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

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## Chapter 7 Conclusion

Nationalism is a powerful social force for the construction and consolidation of a nation-state in modern times. In the last two decades, the Chinese government has staged a series of media events to promote state nationalism (exemplified by government-staged events). In addition, other media events automatically take place, stimulating popular nationalism (exemplified by abrupt events). By constructing nationalism in media events, the government attempts to strengthen or maintain legitimacy through political communication, and Chinese media companies have evidence to reinforce such political motivations.

This dissertation has examined the construction of Chinese state nationalism and popular nationalism in different types of mass media events in the reform era (2008-2012) by exploring three aspects: the operation of nationalism, mass communication of nationalism in media events, and the evaluation of audiences' nationalism reflected in online public opinion. It has answered the following questions:

### 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 audience's 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?

## **7.1 Major Findings**

I investigated a government-staged media event, the 2008 Beijing Olympics, in Chapter 5 to explore how the Chinese government enhanced state nationalism by organizing and propagating the event. I then compared the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony's visual presentation with that of the 2012 London Olympics opening ceremony to explore the similarities and differences in the ways that two nations constructed national identity. I looked at how audiences reacted to the event communication on Tianya BBS to express nationalism.

I found that by establishing the Olympic dream, i.e., the hosting of the Beijing Olympics as a social demand, the Chinese government encouraged public engagement to boost state nationalism and strengthen legitimacy. The pre-Games propaganda through several subevents such as the torch relay and the volunteer recruitment program mobilized many citizens to participate in the event. As a typical top-down overwhelming way of political communication, the ubiquitous Olympic propaganda arguably raised public attention to the event. The solemn and majestic visual presentation of the opening ceremony witnessed the realization of the Olympic dream by creating a friendly, modernized, and powerful image of the Chinese nation. The London Olympics opening ceremony in a humorous and relaxed style shaped striking contrast with the former. Nevertheless, nationalism was not the political theme only stressed by the PRC, but instead, both countries similarly aimed at promoting national identity to (re)brand national image through the ceremonies. Concerning Chinese digital nationalism in the two events, audiences' engagement in online discussions signifies that their nationalism was higher in the Beijing Olympics than the London Olympics, despite the expansion of the number of BBS users from 2008 to 2012. Furthermore, Chinese nationalism in 2012 could be more confident in 2008, as China continuously made successes in terms of its economy and culture during these years. The discourse analysis of

nationalist sentiments expressed in threads on the opening and closing ceremonies further approved the previous result. In this sense, the social demand of the Olympic dream was satisfied in the Beijing Olympics, which meant the government successfully constructed state nationalism in the mass communication of the Beijing Olympics. With the enhancement of national identity and the satisfaction of the social demand, audiences potentially owed the success to the government, the organizer, thus strengthening the government's legitimacy.

I also examined popular nationalism triggered by the 2012 Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands incident but presented in the opinion pieces of media company Tencent. This incident interrupted the unification dream, another social demand created by the authorities and the Chinese media. However, as it was difficult for the authorities to set down the territorial disputes to satisfy the public, the media, the primary information disseminators for contingent events, have the motivation to help the authorities maintain legitimacy, based on the "Party Principle" (Zhao, 1998). As a media company with discourse power, Tencent thus played a vital role in portraying the incident to shape popular nationalism.

I analyzed how Tencent portrayed the incident and how audiences expressed online nationalist sentiments. Focusing on eighteen opinion pieces published during on Tencent's website, I examined how Tencent guided online public opinion through various communication strategies. I also did a big data analysis of online public opinion by applying a statistic tool, the ASAP, to investigate online opinion that reflected popular nationalism. I then compared online and offline nationalist waves to see if an interaction existed. I found that Tencent transmitted "knowledge" of the incident to guide audiences' attitudes and behavior by applying a set of communication strategies such as agenda setting and framing. These strategies adjusted three nationalist elements (boundaries, collective memories, and people's engagement) that constructed nationalism. Tencent achieved to relieve nationalist sentiments in most of its opinion pieces by obscuring the boundaries (conflicts) between Japan and China, discouraging engagement in some nationalist activities (especially violence), and skipping humiliated collective historical memories about Japan's invasion of China in the 20th century. As it is hardly possible for the authorities to meet the social demand to achieve unification

by solving the disputes, toning down nationalism prompted to reduce the risk of ruining the authorities' legitimacy. Audiences' reaction in the attached comment sections suggested that most online popular nationalism was kept within a safe scope that would not pose a challenge to the authorities. The comparison between online and offline nationalist waves showed that online and offline interaction could exist, as the two emerged on similar dates.

## **7.2 Factors Impacting Online Nationalist Expressions in Media Events**

Online popular nationalism is reflected in the expressions of nationalist public opinion after perceiving and internalizing state nationalism. The following factors in political communication impacts Chinese online nationalist expressions: long-term and nationwide patriotic propaganda of state nationalism, media exposure of the events, and offline event engagement and nationalist activities.

First, long-term and nationwide propaganda of state nationalism

The long-term and nationwide propaganda of state nationalism creates a somewhat patriotism-saturated media or social environment. This continuous propaganda builds up a strong sense of national identity among the Chinese, entailing the Patriotic Education Campaign, CCP leaders' talks, commercialized patriotic films, and mass media events.

The Patriotic Education Campaign is the most influential official propaganda program for the construction of state nationalism. Drawing a lesson from political instability at the end of the 1980s, the authorities employed nationalism as a vital ideology to strengthen national identity for identity crisis and the challenge of CCP legitimacy. Since the launch of the campaign in 1994, the authorities have implemented this patriotic propaganda for about three decades across the PRC, widely and powerfully transmitting state nationalism to the populace. This campaign, integrated into moral and political education targeting the young Chinese generation, continuously boosts the populace's loyalty to the nation and the CCP.

Patriotism still plays a significant role in current school education in the PRC. In 2019, the CCP

Central Committee and the State Council (2019) issued a renewed version of an *Outline on Conducting Patriotic Education in the New Era*, based on the 1994 version<sup>152</sup>. Compared with the old version, the new version stresses more the leadership of President Xi and the Party by putting forward several vital points, including the Chinese dream,<sup>153</sup> as a distinct theme and the integration of love the country, the Party, and socialism as a core requirement (CCP Central Committee & State Council, 2019). It suggests that the CCP, in the Xi era, uses patriotism for the enhancement of legitimacy and mass support by obscuring the distinction between the Party and the nation. The campaign has exerted a long-term influence on the populace's perception of nationalism and nationalist behavior.

Nationalism has been a recurring theme in Chinese leaders' important talks in the past several decades. For example, former President Hu (2011) gives a talk on the 100th anniversary of the 1911 Revolution, indicating that patriotism is a strong aspiration for national rejuvenation. President Xi emphasizes the importance of patriotism in the 100th anniversary of the May Fourth Movement by addressing that patriotism is the duty and responsibility of the Chinese people; it is shameful if someone is unpatriotic.<sup>154</sup> It shows that patriotism becomes even more compulsory than ever before since it is considered citizens' duty and responsibility. As direct official patriotic propaganda, the talks suggest an increasing significance of nationalism in Chinese political communication.

Although the Patriotism Education Campaign and political talks mentioned above represent traditional pure propaganda methods with little aesthetics, the CCP's propaganda mechanism ensures extensive spread from top to bottom. With the emergence of more and more diversified online contents, audiences lose some interest in such traditional pure propaganda and pay attention to novel topics with more entertainment. In this situation, media reform and the popularization of the Chinese Internet have generated new patriotic propaganda in mass communication since the new millennia. In this stage, commercialized patriotism gains popularity among Chinese audiences. Patriotism propagated in the form of mass art instead of pure political preaching gains popularity.

<sup>152</sup> [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2019-11/12/c\\_1125223796.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2019-11/12/c_1125223796.htm), accessed 30 November 2019.

<sup>153</sup> President Xi put forward this term in 2013 to build a moderately prosperous society and realize national rejuvenation.

<sup>154</sup> The talk is available on [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2019-04/30/c\\_1124440193.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2019-04/30/c_1124440193.htm), accessed 15 September 2019.

Under these circumstances, staged mass media events and commercialized patriotic films are more acceptable for audiences because of the elements of mass art. What is more, in such events, mass mobilization, as a distinguishing feature of traditional Chinese propaganda since the Mao era, increases political engagement and turns audiences into information disseminators, or rather, propagandists. In mass mobilization, “intensive political propaganda, intended to arouse emotional enthusiasm and enlist widespread engagement, remains a central element” (Perry, 2011, 43).

Commercialized patriotic films favored by Chinese audiences have played an increasingly important role in constructing state nationalism in recent years. High-budget commercial films with government aid emerged as an alternative patriotic propaganda method (Aranburu, 2017, 12). Different from the main melody films in the 1990s, the recent films are more commercialized than political. For example, the film *The Founding of a Republic* (*jianguo daye* 建国大业) released in 2009 for the celebration of the PRC’s 60th national anniversary, tells a story about the founding of the PRC. It covers historical events to recall collective memories and creates an image of a great nation to stimulate national identification. The film increased mass consumption by enrolling superstars and won box-office success of 0.42 billion RMB<sup>155</sup>. This brought the PRC into an age of “main melody commercial blockbusters” (Tang, 2015, quoted in Aranburu, 2017, 15). The more recent patriotic action film, *Wolf Warrior 2* (*zhanlang 2*, 战狼 2, released in 2017), tells a story about a skilled ex-sniper of the People’s Liberation Army who rescues a group of Chinese medical aid workers in Africa. Its promotional poster says that “anyone who offends China, no matter how remote, must be exterminated (*fan wo zhonghua zhe, sui yuan bi zhu* 犯我中华者，虽远必诛),” inviting strong popular nationalism. This film is an unprecedented success in the Chinese box office (56 billion RMB<sup>156</sup>), which shows great public interest in consuming nationalist topics.

In short, official and non-official patriotic propaganda integrates state nationalism with the Chinese people’s daily lives, directly or indirectly building up popular nationalism.

Second, media exposure

<sup>155</sup> See <https://www.douban.com/doulist/226734/>, accessed 11 November 2019.

<sup>156</sup> See <https://qz.com/1169192/chinas-all-time-top-10-box-office-list-has-four-domestic-films-released-in-2017-including-wolf-warrior-2/>, accessed 11 November 2019.

As a major source to acquire information from a far distance, mass media have been instrumental in spreading nationalism (Anderson, 1991). In a media event, how media expose an event affects audiences' perception and expressions of nationalist public opinion, entailing two aspects: the frequency of media exposure and the frames that the media deploy.

Since mass media select "what to think about" (Cohen, 1963, 13), they guide audiences with a prearranged news agenda. Media set the news agenda by selecting the news topics that the propagandists intend to publish and adjusting the frequency and duration of reporting on the selected topics. Concerning media events, the more frequently audiences are exposed to related news information, the more attention they are likely to pay. As discussed above, heavy reporting and mass mobilization are standard methods for the media to make an issue salient, especially in a staged media event aimed to show the success of the PRC. In addition, the mass media use frames that further impact how audiences think about those highlighted issues. It limits the audiences' perception of the issues within the established frames to realize communication purposes.

In the PRC, state media and commercial media have established their own ways of portraying an event. The state media act as the mouthpiece for the authorities in mass communication. Despite having more flexibility, commercial media, in principle, have to report the news without challenging the legitimacy of the authorities. In staged media events, where little risks seem to threaten the authorities, all media will promote state nationalism to shape favorable public opinion that helps enhance the authorities' legitimacy. In abrupt events, state media are more cautious than commercial media to guide nationalist public opinion. Yet, commercial media act positively to help the authorities maintain social stability when popular nationalism turns to be out of control.

Third, offline engagement and nationalist activities

Mass communication through digital and traditional media impacts public expressions of nationalism in both staged and abrupt media events. Meanwhile, as more and more Internet users emerge and join online communication every year in the PRC, offline involvement in nationalist activities establishes a link to online nationalist public opinion. In this way, offline involvement also influences online expressions of nationalism. For example, the pre-game propaganda (e.g., the torch

relay in the Beijing Olympics) extends the duration and mobilizes the audiences to participate in the event. These activities broaden the communication of nationalism.

Engagement in abrupt events enhances online popular nationalism. Generally, two reasons lead to such events: natural disasters and international conflicts. Offline activities in natural disaster-based events include a donation for victims and onsite volunteer work. The donation and volunteer work generate a sense of belonging to the nation where the victims receive care and assistance. In addition, volunteer work in disasters is similar to that in government-staged events, providing the volunteers with chances to participate in the events. Thus, the related activities extend the duration of media communication of the events.

In abrupt events on international conflicts, antagonism, as a typical tune between involved nations, prompts the audiences to generate nationalist sentiments for the defense of their national interest. As the Internet becomes a popular platform for the public to voice themselves and participate in politics, online discussions facilitate offline activities such as boycott and street demonstrations. Likewise, offline activism promotes online expressions of nationalism, as the Internet is one of the major channels for the public to join nationalist activities. The authorities aiming to stop street activism for social stability may censor such online discussions (King et al., 2013), which will impact online expressions of nationalism.

To sum up, comprehensive factors, including long-term official propaganda and short-term event stimulation, influence online expressions of Chinese nationalism. As media events are at a national or international level that is connected to a sense of nationness, political communication arouses national identity. The Patriotic Education Propaganda Campaign is one of the most salient factors for the strengthening of Chinese national identity, systematically and massively promoting state nationalism. With the long-term and nationwide patriotic propaganda, the Chinese immerse themselves in the sea of banal nationalism. Internalizing this ideology, they spontaneously generate an extra sense of nationalism, especially when an external stimulus such as a mass media event occurs. Furthermore, media exposure through agenda setting and framing influences how the audiences understand the events and how they react to the events. Finally, online expressions of

nationalism may interrelate with offline nationalist activities. To be specific, in staged events, offline activities organized by the government strengthen online nationalism; in abrupt international-conflict events, online discussions that present popular nationalism facilitates the organization of popular nationalist activities.

### **7.3 Rethinking Nationalism and Mass Communication in the PRC**

In this digital age, information and communications technology (ICT) offers an important platform for public opinion expressions, greatly accelerating information dissemination and encouraging online participation in mass communication. “The digitization of communication has prompted the diffusion of a technologically integrated media system in which products and processes are developed on diverse platforms that support a variety of content and media expressions within the same global/local communication network” (Castells, 2009, 72). Online participatory nationalism thus creates various media content in digital mass communication, shaping netizens’ national identity.

The spread of nationalism is unprecedentedly fast in cyberspace. The ICT establishes the Internet as a new communication model for cyberspace cosmopolitanism (Ben-Porat, 2009, 150), which digitally connects people around the world and weakens spatial barriers set up by national boundaries. Beyond cyberspace, globalization in a large sense promotes the integration of nations in terms of economics, politics, and diplomatic relations also seems to raise tension against nationalism. Therefore, it is necessary to revisit Chinese nationalism in globalization and digital mass communication with participatory nationalism. I will focus on these questions: not considering strong censorship, will globalization and the ICT bring about cosmopolitanism, or more specifically, the decline of Chinese nationalism? How should we think about Chinese nationalism in times of ubiquitous digital media? How to consider mass communication under the influence of participatory nationalism in the PRC?

#### *Globalization & ICT: Impact on Nationalism*

As a popular topic in the 20th and 21st centuries, globalization has specific homogenizing effects by obscuring national boundaries and boosting corporation among world nations. As it is generally

believed that the PRC has dramatically benefited from globalization for its rapid economic growth in the past several decades, globalization is important for the PRC to increase its comprehensive national power. Concerning the intricate relationship between nationalism and globalization, Willy Wo-Lap Lam (2006, 223) argues that the PRC views “nationalism as an antidote to the harmful and destabilizing effects of globalization.” Zheng (2007, 161) indicates that globalization does not reduce Chinese nationalism; it instead makes the PRC “more pluralistic, and thus constitutes a source for Chinese nationalism.” When stressing corporation in globalization, it also implies competition with other nations, which may generate nationalism. For the PRC and other countries, globalization is primarily related to the integration of economy rather than politics. “The CCP leadership is still trying its level best to ensure that globalization will not vitiate the core of the political system—that is, one-party rule” (Lam, 2006, 221). Thus, as one of the most important CCP political themes for social stability, nationalism does not give way to globalization under the CCP leadership. Compared with the discourses of globalization and cosmopolitanism, nationalist discourse is still the most potent force in citizenship education in the PRC (Camicia & Zhu, 2011, 611). Strategically, the CCP tries to find a balance between economic globalization and the cultivation of domestic nationalism (Hughes, 2006, 110).

The Internet shapes cyberspace without clear national boundaries, just as McLuhan (1962) proposes “the global village,” which facilitates global communication and maintains a sense of nationalism among different nations. With the debut of the Internet, many people believe that it brings about fragmentation of online national identity. The Internet builds up transnational “net nationalism” that “identifies with the autonomy and freedom of the Internet” (Mueller, 2017, 80) or “virtual ethnic communities” (Conversi, 2012, 1360). Yet, this net nationalism will not displace nation-state institutions (Mueller, 2017). Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2007, 8) suggests that the Internet will not weaken nationalism, but it “is fast becoming a major medium for the consolidation, strengthening and definition of collective identities.” Indicating digital diaspora nationalism connected with territorial issues, Daniele Conversi (2012, 137) argues that “new non-territorial bounds and networks have been built within virtual communities which are nevertheless obsessed by territorial imperatives, in the form of either defending territorial integrity or asserting more aggressive territorial expansion.” Similarly, Lukasz Szulc (2017, 70) indicates that the Internet does not create

banal cosmopolitanism; instead, it fosters banal reproductions of individual nations and the world as the world of nations. In the PRC, the explosive development of the ICT plays an increasingly important role in promoting audiences' political participation that enhances at least one of the three elements of nationalism: engagement in nationalist activities. Under these circumstances, popular nationalism can increase with more and more political participation in cyberspace.

Chinese nationalism is at one of the world's highest levels (Tang & Darr, 2012, 823). Yet, it will not stay at the same level. Specifically, it is currently high due to long-term official patriotic propaganda and the ICT efforts that technologically facilitate mass communication of nationalism and enhance online and offline nationalism. It goes up when a stimulus (such as a nationalist event) emerges, prompting more nationalist expressions. Tang and Darr (2012, 820) suggest that Chinese nationalism will experience two phases: it will stay at a high level with the continuous implementation of the Patriotic Education Campaign. Yet in the long run, it is likely to decline due to further urbanization and education and fading away of nationalist older generations.

#### *Commercialized Participatory Nationalism*

The ICT engenders online participatory communication through content sharing, posts, and comments, etc. User-generated content is an essential part of online communication, besides what media companies create for mass taste. Schneider argues that

The kinds of ICT developments that have taken place roughly during the past two decades have promoted a media rationale in which users receive network privileges to create media of their own, enter into novel network architectures that encourage them to spread such media, and carry their everyday social life into these digital interactions (Schneider, 2018, 171).

As participation nowadays becomes a trend in digital media usage, participatory nationalism gains popularity in mass communication of media events, consisting of online nationalist expressions and offline engagement of nationalist activities. In recent years, driven by a market economy, participatory nationalism goes beyond the political scope and becomes commercialized in Chinese mass communication. Specifically, Chinese advertisers take advantage of participatory nationalism

to brand products for mass consumption (Li, 2008). This leads to the emergence of various nationalist-themed consumer products and the change of nationalist discourse in abrupt events (For details, see the following part). With the impact of the propaganda of state nationalism and the popularization of participatory nationalism, radical nationalists regard nationalism as a critical element of moral value. Moral coercion of nationalism sometimes happens in Chinese society.

Commodified nationalism exists in staged and abrupt events, emphasizing Chineseness or claiming differentiation from other countries. For instance, in the Beijing Olympics, factories manufactured small national flags and T-shirts printed with nationalist symbols for mass consumption. During the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands incident, some Chinese online shops claimed temporary close or refused Japanese clients to show their support for the nation. In addition, other shops utilized the incident to sell nationalist products, such as car stickers.<sup>157</sup> Although this is not a common phenomenon in the market, no matter what forms the commercial activities exist, they partially increase public involvement and exposure of nationalism to enhance national identity.

What is more, commodified nationalism affects how netizens assemble nationalist discourse on the Internet and how the authorities react to such nationalism. For example, some prominent websites use advertising pop-ups and clickbait to commodify nationalist symbols, which changes Sino-Japan nationalist discourse into chauvinistic directions (Schneider, 2018). As online expressions of nationalism facilitated by news consumption bolster state stability and legitimacy (Hyun & Kim, 2015), the Chinese authorities motivate mass consumption of nationalism. Although those websites post violent, pornography, and gambling offers, the authorities turn a blind eye to such content to allow the development of commodified nationalism (Schneider, 2018, 161).

Moral coercion of nationalism occasionally happens under the influence of mass communication of participatory nationalism, restricting the social behavior of citizens, especially celebrities whom the populace regard as social models. In the updated version of *An Outline on Citizens' Moral Construction in the New Era* (the CCP Central Committee & the State Council, 2019), the Chinese authorities advocate vigorously carrying forward patriotism, the core of national spirit for citizens'

<sup>157</sup> <http://www.ebrun.com/20120914/56483.shtml> accessed 12 December 2019.

moral construction. Patriotism is considered a moral trait to which Chinese culture highly values, showing that the authorities, to some degree, urge the citizens to be patriotic. Furthermore, some radical nationalists view patriotism as a practical and even compulsory moral value. For example, radical nationalists will fiercely blame the celebrities who perform unpatriotically in public (such as posting online messages about supporting Taiwan's independence). Conversely, taking this advantage, some celebrities may act in a patriotic way to attract public attention and gain wide support.

#### *Dilemmas of Future Chinese Political Communication*

Based on the results of the case studies in the dissertation, political communication carried out in the media events has by and large successfully promoted state nationalism or shaped popular nationalism as what the authorities and media intend. However, in the reform era, especially the recent years, as the Internet is ubiquitous, participatory popular nationalism is continuously triggered across the PRC. Dilemmas seem to have arisen in political communication, including the decreased authority of information disseminators in the communication chain, tighter control over media content, the ways of media event propaganda, and the controversy of nationalism.

The first dilemma is traditional information disseminators (i.e., the government, media outlets, and media companies) become less authoritative than the earlier period when audiences could not access the Internet in the communication chain. Digital communication is multi-directional, bearing an interactive feature between information disseminators and receivers. In a large sense, with the Internet, everyone can act as a broadcast station and participate in many-to-many communications. To be specific, in this digital age, when a large quantity of information is available, audiences can seek personalized content from diversified information rather than only passively trust certain information with strong guidance from authoritative information disseminators. The upgraded demand for media consumption may ruin most audiences' interests in old-fashioned, pure, repetitive political propaganda.

In addition, the rise of social media has led to even tighter control over media content. It is observed that Chinese political communication is characterized by having a firm grip on sensitive information

flows. As mobile-based online communication realizes faster information flow than ever before, it causes more media management difficulties. From 2008 to 2012, BBSs were one of the most popular media platforms for online discussions. However, in recent years, with the broad penetration of mobile devices and various applications, mobile-based social media such as Weibo (microblog) and Weixin (WeChat) have almost replaced the BBSs, becoming the most popular instant messaging apps in the PRC.<sup>158</sup> A major distinguishing characteristic of social media is the interactivity that is the revenue source of media companies (Stockmann & Luo, 2017, 193). Besides, social interactions among acquaintances<sup>159</sup> established by Weixin and succinctness<sup>160</sup> regulated by Weibo contributed to the improvement of communication efficiency. In other words, the mobile-based social networks “offer an effective channel for public discussion and civic mobilization in China” (Cheng, Liang, & Leung, 2015, 1097).

Nevertheless, this does not mean that audiences make entirely their own choice for news consumption. Instead, opinion leaders on social media, to a large extent, guide public opinion through agenda setting (Nip & Fu, 2016). The authorities indirectly influence media content, as the opinion leaders publish official announcements to describe events (Nip & Fu, 2016). For example, on Weibo, the social media platform that facilitates online opinion best in the PRC, “Big V” bloggers, the celebrities who have many followers on social media, are the most influential groups that guide public opinion (Stockmann & Luo, 2017, 199). The “Big Vs” played a significant role in shaping positive public opinion on Sino-Japanese conflicts in 2012 (Schneider, 2017).

Censorship over online media content still works for political stability and CCP legitimacy, since Xi “is not trying to suppress public opinion or the ‘public-opinion oversight’ role of the media but rather is trying to keep it within acceptable boundaries that do not harm the party’s core interests” (Brady, 2016, 11). However, despite the robust censorship mechanism, fast online message transmission sometimes makes it difficult for the authorities to filter out all adverse information,

<sup>158</sup> Although BBSes have gradually faded away, a new question and answer online community Zhihu (知乎) rises for online discussions, partly playing similar functions with BBSs.

<sup>159</sup> For example, in Wechat, a personalized messaging tool, users do not need to spend much time on information filtering because the information from acquaintances ensures trust and interest.

<sup>160</sup> The limitation of the character number of Weibo posts is 140. Although users have been allowed to publish up to 2000 characters since 2016, the characters over 140 will be hidden. This means audiences can read information rapidly.

including anti-government discourses. Censorship instead generates dissatisfaction among audiences.

As implicit political communication forms that promote state nationalism or adjust popular nationalism, propaganda in staged and abrupt media events respectively bears some characteristics that may reduce the intended media effect. Concerning staged media events, although they are more aesthetic than traditional pure political propaganda, they have inherited certain elements from traditional propaganda: first, positive propaganda is the most noticeable feature in a staged media event, as Brady (2008, 95) argues that “the goal of the emphasis on positive propaganda - positive accounts of the triumphs of Chinese — style socialism — has been to help Chinese citizens regain confidence in the political system after the crisis of 1989.” Second, overarching grand narratives, like typical Chinese political propaganda style, are used by MCs or announcers to create a spectacular scene and generate a sense of pride. However, sometimes such narratives are excessively used, but the discourse content is empty. Third, with a poetic sense, MCs’ narrations are lack of discussions and interactions. Following a grand narrative style, MCs usually narrate the events overpassionately to stimulate audiences’ mood. This way of propaganda could be acceptable when media resource was limited before the reform era. Nowadays, since diversified digital media content allows audiences to shift attention to non-political programs, such characteristics may be challenged by more and more critical audiences in the future.

Regarding abrupt media events about difficulties or disasters, it is expected that the media tell the stories in a stereotype way that would not challenge the government. Specifically, they frame the narratives of the difficulties or problems for crisis control (Zhang, 2015) but avoid mentioning the root cause for the outbreak of the events to criticize the incapability or irresponsibility of the government.<sup>161</sup> To shape favorable public opinion, media elaborate such events in two aspects: how the government attaches great importance to the raised problems and make efforts to overcome them and how people positively react to the events. Specifically, people are often described as united to face such abrupt problems, yielding a sense of solidarity to strengthen state nationalism. Moreover,

<sup>161</sup> Challenging a local government sometimes does happen on (a) provincial level but seldom to the central government and the CCP who wield paramount power, and this helps the central government create favorable public opinion (Chen, 2017).

media coverage emphasizes that if the crisis is relieved, it is because of the authorities' swift reaction and smart guidance. In this way, self-regulated media help the authorities maintain legitimacy in the events.

The last core issue for consideration is that nationalism, regarded as a somewhat controversial political ideology, does not have a positive reputation in political communication. A famous statement of Samuel Johnson (cited in Boswell, 1986, 125) goes like this: "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel." The overwhelming emphasis on patriotism may give rise to adverse effects for governance when the cognitive levels and international perspectives of the Chinese are improved in the future, allowing them to rethink the ideologies and generate alternative reflections on this issue. For example, more and more critical audiences will look for the truth behind the media reporters' official sources. This would, in turn, raise challenges to the authorities.

In short, mass media events, as a new media form for political communication popularized in the last decade, construct the "truth" to enhance state nationalism and shape the "reality" of popular nationalism with respective communication strategies applied by information disseminators. Although mass communication of nationalism in media events still works well in the PRC at this stage in terms of strengthening or maintaining state legitimacy, the controversy of nationalism, the possible decline of nationalism in the long run, and potential changes in people's way of thinking aroused by digital communication pose some challenges for future political communication. Excessive mass communication of state nationalism that reinforces popular nationalism may raise threats to the legitimacy of the authorities, as it can be difficult to handle social disorders engendered by radical popular nationalism in abrupt events.

#### *Contributions, Limitations, and Future work*

Three contributions to the dissertation worth mentioning. First, arguing that strengthening the legitimacy of the authorities is the ultimate goal of political communication of media events, this dissertation has applied the established theoretical framework to understand nationalism constructed in media communication and expressed in online public opinion and its complicated impact (positive or negative) on regime legitimacy. Second, through visual and discourse analysis, the

dissertation summarizes a set of communication strategies that guide public opinion. The strategies are the catalysts that shape the online perception of nationalism and exert an influence on governance. Third, besides qualitative methods, it also uses quantitative analysis to explore online nationalism. It is a novelty to apply a statistical tool (the ASAP) to big data analysis of online communication, which helps realize passive surveys that enable broad investigations into the corpus. It proves that the machine-learning method is workable for large-scale media communication research. Despite some possible limitations in big data analysis, such as lack of consideration of privacy and confidentiality, it can enhance the understanding of the research results, theory, and methods (White & Breckenridge, 2014, 337).

In recent years, social media facilitated by the ICT have become the primary messaging tools for information access, sharing, and social interaction in Chinese mass communication. Thus, I will focus on some of them to explore how information is accessed, transmitted, or reposted by audiences and how audiences interacted with each other to perceive and express national sentiments. I will also further investigate how online nationalist communication and offline nationalist activism facilitate each other to better understand social interactivity in digital mass communication.

#### **7.4 Conclusion**

This dissertation aims to understand the construction of nationalism through online communication conducted by the Chinese government and media companies as well as online audiences' reactions to mass media events in the reform era from 2008 to 2012. Focusing on dream discourses, it examines how the government establishes and meets the social demand exemplified by the Olympic dream to construct state nationalism. It also investigates how Tencent uses discourses to shape online popular nationalism in the abrupt event by bringing audiences away from the established challenging social demand (the unification dream). The discourses assembled by the government and media companies, the representatives of power institutions, play an essential role in shaping online nationalist sentiments that are key to the legitimacy of the authorities. This study implies Foucault's (1969/1972) theory of "knowledge power", which indicates that the institutions with discourse power are capable of transmitting knowledge or "truth" to mass audience, can still be applied to understand mass communication of Chinese nationalism in various media events.

The two cases studies indicate that the authorities embrace ICT innovation to boost national identity and government legitimacy in media events through online communication where information dissemination speed is much higher than a decade ago. Mass media, as the bridges between the authorities and audiences, potentially help the authorities maintain legitimacy in conflict-based abrupt events by shaping public opinion that reflects participatory nationalism. Although ICT innovation facilitates the spread of nationalism and the emergence of collective actions through various Internet platforms, which sometimes poses challenges to information management and social stability, this dissertation shows that the authorities consistently use nationalism as a core theme for political communication to enhance national solidarity and promote or maintain legitimacy through media management and censorship mechanism. For the goal of bolstering legitimacy, staged mass media events will continue to emphasize top-down state nationalism, and abrupt events engendering bottom-up popular nationalism will be carefully managed with joint efforts of the media and the authorities.