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COVID-19 nationalism and the visual construction of sovereignty during China's coronavirus crisis

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Abstract

This article explores how competing actors established, spread, and challenged visual representations of the Chinese nation during the COVID-19 pandemic. It asks: how do official gatekeepers of meaning in China imbue their visual construction of a crisis-hit nation with pathos?; and what happens when their critics utilize the resulting repertoire of visual cues for their own ends? To answer these questions, the article first examines the visual libraries of nationalism and national crisis from which Chinese propaganda drew during the COVID-19 outbreak. It then analyses the struggles that ensued over such representations, specifically the use of national flags and the sentiments they elicit. The analysis traces representations of the flag of the People's Republic of China (PRC) from an initial satirical portrayal in a Danish broadsheet to the angry Chinese backlashes that followed on social media, and it shows how the tensions over such portrayals became part of a meme war over the sovereignty of Hong Kong. The analysis shows how representations of the nation can become a matter of existential anxieties during a time of crisis, especially in highly networked communication environments where authoritative official actors and their supporters are no longer in control of the symbols they established as part of their 'emotional governance'.

Keywords

sovereignty, COVID-19, emotional governance, nationalism, visual communication, visuality

Tempers are boiling over on the transnational gaming platform Steam, where an activist game designer has released a COVID-19-themed video game that mocks the People's Republic of China (PRC) and advocates an independent Hong Kong and Taiwan. The

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comment section of the game is flooded with both English- and Chinese-language vitriol. Detractors call for an immediate ban, on the grounds that the game ‘is racism causing prejudice and misunderstand [*sic*]’, that it uses ‘people’s death for entertainment’, and that it ‘insults the mother country’. ‘Lol, making a game can’t free HK/free TW, be [a] grown-up, get yourself some courage & weapon to start a war at least’, writes one reviewer.¹

Meanwhile, supporters of the game post screenshots of their in-game exploits alongside memes that show President Xi Jinping with a head that resembles a viral particle. In other images, he is spreading the virus in the guise of Winnie-the-Pooh, a cartoon character that critics like to mockingly associate with the PRC president. The positive game reviews, which outnumber the critics three to one, gleefully deride the ‘nmsles from nmsland’, referring to aggressive Chinese nationalists who tend to attack any opposition with slurs such as ‘your mother has died’, a Chinese phrase in pinyin that abbreviates to ‘nmsl’ (你妈死了). The forum threads are flooded with a piece of text-based visual art, or ASCII art, which users copy and paste to the forum and post repeatedly: the image uses computer characters to simulate Xi’s face, with the capital letters NMSL printed on his forehead.

As this exchange on an online gaming platform illustrates, understandings of complex crises such as pandemics can become deeply entwined with the language and imagery of the nation, leading to antagonistic and highly emotional online disputes over issues of sovereignty. It also shows how contributors to these disputes creatively use different modes of mediation to make visual and interactive statements, some of which in turn become the objects of yet further heated contestation and negotiation. Such practices have been particularly visible during the COVID-19 outbreak, when heightened anxieties over life in an uncertain and dangerous world brought to the fore the deep-seated tribal sensibilities of national identification.

This article examines how a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic became entangled with nationalist symbolism and sentiment in the PRC, and it explores how competing actors inside and outside of mainland China established, spread, and challenged visual representations of the Chinese nation during the crisis. How do official actors in China imbue their visual construction of a crisis-hit nation with pathos, and what happens when other media producers, both at home and abroad, utilize the resulting repertoire of visual cues for their own ends?

These questions speak directly to the protracted relation between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and private citizens in a ubiquitously interconnected China, and to the leadership’s attempts to govern PRC subjects in the face of such interconnectivity through emotional appeals to the national community. To better understand these attempts at what I call ‘emotional governance’, this article analyses visual political communication during the COVID-19 outbreak, focusing specifically on the use of national symbols in official propaganda and popular memes. Methodologically, this study combines qualitative tools from semiotics, multimodal discourse analysis, and political iconographic analysis to disentangle and trace the political meanings that actors assemble through interactive chains of visual communication.²

To set the stage for this analysis, the article first explores how nationalism provides a convenient emotive framework for governance in times of crisis. It discusses the role that

visual communication plays in such contexts and then examines the visual libraries of nationalism and national crisis from which Chinese propaganda drew in its emotional governance of the COVID-19 outbreak. The focus is on the iconography used in officially approved posters and on Chinese magazine covers. The article then analyses the struggles that ensued over such representations as various actors redesigned national flags to attack each other's understanding of China's role during the crisis. The analysis traces representations of the PRC flag from an initial satirical portrayal in a Danish broadsheet to the angry Chinese backlashes that followed on social media, and it shows how the tensions over such portrayals later became part of a meme exchange over the sovereignty of Hong Kong, exemplified by the controversial video game *Coronavirus Attack*.

As this analysis shows, representations of the nation can become a matter of existential anxieties during a time of crisis, especially in highly networked communication environments where authoritative official actors and their supporters have flagged nationalism as an appropriate framework of meaning making, but they themselves are no longer in control of the symbols they established as part of their emotional governance. As emotional struggles over the semiotic resources of the nation escalate, so does the willingness to see the respective opposition as a fundamental 'other' with whom no reconciliation is possible.

The visual performance of crisis nationalism

Crises generally provide a test for political performance, and this links them intimately to the legitimacy of and trust in ruling elites.³ As Eric Woods and Robert Schertzer write, pandemics function much like natural disasters in that they 'provoke efforts to attribute responsibility' and 'lay blame at the feet of an individual, group or institution for failing to act appropriately'.⁴ This was apparent in China during the 2003 SARS crisis, which at first threatened to undermine the legitimacy of the CCP as critics homed in on an initially poor crisis response and attempts at a cover-up.⁵ However, as the crisis progressed, the leadership managed to turn the calamity to its advantage, and an important factor in this was propaganda.⁶ Nationalism played a crucial role in this effort: the state made sure to portray health officials and first responders as national heroes and martyrs that beat back the disease. SARS, in these representations, was not merely a test of solidarity for local communities, it became a test of *national* solidarity.

The Chinese leadership has a long history of leveraging nationalist sentiments as part of its legitimation strategy,⁷ and this has certainly been the case during times of crisis. The components for evoking such nationalist discourse have been in place since at least the 1980s, and certainly since the political crisis of the 1989 Tiananmen protests. In the wake of this upheaval, the CCP leadership decided to bolster its political legitimacy through a state-led nationalism that was meant to inspire unity and loyalty among China's vast and diverse populace.⁸ Through patriotic education campaigns and state media propaganda, the authorities weaved together the readily available resources of Chinese history that emphasized suffering at the hands of foreign forces, and the Chinese people's struggle against adversity, to establish the emotionally charged narrative of 'national humiliation' and China's 'road to revival' that today provides a core justification for CCP politics.⁹

While the leadership may have aimed to establish and promote a state-led ‘pragmatic’ nationalism, the reality of nationalism in China quickly took on dynamics that have not been under the leadership’s full control.¹⁰ Primed with the idea that national humiliation and pride mattered as a means of generating meaning in an increasingly complex contemporary society, many Chinese re-appropriated the discursive resources that the nationalist narrative provided and created their own idiosyncratic meanings around the Chinese nation. While some interpret nationalism mainly in terms of national solidarity, others move the nationalist narrative into aggressively reactionary directions, for instance attacking ostensible foreign enemies of the nation.¹¹

Xenophobia has been a recurring theme in nationalist discourses, and it has indeed come to the fore strongly during the COVID-19 crisis. Cynthia Miller-Idriss points out the ‘dehumanizing language about “dirty” immigrants carrying disease’ that populist nationalists around the world have used extensively.¹² Eva Nossem similarly illustrates how naming diseases after countries (e.g. ‘Spanish flu’ and ‘Chinese virus’) serves as a form of ‘linguistic (re-)bordering’, a practice of ‘disease-based othering’ in which ‘the disease is assigned to a specific location outside of one’s own borders and thus created as something foreign, which is then seen as a threat to the nation from the outside’.¹³ As Chris Hughes explains, in China such xenophobic sentiments have ‘been fed by the narrative that the Party is fighting and winning a “war” against a virus that was sent by the United States and is being spread by foreigners. There have been particularly serious cases of racism towards Africans, due to the erroneous belief that they are unhygienic carriers.’¹⁴

These observations capture a core feature of nationalism: it relies on simplistic us-vs-them categories and strong emotional commitments to the ‘in-group’ that can quickly turn sour when unsettled,¹⁵ for instance during times of crisis when people are confronted with unprecedented uncertainties and a general loss of agency. While the dehumanizing language and linguistic (re-)bordering that other scholars have observed during such crises are certainly important communicative vectors of discourse, nationalist messages are not solely textual. In fact, they unfold much of their emotional potential when they are communicated visually.

Such visual communication is not merely relevant because of the perceived immediacy with which images ‘illustrate’ their subject matter, but they also directly construct politics ‘as visual performances that viscerally move and connect people in unexpected ways’, as William Callahan puts it.¹⁶ Chinese propaganda has long recognized this potential, and it relies heavily on a small repertoire of recognizable visual cues meant to elicit strong sentiments such as fear, anger, solidarity, or pride. Propaganda in past crises illustrates how these visual tropes work, for instance when the authorities represented the Sichuan earthquake by using images of human hands that were either reaching out in search of aid or clasped together in solidarity; such visual cues invite emotional investment in otherwise stale propaganda slogans such as ‘in solidarity there is strength’ (团结就是力量), and in this way attempt to structure the landscape of ‘correct’ emotional responses to communal politics.¹⁷ I refer to these practices as emotional governance, which I understand as the process of indirectly regulating society by inviting or prompting actors to invest themselves emotionally in certain political principles, institutions, or processes. Emotional governance is any authoritative action that aims to manage the

emotional context within which a political issue is situated. As other scholars have pointed out, such emotional governance empowers the state to create ‘subjects for the sake of political projects and of capital valorisation’, for instance in the education and training of the working class.¹⁸ Such governance activities are aimed at synchronizing the feelings that diverse citizens experience as they ritualistically engage with the artefacts of the nation. In pursuit of this effect, the Chinese authorities are constantly at work creating a set of what I would call ‘watch signs’, the visual equivalent of the CCP’s famous ‘watchwords’ (提法): ritualized formulations that capture the CCP’s most relevant ideological concepts and condense them into recognizable, emotive memes.¹⁹

Marion Müller and Arvid Kappas call such use of emotive visual patterns ‘pathos formulae’,²⁰ and the Chinese propaganda system uses such patterns to great effect in materials that transcend the reach of propaganda posters or public service announcements. Through its ideological monopoly over all state media, the party is able to inject its repertoire of symbols into anything from news broadcasts to ‘main melody’ (read: officially approved) entertainment. This has the effect of saturating China’s visual landscape with curated visual elements, to the point that private actors such as commercial content producers in television, film, and gaming adopt these components and integrate them into their own entertainment efforts. For such producers, the officially approved visual vocabulary provides a convenient way to create products that are politically ‘safe’, but it also offers a set of widely recognizable, collectively shared shorthand representations for common emotions and associations that can be put to work for commercial purposes.

The challenge of maintaining such a governance approach is that images and their associations are never truly fixed, and as they circulate through ever more complex communication networks, they can take on a life of their own. As Marion Müller and Stephanie Geise clarify, ‘The actual image motif becomes transportable, divorced from any concrete carrier medium, and simultaneously available globally for further image operations, which can lead to intensification and addition of, but also shifts in, meaning.’²¹ Such shifts in meaning have received extensive scholarly attention in the Chinese case, where diverse actors frequently reappropriate and remediate political meanings. Chinese political discourses are full of ruptures created by sarcastic criticism or subaltern media practices.²² Particularly online satire, or digitized parody (恶搞), is frequently ‘emblematic of the cultural incoherence, inconsistency, and hybridity of China’s postsocialist condition’.²³ The visible mainstream representations then often hide a vast array of critical attitudes, as was illustrated vividly by the debates of Chinese politics that took place on the audio-chat app Clubhouse in early 2021.²⁴ However, the political actors who attempt to govern what Erving Goffman famously called the ‘front stage’ of communicative behaviour continue to expend a great deal of effort to relegate such inconsistencies to ‘back stage’ realms and guide public discourse into approved channels.²⁵ The fate of the chat-app Clubhouse in China is telling, in this regard: it was quickly banned when it gained popularity, making the open discussions that had been taking place there short-lived.

Visualizing the ‘people’s war’ against the pandemic

China’s media networks are infused with officially sanctioned visual artefacts, and today these artefacts often evoke sentiments of belonging to the ‘imagined community’ of the

nation.²⁶ The COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan is an example of what happens when diverse actors reappropriate the artefacts that political elites created in their attempts to inspire collective identification and reinvigorate popular emotional investment in the idea of national sovereignty.²⁷ A useful place to explore how party and state authorities pushed a particular set of nationalist tropes during the COVID-19 pandemic is the iconography of officially approved posters, artworks, and magazine covers. Such outlets have generally played an important role in the mass media, due to their ability to make complex political statements on a single page, shape the agenda of public debates, and frame how a topic should be understood at an immediate, visceral, visual level.²⁸ This means that such visually potent sources do not just move certain topics quite literally into the public eye, but that they further invite viewers to accept certain attributes and emotional cues as the correct lens through which to interpret the topic.²⁹

The CCP has long recognized the political power of images, making extensive use of the watch signs discussed earlier. Traditionally, many of these signs were linked to the Chinese revolution, especially during the Mao era, when visual politics were grounded exclusively in socialist realist understandings of art, for instance in propaganda posters.³⁰ Some of these propaganda campaigns also addressed issues of health and disease, often presenting model workers, for example in the promotion of ‘barefoot doctors’.³¹ At other times, representations resorted to the language and imagery of struggle and war, for instance in the way the CCP promoted the ‘Four Pests Campaign’ and ‘Patriotic Health Campaign’, though those efforts have to be understood in the context of the Korean War and general anti-imperialist concerns over potential US ‘germ warfare’.³² While contemporary political art and propaganda still rely on some of this imagery, they also draw from visual representations that either evoke hyper-modern and at times science-fictional visualizations of the Chinese present or hark back to historic visual styles, for instance Republican-era iconography or even pre-modern landscape painting and calligraphy. Examples of this juxtaposition of styles were evident, for instance, in the propaganda campaign that promoted the China Dream in 2012 and 2013.³³

The state’s efforts to address the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020 were also flanked by a substantial amount of art and visual propaganda, the production of which was to some extent ‘outsourced’ to the wider public to generate a sense of grass-roots participation. Representative in this regard were the activities of the China Artists Association (中国美术家协会), an organization subordinated to the CCP’s propaganda department. The association issued a call for artworks that illustrated the ‘people’s war against the epidemic’ (人民战疫), and Chinese propaganda outlets such as the *People’s Daily Online* (人民网) later curated the pieces that did the best job.

These artworks draw from a circumscribed range of discursive and semiotic mechanisms, including the frequent depiction of heroic health personnel fighting viral particles that are rendered as monsters or anthropomorphized cartoon creatures. Health advice is also common, and many of the artworks double as public service announcements for health and safety, in the vein of past propaganda poster campaigns.³⁴ Some artists aim for a more intimate tone, for instance by showing a little girl who proudly points out her aunt and uncle on national television among a group of enthusiastic health workers, or a medical professional watching a cute Lunar New Year’s message that her little daughter sent



Figure 1. Officially approved artworks illustrating the ‘people’s war against the epidemic’. Source: Compiled by the author. To view these images, visit the website ‘人民战“疫”文艺作品 | 画笔作枪 抗击疫情 (漫画篇) (Artworks on the ‘People’s war against the “pandemic”’: Brushes used as guns in fighting against COVID-19 (the chapter on comics)), 3 February 2020, <http://art.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0203/c41426-31568578.html>, accessed 5 June 2021.

to her mobile device. The contributions thus run the gamut from heart-warming to combative, but the tone is in any case highly emotive and maintains a positive spin.

Among the recurring tropes is the frequent flagging of the national context. I have compiled four examples in Figure 1. As these posters illustrate, the discourse presents the COVID-19 crisis as a ‘war’, fought not just by people in the city of Wuhan, but by the entire nation. The title of the first image from the left is ‘Resist pneumonia’ (抗击肺炎), a phrase that evokes China’s War of Resistance against Japan. As Hughes has pointed out about such discursive moves, ‘by describing the campaign in terms of a “people’s war,” it can also be linked with the narrative of the CCP’s “salvation of the nation” from Japanese aggression’, which amps up the urgency of the crisis and connects it to a perennial hot-button issue in Chinese political discourse: the deeply felt humiliation at the hands of foreign imperialist forces during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.³⁵

Importantly, the poster clarifies that it is not just Wuhan that ‘will prevail’, but rather all of China. The massive national flag in the background that overshadows the small, stylized image of Wuhan further drives home the point that indeed everyone (read: the entire nation) is ‘united together’. The second poster from the left similarly makes it clear that ‘defending Wuhan’ is tantamount to ‘defending all of China’. Here, too, Wuhan’s iconic landmark – the Yellow Crane Tower – is placed before the backdrop of a national icon, the Great Wall of China, tinted in the national colour red. Red also plays a central role in the artwork ‘Divine troops descend from heaven’ (Figure 1, third from the left), where the red parachutes of relief troops carrying gigantic syringes and other medical props sync up with the red supply plane with its hammer-and-sickle logo (the emblem of the CCP), clarifying visually that the party is China’s saviour. The fourth poster from the left, titled ‘Drive out the devil’, uses a more socialist realist iconography, showing the silhouettes of masked workers nailing a comic viral particle to the ground. One worker is wearing the Chinese national flag as an armband, reinforcing yet again the impression that the figure in the image stands for the PRC as a whole.

This conflation of nationalist and CCP symbols, together with the iconography and language of war, collapses the entire Chinese population into one unified force, locked into an existential struggle with the virus. This is also the message the *People's Daily Online* presents in its preface to the art collection. It writes the following about the artists:

Together with the whole nation, under the strong leadership of the CCP Central Committee, they lead each other hand in hand; in unity there is strength; they devote their power to seize the final victory over the epidemic!³⁶

To explore whether this general sentiment was also reflected on the covers of Chinese news magazines, I monitored major Chinese media outlets throughout early 2020.³⁷ While commercial and more liberal magazines such as *Caixin Weekly* (财新周刊) and *Sanlian Life Weekly* (三联生活周刊) kept their focus mostly on the nation's healthcare workers and their plight, using more muted visuals than some of the publications that were strongly state- or party-affiliated (e.g. the Central Committee's *China Newsweek* (中国新闻周刊), or the Guangdong Provincial Party Committee's *Southern Weekly* (南方周末)), they still framed their representations in the language of war. Newsstands across the country were thus decked out with images of a national battle.

A particularly instructive case is the *Xinmin Weekly* (新民周刊), which exemplifies many of the visual and discursive choices on Chinese news magazine covers at the time. *Xinmin Weekly* is published by China's largest newspaper conglomerate, the state-run Shanghai United Media Group. Like many news publications in China, the magazine is part of the state media system, and thus beholden to general propaganda directives. However, since its purpose is also to remain lucrative in China's competitive news market, it retains some leeway when it comes to interpreting those directives in ways that promise to reach a broad audience.³⁸ Considering its scope and popularity, *Xinmin Weekly* is an excellent barometer for how commercial media reuse official cues to sell complex, controversial topics to an informed cosmopolitan readership.

What does an analysis of *Xinmin Weekly* covers reveal? While some of its post-lockdown issues presented imagery related to science and medicine (syringes, lab equipment, and medical professionals in safety attire), many of the covers that the magazine published during the height of the crisis in China took a martial, nationalistic tone. Figure 2 illustrates four noteworthy examples.

Again, several tropes stand out. The magazine follows the general nationwide practice of framing the crisis as a 'war against the epidemic' (issue 4), calling for a 'general offensive' against the disease (issue 6), and promising to provide a faithful record of the 'decisive campaign' in Hubei Province (issue 5) and the 'brave fight on the Wuhan front line' (issue 11). Granted, background visuals anchor this discourse in the city of Wuhan, for example through maps and through images of the Yellow Crane Tower and other famous vistas, at least one issue (no. 11) also speaks directly to Shanghai readers by referencing the experience of Shanghai medical workers in Wuhan. However, additional headlines make it clear that the crisis is not a local issue: 'If Hubei [Province] wins, the whole country wins', reads a headline in issue 5.



Figure 2. *Xinmin Weekly* magazine covers published in early 2020.

Note: From the left, issues 4, 5, 6, and 11.

Source: Compiled by the author from *Xinmin Weekly*'s official website. The corpus of the magazine's covers is available at <http://www.xinminweekly.com.cn/wqframe/>, accessed 5 June 2021.

Particularly intriguing in this context is the depiction of medical workers, which takes a cue both from the anti-SARS propaganda of 2003 and from Mao-era iconography: the three medical workers on the covers of issues 6 and 11 stride forward with purpose, and on the cover of issue 6 they stare into the distance with the characteristic 'socialist realist gaze' familiar from early revolutionary propaganda.³⁹ The heroes are otherwise nondescript, much like the heroes of the revolution: in depictions such as those that grace the Monument to the People's Heroes on Tiananmen Square, the faces of heroes and martyrs are intentionally left generic so as to imply that it is every Chinese who is struggling for the cause.⁴⁰ The masked men and women of the 'front line troops' depicted by *Xinming Weekly*, and by many other news publications at the time, also leave the identity of the medical workers obscure, creating a similar archetype of the hero that effectively stands for the entire nation. This visual representation is by no means made inevitable by the circumstances, which of course force medical workers to wear protective gear that obscures their faces: it would be entirely possible to depict the faces underneath the masks, to assign identities and personality traits, but this is not the editorial choice that most print covers make. Instead, they create a homogenous impression of the 'combatants' on the 'front line'.

Chinese news media indeed drew symbolic representations from a recognizable iconography that the party had established over years and even decades as the officially sanctioned repertoire of communicative resources. Through their own example, and the workings of party and state media politics, the authorities narrowed what Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann call the 'symbolic universe': a generally accepted, recognizable set of tropes that serve to legitimate social and political institutions.⁴¹ The central workings of emotional governance are on display here. The various mainstream media representations provide the building blocks for both institutional and personal meaning making, inviting viewers to conflate nation, state, and crisis into a single narrative network associated with deep-seated emotions. Much like with other cultural artefacts that become part of emotional work and identity processes, any re-appropriation, let alone abuse of such an associative network, can then lead to severe resentment and anger.

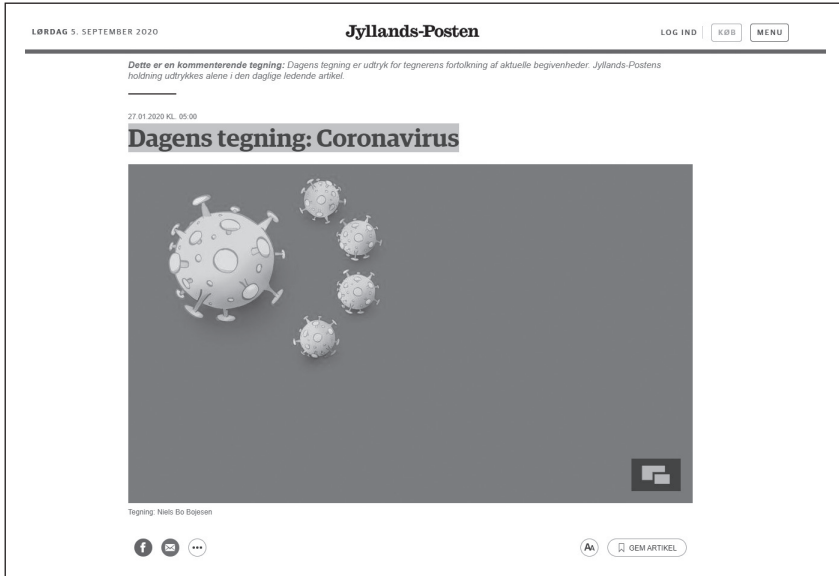


Figure 3. Screenshot of the *Jyllands-Posten* caricature of the PRC flag during the coronavirus pandemic.

Source: Niels Bo Bojesen, Dagens tegning: Coronavirus (Today's drawing: Coronavirus), *Jyllands-Posten*, 27 January 2020, <https://jyllands-posten.dk/opinion/tegning/ECE11898365/dagens-tegning-coronavirus/>, accessed 5 June 2021.

From health crisis to emotional crisis

Such anger was indeed sparked in late January 2020, when the Danish broadsheet *Jyllands-Posten* ran a caricature by Niels Bo Bojesen, an editorial cartoonist who frequently uses the symbolism of national and regional flags to provide satirical visual commentary on contemporary politics, including human rights issues in China.⁴² In the caricature, Bojesen takes a stab at the PRC national flag: instead of the five golden stars that adorn the flag in the upper-left quadrant, which depict the CCP and the four social classes of revolutionary China (workers, peasants, petite bourgeoisie, and national bourgeoisie), the cartoon shows five golden virus particles (see Figure 3).

Jyllands-Posten had previously courted controversy over its caricatures, for instance during a widely publicized dispute over depictions of the prophet Muhammad in 2005.⁴³ Giseline Kuipers has referred to such disputes as 'humour scandals', describing them as 'public controversies about transgressive humour' that dramatize wider 'moral and political rifts'.⁴⁴ A similar humour scandal erupted around the Chinese flag caricature in 2020, and it quickly developed into a crisis of its own. The broadsheet saw itself confronted with widespread criticism, not just from China, but notably from both PRC state officials and citizens. The newspaper published such a critique in its own pages, a commentary by the Chinese ambassador to Denmark, Feng Tie, in which Feng calls the satire 'shocking and deeply insulting to the Chinese people'. Feng goes on to warn Danes that 280 million

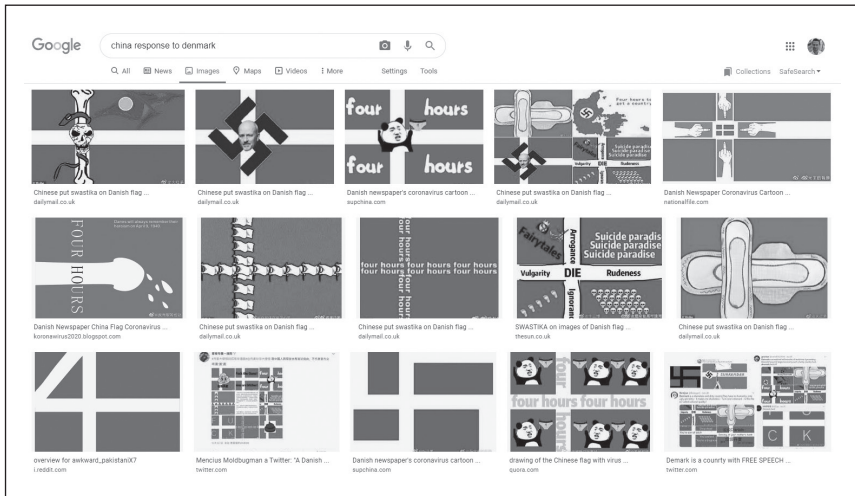


Figure 4. Screenshot of the results of an online search showing caricatures of the Danish flag, 5 September 2020.

Source: The author used Google Images and the search term 'china response to denmark', <https://www.google.com/imghp?hl=en>, last accessed 5 September 2020.

social media users had already been outraged by the caricature, and that this 'may harm Denmark more by destroying Denmark's reputation in China and possibly elsewhere in the world'.⁴⁵ Note how Feng chose not to focus on, for instance, the responsibility of the individual artist and editors, but instead readily conflated the actions of an independent media outlet with an entire country, creating a narrative that presented the events as a conflict between nations.

He was not alone in evoking the framework of national identification to voice his dissatisfaction. Chinese online users were quick to retaliate by satirizing the Danish flag, posting caricatures of their own on social media (see Figure 4). These flag representations reached deep into the trove of cultural stereotypes and mobilized the kind of crude memes familiar to students of Chinese online satire.⁴⁶ References to World War II were particularly common, with commentators revelling in the fact that, on 9 April 1940, the Danish authorities had surrendered to Hitler's surprise invasion after only about four hours of resistance. The phrase 'four hours', the numeral 4, as well as swastikas and white flags of surrender consequently played a dominant role in the various memes.

Much like what Feng had done in his *Jyllands-Posten* op-ed, Chinese online users picked up on the national context that Bojesen's caricature had quite literally 'flagged' through its use of the PRC's national symbol, and they then extended that context to its seemingly natural conclusion: the idea that insults and injuries were being traded by entire nations. And yet, while defenders of the PRC flag were trying to defend their national symbols, other actors in East Asia were already picking up the iconographic building blocks and were deploying them for their own political projects.

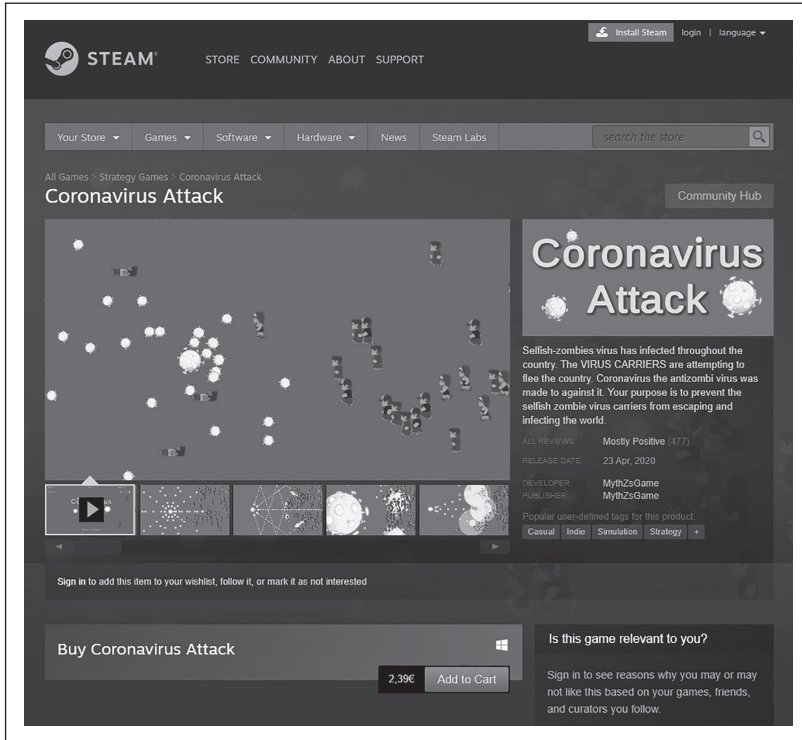


Figure 5. Screenshot of the game *Coronavirus Attack* on the PC-gaming platform Steam. Source: *Coronavirus Attack*, Steam, https://store.steampowered.com/app/126500/Coronavirus_Attack/, last accessed 25 April 2020 [no longer available].

Meme wars and the Milk Tea Alliance

Such was the case on 23 April 2020, when game designer MythZsGame published the video game *Coronavirus Attack*. MythZ, an anonymous activist, released the game for personal computers via the transnational gaming platform Steam. The game *Coronavirus Attack* (Figure 5) takes the form of a side-scrolling shooter, in which the player steps into the role of a golden virus particle that zips around before a red backdrop. The task: to shoot (read: kill) a never-ending horde of ‘zombies’ that appear on the right-hand side of the screen and try to cross to the left. As the developer writes: ‘Your purpose is to prevent the selfish zombie virus carriers from escaping and infecting the world.’ It was not lost on Steam users like those I quoted at the start of this article that the designer was effectively portraying all Chinese as diseased zombie hordes, and that the creator was insinuating that death by COVID-19 provided the ‘solution’ to this ‘problem’. Steam soon removed the game from its Chinese site,⁴⁷ and it later pulled the publication globally, along with much of the comment section, presumably due to complaints that the game’s political message, its thinly veiled racism, and the aggressive discussions it evoked were in violation of the platform’s terms of service.

L	Pink Wu Mao NMSL 08	15.1%
台	Taiwan is Not China 01	14.3%
灣	Taiwan is Not China 02	13.8%
中	Taiwan is Not China 03	13.1%
國	Taiwan is Not China 04	12.7%
一	Taiwan is Not China 05	12.3%
邊	Taiwan is Not China 06	12.0%
一	Taiwan is Not China 07	11.8%
光	Liberate Hong Kong 01	11.8%
國	Taiwan is Not China 08	11.6%
復	Liberate Hong Kong 02	11.6%

Figure 6. Screenshot of in-game achievements for *Coronavirus Attack* on the Steam platform. Source: Global gameplay stats: *Coronavirus Attack*, Steam, <https://steamcommunity.com/stats/1265000/achievements>, last accessed 5 September 2020.

The game's symbolism is hardly subtle, but it is intriguing how its iconography is inspired by Bojesen's caricature in *Jyllands-Posten*. In fact, it seems that Bojesen's flag satire has become a popular trope among anti-China activists more generally. As various news reports showed in early 2020 (e.g. *Reuters*, *South China Morning Post*, *Al Jazeera*, the *New York Times*, and others), printed versions of the flag served Hong Kong localists as picket signs in their protests, for instance during a strike on 3 February 2020, when medical workers demanded better work conditions and a closure of all border crossings from the mainland. The news outlets that had originally published photographs of these signs have since largely removed those images, possibly because of their offensive nature: the signs contemptuously referred to China as 'Shina', a derogatory term used by Japanese colonialists during World War II, and they contained crude expletives such as 'f*** your mother', which may not have reflected the views of the unionized healthcare workers.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the use of the flag caricature during the protests reinforced the general sentiment that the hardship of Hong Kong medical workers had been caused by 'China'.

The game *Coronavirus Attack* uses a similar framework to communicate its activist agenda. Most notably, players score achievements throughout the game, and these achievements are predominantly accompanied by political slogans (see Figure 6 for

examples). This includes derision of potential antagonists, such as nmslese mentioned earlier, as well as ‘pink *wumao*’, a combination of the terms ‘little pink’ (小粉红), which is a reference to young Chinese nationalists, and ‘fifty cents party’ (五毛党), which refers to Chinese online commentators who are presumably paid by the CCP for their pro-China astroturfing.⁴⁹ The achievement list also contains references to sensitive dates such as ‘9.18’, the day imperial Japan started the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1931, and ‘1989.6.4’, the day of the Tiananmen Massacre. But maybe most notably, the achievements speak to issues of sovereignty, demanding that the PRC ‘free Tibet’, ‘release Xinjiang’, and ‘liberate Hong Kong’; they also insist that ‘Taiwan is not China’.

Overall, Hong Kong is mentioned most frequently in these achievements, but the collection of themes suggests transnational concerns inspired by the ‘meme wars’ between Chinese online nationalists and members of the so-called Milk Tea Alliance that had emerged in April 2020, just before *Coronavirus Attack* was published. The term ‘Milk Tea Alliance’ refers to a union of online commentators and activists from East Asian societies that identify with a shared preference for sugary milk-tea beverages. Most notably, this includes Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand. What had united these online activists in April 2020 were the activities of aggressive mainland Chinese nationalists, who had attacked a Thai popstar and his girlfriend for implying, on social media, that Hong Kong and Taiwan were independent entities. As Chinese online commentators attacked ‘Thailand’ and Thais more broadly, Thai Internet users responded by demonstrating a self-deprecating and relaxed humour that was diametrically opposed to the angry nationalist vitriol visible in Chinese online comments.⁵⁰ These Thai commentators were quickly joined by like-minded online users from Taiwan and Hong Kong, and the activism of *Coronavirus Attack* should be understood in this context, even if it does not contain the kind of self-deprecation that observers associated with the Milk Tea Alliance at the time.

Still, the game’s comment section and its art gallery suggest that many of the commentators were familiar with, or even steeped in, the tropes of the meme exchange between nmslese and Milk Tea Alliance. Visually, the memes then also drew from a transnational repertoire of visual cues that have come to shape criticism of PRC politics, both domestically and abroad. I have compiled four examples in Figure 7.

These four memes illustrate how online critics of PRC politics creatively combined three different sources of meaning as they were generating visual statements about PRC politics. The first of these inputs is the coronavirus, represented as viral particles in an attempt to visualize this invisible agent; a practice that became common both in the PRC and elsewhere. The second is the Chinese leadership, represented by Xi Jinping. Xi is shown either directly or is alluded to, for instance using images and silhouettes of Winnie-the-Pooh. The third input is again the national flag. In two cases, references to the flag are explicit, for instance when Xi is rendered as a baby wearing the flag as a nappy, or when the stars in the flag are replaced with five Winnie-the-Pooh faces. In the other two cases, the connection is more implicit, showing the silhouette of Winnie-the-Pooh blowing yellow dandelion seeds that look like viral particles across a red background, or depicting Xi as wearing a retro uniform in the flag’s colours.

These depictions in many ways logically extended the very frames of reference that PRC propaganda had worked so hard to fuse into a positive, legitimating representation of its crisis performance: nation, state, and virus collapsed into a single unit. But that

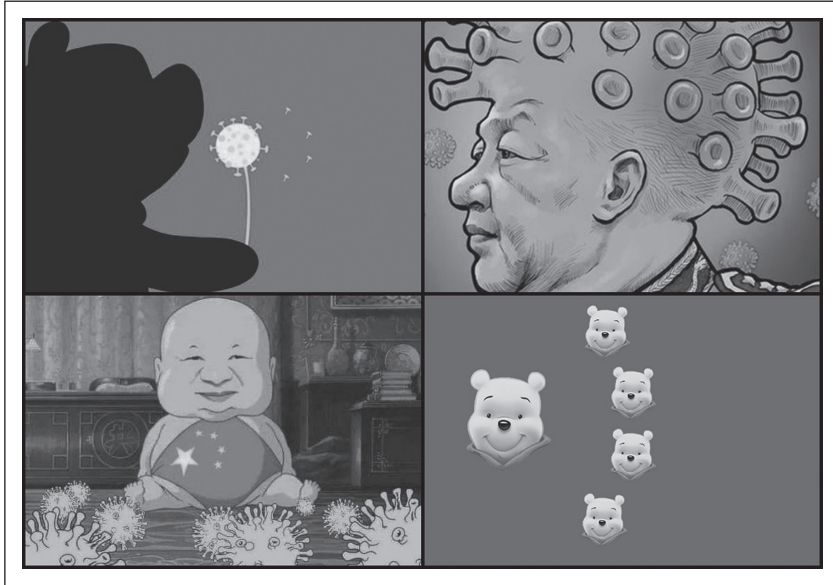


Figure 7. Anti-PRC memes on the Steam platform.

Source: Author's compilation from Steam's official website. For a collection of this art gallery, see <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1265000/images/>, last accessed 5 September 2020.

unity was now re-coded using satirical cues to insinuate that 'China' was directly responsible for the coronavirus outbreak. Considering the potency of this message, it should not come as a surprise that exchanges on Steam's message boards quickly devolved into a toxic shouting match between opposing actors, each committed to irreconcilable narratives of the Chinese nation and its role during the pandemic. While it is not the purpose of this article to analyse the discursive patterns of these exchanges – an issue that deserves further research – it is worth pointing out that positive and negative comment threads on Steam seemed to mostly exist in isolation from each other. In some cases, opposing views were expressed in the same thread, but they were then overwhelmingly showered with expletives and derision. Mostly, the threads consisted of critics or supporters of the game, each signalling their righteousness to their own respective in-group.

It is then also an open question how this behaviour compares to the online activism of the Milk Tea Alliance commentators, which Dan McDevitt describes as successfully subverting the aggressive nationalist frames that Chinese online commentators relied on in their memes.⁵¹ It is beyond the scope of this article to establish whether such subversion actually remained sustainable on Thai, Hong Kong, and Taiwanese online forums, but the spin-off discussions surrounding *Coronavirus Attack* on Steam at least suggest that no subtle subversion emerged in this case. Whether it was commentators who asserted PRC sovereignty over Taiwan and Hong Kong or activists who conversely promoted independence for these regions, the language and iconography of nationalism was ever-present, and an aggressive, hateful tone prevailed that provided little hope of dialogue and exchange. Instead, advocates on each side used what John Morreall has called

the 'play frame', that is the pretence of light-hearted triviality aimed merely at a humorous exchange, to immunize their own prejudices against meaningful criticism.⁵²

Discussion and conclusion

This article examined how the PRC propaganda system used the visual resources of its long-established symbolic universe in its emotional governance of the COVID-19 outbreak, and how counter-narratives re-appropriated those resources to criticize the PRC's crisis response, challenge the leadership's legitimacy, and make claims about the sovereignty of regions such as Hong Kong and Taiwan. As I have shown, this counter-discourse was emboldened in no small part by the conflation of nation, state, and virus that Chinese propaganda and media outlets relied on as they represented the pandemic as an existential crisis for the entire Chinese nation. Much was at stake in these representations, and this assemblage of nationalist meanings was then both vulnerable to deconstruction and re-coding as well as subject to intensely emotional contestations.

When one Danish cartoonist created his own satirical nexus between the virus and the Chinese nation-state, both official and non-official Chinese responses quickly bought into the national framework that the cartoon had earmarked. As they voiced their discontent, more nationalist meaning making followed, with Chinese online users retaliating by creating Danish flag satires of their own. But the Danish cartoon would not be shut down. Instead, it travelled, and it came to serve as a semiotic resource for critics of the PRC, who in turn generated new memes that shifted the meaning by insinuating a connection between the Chinese nation, its leadership, and the pandemic. These representations, for instance during street protests in Hong Kong, made the case that it was 'China', as a unified actor, who was responsible for the pandemic. The video game *Coronavirus Attack* provided an interactive take on this theme, using the same iconography that the Danish cartoon had established to make less-than-subtle demands for Hong Kong and Taiwan independence. As incensed mainland gamers derided the game and its political agenda, supporters rehearsed the online disputes that had emerged between Chinese online nationalists and members of the so-called Milk Tea Alliance, producing yet another series of emotive visualizations of China and the virus.

What should we then make of these struggles over systems of meaning making and emotions during times of crisis? It might be tempting to interpret these developments as a case where Chinese nationalist visual discourses became undermined by activists who resisted the overarching narrative and challenged it in transnational online networks. However, it is important to keep in mind that while these activists may have challenged Chinese representation of the nation, they did not actually undermine the meta-narrative of nationalism. They, too, returned to the readily available well of nationalist symbols to visualize the crisis and provoke emotional responses. These activities were examples of (re-)bordering, not just of the linguistic kind that Nossem has discussed,⁵³ but also of a visual and emotional kind. Critics from Hong Kong and Taiwan were rendering China as fundamentally alien, and they were doing so by drawing up precisely the dichotomies between outside and inside, us and them, familiar and 'other' on which nationalism relies. In so doing, they did not oppose Chinese nationalism by presenting alternatives. They simply confronted it with different nationalisms, in this instance nationalisms that promoted an independent Hong Kong and Taiwan.



Figure 8. Iconography of national struggle.

Source: Compiled by the author. Image 1: *Liberty Leading the People*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberty_Leading_the_People, accessed 2 July 2021; Image 2: 战疫之路,来看美术 作品的生命力!(漫画篇) (On the road to ending the pandemic, see the life force of art works! (the chapter on comics)), 11 February 2020, https://www.sohu.com/a/372213840_297571, accessed 2 July 2021; and Image 3: Fight for Hong Kong, <https://nl.pinterest.com/pin/705798572837697071/>, accessed 2 July 2021.

It is then also telling how both mainland and Hong Kong compatriots used precisely the same iconography of nationalism to frame their respective crises. This is evident in Figure 8, which illustrates how COVID-19 propaganda art from the PRC (image 2) and Hong Kong protest art (image 3) each made their struggle legible as national pursuits for liberty, using the template of Eugène Delacroix's famous 1830 painting *Liberty Leading the People* (image 1) to draw a direct connection to one of the most influential templates of nationalism: modern France.

Ultimately, each side in this debate then remained committed to the same framework of nationalism, both in verbal discourses and visual art. We should of course be careful not to extrapolate from such communicative patterns and artistic representations that all 'Chinese' were buying into nationalist understandings of China and the virus, and Chenchen Zhang has rightly stressed that 'the diversity of opinions and the creative

expression of criticism despite strict censorship should never be underestimated. Representing the country as a monolithic whole and disregarding the agency of its citizens is a key component of the binary thinking' that lies at the heart of nationalism.⁵⁴ However, if there were voices advocating a more cosmopolitan or humanist understanding of the crises surrounding COVID-19 and Hong Kong's political status, then those voices were drowned out by incessant complaints, vicious mockery, and crude visual insults, at least on the Steam platform.

The strong emotional dimension of these exchanges follows logically from the fact that fundamental understandings of identity were at stake. The escalation and entrenchment of these emotional responses should be a matter of concern: as Lita Crociani-Windland and Paul Hoggett have pointed out, the somatic reaction that such activities elicit can become an end in its own right.⁵⁵ It can become a powerful driver in community construction. When grievances are constantly repeated, the repetition itself becomes a ritual of bordering and splitting that serves as 'a source of affectively charged enjoyment, where the pleasure of not having to think is not only amplified, but glorified. There is a displacement of where and what kind of boundaries are best employed in the service of collective health.'⁵⁶ The authors suggest that the only useful response to such affect-charged attacks is 'questioning without retaliating',⁵⁷ though whether this is a realistic proposition in the face of seemingly humorous derision is doubtful. As Kuipers has highlighted, the 'humour regimes' that govern the 'non-serious and irreverent communicative mode' of a perceived community 'are infused with power' while simultaneously allowing the communicative agents to shirk responsibility for their use of that power.⁵⁸ She goes on to argue that 'this leads to deadlock or victory for the viewpoint of the loudest or strongest',⁵⁹ and such deadlock is indeed evident in the disputes between angered Chinese and Hong Kong nationalists.

At first glance, the COVID-19 crisis may seem like a success story of Chinese emotional governance, illustrating how a nation-state's leadership can effectively legitimate itself and inspire unity through nationalist messages during a time of uncertainty. However, as the leadership 'flags' the nation and its symbols as the primary locus for meaning making and emotional investment, it simultaneously hands its detractors the tools for potentially disruptive interventions into the emotional structures that fuel the state's nationalist project. The same components that are meant to inspire unity and promote Chinese sovereignty become tools for bordering and rebordering exercises along China's periphery that cement the very community divisions they were supposed to mend. What is more, rather than inspire resilience in its citizens in the face of such challenges, the state's overbearing nationalist emotional governance has atrophied the ability of many to react with dignity to perceived attacks on the nation and its sovereignty. Much like with previous crises, the PRC may yet overcome this specific health crisis, but that success comes at the cost of an emotional crisis that is bound to run deeper and last longer than any pandemic.

Notes

1. See users' reviews on *Coronavirus Attack*, https://steamcommunity.com/app/1265000/reviews/?l=english&browsefilter=toprated&snr=1_5_100010_&filterLanguage=all, accessed 5 June 2021.

2. On semiotics, see Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, 2nd edn, Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006; for a multimodal analysis, see Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication*, London: Arnold, 2001; and on political iconography, see Marion G. Müller and Stephanie Geise, *Grundlagen der Visuellen Kommunikation* (Foundations in visual communication), 2nd edn, Konstanz, Germany: Universitätsverlag Konstanz, 2015.
3. Daniel Levine et al., Trust and the coronavirus pandemic: What are the consequences of and for trust? An early review of the literature, *Political Studies Review* 19(2), 2021: 274–85.
4. See Eric Taylor Woods et al., COVID-19, nationalism, and the politics of crisis: A scholarly exchange, *Nations and Nationalism* 26(4), 2020: 820.
5. On SARS in China, see Erik Eckholm, SARS in Beijing: The unraveling of a cover-up, in Arthur Kleinman and James L. Watson (eds) *SARS in China: Prelude to Pandemic?*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006, 122–32; Patricia M. Thornton, Crisis and governance: SARS and the resilience of the Chinese body politic, *China Journal* 61, 2009: 23–48.
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8. State-led nationalism in China is covered by Suisheng Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.
9. See William A. Callahan, *China: The Pessoptimist Nation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Specifically on patriotic education, see Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, 95–117.
10. Pragmatic nationalism is discussed in Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction*. On popular nationalism, see Peter Hays Gries, *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.
11. See James Leibold, More than a category: Han supremacism on the Chinese Internet, *China Quarterly* 203, 2010: 539–59.
12. In Woods et al., COVID-19, nationalism, and the politics of crisis, 817.
13. Eva Nossem, The pandemic of nationalism and the nationalism of pandemics, *UniGR-CBS Working Paper* vol. 8, 21 April 2020, <https://doi.org/10.25353/ubtr-xxxx-1073-4da7>, accessed 5 June 2021.
14. In Woods et al., COVID-19, nationalism, and the politics of crisis, 814.
15. Gries, *China's New Nationalism*, 100.
16. William A. Callahan, *Sensible Politics: Visualizing International Relations*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020, 45.
17. See Florian Schneider and Yih-jye Hwang, The Sichuan earthquake and the heavenly mandate: Legitimizing Chinese rule through disaster discourse, *Journal of Contemporary China* 23(88), 2014: 636–56.
18. Ngai Pun and Jack Qiu, 'Emotional authoritarianism': State, education and the mobile working-class subjects, *Mobilities* 15(4), 2020: 622–3.
19. Specifically on watchwords, see Qian Gang, Watchwords: The life of the party, China Media Project, 10 September 2012, <http://chinamediaproject.org/2012/09/10/watchwords-the-life-of-the-party/>, accessed 5 June 2021.
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21. Müller and Geise, *Grundlagen der Visuellen Kommunikation*, 51; author's translation.
22. See Bingchun Meng, From steamed bun to grass mud horse: E gao as alternative political discourse on the Chinese Internet, *Global Media and Communication* 7(1), 2011: 33–51; Haomin Gong and Xin Yang, Digitized parody: The politics of *egao* in contemporary China, *China Information* 24(1), 2010: 3–26; and Wanning Sun, *Subaltern China: Rural Migrants, Media, and Cultural Practices*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.
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26. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. edn, London: Verso, 2006.
27. See also Chenchen Zhang, Covid-19 in China: From 'Chernobyl moment' to impetus for nationalism, *Made in China Journal*, 4 May 2020, <https://madeinchinajournal.com/2020/05/04/covid-19-in-china-from-chernobyl-moment-to-impetus-for-nationalism/>, accessed 5 June 2021.
28. For an example, see Mark S. Meisner and Bruno Takahashi, The nature of *Time*: How the covers of the world's most widely read weekly news magazine visualize environmental affairs, *Environmental Communication* 7(2), 2013: 255–76.
29. Müller and Geise, *Grundlagen der Visuellen Kommunikation*, 246–8.
30. Stefan Landsberger, *Chinese Propaganda Posters: From Revolution to Modernization*, Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1995.
31. See Lan Angela Li, The edge of expertise: Representing barefoot doctors in Cultural Revolution China, *Endeavour* 39(3–4), 2015: 160–7.
32. See Nianqun Yang, Disease prevention, social mobilization and spatial politics: The anti germ-warfare incident of 1952 and the 'Patriotic Health Campaign', *Chinese Historical Review* 11(2), 2004: 155–82.
33. For an analysis, see Zhen Sun, Utopia, nostalgia, and femininity: Visually promoting the Chinese Dream, *Visual Communication* 18(1), 2019: 107–33.
34. For examples, see SARS, <https://chineseposters.net/tags/sars>, accessed 5 June 2021.
35. See Woods et al., COVID-19, nationalism, and the politics of crisis, 814.
36. Author's translation. For the original, see '人民战“疫”' 艺术作品.
37. Due to the manageable amount of data, this analysis was qualitative rather than quantitative, which has the further advantage of offering insights into the nuanced meaning making of individual front pages. For a collection of news magazine covers from this period, see 期刊强国微信公众号: 厉害了,我的刊!这是一份份漂亮的战“疫”答卷 (WeChat public account of the Strong State in Periodicals: Awesome, my periodicals! This is a beautiful answer sheet in the fight against the 'pandemic'), 26 March 2020, <http://www.yueduchuanmei.com/listny.asp?id=2154>, accessed 5 June 2021. The present analysis primarily focuses on issues that appeared during the Wuhan lockdown, that is, between 23 January and 8 April 2020.
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39. Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, *Public Secrets, Public Spaces: Cinema and Civility in China*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000, 62.
40. Wu Hung, *Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space*, London: Reaktion Books, 2005, 32.

41. See Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, New York: Open Road, 2011, 92–108.
42. For examples, see Niels Bo Bojesen, <https://www.cagle.com/author/niels-bo-bojesen/>, accessed 5 June 2021.
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45. Feng Tie, Derfor er det forkert at publicere tegningen (Therefore it is wrong to publish the drawing), *Jyllands-Posten*, 30 January 2020, <https://jyllands-posten.dk/opinion/breve/ECE11908668/derfor-er-det-forkert-at-publicere-tegningen/>, accessed 5 June 2021.
46. See Meng, From steamed bun to grass mud horse.
47. Masha Borak, Coronavirus game with hidden political messages gets blocked in China, *South China Morning Post*, 28 April 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/abacus/games/article/3081827/coronavirus-game-hidden-political-messages-gets-blocked-china>, accessed 5 June 2021.
48. At the time of writing, only very few media outlets still contained evidence of these images, for example Jessie Pang and Sarah Wu, Hong Kong reports first coronavirus death as hospital workers escalate strike, 4 February 2020, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/overseas/02/04/20/hong-kong-reports-first-coronavirus-fatality-tvb-news>, accessed 5 June 2021.
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51. McDevitt, ‘In milk tea we trust’.
52. John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*, Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, 107.
53. Nossem, The pandemic of nationalism and the nationalism of pandemics.
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56. *Ibid.*, 173–4.
57. *Ibid.*, 171.
58. Kuipers, The politics of humour in the public sphere, 69.
59. *Ibid.*, 71.

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