a rising global trend of populist nationalism. As mentioned previously, both market logics and state logics work hand in hand in the reproduction of national discourse. Digital nationalism in the discursive arena on Weibo is mediated through commercial friendly patriotic personas, such as the Six, who are ambassadors for government propaganda and thought work (e.g., Hou, 2019) and who reinforce the official narrative of the nation. However, when market logic and state logic clash at a geopolitical flash point, as our case study indicates, the power and legitimacy of these self-branded patriotic bloggers as the embodiment of digital nationalism are questioned and challenged. The debate on “who is the true patriot” not only exposes the Six as nationalist *others* by questioning their commercial activities associated with a Japanese company but also educates *us* on proper patriotic actions by invoking the consumer’s nationalistic sentiments of boycott. Nationalist mobilization continues to construct *others* in *us*, exposing how nationalism can be a form of performance mediated in the discourse of the nation. The Six’s controversy reinforces mainstream historiography and nationalistic discourse and, ironically, exposes the ruptures of this grand narrative. Our analysis enriches the scholarly discussion on digital nationalism in China as a mediated forum for interaction and performance, influenced and shaped by digital affordances, market logics, the state’s grip on ideological indoctrination, and media users’ sentiments and activities.

In what follows, we will first situate our study in the existing discussion of digital nationalism, platform economy, geopolitics, and misogyny. With a brief description of the method, our analysis unpacks the nuances of mediated nationalism in the controversy and contributes to ongoing debates in scholarship.

### **Platform Economy, KOL Culture, and Sino-Japanese Historical Tensions**

As the key battlefield in our case and China’s biggest microblogging site, Weibo exemplifies the platformization of Chinese society—that is, the economic, governmental, and infrastructural extension of platforms into Chinese web and app ecosystems with unique ideological, economic, and cultural functions (de Kloet, Poell, Zeng, & Chow, 2019). Weibo participates in the attention economy, with KOLs being the main content providers and core attractions. In turn, the platform enables KOLs to monetize the traffic that they draw through advertisements and sponsorships (Q. Huang, 2023). The traffic data provided by the platform, in terms of the number of views and user engagements (e.g., mentions, likes, and comments), serves as the main index for determining KOLs’ commercial value and incentivizing them to produce attention-grabbing content that taps into popular sentiments (Schneider, 2017). Nationalism has become a common subject for such digital commercial activities. The intersection of the KOLs’ business pursuits, user attention, and the platform’s technological affordances leads to a drastic power difference between the KOLs that attract considerable traffic and ordinary Weibo users in online discourses, with the former being able to reach and influence legions of followers (Schneider, 2017). Our analysis demonstrates Weibo users’ strong awareness of this power gap, given that they passionately contested it in the debate.

The Chinese state significantly influences the operation and discursive affordances of digital platforms. Facing the tightened oversight of digital platforms, Weibo KOLs have increasingly avoided social issues (Buckley, 2013). Meanwhile, the state strategically engages in active digital propaganda and public opinion management. One of its substantial moves is to recruit domestic and international influencers who are willing to function as

modern mouthpieces of the Chinese government (Mozur, Zhong, Krolík, Aufrichtig, & Morgan, 2021; Repnikova & Fang, 2018). In addition, the government has been actively creating and propagating pro-regime media productions that are paternalist, patriarchal, misogynistic, and sexist (Yang & Zhang, 2021). These efforts, especially in the cultural realm, have not always been well received, but their synergistic effects have been executing governance from near and afar with the complicity of social media platforms and, especially, the commercialization of Internet opinion management (Han, 2015; Hou, 2019). These efforts consequently contribute to an online discursive space that tolerates and encourages popular nationalism.

Our study also converses with existing scholarship on Sino-Japanese historical tensions, in which three situational factors significantly shape contemporary digital nationalism in China as economic activities amidst geopolitics. First, since the marketization of China's economy in the 1980s, especially after the country joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2008, its increasing integration into the world economy has brought an influx of transnational capital that has invested heavily in Chinese media and advertising industries, setting up the basic business environment where the Six can endorse a Japanese brand and alike (Li, 2009). However, while advertising foreign brands is, in general, viewed as a way to garner more investment in China's economy and enhance its power in the world, geopolitics in Asia and beyond carries risks of nationalist repercussions for both foreign businesses and domestic commercial media entities, including media platforms and, increasingly, KOLs that promote foreign business for profit. Nationalists in China today are informed about the region's geopolitics and adopt a "game-playing paradigm" that molds their positions and responses to international political and economic affairs (Zhou, 2006, p. 212). The nationalist perception of the postwar order of the region, heavily influenced by the United States, has often led to episodic boycotts and backlashes against cultural products from other East Asian countries, such as South Korea and Japan (Koo, 2009). Finally, these nationalist actions are also shaped by the participants' interpretations of history. Researchers have identified the constructed narrative of the "century of humiliation," during which China lost its status as a world power and suffered under Western and Japanese imperialism, as a major element of Chinese nationalist discourse (Gries, 2006; Li, 2019). Because of the Japanese imperialist invasion of China in the 1930s and 1940s, Japan has been the main target of Chinese nationalist campaigns, increasingly in digital terrain (Ng & Han, 2018). Examining the Six's controversy highlights the nuances in understanding Chinese nationalist references to the historical narrative and populist enactment of anti-Japanese sentiments, which provide insights into the polyvalent nature of nationalist history.

### **Nationalism and Gender: Locating the Technoculture of Misogyny**

Nationalism is not only a mundane economic activity but is also deeply imbricated with gender politics, reflecting and shaping national policies and discourses about gender, race, and sexuality. Critical scholarship has acutely pointed out that gender is fundamental in the making of the nation, where manhood and nationhood are historically connected to construct nationalist ideologies, policies, and discourses; preserve masculine, monoracial, and heterosexual institutions, such as the military; and define proper ways of being men and women (Mayer, 1999; Thapar-Björkert, 2013). Technological revolutions and the expanded discursive space online have witnessed a surge of nationalistic and populist expressions strongly associated with gendered, racialized, and heterosexual normativity around the world (Bjork-James, 2020; Heinemann & Stern, 2022).

While digital platforms play a central role in the Chinese government's nominal affirmation of gender equality and Chinese feminists' information-sharing, community-building, political mobilization, and participation in public life, they also simultaneously provide efficient and effective mechanisms for nurturing a digital manosphere that works in tandem with chauvinistic ethnonationalism, reinforcing what is known as "networked harassment" (Marwick & Caplan, 2018, p. 543) and "platformization of misogyny" (Liao, 2023, p. 191). In China, digital nationalism is still predominantly associated with male netizens, where women's participation is appropriated by the masculinized construction of the nation. For example, a recent phenomenon widely known as *xiao fen hong* (小粉红), literally "young fans of the red (the official color of the Chinese polity)," exemplifies how official nationalist discourse objectifies and sexualizes women and girls as symbols of the nation. In English scholarly work and media discourse, *xiao fen hong* is often translated as "little pinks," describing young Chinese netizens who engage in digital nationalism, activities that approximate those of dedicated fans supporting their idols (Wu, Li, & Wang, 2019). Importantly, the official discourse assumed a female image associated with the color pink, referring to these nationalists as "our daughters, sisters, girls we had crushes on" and insisting that "we need to protect them" with masculine and chauvinistic affection (ComradeXiaoWang, 2016). Where nationalism can be mobilized through the construction of women as the bearers of the nation, it can also be done through denouncing women as the *other* within *us*, as exemplified in Qian Huang's (2023) analysis of digital vigilantism characterized by populist and misogynist discourse of nationalism that targets Chinese intellectual women. Furthermore, as Peng (2022) observes, digital debates about gender issues demonstrate the amplification of misogynistic voices in nationalist mobilization among men, where masculine nationalism heavily influences gender politics.

The compatibility of digital nationalism and patriarchal and paternalist social values has loomed large in Chinese society, echoing a global trend of toxic technocultures against progressive gender politics (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Bassett, Kember, & O'Riordan, 2019) and corresponding to China's revival of conservative and traditional gender norms and values in national policies and media discourses and the shrinking space for feminism and activism with amplified sexist and misogynistic voices (Jing-Schmidt & Peng, 2018; Liao, 2020; Liao & Xia, 2023). It is clear that the Six's controversy is gendered not only in its cause but also in how misogyny is a legitimate expression of nationalism throughout the debate. In unpacking the incident, our study makes an important intellectual intervention in the much-needed intersectional studies of digital nationalism and gender politics.

### Methods and Data Collection

We kept a keen eye on the development and discussion of the case since its outburst in August 2022, and started to collect Weibo posts using the keywords "Okamoto six" and "Okamoto equals kimono" and the hashtags #OkamotoRoachSix (冈本六螂)#, #PatriotismThroughHoleInACoin (钱眼里的爱国)#,<sup>2</sup> and #ThinOkamotoThickSkin (冈本很薄脸皮很厚)#. All the data were finalized on September 10, 2022, a month after the controversy, when we believed that the debates were quite settled. We also collected comments under major posts by the Six and other important figures (such as the original accuser unclesam) that addressed the

<sup>2</sup> "(Falling) Through hole in a coin (掉进钱眼)" is a Chinese slang to refer to greed for money. In the ancient days, coins were made with holes in the middle so that they could be strung on a cord.

incident and provoked large responses. These posts and comments, though not inclusive of every discussion thread about the incident, speak broadly to the public discourse surrounding the case. In total, we collected 11,270 posts. In addition, we consulted documents on the development of the platforms, state policies, and information control, as well as relevant scholarly discussions, to contextualize the collected data.

The study aims to reveal the discourse in which these texts operate. We manually sorted the corpus and analyzed numerous texts in qualitative textual analysis to focus on the characteristics of communications and to use public words to make inferences about thoughts and feelings (see Pain & Chen, 2019). We each read through the entire corpus carefully at least twice, and we exchanged ideas to identify common themes and discussion threads. While the keywords and hashtags represent the core themes proposed and discussed by the online public surrounding the incident, we further unpacked the meanings embedded in these discussions to reveal the three underlying contested subjects in the discourse as mediated nationalism: (1) discursive contestation of authority over nationalism, (2) patriotism as a trope for attention-grabbing and profit-seeking, and (3) misogyny as a constitutive part of love of country. The data analysis was conducted in Chinese; all translations are ours. Apart from the Six and unclesam who were highly identifiable in this controversy that we translated their Weibo handles, the rest of the commenters referred to in this study are identified by pseudonyms.

### **Discursive Contestation: The Authority of Being a Patriot**

The controversy began, not with the news report of the arrest of the woman dressed in a kimono, but with a post by unclesam later the same day, at 1:27 pm,

If wearing a kimono is a crime, @chaitaiCT, @eagleofgod, and @bearsix, who drive the sale of Japanese-brand ultra-thin condoms, should be chopped up piece by piece. Why did they sell ultra-thin condoms from Japan? Because they want to feel good fucking while not worrying about having babies for our country.... How can you be so "flexible/elastic" in terms of loving our country?<sup>3</sup> Are you all Okamoto? I urge the state to banish these vocal mouthpieces for condoms. (personal communication, August 15, 2022)

unclesam's post drew over 19,527 retweets and 46,581 likes at the time we collected the data, and it immediately provoked intense discussions. Six pictures accompanied the text, two of which were presented in pairs to demonstrate the simultaneous condemnation of the kimono as a Japanese cultural symbol—playing the patriotic card—and endorsement of the Japanese consumer product Okamoto—abandoning patriotism to amass capital. The intense debate concerning nationalism, transnational capital, and geopolitics has largely concentrated on the discursiveness of three dimensions—political tension and historical invasion, cultural imperialism, and economic interests—that connect "Okamoto" and "kimono" with nationalism to contest the authenticity of the Six and their authority as patriots.

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<sup>3</sup> unclesam used *shou fang zi ru* (收放自如)—translated as elastic or flexible, as a pun to describe both the characteristics of condoms and the double standard regarding the self-claimed patriotism of the three accused influencers (who later formed half of the Six) in that they condemned the woman arrested for wearing Japanese traditional apparel in China but had engaged in marketing for a Japanese brand for profit.

A primary focus of the controversy was the historical and geopolitical tension between China and Japan, in which the promotion of Japanese products supposedly signified disregard for history and China's national wounds. While unclesam accused the Six of being "flexible" in regard to their patriotism, the discourse of the "century of humiliation," of which the brutal Japanese imperialist invasion of China is a perennial feature, also testifies to an official flexibility in interpreting history to promote nationalism. During the controversy, many commenters adopted the victimization narrative to attack the Six, suggesting that their promotion of a Japanese brand was tied to an underlying Japanese imperialist agenda. For example, strawberrytreeindreams posted:

#OkamotoRoachSix#...in today's situation, we need to stay alert to the *wo nu* [倭奴, servants of Japan], who are inciting domestic conflicts so Japan can seize the opportunity to benefit. The cunningness of the *wo nu* is widely known to the people; the people still hate the Japanese imperialist-assisting armies of the past. (personal communication, August 27, 2022)

The commenter used the derogatory term *wo nu* to refer to the Six, interpreting their promotion of the Japanese condom company as a betrayal of China and an aid to Japanese invaders and, as such, compromising the authenticity of their claim to be true Chinese patriots. In the debates, similar-minded commenters also affirmed that "the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan has sponsored years of implicit and explicit political propaganda" (uncleliu, personal communication, August 19, 2022) and that the Six had been paid by "the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan and potentially switched their nationality [to Japanese]" (guanyunchangxneedle, personal communication, August 20, 2022). Commenters constantly evoked the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan and the Japanese government in general, implying the existence of a political conspiracy involving Japan and influential patriotic icons such as the Six.

The references to the Japanese government and conspiracy theories involving it speak to a further dimension of the debate, as many commenters depicted the promotion of Okamoto as a form of cultural imperialism. They associated Japanese products, such as manga, games, and apparel, with symbols of Japan's past aggression and atrocities against China, describing their destruction as patriotic. This rhetoric reached a low point during a 2012 anti-Japan protest when one man smashed the skull of a Toyota Corolla owner (Qin & Wong, 2012). The bike U lock used by the attacker became an Internet slang and a meme frequently used, especially in the debate about the Six, to criticize those who twist patriotism into self-aggrandizement while condemning others for lacking it. The Six were also attacked for hypocrisy because their criticism of the woman in a kimono partially invoked the consumerist logic that demanded the boycotting of all Japanese products, including those sold by Okamoto.

Interestingly, for pranking, the commenters creatively mixed up words and phrases that were deeply intertwined with anti-Japanese sentiments. For example, "Okamoto Six" embeds a creative pun based on appropriation of the Japanese practice of naming the brothers in a family in a sequence by referring to the members of the Six as *da lang* or *tai lang* (大郎/太郎, the eldest), *er/ci lang* (二郎/次郎, the second eldest), down to *liu lang* (六郎, the youngest). Moreover, the Chinese language is replete with homophones, and *lang*, phonetically, can mean both "men" and "roaches," so the "Okamoto Six" can also be the "Okamoto Roach Six." Similarly, the self-branded patriotic influencers were attacked as an *ai guo pai* (碍国派, nation-undermining faction), the first character of which is phonetically the same as "love," yielding the literal

meaning “hampering the national development,” giving rise to another widely circulated Internet slang for the Six that challenged their authenticity.

Likewise, supporters of the Six responded to their critics by laying claim to the patriotic position. They called out some commenters as *jing ri* (精日), literary meaning “Japanese in psyche,” to mock those who sympathized with the woman in the kimono after her arrest, suggesting they were traitors for admiring Japanese culture themselves. Eventually, each side was competing to brand the other with variants of *jing ri*, such as *jing gang* (精冈)—translated as “Okamoto in psyche,” with the condom maker obviously standing in for Japan, and *bian xing jing gang* (变形精冈), a homophone of “Transformers” in Chinese with a literal meaning indicating flexibility in adapting to Japan’s stances and actions. Both sides, then, not only contested the meaning of cultural imperialism but also laid claim to the mantle of a true patriot in word and deed.

Another aspect of the discussion of mediated nationalism centered on the economic interests of the Six in selling Okamoto’s products, which unavoidably intertwined with previous debates and clashes about authentic patriotism. The Six refuted the accusation of hypocrisy by differentiating between the cultural, political, and economic significance of kimono and Okamoto. As wuweiliye asserted, “essentially, these people connected the kimono, a Japanese cultural symbol, with Okamoto [condoms], a global consumer goods, attempting to depoliticize the kimono in China. They overreached and made Japan equivalent to Okamoto” (personal communication, August 17, 2022). To justify their criticism of the woman in the kimono, the Six presented the kimono as a symbol of Japanese cultural imperialism and attacked other commenters for their move to depoliticize the kimono and frame the controversy as the freedom of the Chinese to dress as they please. In the post, wuweiliye strategically used the word “global (*quan qiu*, 全球)” rather than “Japanese” when referring to Okamoto to downplay its national origin and then explicitly rejected the inference that Okamoto was representative of Japan’s war crimes and nationalist interests. However, this strategic move also drew intense criticism of the Six’s efforts to justify their marketing behavior through depoliticizing Okamoto and re-politicizing kimono, which, thus, confirmed the KOLs’ double standard. Another critic, lushidu, commented,

If kimonos can make some of the public feel offended, doubtlessly, by the same reasoning, promoting Okamoto is going to offend these people’s self-respect for the nation.... The problem is not promoting Okamoto but the attitude and stance afterward, whether [the Six remained] consistent with the sensitive self-respect of the nation. Candidly, I have used Okamoto condoms often...but, while I can use it, you can’t promote it, for I never thought using Japanese products was a big deal, but you attacked the girl in the kimono with words and pens. (personal communication, August 24, 2022)

The post exemplified a common sentiment among opponents of the Six about their inconsistency. These critics argued that the Six tend to frame any actions and statements of their own as authentically patriotic to occupy moral high ground. However, their critiques of a woman in Japanese costume while nationalizing their own commercial collaboration with a Japanese brand expose their double standard, making them hardly credible as “authentic” patriots.



### **Doing the Ideology Business: Pranking the Six Through Platformized Patriotism**

Critics of the Six and alike questioned the authenticity of their self-presentation as patriots, keenly aware of the competition for legitimacy and power—for social influence and commercial gain—that is involved in such discursive contestation. To be clear, we cannot ignore the state's role in shaping the operation and discursive affordances of digital platforms. For example, what can be expressed on Weibo is governed through the Weibo Community Contract, which follows the state's regulatory policies and guidelines against harmful information, such as those that hurt national feelings and incite hatred (Weibo, 2021). That the debate surrounding the Six can exist in the first place without direct censorship or involvement of the state is largely because these discussions explicitly referred to national feelings and interests, thus conforming to the core socialist values championed by the government and facilitating the ideology work of the state. In the debates, both sides—critics and supporters of the Six—have appropriated digital affordances to perform mediated vigilantism (Trottier, 2017). Central to the debates is the platform economy, where nationalism is a product for sale.

For one thing, the debate centered on the affordances Weibo provided and the misuse of its tools and features by the Six, including those like them, to attack others. The charge of manipulating online traffic was constantly brought up in comments, criticizing both the influencers' willingness to market anything and the platform's complicity in doing so. For example, a Weibo user insistgoal declared that "the Six driving sales with their patriotic personas is shameful," (personal communication, August 22, 2022) and another user vsparkling argued that influencers such as the Six were "putting up ads not for left or right [political positions], patriotic or not, but with traffic for sale being the only evaluating criterion" (personal communication, August 21, 2022). As mentioned, Weibo's business model relies largely on relation-rich networks in which KOLs serve as the nodal points for commercialization. The design, features, and algorithm of sociality on the platform prioritize activities and content that are commercially viable and advertiser-friendly. Many Weibo users who participated in the discussion argued that the popularity and profitability of influencers such as the Six testified to the ability of KOLs to exploit the features and design of the platform for personal gain. Accordingly, a commenter pointed out, "These KOLs use their huge fan bases to brush off any counterargument against their views" (qin, personal communication, August 20, 2022). In addition, littleear tellingly contends,

Patriotic big Vs [influencers] have no stance on issues.<sup>4</sup> They don't care about people's livelihood but only about participating in controversial topics for attention and profit. They walk picket lines in the morning to monitor "foreign hostile forces" and sing their praises loudly at night to the dear motherland—all to capitalize on the attention. (personal communication, August 24, 2022)

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<sup>4</sup> The term "big Vs" in Weibo refers to KOLs. The platform has developed a certified VIP system such that the creators of content, organizations, and brands obtain certification signified by a "V" logo after their handles. The V symbolizes the quality and quantity of their content for individual users and also their consistent output to maintain their followers and visibility.

Interestingly, the self-branded patriotic influencers' strategy of profiting from the traffic they drive to Weibo reveals a design choice by the platform that also made the opponents of the Six visible, giving attention to and galvanizing further debate about the controversy. Through hashtags and trending topics, the sharing, commenting, and liking practices on Weibo magnified the controversy. Many of the comments and posts, particularly those at the center of the discussions, were retweeted and liked thousands of times. These metrics were critical for assessing the relevance of the issue, influencing the ranking of the topic in Weibo's algorithm, and enhancing the visibility, intensity, and virality of these discussions. For example, the Weibo user hanshi (personal communication, August 17, 2022) tagged #kimonoequalsOkamoto# to explain one of the central points of contention about the mechanism of the debates discussed in the context of pranking practices. The post's 1,004 retweets, 3,353 comments, and 39,987 likes made it highly visible, and it received numerous mentions through the @ function in the discursive contestation over patriotism. Posts, as such, benefit from the KOLs' large fan bases (hanshi, for example, had a base of 3.267 million followers at the time of this research) to spread virally. With the mentions, tags, and responses from other influencers who had a similar influence over their followers, the topic was further communicated and circulated to attract attention, a process detached from the actual topic being created and circulated. Intentionally or not, and regardless of their attitudes and positions in the controversy, these Internet users gamed the algorithm to increase their visibility (Cotter, 2019).

Second, pranking as wordplay in the contest for authenticity increased the visibility of the controversy. Notably, the success of such pranking was contingent on the algorithmic sociality of the platform and was mobilized through the affective performance of Internet users, especially KOLs such as the Six, and the prominent voices accusing them of hypocrisy. As discussed, the Six exploited the platform's affordances, particularly the algorithm, to enhance visibility and popularity for commercially viable and advertiser-friendly content and controversial topics that drive huge traffic yet remain within the safe space of state ideology, such as by promoting patriotism. While some critics suspected that the controversy represented simply another performance to monetize gender topics, the commenter talkwhat questioned, "How much traffic can gender topics drive compared with the Six's retarded nationalism topic?" (personal communication, August 23, 2022). The controversy surrounding the Six combined platform economy, geopolitics, patriarchal nationalism, and gender politics helped to keep the issue highly visible and profitable.

Wood (2020), in analyzing anti-haul videos on YouTube, described "algorithmic culture jamming" as the "manipulation of the platform's visibility mechanisms to spread anti-consumer messages" (p. 2755). While the Six master the knowledge and communication techniques necessary to become KOLs and profit from their endeavors, other Internet users involved in the controversy likewise appropriate the knowledge, techniques, language, and style of the influencers and the platform economy. The proximity of the counter-practice to the attention economy and influencer-driven platform design is key to the prankers' success—simply put, they incorporated what they sought to subvert. In just this way, the term "Roach Six" was coined, turned into memes, bandied about, and mocked. Nonetheless, culture jamming is not the privilege of any given individual or group, for the techniques, being platform-based, can be appropriated by the supporters of the Six and used to subvert messages critical of the exploitation of patriotism of the sort evident in the texts and images of *jing ri*, *jing gang*, and *bian xing jing gang*. These pranks also delivered the satisfaction of repaying foes in their coin, or in Chinese Internet slang, "using magic to defeat magic,"

which many participants invoked in the debate.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the opponents of the self-branded influencers attempted to use pranks to unpack the Six's hypocrisy and claim the mantle of authentic patriotism for themselves while also being challenged by supporters of the Six using the same techniques. Nonetheless, these jammers and jams are more old wine in a new bottle, reinforcing the notion that "to screw foreigners is patriotic" (Barme, 1995, p. 209).

### **Patriarchal Nationalism and Misogyny in Geopolitics**

unclesam, in a post accusing the Six of hypocrisy in their performance of patriotism, commented vociferously that "In the past, Japanese used weapons to kill Chinese, and nowadays, they employ vocal Chinese influencers to popularize Okamoto to kill Chinese unborn children.... This is genocide!" (personal communication, August 15, 2022). The contrast between Japanese condoms as contraceptives and the Chinese national interest in increasing the birth rate speaks directly to the reification of the Sino-Japanese historical tension in contemporary cultural rhetoric, which is racialized and gendered. When Weibo users brought up Okamoto, the mention of Japanese war crimes added heat to the discussion, harshly associating the Japanese company with the racialized and misogynistic denunciations of the Japanese government and people. In other words, the criticism of the Six's marketing message for Okamoto often referred explicitly to the company's historical involvement in the war. Commenters shared the information that the company had provided products for the comfort women camps, thereby playing an enabling role in the sexual enslavement of Koreans and Chinese by Japanese occupiers. For example, tomatoshoes posted:

#Okamotoequalskimono# The ordinary patriotic people who said Okamoto equals kimonos were fooled by those second-class devils (*er gui zi*, 二鬼子) bought by the [Japanese] foreign ministry. To be more exact, Okamoto >= kimonos; Okamoto is a war criminal corporation reborn on dirty ground. Promoting Okamoto's products and making tens of thousands of Chinese like Okamoto—if that's not cleaning up the war criminal's reputation, then what is it? (personal communication, August 19, 2022)

Many similar comments provided additional details about the horrific conditions endured by captive women and the brutality of sex crimes. As is well documented, the so-called comfort women, mostly Korean and Chinese, served as sex slaves for Japanese soldiers. The Chinese education system has emphasized the history of invasion and occupation during the century of humiliation, a topic that inevitably resurfaced during geopolitical flashpoints. In the present case, the connection between the controversial kimono woman and the anniversary of the Japanese surrender at the end of WWII is more arbitrary than a specific symbolic association with the past, more of an affective response to nationalistic sentiments than a question of individuals' right to dress as they please, and more of a populist charge by those interested in eye-catching topics and events through which to monetize online content than a deep intellectual debate.

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<sup>5</sup> The phrase "using magic to defeat magic" originated in a Kungfu movie and has been appropriated in various contexts to refer to the adoption of practices that have been developed by others in circumstances in which the outcome is uncertain at the point when the practices are enacted.

Posing as patriotic influencers, the Six and their supporters were not seeking to downplay the significance of Chinese anti-Japanese sentiment or the historical narrative of the comfort women. Nevertheless, in their engagement with the controversy, they conveniently omitted the mention of Okamoto's involvement when making historical references. Instead, they emphasized that many of the women were forced to wear kimonos to justify what was, in fact, a misogynistic attack on the woman in a kimono. The differing accounts of the same historical events from the supporters and critics of the Six demonstrate the polyvalent nature of the nationalist narratives cited by those on both sides of the controversy.

The strategy of drawing attention to the link between Okamoto's role in World War II and its contemporary marketing of condoms—thereby suggesting that the company is a facilitator of both war crimes and sex crimes—evoked an affective reaction among the online Chinese public to denounce Okamoto as insensitive to China's nationalistic sentiments. Other comments indicated a much stronger and deep-seated racialized and gendered antagonism against Japan and, often, women in general. So it was the aforementioned post by unclesam that touched off the debate associated condoms as contraceptives with racial genocide and part of an ongoing Japanese conspiracy. In addition, some commenters ridiculed the size of Okamoto condoms to create a racial hierarchy based on genital size. For example, mafable contended, "Those who have used [Okamoto condoms] know . . . [that they are] thin but small. You know, they are suitable for little Japanese" (personal communication, August 26, 2022). The sexual slur asserts the inferiority of Japanese to Chinese in virility and sexual ability, a trope that is constantly evoked in nationalistic discourse (Ng & Han, 2018).

Significantly, while the condemnation of Okamoto in this rhetoric served largely to attack the Six and their supporters for their allegedly unpatriotic marketing of a brand associated with war crimes against China, the Six also appropriated racialized, masculine, and misogynistic language to sustain their discourse. One of them, victoryzhang, proclaimed, "I am not 'Okamoto Sixth' but 'Okamoto Six Times.' [I] wear Okamoto [condoms] (though [they are] not comfortable) to fuck [*jingri*] six times a day" (personal communication, August 17, 2022). Such comments quickly garnered wide support, with the obscene and disgraceful language also extending to "the parents of *jingri*" and "Japanese." Many of the popular discussion threads shifted the focus from the arrested woman and her choice to dress in a kimono to express contempt for women in general, slut-shaming them for their "insensitivity to national feelings," "conspiracy with the Japanese," "doing sex work [because the kimono is also considered a risqué dress with which women do not wear panties]," and "being a cunt while asking for the freedom to dress." These discussions substituted the issue of freedom for women—and only women—to dress as they please for that of national sovereignty and the national feelings of the Chinese people as a whole. Here, misogyny finds validity when garbed in the camouflage of patriotism. Moreover, the commenters appropriated the equation between Okamoto and the kimono to sexually troll women—for, in the words of hahahehe, "Japanese girls love to dress in a kimono on the streets because it is safe (i.e., because of the 'safety' provided by condoms)" (personal communication, August 21, 2022)—conjuring up a sexual image of a national costume associated with women.

The commenters also repeatedly invoked and ridiculed Japanese adult video (AV) actors as symbolic of a Japanese sexual culture wherein women are property to be owned, consumed, and played with for men's entertainment. Fundamentally, nationalism is masculine because, as just observed, women are often viewed as objects for men to own, protect, defend, and fight for in nationalist movements. Ng and

Han (2018), in an analysis of online anti-Japanese slurs against a Japanese AV idol during a Sino-Japan territorial dispute, contended that the Internet public often deploys misogynistic slurs to promote nationalistic sentiments. The branding of misogyny as patriotic is evident in the debates in which the Six engaged. Misogyny has thus been evoked as an appropriate form of nationalism, with witch-hunting, cyberbullying, and the denunciation, objectification, and sexualization of women playing out as discursive strategies for sustaining patriarchal nationalism.

Gender is, of course, central to ideas about biological, racial, sexual, and cultural superiority and hierarchy. In this context, the Okamoto-condom rhetoric enacts a triple move in which rhetoric such as "selling/using Okamoto while fucking Japanese and/or *jingri* to death" combines strong misogynistic and nationalistic sentiments. First, the rhetoric enables a certain politics of identity that evokes pride in Chinese masculinity, which ensures China's capacity to conquer the Japanese biologically and sexually and to effeminize them as inferior because of their supposed inability to protect their women and race. Second, such rhetoric also constructs an ideal patriotic subject that is male and endowed with the physical, financial, and sexual capacity to defend one's nation. Notably, in this rhetoric, financial rewards are derived from the hostile country through the sale of its products and the glamorization of the attention economy. This financial capacity of the so-called patriotic KOLs contrasts strongly against opponents of the Six, who may be patriotic but fail or are reluctant to profit from the ideology business for economic superiority. Moreover, the notions of biological and cultural superiority and inferiority form a contrast between the supporters and opponents of the Six in gendered and sexualized terms. For instance, Friedegg commented, "Okamoto should make special small editions of condoms for the Six, for they have small [genital] sizes. But [the irony is that] their back holes are so loose that a regular-sized condom is too small for it" (personal communication, August 26, 2022). Such an attack again involves othering the economically empowered self-proclaimed Chinese patriots by claiming sexual ownership of and superiority about sexuality and gender, further, in the form of homophobia, challenging the capacity of the Six to demonstrate the chauvinistic ethnonationalism supposedly necessary to protect the country. In all of these disputes, misogyny served to defend and sustain a militarized and masculinist approach to nationalism. In this articulation and mapping of multifaceted and hierarchical masculine patriotism, Chinese women and Japanese of both genders are sexualized, objectified, and claimed by Chinese men, who weave a web of patriotic and misogynistic identities through erotic expressions of patriarchal nationalism.

### Discussions

Digital nationalism and populist expressions in online space are, of course, neither new nor specific to China. The urgency of analyzing platform-based nationalist expressions in China lies in the historical juncture of both the resurgence of populist and misogynist nationalism against a global backdrop of rising far-rightism, populism, jingoism, and digital violence based on gender, sex, sexuality, race, class, and national identities, as well as in the unique Asian histories and cultures rooted in colonialism, imperialism, and techno-nationalism. Thus, our study offers a critical and productive analytical framework of mediated nationalism—a socio-digital engineering of symbolic environment and subject identification that reproduces the nation as an evolving discourse and nationalism as sites of negotiation and performance.

By focusing on a public dispute over patriotism in Sino-Japanese geopolitics, we highlight in this study the complexity and nuanced articulation of nationalism in the coalescing of propaganda from below as an ideological business that was allowed to ferment on Weibo. Some commenters on the platform acutely pointed out that selling patriotism ultimately amounted to doing the kind of thought work that the Chinese state has explicitly promoted, mediated on media platforms, and advocated through support for self-branded patriotic influencers. The intertwining among geopolitics, transnational capitalism, and the platform economy has unraveled in mediated nationalism when confronted with the power, legitimacy, and sources of social and cultural capital that self-branded patriotic influencers and those who opposed them marshaled. Their dominance of the symbolic and discursive materials and space of patriotism positioned the Six advantageously to legitimize their cyber-trolling of the woman in kimono and others who fell short of their standards of patriotism. The acquisition of social and cultural capital enabled the Six to solidify and expand their follower bases and to maintain and enhance their followers' engagement, thereby increasing their commerce and profit in the attention economy.

The critics of the Six showed acute, if implicit, awareness of Weibo's visibility mechanisms when they attributed the power and influence that the Six enjoyed to their forceful occupation of "our public discursive space for patriotism" (mellondog, personal communication, August 22, 2022) and monopoly on "the discursive rights of patriotism" (lushidu, personal communication, August 24, 2022). This awareness and the critics' "anti-selling-nationalism" and "anti-nationalizing-the-sale" discourses on Weibo appear to have been highly political and collective, disrupting the monopoly on narratives of patriotism and providing a critique to the platform economy, though falling short of a systemic critique of capitalism and nationalism. Nonetheless, the intervention demonstrates multiple contradictions amidst the controversy and rupture of nationalist discourses. The fundamental strategy of gaming the algorithm was used by both pro- and anti-Six Weibo users to defend their positions and attack their opponents. The platform has been designed, governed, and used in ways that consistently favor commercial, engaging, and entertaining content, and nationalistic debates that extend into these categories have contributed significantly to the growth of the attention economy.

Further, the online nationalistic environment backs a digital manosphere in which the business of patriotism is simultaneously the business of misogyny. The debate about who has a legitimate claim to being a "true patriot" persists in notions of a masculine China overpowering a feminine Japan through the supposed ability of Chinese men to protect "our women," "our culture," and "our land," amidst discussions where a sense of shame and victimhood about losing "our women," "our culture," and "our land" to Japan in the past has loomed large. This environment nurtures the fusion of patriarchy and nationalism to produce discourse promoting the reproduction and reinforcement of a world replete with sex discrimination, the objectification of women and girls, sexual harassment and abuse, and toxic masculinities that cross gender, sexual, and racial lines. Thus, platform-based nationalist expressions have proliferated as both a participatory activity and a strategy for contesting political, discursive, and economic power and legitimacy to secure individual and institutional benefits while spawning toxic technocultures of misogyny. This is a much-understudied area in China and elsewhere, where future research should and indeed can address the gap with theoretical innovations and empirical evidence of the synergy of digitality, misogyny, and nationalism. Scholars can further develop the framework of mediated nationalism to attend to the process of reproducing the nation, where nationalism intersects with populist, misogynist, and racialized expressions and activities, making the

discourse about the nation less monolithic and cohesive and the patriotic subject formation less straightforward.

As of the writing of this study, an evolving discussion about Weibo's new policy that orders KOLs with a large following to disclose their real names has unfolded (Zhang, 2023). As a highly censored digital universe, whereas backstage real-name authentication has existed for a long time in China, adopting a real-name system at the front stage on social media platforms would mark a watershed in the digital "public" space, if ever clearly defined and operated, and the formation and impact of public discourses, nationalist or not. In this sense, our study will be a useful reference point for future research to examine the new interaction and negotiation between the market logics of platforms and the regulatory logics of the state, which will shuffle the political economy of digital platforms, popular media activities, consumption habits, and media users' practices.

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