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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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Summary

This dissertation studies the construction of Chinese nationalism by the Chinese government and media companies through mass communication of government-staged and abrupt events in the reform era from 2008 to 2012. It examines how Chinese audiences express online nationalist sentiments, representing whether the communication of events meets the social demands established by “dream discourses.” If the social demands are gratified, the mass communication helps enhance the ruling legitimacy of Chinese authorities. If not, it may ruin the legitimacy.

I exemplify mass communication of nationalism with two case studies: the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2012 Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands incident. The former, organized by the Chinese government for the “Olympic dream,” transmits top-down state nationalism. The latter, erupting spontaneously and symbolizing the “unification dream,” triggers bottom-up popular nationalism. I use a mixed approach, including qualitative (critical discourse analysis) and quantitative methods (manual and automat data analysis), to explore nationalist communication implemented by the government and media companies and online reactions in the form of nationalist public opinion.

The study results show that the Beijing Olympics, presenting the realization of the Olympic dream, help the Chinese authorities strengthen ruling legitimacy through various communication strategies. However, in the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands incident, as it is hardly possible to fulfill the “unification dream,” more uncertainty in the incident development prompts the commercial media company (Tencent) to mediate popular nationalism by adjusting media content. Although the incident arouses excessive popular nationalism that raises challenges to the government, the legitimacy is finally maintained.

Chinese audiences have increasingly voiced themselves online with the expansion of ICT in recent years. However, the authorities and media companies, as the representatives of institutions endowed with “knowledge power” coined by Michel Foucault, still play an essential role in shaping nationalist sentiments. As nationalism is a mixed blessing, the authorities will continuously take advantage of its benign aspects by staging media events to enhance national solidarity and promote legitimacy. Through media management and censorship mechanism, they will also carefully deal with popular nationalism in abrupt media events with the joint efforts of media companies to maintain ruling legitimacy.