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## **The construction of nationalism in Chinese media events in the reform era: an analysis of online mass communication, 2008-2012**

Zhang, Q.

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

With the advent of the reform and opening-up policy in 1978, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has undergone tremendous transformation in the last few decades. The Chinese government has made great achievements to improve people's living standards, as the economy is growing at a brisk clip. With an increasing global impact, it is generally believed that the PRC is becoming a rising power in the 21st century in many aspects such as economy, politics, and military. David Kang (2007, 13) argues that China's amazing rise as a strong power—in East Asia in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth, military spending, and national power—is unprecedented. Although David Shambaugh (2013, 4) points out that China only partially exerts global influence, he still admits that “China is the world's most important rising power.”

Notably, the Chinese government has staged a series of remarkable mass media events to narrate various successes over the last two decades, telling stories about the country's past, present, and future and showing it as a rising powers, as “the international mass event is an excellent format for generating a sense of membership in the international community” and shows a country's modernity (Schneider, 2019, 57). The 2008 Beijing Olympics represent the realization of a “one-hundred-year Olympic dream.” Susan Brownell (2013, 1318) holds that “the event symbolically marked the incorporation of China—the world's most populous nation, a rising economic and political power and the nation most culturally and geographically distant from the West—into the world system to a degree never seen before in human history.” The 60th national anniversary in 2009 demonstrates a rising powerful Chinese state to all world audiences. Zhu Jiangnan and Lu Jie (2013, 1086) examine how other countries responded to the PRC's military might exhibited in the 2009 national celebrations and indicate “that the military implications of China's rise appeared to be more compelling to other countries than its economic implications.” The official design of the 2010 Shanghai World Expo constructed a unified, harmonious future for the PRC and the world, which established the PRC as a cultural power in the world (Callahan, 2012). In 2012, the government launched the Shenzhou 9 manned spacecraft mission. The success of this mission “constitutes a new achievement in the PRC's effort to build an innovation-driven country, a new significant step in the PRC's scientific development, and an important contribution to human exploration of the outer

space.”<sup>1</sup> These media events are supposed to enable the government to improve the PRC’s international image and further strengthen the people’s national pride and identification with the ruling Party, i.e., the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

### **1.1 State Nationalism and Popular Nationalism in the PRC: Affecting Ruling Legitimacy**

The PRC’s rise, narrated in the mass media events mentioned earlier, promotes state nationalism, led by Chinese authorities. However, besides state nationalism, there is another type of nationalism, i.e., popular nationalism expressed and spread by the Chinese populace. Generally, state nationalism in the PRC’s reform era is top-down nationalism transmitted from the authorities to the people, bearing characteristics of pragmatism (Zhao, 2004 & 2014). In contrast, popular nationalism is bottom-up nationalist sentiment widely presented in public discourse and nationalist activities. Regardless of what forms Chinese nationalism takes, it affects the authorities’ ruling legitimacy (Brady, 2009a; Gries, 2004; Shirk, 2008; Tai, 2006; Zhao, 2004; Zheng, 1999).

In the reform era, the authorities have established “patriotism” as an important official discourse to seek political stability and maintain the ruling legitimacy. The Chinese leaders attached importance to political stability for state administration, especially after the political unrest caused by the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. They put an overwhelming emphasis on patriotic propaganda to boost Chinese people’s loyalty to the state. This way, they sought to attain a stable society and ruling legitimacy. This is state patriotism, or rather, state nationalism, equal to what Zheng Yongnian (1999) called “official nationalism” and Zhao Suisheng (2004) named “state-led pragmatic nationalism.”<sup>2</sup> Zhao (2004, 209) indicates that the authorities use pragmatic nationalism to “rally support in the name of building a modern Chinese nation-state” and “preserve regime legitimacy.” Similarly, Anne-Marie Brady (2009a, 435) argues that concerning thought work,<sup>3</sup> mass persuasion serves as

<sup>1</sup>A congratulatory note delivered by former Premier Wen Jiabao, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2012/06/shenzhou-9-makes-triumphant-return/>, accessed 22 April 2016.

<sup>2</sup>As both patriotism and nationalism connote the meaning of “love of the country/nation,” many people use the two concepts interchangeably without making a distinction. Generally, the two terms are similar in the literal and deep meanings. Patriotism focuses more on the nation itself to address attachment and loyalty to a country, while nationalism highlights distinction between nations. Since nations nowadays are placed in an environment with competitions that distinguish themselves from others, I will mainly use the term nationalism in my argumentation of the dissertation, except in some cases that especially refer to Chinese patriotic propaganda, such as the Patriotic Education Campaign.

<sup>3</sup>Thought work (*sixiang gongzuo* 思想工作) refers to the work to model people’s ideology. Brady (2008, 7) indicates that “in the Chinese context, propaganda is the medium and thought work is the content.”

an essential tool to strengthen the legitimacy of the CCP. To implement mass persuasion, “patriotism was emphasized [since 1991] as a key theme of political ideology, along with collectivism and socialism” (Brady, 2009a, 448).

Where does Chinese popular nationalism come from? Two positions mainly interpret the origin of popular nationalism: one is from people’s perennial consciousness based on shared culture, language, and territory, which then becomes modern popular nationalism. For example, Walker Connor (1994, 159) supports this viewpoint, suggesting that nationalism is mass rooted. The other position stems from nationalist sentiments created or fostered by the elites, including outstanding politicians, military officials, and intellectuals at the start of the modern era. Most criticism agrees that it is the elites who bring about nationalism. For instance, Ernest Gellner (1983, 118) regards the intellectuals as “the driving force of initial nationalism.” Miroslav Hroch (1985, cited in Smith, 1998, 56) distinguishes three stages of the emergence of nationalism in Eastern Europe: small circles formulated the idea of “nation” and then disseminated this idea to the growing town. After that, the populace’s involvement in the nationalist movement constructed popular nationalism. Besides, Benedict Anderson (1991) attributes the origin of nationalism to print capitalism<sup>4</sup> dominated by businessmen and intellectuals, emphasizing the elites’ pivotal role in generating nationalism. However, Joseph Whitemeyer (2002) admits elites’ function in disseminating nationalist ideology but proposes that elites failed in creating nationalism. Chinese nationalism originated in the late 19th century and early 20th century when foreign powers invaded China. Intellectuals introduced nationalism from the West and Japan and disseminated it to the populace. In the PRC, state nationalism largely influences popular nationalism because of the great efforts made by the authorities to propagate patriotism to the populace. Through such propaganda, it is believed that state nationalism turns into popular nationalism when people accept such official patriotism and then internalize it as their nationalism. Furthermore, to a certain degree, state nationalism is set as a paradigm of popular nationalism.

Nevertheless, there is no clear line between state nationalism and popular nationalism in the PRC,

<sup>4</sup> Print capitalism, coined by Anderson (1991), refers that the nation, as an imagined community, is impacted by the printing press (e.g., newspapers) and proliferated by capitalism.

as the two types of nationalism have considerable overlap and intertwinement. They have the same meaning of “love for the nation.” A big difference between the two is that state nationalism teaches people to accept political indoctrination passively, but that popular nationalism prompts people to actively rethink politics and participate in political activities. Miao Feng and Elaine Yuan (2014, 120) note that bottom-up, spontaneous popular nationalism—manifested in online opinion and voices—indicates people’s engagement in national politics. Another major difference is that different agents bring about different features of the two types of nationalism. The agents of state nationalism are the authorities, so state nationalism does not frequently fluctuate to ensure a stable society. The agent of popular nationalism is the populace whose sentiments are prone to be stimulated so that popular nationalism is dynamic when a stimulus exists.

In most cases, as the people express nationalist sentiments in line with the authorities’ expectations (not threatening the authorities’ legitimacy), state nationalism and popular nationalism can be understood as same. However, in some cases, when certain stimulation such as international conflicts gives rise to excessive popular nationalism that might be out of control of the authorities, the authorities may have to take some measures to adjust popular nationalism to a “safe” scope wherein nationalist sentiments do not negatively affect the legitimacy.

## **1.2 Media Events and Online Communication: Constructing Chinese Nationalism**

With the rapid development of mass communication, mass media events have become a form of popular art, drawing broad public attention and impacting people’s daily lives. Yet, what is a media event? How does it affect people’s daily lives? In a general sense, a media event is a mega event recorded and broadcast by mass media to transmit cultural symbols and/or political conceptions to audiences. Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1992, 1) define a media event as a “high holiday of mass communication.” To be more specific, it is a live televised ceremonious performance targeting a large audience to disrupt people’s daily routines. The disruption makes people collectively remember the day as a moment when the nation is celebrated (Billig, 1995, 45). The “ceremony interrupts the flow of daily life (syntactics); it deals reverently with sacred matters (semantics); and it involves the response (pragmatics) of a committed audience” (Dayan & Katz, 1992, 14). For example, the Chinese government announced 3 September 2015 as a Victory Day to celebrate the

70th Anniversary of Victory over Japan in World War II, and the whole nation then took one day off to watch the parade that presented a powerful Chinese nation on the world stage<sup>5</sup>. The event disrupted audiences' daily routines (which had never happened on that specific day before) and promised to remind the audiences of the days of humiliation in the past and to impress them with a powerful nation at present.

Dayan and Katz (1992) define three categories of media events: Contest, Conquest, and Coronation. Contest refers to competitions among people or countries involving sports games, election campaigns, and other rivalry forms. Conquest demonstrates great moments that symbolize the big progress of humankind in history. Live broadcast allows audiences to witness these exciting moments. Coronation is the presentation of rituality, such as award ceremonies and inaugurations, creating a distance between the figures being celebrated and the onlookers. However, it should be noted that as the three categories of media events are often mixed, no distinct boundaries exist between these types of events. A media event usually does not fall into just one category but often includes parts of other categories as well. Most of the time, one element is dominant (Dayan & Katz, 1992, 27). For instance, a sports game, considered a Contest in principle, is also endowed with a Conquest element (if a contestant breaks a record) and a Coronation component (in the opening ceremony and the award ceremony).

Media events are organized and designed by a group of people, some organizations, or authority institutions with special intentions. For example, a presidential campaign aims to familiarize voters with presidential candidates and guide them to vote for their favored candidate. Normally, the procedure of this kind of media event is prescheduled before it takes place, which allows audiences to expect what will happen in the next step (such as candidates' speeches and the announcement of the campaign result). In contrast, abrupt events, such as big natural disasters, are another event-form widely reported by mass media. They do not tell "stories" designed by communication agents but transmit social or political implications to audiences. Their unpredictability for audiences creates more novelty than designed events. As there are no directors for the events, their representation in detail mainly relies on media coverage. In this way, media practitioners heavily script the process

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-05/13/content\\_20704788.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-05/13/content_20704788.htm), accessed 21 December 2020.

and results of how the events are transmitted to the audiences based on their demand.

In the PRC, nationalism is an important theme in political communication for the authorities to strengthen Chinese people's national identity in the reform era. Mass media events play a critical role in constructing state nationalism and arousing popular nationalism. Two types of media events respectively enhance state nationalism and popular nationalism: government-staged media events and abrupt media events, on which I will elaborate in the following part.

By stressing the PRC's achievements in a conspicuous way, media events staged by the Chinese government promote state nationalism. The design of these events, such as artistic performances and astronauts' exploration in space, aims to inspire audiences to appreciate Chinese civilization or to witness great moments of the PRC's successes. With achievements, the government expects the people to be more patriotic and at the same time attribute the successes to the efforts of the authorities.

Besides the above-mentioned scheduled media events, abrupt events emerge in the PRC, influencing state nationalism and popular nationalism. For instance, the 2008 Sichuan earthquake was a natural disaster that did not directly connect with nationalism. However, Chinese media covered many stories related to this disaster (including generous donations) to show the solidarity of Chinese people, which prompted "small symbolic acts of patriotism" (Schneider & Hwang, 2014, 655). In addition to natural disasters, media events concerning international conflicts directly generate popular nationalism. For example, the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 ignited strong popular nationalism. Such media event engenders nationalism from the populace in a more spontaneous way than staged media events. Yet, to a certain extent, Chinese authorities affect the development of spontaneous events through administration. Different from staged media events, abrupt events, especially those rooted in the international conflicts, sometimes inadvertently ruin the legitimacy of the authorities if the authorities do not perform well enough in dealing with the conflicts.

No matter what categories media events fall into, mass media play a significant part in scripting

various event stories for Chinese audiences. As “mass communication in the traditional sense is now also Internet-based communication in both its production and its delivery” (Castells, 2009, 65), Internet media with plenty of digital resources have become the most popular channel for the audiences to view live broadcasts, access related news information, and launch discussions, owing to the advancement of Internet access and communication devices. Tai Zixue (2006, 94) argues that “vigorous promotion of the Internet and related information technology is considered by the government to be a necessary step in boosting China’s national pride and bringing legitimacy to the rule of the Communist Party in the country.” The current Covid-19 pandemic accelerated online communication around the world. According to Statista<sup>6</sup>, the PRC was ranked the first with the highest Internet users in the first quarter of 2021. More specifically, the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) states that

1. As of December 2020, China had 989 million netizens<sup>7</sup>, up by 85.4 million over March 2020, and its Internet penetration had reached 70.4%, up 5.9 percentage points over March 2020.
2. Up to December 2020, the number of mobile Internet users in China had reached 986 million, up 88.85 million over March 2020. The proportion of China’s netizens accessing the Internet via their mobile phones had amounted to 99.7%, up 0.4 percentage point over March 2020. (CNNIC, 2021, 1)

Not just acting as news media, Internet media also provide various platforms for audiences to discuss and exchange ideas. Reacting to the narration of “national success” or “nationalist conflicts” connoted in media events, many Chinese Internet users air opinion and express nationalist

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.statista.com/statistics/262966/number-of-internet-users-in-selected-countries/>, accessed 15 August 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Internet users in the PRC are commonly addressed as “netizens (*wangmin* 网民 or *wangyou* 网友).” David Herold (2014, 21) refers to “netizens” as (politically oriented) “Internet citizens” and states “that online spaces serve the function of a public sphere making the emergence of a civil society in China possible.” He also points out that “*wangmin*” or “*wangyou*” are heavily used by the Chinese government to promote a particular vision of web communication (Herold, 2011). Manya Koetse (2018) argues that the difference between the term “netizens” used in Western countries and East Asian countries is that Western countries consider it carries many political implications, but East Asian countries such as the PRC use the term “netizens” to refer to any Internet user including those who use the Internet for entertainment. However, Payal Arora (2012, 94) argues that Internet users in the “Third World” countries are similar to Western users, and they are both heavily leisure-oriented, as the Internet is widely regarded as a leisure space. I regard that many “netizens” in Chinese discourses do not have the sense to organize or participate in activities in such a civil society as Herold refers to; they mostly use the Internet for daily communication and for fun.



sentiments on these Internet platforms, which provides a corpus of opinion for studying online nationalism under the influence of mass communication in media events.

To study online communication of nationalism in the PRC, the main focus of this dissertation is on the rising period in the reform era from 2008 to 2012, when the PRC started to shine on the international stage and the national confidence of the Chinese became stronger than before. From 2008 to 2012, the PRC had made some prominent achievements in terms of economy and culture, which made state nationalism a “natural” process to shape popular nationalism and promote the citizens’ national identification. In the following part, I will enumerate four factors why the period I focus on is important for the study of online mass communication of nationalism.

First, the outstanding performance of the economy in this period marked the rise of the PRC. The PRC’s reform era started in 1978. Its economic development, however, did not make much progress until a market economy was introduced in the 1990s. With the admission to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, the PRC integrated into the global economy, thus greatly accelerating its economic development. This, taking advantage of the world market, was the starting point of the PRC’s economic take-off. The year 2008 was the 30th anniversary of the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy, and it was a critical year for the PRC in its economic reform history. Specifically, the world economy suffered from an economic crisis in 2008, which was also a heavy blow to the Chinese economy. The authorities launched the Four-trillion Yuan Economic Stimulus Package Program and tax stabilization in 2008 to cope with this problem (Whalley & Zhao, 2013). Although the world’s leading economies experienced negative economic growth, the PRC’s GDP still maintained a growth average of 9.7% from 2008 till 2010 (Morrison, 2013, 5). Nonetheless, the worldwide economic recession negatively influenced Chinese people’s lives, causing, among other things, excessive inflation. However, with the efforts of the authorities, the constant growth of the economy promoted the populace’s identification and satisfaction with the nation-state.

Second, the period between 2008 and 2012 created a more liberal political environment than other periods in the PRC’s reform era for mass communication. After the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, the PRC has been under the leadership of three consecutive presidents: Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and

Xi Jinping. In the Jiang era (1989-2002), the state put more emphasis on political stability than on economic development, especially at the beginning of this era when the impact brought by the Tiananmen Square protests was discernible. In this situation, the people had limited liberty in the political sense. In the current Xi era (2012-present), although the economy is further developed, the power of the political system is highly concentrated in President Xi, who is considered the “chairman of everything” (The Economist, 2016, 43-46) and who creates “a tightly centralized political system” (Economy, 2014, 80). In the Xi era, the Central Propaganda Department (CPD) regulates public opinion on the Internet unprecedentedly that sets up many barriers for free online discussions. Compared to the former Jiang era and the later Xi era, the Hu era (2002-2012) was relatively low profile, and in this era, the government spearheaded economic development, leading to an economic boom. Hu advocated a “harmonious society (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会),” which allowed the Chinese to have a little more freedom to air political opinion. In this sense, online public political opinions in this period are freer and more accessible than in the other two periods.

Third, in respect of the cultural impact on the world (as I have already mentioned above), the PRC has staged a series of media events in this period to present the successes of the Chinese nation to the world. Among all media events, the Beijing Olympics were the most significant. William Callahan (2010, 1) argues that “the opening ceremony of Beijing’s Summer Olympics can tell us much about the political direction of China’s rise.” Furthermore, Sun Wanning (2010, 127) notes that after the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the PRC “is believed to have ‘graduated to world power status,’ and its supposed ascent as the most powerful nation of the twenty-first century has started to take on the appearance of established truth rather than prediction.” In short, the year 2008, when Beijing hosted the Olympics for the first time, was a milestone for the rise of the PRC. Besides the Beijing Olympics, other media events, such as the 2010 Shanghai Expo, also presented a rising Chinese nation to world audiences.

Fourth, in the period between 2008 and 2012, Internet access in the PRC was broadly expanded. In 2008, the PRC surpassed the United States (US) in terms of the number of Internet users (Krysko, 2011, 198). Online communication was available to most Chinese. More importantly, with various Internet-based, freely accessible online platforms, the people could voice political views in this

period more conveniently than in other periods.

Mainly targeting Chinese mass media events from 2008 to 2012, I examine how the government and media companies establish nationalist discourse and how online public opinion reflects Chinese netizens' nationalist sentiments under the influence of mass communication. I use passive surveys to investigate online public opinion by applying a manual method and an automated analysis program (for details, see Chapter 4). Furthermore, I explore whether there is a relationship between media communication and public nationalism on the Internet. To be more specific, I examine the following questions in three categories:

1. The operation of nationalism in the PRC

What is nationalism? In what form and how does it operate in the Chinese context? What is its relationship with Chinese patriotism? Why does the Chinese government aim to propagate patriotism instead of nationalism?

2. Construction of nationalism in media events

How is nationalism narrated and constructed in media events? What communication strategies do the Chinese government and media companies use to construct state nationalism and adjust popular nationalism, i.e., how do they strengthen or maintain the authorities' ruling legitimacy through media events?

3. Evaluation of popular nationalism reflected in online public opinion

How do audiences' online reactions shape online public opinion? How are the reactions presented in online public opinion? What should we do to evaluate the effect of communication? Is it possible to know how effective efforts made by the Chinese government and media companies to guide public opinion are? Is ruling legitimacy strengthened or maintained based on the evaluation of nationalist public opinion?

Exploring these questions, I argue that Chinese authorities use nationalism tactically to pursue popular support and strengthen ruling legitimacy through mass communication of media events in the reform era. Focusing on the digital reflection of Chinese people is a new and hitherto underutilized way to investigate the effectiveness of the authorities' efforts to utilize mass communication and mass media, through these means, to construct state nationalism, shape popular nationalism, and maintain their ruling legitimacy.

### **1.3 State of the Field of Media Communication and Online Nationalist Public Opinion Research in the PRC**

Scholars have recently done numerous studies to understand online nationalism and the extent to which it is influenced by the mass communication of various media events. These studies mainly involve two issues: media/government communication and audiences' online expressions of nationalism.

On the issue of mass communication of media events by Chinese media, the major contentions lie in three aspects: communication characteristics, media content, and media effect in the PRC. Regarding the first aspect of the characteristics of mass communication in media events, a typical argument is that Chinese media communication is highly regulated by CPD and serves a state administration purpose. Sun (2002) indicates that during the Sydney Olympics of 2000, Chinese media sent many journalists on-site to report the event, which "allowed the transmission of images from the event to serve the political and cultural agenda." Brady (2009b) argues that the CPD guided the Olympic propaganda conducted by Chinese media and drove the media to publish positive reports but to avoid sensitive coverage to improve the PRC's image on the international stage. In addition, she notes that the "saturation-style" Olympic propaganda in the PRC dominates the public sphere (Brady, 2009b). Thus, positive and heavy propaganda are typical characteristics of political communication in the PRC.

The second aspect is media content, more specifically, under the influence of media commercialization. Political content in the PRC is strongly regulated in many periods, especially concerning topics that may ruin the legitimacy of the CCP (Schneider, 2016). This affects audiences'

interests and thus may further arouse dissatisfaction with the state. Media commercialization, although under political regulation, generates alternative content for audiences to access sensitive information that the state intends to control. By exploring the annual Chinese media event, the Spring Festival Gala Party, Zhang Xiaoling (2011) shows how the state used new forms to transmit values and concepts—such as patriotism—to audiences. Furthermore, she offers an insight into the dynamic relationship between media reform and political control and argues that commercialization reform drives media to pursue profits, which poses a challenge to the state that has to balance the control and autonomy of the media (Zhang, 2011). In the state-controlled media system, Chinese media practitioners apply self-censorship to avoid offenses.

Generally, the regulation and reliability of media content are slightly different in different media forms. The CPD often strictly watches the content of traditional media such as newspapers and television, making a difference between commercialized media and state media. By investigating the 2005 anti-Japanese protests in the PRC, Daniela Stockmann (2010) finds that commercialized media are more credible than official media for urban citizens and that commercialized media can help the state shape public opinion if given more freedom by the state. Concerning Internet media, content regulation of news websites is sometimes as strong as that of traditional media. Yet, on social media, where there is a large quantity of user-generated content, it is hard for the CPD to control all content immediately. Florian Schneider (2016, 2677) indicates that traditional Chinese websites, as information sources, only present isolated beacons of information approved by the CCP. Within this paradigm, discussions published by Internet users are limited within the range of CCP regulations (Schneider, 2667).

The third aspect concerns the effectiveness of media communication, i.e., how capable Chinese authorities are at legitimating themselves through political communication. Concerning the legitimacy of Chinese authorities in media events, Hwang and Schneider (2011) explore how the CCP used the 60th national anniversary event to establish its legitimacy by analyzing the political performance presented in the event. They note that dominant discourses did not effectively guide public opinion and that nationalist discourses in propaganda would also pose a challenge to the legitimacy of the CCP. Examining communication strategies used in the Beijing Olympics,

Françoise Papa (2012) argues that the state applied a soft power strategy in the event, following a traditional top-down propaganda pattern. Yet, it did not achieve the goals of improving the PRC's image in the West, as it was difficult to reconcile vertical propaganda from the state with horizontal social interaction among audiences. Applying content analysis and digital tools to Sino-Japanese conflicts, Schneider (2016) explores how Chinese authorities shape nationalist discourse on the info-web and argues that the authorities successfully bring digital media into the scope of traditional Chinese mass media.

On the issue of online public opinion representing nationalism, scholars use different methods to establish debates. The current state of the field primarily focuses on two major themes. One is how nationalist discourse is constructed on the Internet; the other is the influence of online popular nationalism, i.e., how online Chinese nationalism influences Chinese people's offline activism and life in general and how it influences the foreign relations of the PRC. There are many debates on the construction of online nationalist discourses. Cheng Yinghong (2011) uses discourse analysis to discuss Chinese online nationalism connected with online racism against Africans and reveals that racial discourses are fueled by nationalist sentiment. Jiang Ying (2012) applies a critical approach to exploring cyber-nationalism by examining how western media portray Internet censorship in the PRC and indicates that young Chinese (most netizens), influenced by consumerism, play a critical role in the development of nationalism, besides state propaganda. Yu Haiyang (2014) employs a documentation study to examine distorted narrations of Chinese imperial history on the Internet, arguing that these exaggerated narrations give rise to strong populist nationalism and that the glorious past becomes a reason for the populace to blame the government for its incapability in disputes with other countries. Applying a mixed (quantitative and qualitative) method, Cristina Jayme Montiel, Alma Maria Salvador, Daisy See, and Mariene De Leon (2014) examine news reports on Huangyan Island (also called Scarborough Shoal) conflict covered by domestic media of the PRC and the Philippines to find out how media in the two countries use discourse to claim sovereignty of the island and to shape nationalist public opinion. Through the categorization of indicative words of the posting data on Sina Weibo, Feng Miao and Elaine Yuan (2014) perform a qualitative discussion to explore online nationalist sentiments about the 2012 Sino-Japanese disputes. Their computer-assisted content analysis exemplifies a powerful method to deal with huge

amounts of online posted data. In their findings, they argue that “China’s online popular nationalism embodies wide-ranging popular imaginations, diverse public opinions, and variegated efforts of political participation in national affairs” (Miao & Yuan, 2014, 135).

Concerning the impact of popular nationalism, scholars publish various arguments. Cheng Mingming and Anthony Ipkin Wong (2014) analyze the influence of Chinese popular nationalism on tourism since the 2012 Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands Incident through in-depth interviews and on-site observation. They indicate that national history is a crucial factor influencing public patriotic sentiments for Chinese tourism to Japan. By collecting news about offline nationalist protests, Jeremy Wallace and Jessica Chen Weiss (2015) carry out a quantitative investigation to analyze the political geography of offline nationalist protests in the PRC. Their statistical analysis provides an insight into the potential factors inducing offline protests.

In general, previous studies have laid a solid foundation for understanding mass communication and nationalism in the PRC. However, most studies discuss either media communication or nationalist manifestations, but only a few examine both aspects and their relationship (e.g., Schneider’s work in 2016). Few works investigate nationalist discourse on the Internet on a large scale to explore online nationalism. Furthermore, in terms of the methodology, some of the studies (e.g., Brady’s study on the Beijing Olympics) do not explicitly describe the method design. Brady’s work draws mainly from Chinese media sources and from secondary literature to map out political communication in the PRC and the role of mass persuasion in maintaining the CCP legitimacy. Although Wallace and Weiss conducted quantitative analyses, they did not examine public opinion that presents nationalist sentiments. In this dissertation, I will use a computer-assisted automated program to conduct sentiment analysis to examine online nationalism. I will apply a mixed (qualitative and quantitative) method to analyze media communication, online nationalism, and possible online and offline interaction. I choose two major media events taking place between 2008 and 2012 as research objects for case studies. One is the 2008 Beijing Olympics, a government-staged event promising to promote state nationalism. The other is the 2012 Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands incident, an abrupt media event that largely stimulated popular nationalism. The two case studies cover how nationalism is presented in official and nonofficial discourses.

### 1.4 Theoretical Framework

Chinese nationalism, accumulating the people’s love and loyalty to the nation, affects the legitimacy of the ruling Party and the government positively and negatively: it either promotes or decreases their legitimacy. The process of mass communication of media events influences people’s perception of nationalism. Therefore, mass media events and the related mass communication impact state legitimacy.

Based on the argument mentioned above, I built a theoretical framework shown in Figure 1.1 (a) and Figure 1.1 (b). Figure 1.1 (a) is the major, structured theory for the dissertation, and Figure 1.1 (b), as a supplementary part of the major theory, is used to analyze its core part: nationalism, mass communication, and media events.

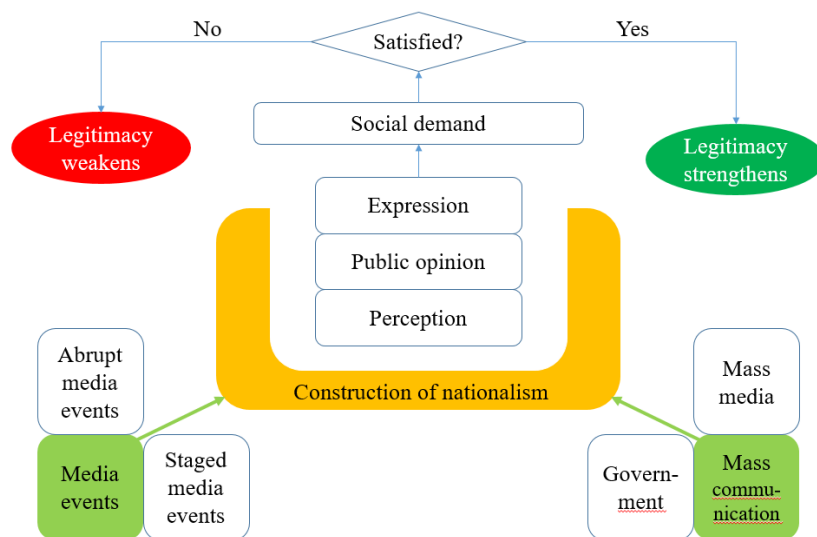


Figure 1.1 (a) Theoretical framework (1)



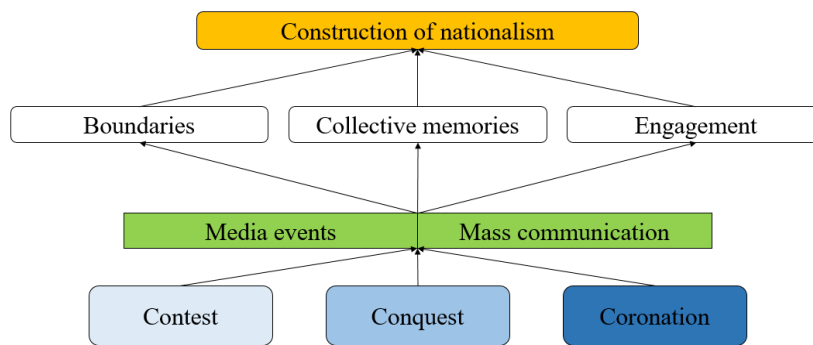


Figure 1.1 (b) Theoretical framework (2)

In Figure 1.1 (a), I present three steps that compose the theoretical framework (1) from bottom to top: (1) nationalism is constructed by the media and government through media events; (2) audiences perceive nationalism, shape nationalist public opinion, and express nationalist sentiment; (3) nationalism works for the political legitimacy of the authorities, either positively or negatively.

Nationalism, a central concept of the dissertation, is constructed in media events by mass media and/or the government through mass communication. Government-staged and abrupt media events are the two major event types that construct state nationalism and shape popular nationalism through government and/or media impact. In this dissertation, the 2008 Beijing Olympics exemplify government-staged media events (for details, see Chapter 5); the 2012 Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands incident represents abrupt media events (for details, see Chapter 6). Audiences perceive the implications connoted in the events, and popular nationalism is correspondingly stimulated. In this way, they form nationalist public opinion and then express nationalist sentiments by discussing event topics and publishing-related reviews on the Internet. In the process, if a social demand is satisfied in the events (i.e., if social consent dominates), popular nationalism will strengthen Chinese authorities' legitimacy; if not (i.e., if social discontent dominates), popular nationalism will weaken or even ruin the political legitimacy. In this sense, under the control of the authorities, Chinese media have an incentive to adjust popular nationalism, especially when it goes too high and poses a challenge to the state in abrupt media events. In contrast, in government-staged media events, where people align themselves naturally with the nation, the nation's achievements and presented in the

media events will produce people's consent. As the government positively shapes nationalism, the events expectedly pose no challenge to the authorities but increase the ruling legitimacy by obtaining people's consent.

It should be pointed out that the ultimate goal of a media event is to maintain and/or strengthen the ruling legitimacy of the authorities. Legitimacy is understood as the right to rule the governed. A government is established by the ruling class because there is a demand for a stable way to organize people in society. John Locke (1689/2003) points out that ruling legitimacy comes from the consent of people who transfer part of their right to the government and seek a better living environment to be established by the government after a social contract is made between the government and the people. In this sense, people play a critical role in preserving the legitimacy of the ruling class. In the PRC, state nationalism aims to legitimate the ruling of the authorities. Influenced by state nationalism, popular nationalism works dynamically in two directions: it either strengthens or weakens the ruling legitimacy, depending on the people's consent. To be more detailed, if people's needs are fulfilled by what the authorities do, popular nationalism strengthens the legitimacy; otherwise, it weakens and may even ruin it.

People's consent relies on the fulfilment of their different levels of demands. Abraham Maslow (1943) established a controversial model of hierarchical human needs that illustrates five basic needs for human life: physiological needs, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization. The physiological needs, which should be satisfied first, are at the lowest level: for example, the need for food and sleep. If people cannot be physiologically satisfied, they will not look for the fulfilment of the needs on the higher levels. The safety needs imply that people seek a safe and stable environment for their lives. Safety here includes good health, economic security, and emotional safety. The needs for love and belonging come when the previous two kinds of needs are gratified. The esteem needs are where people look for achievements and respect from others: "Satisfaction of the self-esteem need leads to feelings of self-confidence, worth, strength, capability, and adequacy of being useful, and necessary in the world" (Maslow, 1943, 382). On top of the hierarchy is the need for self-actualization, referring to "the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming" (Maslow, 1943, 382).

Since its inception, this model has received criticism from scholars for many reasons, such as lack of empirical evidence (Wahba & Bridwell, 1976) and no consideration of cultural and language environment (Neher, 1991). Based on Maslow's model, some scholars, Douglas Kenrick, Vidas Griskevicius, Steven Neuberg, and Mark Schaller (2010, 293), for instance, revised this model and extended it to seven levels: immediate physiological needs, self-protection, affiliation, status/esteem, mate acquisition, mate retention, and parenting. Nevertheless, for the present purposes of my research, Maslow's model in its original form is a useful tool to understand the social demand satisfied by nationalism. Schneider (2019, 49) points out that nationalism that generates group affiliation expresses human aspiration and safety and security needs. To be specific, nationalism creates a sense of national identity that protects individuals within the nation from being invaded by outsiders. This satisfies the safety needs. What is more, nationalism entails love for the nation, satisfying people's love needs.

The social demand regarding a media event entails satisfying different levels of needs for most of the population. In the PRC, the social demand is created or emphasized by the authorities and/or the media through political propaganda. This holds for both government-staged and abrupt media events, as illustrated by the Beijing Olympics and the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands incident. Concerning the Beijing Olympics, in the early 20th century, Chinese media put forward "the Olympic dream" (*aoyun meng*, 奥运梦), aiming at participating and hosting the Olympic Games. Thus, a social demand was created, and then, taking this idea for the propaganda of nationalism, the authorities spared no effort to realize this dream by mobilizing the people to participate in the event. Under these circumstances, the Olympic dream gradually took on the role of Maslow's love and esteem needs of the people in the form of a social demand. The Olympic dream was a collective goal shared by the people, showing their love and expectation for the nation. As, under the influence of media propaganda, the people may feel eager to achieve the goal, they gained much confidence, self-esteem, and respect from other countries when the goal was achieved. During this wait, the perception arose that if the government won the bid and magnificently hosted the event, social demand would then be satisfied. Furthermore, social demand became a motivation for the authorities to win the bid and host a remarkable Olympic event. If the audiences felt satisfied with the event,

social consent would be achieved, and the authorities gained legitimacy.

Regarding the case study of the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands incident, the social demand has been created by Chinese authorities for a long time through addressing “the unification dream” (*tongyi meng*, 统一梦). This dream mainly pertains to the reunification with Taiwan, the only unsettled area of the PRC (the reunifications with Hong Kong and Macau were accomplished in the 1990s). However, in a larger sense, unification also implies that the nation will settle the territorial disputes with neighboring countries, such as Japan, although Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping advocated shelving the dispute in the 1970s (Zhai, 2013). Obtaining sovereignty over disputed territories is related to the national interest, and so becomes a social demand of the people. However, it is not as easy as the Olympic event to satisfy social demand because such disputes are complicated to settle and require intricate diplomatic strategies. In this sense, in the abrupt media events that arouse international conflicts, the development of the events is normally unpredictable, so the authorities and the media have to carefully deal with public opinion expressing strong nationalist sentiments and adjust it to a level where it will not threaten the legitimacy of the authorities.

In the theoretical framework illustrated in Figure 1.1 (a), nationalism and mass communication are two fundamental theories in media events. I will explore their detailed interaction illustrated in Figure 1.1 (b). Media events are a way to construct nationalism employing three key elements: boundaries, collective memories, and engagement (for details on the definition of nationalism and the three elements, see Chapter 2, Section 2.1.1). When conducting nationalist discourse analysis, I will examine the three elements in media and/or government communication to explore how nationalism reflected in public opinion is shaped in Chinese political communication practice.

As discussed in Section 1.2, Contest, Conquest, and Coronation are three genres of media events defined by Dayan and Katz (1992). I propose that these genres are in an iterative relationship in a media event if more than one occurs. It means that the categories not only overlap with one another but also emerge in sequential steps. The first step is Contest between different groups, followed by one group conquering the other group. The last step, Coronation, is then the validation of the winner. As these sequential steps, the categories stand for the development of a media event, although one

step sometimes takes precedence over the other two. This helps understand how the government and/or media present(s) major events and attached sub-events<sup>8</sup> to implement mass communication of nationalism.

### **1.5 Structure of the Dissertation**

Besides this introduction, the dissertation elaborates on nationalism and mass communication, methodology, two case studies, and the conclusion. Chapter 2 introduces the theories of nationalism. By taking the definition of nationalism as the starting point, this chapter discusses the origin, development, and spread of nationalism. It also compares several concepts that are closely connected with nationalism—for example, patriotism, nation, state, and nation-state—to clarify the similarities and differences between these concepts and nationalism. I intend to pave the way for an understanding of nationalism in the context of online discourses in the PRC. Moreover, it explores how nationalism was imported to China to construct a popular national identity, how the authorities make efforts to promote state nationalism, and how the Chinese express nationalist sentiments.

Chapter 3 explores theories on mass communication and mass media. By distinguishing mass communication from common interpersonal communication, it examines the conditions for the existence and characteristics of mass communication, and the power mass art has in large-scale communication. It also discusses the social implications of mass media, especially Internet media, and their relations with politics. Furthermore, it explores how mass communication was developed in the PRC and what kind of censorship mechanisms are used by the government to guide political communication. More importantly, it introduces how the government implemented patriotic education in political communication aimed at the populace before and after the reform.

Chapter 4 discusses the methods that I used in this dissertation. I used a mixed approach to analyze online nationalist communication in mass media events. This approach involves both quantitative and qualitative methods. I adopted a qualitative method, i.e., critical discourse analysis, to explore how the Chinese government and media companies construct the people's national pride and national identity through various narratives of media events. Concerning people's online feedback

<sup>8</sup> For example, the torch relay is a sub-event of Olympic events.

on state and/or media communication of media events, I analyzed audiences' engagement in discussions to measure popular nationalism using quantitative and qualitative analysis. For a quantitative analysis of online public opinion in the case studies, I used a hand-processing method that examines if and how nationalism is reflected in the collected posts from a representative Chinese Bulletin Board System (BBS), Tianya BBS. What is more, I applied a supervised automated program that does a sentiment analysis of online nationalism presented in online comments in news comment sections of Tencent news website to understand online nationalism in these sources.

Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 present two case studies. Chapter 5 explores how the government showcased the realization of the Olympic dream, and it asks how this process constructed state nationalism. By comparing the 2008 Beijing Olympics to the 2012 London Olympics, it examines how Chinese audiences expressed nationalism on the popular Internet community Tianya under the influence of Olympic communication, such as the opening ceremony. Chapter 6 studies the 2012 Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands incident in terms of nationalist communication from representative the media company Tencent and the online expression of popular nationalist sentiments by the audiences. I examined Tencent's attitudes towards the incident—in terms of editing styles and nationalist frames—in its opinion pieces to explore how Tencent scripted the related news to shape nationalist public opinion. By applying an automated content analysis program for sentiment analysis, I investigated how audiences expressed nationalist sentiments in the related news comments, thus gauging the online nationalist public opinion.

Based on the results from the preceding chapters, Chapter 7 concludes that government-staged media events (such as the Beijing Olympics) help the authorities strengthen ruling legitimacy by their very design. In contrast, in abrupt media events (such as the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands incident), the authorities, in order to maintain legitimacy, need to mediate popular nationalism by editing media content, potentially aided by commercial media companies (such as Tencent). This chapter summarizes the strategies applied by the government and media companies in the mass communication of media events. In addition, it summarizes the factors that affect online nationalism. Finally, it rethinks Chinese political communication by identifying the characteristics of current nationalist communication in the PRC and the dilemmas that may arouse in the future. It discusses

the powerful entanglement of globalization, nationalism, and digital media. It points out that staged and abrupt media events will continue strengthening or maintaining state legitimacy.