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Between nationalist propaganda and public mobilization: people's daily's nationalist discourses and their public responses on Chinese social media

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Between Nationalist Propaganda and Public Mobilization: People's Daily's Nationalist Discourses and their Public Responses on Chinese Social Media, 2019 to 2021

Abstract

In this study, we explore official nationalist propaganda by the Chinese government on Chinese social media, focusing on inward-oriented, outward-oriented, and liberal nationalist narratives, as well as the public's responses to them. We analyze data from a unique database that compiles all Weibo posts from the Chinese Communist Party's mouthpiece, *People's Daily*, from January 2019 to December 2021. With a total of 43,259 Weibo posts, we conduct computational and statistical analyses, including Latent Dirichlet Allocation, sentiment analysis, word frequency analysis, and *t* tests. Our results indicate that inward-oriented nationalist narratives predominate in state-sponsored propaganda and are readily adapted to address domestic and international concerns. By contrast, outward-oriented nationalistic narratives emerge mostly in response to global events, while liberal nationalistic propaganda focuses more on individual rights with positive sentiments. Our findings further reveal the support of social media users for China's assertive actions and achievements, as evidenced by their active participation in discussions on outward nationalism. These findings advance the understanding of the intricate dynamics of Chinese state-led nationalist propaganda and manipulation in the digital sphere.

Keywords: nationalism; propaganda; manipulation; social media; China; Weibo; engagement

Introduction

Nationalism is an enduring topic in the social sciences (e.g., Bonikowski, 2016; Calhoun, 1993; Mylonas and Tudor, 2021; Skey, 2022). It encompasses vital discussions on territorial integrity, national identity preservation, and defense justification (e.g., Gellner, 1983; Guibernau, 2007; Schrock-Jacobson, 2012; Smith, 1991). Nationalism permeates politics and society in contemporary China. Nationalism in China have long been perceived as 'state-led' (Zhao, 1998; Mattingly and Yao, 2020), given the extensive control exerted by the Chinese government since the inception of the People's Republic of China. Previous studies show that the Communist Party of China (CPC) strategically uses (media) propaganda to boost its legitimacy by promoting nationalism (Zhao, 2004; Zhang and Xu, 2023; Xu and Zhao, 2023). Furthermore, scholars suggest that China's nationalist propaganda influences public attitudes towards xenophobia, support for war, and ingroup empathy (Liu and Shao, 2023; Zhou and Wang, 2016), which in turn ensure the stability of the CPC's rule, safety, and the development of economy (Weiss and Dafoe, 2019; Liu and Ma, 2018; Liu and Shao, 2023). While scholarship has primarily focused on identifying, describing, and explaining nationalist propaganda in China, this approach essentially treats nationalism as a static concept (e.g., Chen et al., 2023; Han, 2015; Schneider, 2018; Zhang, 2022; Zhao, 2004), with comparatively little consideration of the evolution of nationalist propaganda and the public's response to it. Thus, research regarding state-led nationalism as a dynamic concept is required to chart its development (both in terms of its growth and decline) and analyze how people react to nationalistic propaganda.

To investigate the development of nationalist propaganda and the corresponding public reactions on Chinese social media, we compiled a dataset from the official Weibo account of *People's Daily* (PD) covering the period from 2019 to 2021. This allows us to explore the PD's nationalist narrative in response to various events, including the initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our preliminary findings reveal that inward-oriented nationalist discourse

dominates in nationalist propaganda and emerges in response to a wide range of political concerns, both domestic and international. In contrast, outward-oriented nationalist propaganda primarily increases in response to international events, while liberal nationalistic discourse mainly focuses on individual rights and welfare. Notably, liberal nationalism propaganda carries the most positive sentiment. Our statistical results also highlight that while Weibo users tend to ‘like’ or ‘repost’ nationalistic narratives more than other types of posts, they show the highest level of engagement—particularly through active commenting—with outward-oriented nationalist narratives.

The article is structured as follows: we first review the literature on nationalism in China, with a focus on nationalism propaganda, and then clarify the nuances of Chinese nationalism, providing descriptions of inward-oriented, outward-oriented, and liberal nationalist discourses (Zhao, H., 2022; Zhao, S., 2013). Next, we provide a detailed explanation of our data collection and analysis methods. We subsequently present and discuss our results.

Nationalism and the Chinese Government

The Chinese government has a long history of shaping and manipulating various forms of nationalism to serve its interests (Guang, 2005; Hughes, 2006; Zhao, 1998; Zheng, 1999; Chen et al., 2023). This state-led nationalism, often defensive and reactive, strategically bolsters the legitimacy and authority of the CPC (Gries, Steiger, and Wang, 2016; Han, 2015; Schneider, 2018; Zhao, 1998; Zhao, 2004). Chinese nationalism is largely rooted in the ‘century-long humiliation’ that commenced in 1842, when British troops defeated the Chinese army to preserve the British-dominated opium trade (Modongal, 2016; Zhao, 1998). Consequently, it is often infused with strong anti-Western sentiment and outgroup hatred (Friend and Thayer, 2017; Weiss, 2013).

When under international criticism, the CPC often depicts foreign influence as a threat to Chinese values, leveraging accusations of human rights abuses and highlighting the perceived threat Western values, culture, knowledge modes, and historical narratives pose to Chinese exceptionalism. This approach fosters xenophobic sentiment among the Chinese populace (Xu, 2001). Additionally, the Chinese government has adopted a 'victimization narrative,' blaming the West for China's difficulties (Guang, 2005; Xu and Zhao, 2023). Overall, these factors result in what Comaroff and Stern (1995, p. 4) define as nationalism with an outward orientation that entails fundamental hostility toward others (also see Zhao H., 2022).

Notably, state-led nationalism in China is not solely anti-Western; it also focuses on presenting the state as powerful and fostering ambition to regain the past glory of China's historical empire (Guang, 2005; Duan, 2017). This form of nationalism has an inward orientation, intended to invoke a sense of ingroup solidarity (Comaroff and Stern, 1995, p. 4). According to Zhao (1998), the Chinese government presents the state as the embodiment of the nation's will, fostering loyalty and support among the people to establish a collective sense of nationhood. Duan (2017) posits that Chinese nationalism has its roots in history, politics and culture, which prompts the Chinese government to promote the glory of Chinese culture and emphasize its achievements (also see Zhao, 2004). Overall, Chinese nationalism is widely understood to have two main aspects: (1) national unity, territorial integrity, state sovereignty, and international legitimacy, and (2) antforeign sentiment, the perceived threat of victimization by foreign powers, and national humiliation (Duan, 2017; Gries, 2006; Guang, 2005; Wang and Kobayashi, 2020; Zhao, 2004).

However, scholars like Zhao (1998) contend that state-driven Chinese nationalism possesses a pragmatic dimension. In this view, the objective is to assist the CPC and the government in navigating domestic challenges and sustaining authority. Consequently, the Chinese government promotes a form of liberal nationalism (Modongal, 2016) that grants the

public a voice in representing the nation (Zhao, 2013), thus demonstrating the government's concern for the public. In the Chinese context, liberal nationalism is defined as 'a nation as composed of citizens who have the duty of supporting their own state in defending national rights in the world of nation-states while also pursuing individual rights of participation in the government' (Zhao, 2013, p. 539). This pursuit, however, does not necessarily promote Western beliefs. Although the focus of liberal nationalism is to cultivate unity among citizens, it does not consistently portray the CPC positively and Western countries negatively (Modongal, 2016). Unlike inward nationalism, which prioritizes formation of collective ideas, and outward nationalism, which is infused with anti-Western sentiment (Zhao, 2004), liberal nationalism emphasizes individualism, highlighting the individual rights and welfare of the public (Zhao, 2004; Zhao, 1998; Zhao, 2000).

Nationalist Propaganda in the Digital Era

The Chinese media is widely recognized as a party–state political apparatus (Duan and Takahashi, 2017; Qi, 2018), owned, funded, and monitored by the CPC (Chan and Qiu, 2001). Consequently, the Chinese media typically serves as the 'mouthpiece' of the Chinese government, fulfilling the role of a propaganda machine (Duan and Takahashi, 2017; Zhang, Zhang, and Shao, 2023). Shambaugh (2007) highlights various propaganda tactics used by Chinese mass media, including mass mobilization campaigns, nationalism promotion, ideological model creation, editorial control, nationwide loudspeaker systems, and broadcast media dominance. Jiang (2010) suggests that nationalism is seen by the CPC as a source of authoritarian legitimacy, strengthening support for the CCP by fostering the desire for national strength and power. Consequently, the Chinese government views the news media as a crucial tool for promoting nationalism (Zhang and Xu, 2023; Zhao, 2004), with the media often reflecting, expressing, and actively serving national interests as determined by other

powerful actors and institutions (McQuail, 1994). In this context, Chen (2019) notes that Chinese nationalist propaganda focuses on showcasing top CPC leaders and China's achievements. Additionally, Chinese nationalist propaganda often features a strong anti-Western sentiment (Zhang and Xu, 2023; Jaworsky and Qiaoan, 2020; Xu and Zhao, 2023), highlighting perceived foreign interference in Chinese politics, threats to national integrity, and past humiliations (Guang, 2005; Xu, 2001; Zhao, 2004). Overall, it aims to foster ingroup solidarity while promoting outgroup hatred (Comaroff and Stern, 1995).

While some scholars caution that the Chinese government may deter nationalism to prevent collective actions (Lu, Huang and Meng, 2023), it is widely acknowledged that nationalist propaganda has indeed proliferated online (Modongal, 2016; Sullivan and Wang, 2023), especially considering the digitization of Chinese official media (Lu, Huang and Meng, 2023; Zhang and Xu, 2023). China's digital nationalist discourse has evolved from overt, hard persuasion to nuanced soft propaganda, with its tone shifting from persuasive to more engaging and entertaining (Chen and Guo, 2023; Zou, 2021). For instance, research suggests that the Chinese government emphasized heroic individual sacrifices, portrayed the nation's beauty, and propagated news on Western criticism to cultivate public nationalism (Mattingly and Yao, 2022; Zhang, 2022; Kipnis, 2012). Schneider (2018) suggests that the digital nationalism in China is 'a consequence of technological affordances, economic incentives, and policy choices' (p. 197) and is an increasingly central characteristic of communication networks.

According to Kipnis (2012), the Chinese government is shaping the internet as a national social arena in which the political tone of expression can be controlled. The Chinese government heavily censors antiregime posts and fabricates pro-regime posts online (Han, 2015; King, Pan and Roberts, 2017; Zhang, Liu and Wen, 2018). In doing so, the Chinese government employs the notion of 'imagined communities' (Schneider, 2018b) on the

Internet, cultivating a context where citizens view the world through the lens of communities perceived to be politically and culturally unified. In short, the Chinese government is adapting to the new media ecology, manipulating social media in its favor, tightening information control, and enhancing the efficiency of nationalist propaganda (Hyun and Kim, 2015; Zhang and Xu, 2023; Chen et al., 2023).

Studies on nationalist propaganda in China, have yielded valuable insights but have two major limitations. First, their excessive focus on identifying and classifying nationalism has failed to elucidate how nationalism develops in digital media. That is, studies have tended to focus on the types and categories of nationalism online (Cabestan, 2005; Chen et al., 2023; de Kloet et al., 2020; Zhang, 2022) but have disregarded the trajectory of nationalist propaganda. These studies have not clarified whether nationalism or nationalistic discourse change in response to real-world events. Second, the reaction to nationalist propaganda remains underexplored, despite scholars examining strategies employed by various actors to cultivate nationalism (e.g., Chen et al., 2023; Han, 2019; Zhang, 2022; Chen, Su and Chen, 2019; Fang and Repnikova, 2018). These topics are key to understanding digital nationalism in contemporary China when myriad nationalistic expressions commonly occur (Stroup, 2022).

Nationalistic Propaganda and Its Effect on Social Media

Given the preceding discussion, our first research question is as follows:

RQ1: How have different forms of nationalism and nationalistic discourse evolved in Chinese nationalist propaganda?

Given the complexity of nationalism, both online and offline—with some elements being beyond our scope—we adopt the typology proposed by H. Zhao (2022). Based on a systematic review of nationalism in China, Zhao differentiates between inward-directed and outward-

directed nationalism. Inward-directed nationalism focuses on bolstering the national identity of the Chinese people (Zhao H., 2022, p. 7). It emphasizes the unification of all Chinese people, fostering a strong, homogeneous identity with confident national self-awareness (Cabestan, 2005; Modongal, 2016; Zhao, 2004); moreover, it encourages unity across ethnic groups, resistance to foreign intrusion, the upholding of national values, and the cherishing of Chinese culture (Duan, 2017; Guang, 2005). By contrast, outward-directed nationalism encourages xenophobia, or fear of foreigners, which distinguishes the national group from foreign entities while also homogenizing aspects within the national group (Calhoun, 1997; Salzborn, 2021), with the discourse on such nationalism often involving opposition to imperialism, bureaucratic capitalism, and democracy.

Distinct from inward-directed and outward-directed nationalism, both of which fuel support for the CPC and the nation, liberal nationalism draws inspiration from Western political concepts. Liberal nationalism emphasizes political participation and individual rights in pursuit of welfare, with the ultimate aim of strengthening China (Zhao, 2013). Liberal nationalism entails ‘the power to turn against the state if it fails to meet the radical demands of nationalistic voices’ (Fang and Repnikova, 2018, p. 2163). Different from inward-directed and outward-directed nationalism, liberal nationalism is focused on the development of technology, the economy, individual rights, and well-being. In this article, liberal nationalism is thus regarded as a third type of nationalism in China.

Zhang, Zhang, and Shao (2023) find that China’s propaganda contains a mix of positive and negative sentiments, with positivity notably prevailing, especially during the COVID-19 period. Likewise, discussions on China's domestic affairs are generally dominated by positive sentiments in nationalist propaganda, whereas negativity tends to characterize discussions related to Western countries (Hyun and Kim, 2015; Zhang and Xu, 2023). However, these studies often treat Chinese nationalism as static, failing to recognize its dynamic nature.

However, few studies have explored public reactions to nationalist propaganda. While Zhang and Xu (2023) discover that exposure to Chinese media can evoke public nationalism, previous studies overlook the public's response to different nationalist content and discourse, failing to elucidate their attitudes toward specific topics (e.g., Lyu, Chow, and Hwang, 2020). Therefore, our second research question (RQ2) is: *How do social media users react to the three forms of nationalist propaganda on Chinese social media?*

Methodology

Data Collection and Processing

To investigate nationalist propaganda on Chinese social media, we analyze the Weibo posts of *People's Daily (PD)*. Studies have demonstrated that *PD* tends to reflect the stances of the Chinese government and its top leadership (Mao, 2014; Wu, 1994). In addition, *PD* is well-known for its robust nationalist content and discourse (Schneider, 2021; Wang and Kobayashi, 2020). With over 116 million followers, the official Weibo account of *PD* is the most followed mainstream media account in China,¹ highlighting its considerable influence and authority (Dong et al., 2020; Zhang, Zhang and Shao, 2023).

A flowchart of our study procedures is presented in Figure 1. We first extract all the Weibo posts of *PD* from 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2021. This 3-year period allows for an extensive observation of the development of nationalist propaganda and for a comparison of nationalist propaganda during both small and large events, including the COVID-19 pandemic. Our final *PD* Weibo data set comprises 43,259 posts.

Subsequently, we conduct data preprocessing by first removing English characters and numbers to ensure our focus remains on Chinese text and to reduce potential noise and

¹ See 2020 Media Convergence Communication Index General Report
{<http://yjy.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0426/c244560-32088214.html>}

distractions from extraneous linguistic elements (Xu and Yang, 2020). Second, because of the absence of explicit word boundaries in the Chinese language, we segment the text into individual words or phrases for a more detailed understanding of the content and to facilitate subsequent analytical procedures (Li and Yi, 2022). Third, we remove stopwords and eliminate common words that might not have significant meaning on their own.

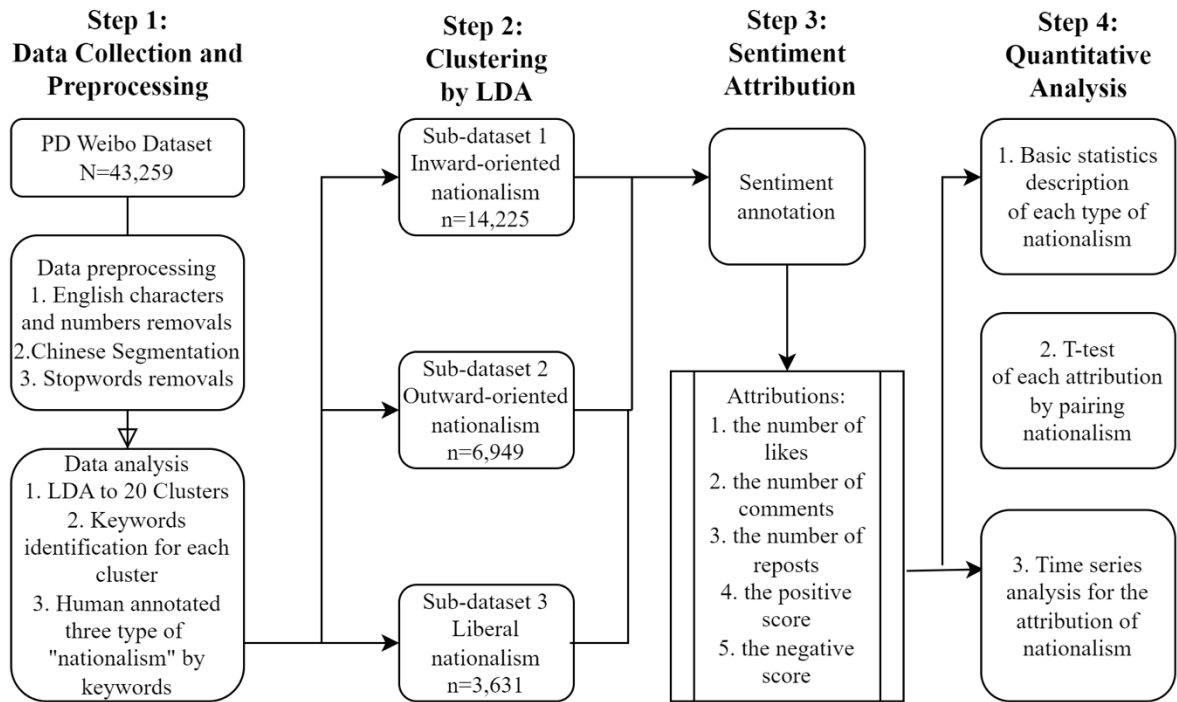


Figure 1. Study flowchart

Data analysis

Latent Dirichlet Allocation

To identify the three types of nationalist discourse in our *PD* data set, we first employ unsupervised Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA). LDA is used to determine the topic distribution in a document and the word distribution within each topic (Blei, Ng, and Jordan, 2003). We adopt the Python ‘gensim’ package to categorize all posts in the dataset into 20 distinct groups, with the use of four iterations to ensure cluster stability². Our LDA coherence

² num_topics = 20, id2word = dictionary, passes = 4, workers = 4, chunksize = 2000, batch = False, alpha = ‘symmetric’, eta = None, decay = 0.5, offset = 1.0, eval_every = 10, iterations = 50, gamma_threshold = 0.001,

score of 0.4978 indicates that our topic model exhibits high coherence (Alattar and Shaalan, 2021). Each group is characterized by a set of keywords that represents the primary themes or topics within that group. We subsequently read through all groups and manually assign them to one of the three forms of nationalist discourse: inward-oriented, outward-oriented, and liberal nationalism.

- a. Outward-oriented nationalism is represented by keywords that express resistance against imperialism, bureaucratic capitalism, democracy, and foreign products, and imperialism, or contain xenophobic and anti-Western elements (Zhang and Xu, 2023; Zhao, 2004). Examples of such keywords are ‘United States’ (美方), ‘resist US aggression and aid Korea’ (抗美援朝), ‘People’s Volunteer Army’ (志愿军), ‘Trump’ (特朗普), and ‘overseas’ (境外).
- b. Inward-oriented nationalism is represented by keywords that highlight a strong sense of homogeneous identity with assertive national self-awareness and a focus on the achievement of national independence (Cabestan, 2005; Modongal, 2016; Zhao, 2004). Example keywords include ‘China’ (中国), ‘hero’ (英雄), ‘the people’ (人民), ‘local’ (本土), and ‘motherland’ (祖国).
- c. Liberal nationalism is represented by keywords relating to individual rights and freedoms and the glorification of China’s economic development (Modongal, 2016; Zhao, 2013). Example keywords include ‘democracy’ (民主), ‘the masses’ (群众), ‘development’ (发展), ‘happy’ (快乐), and ‘together’ (一起).

Subsequently, we conduct supervised LDA, which involves labeling each post as an example of one of the three forms of nationalist discourse. To reveal trends in the nationalist propaganda over the 3 years, we conduct time series analysis (Chan and Fu, 2017).

random_state = None, minimum_probability = 0.01, minimum_phi_value = 0.01, per_word_topics = False, dtype = np.float32

Thereafter, we conduct word frequency analysis, to explore the descriptive aspects of the three nationalist discourse forms and reveal key events in each form of nationalist discourse. Given the extensive 3-year data set, identifying every event would be impractical. Thus, we focus on the top 500 words for each form of nationalism to identify keywords linked to distinct events within this subset. The objective is to achieve a comprehensive understanding and reveal variations across the three forms of nationalist discourse.

Sentiment analysis

Sentiment analysis is used to analyze and classify the emotional tone of text as positive or negative. Xu et al. (2008) suggests that in discourse analysis, focusing on strongly positive and negative sentiments is the most informative approach, with neutral sentiments unlikely to yield additional insights. We thus use the 'cnsenti' package in Python, a natural language processing tool for identifying sentiment in Chinese corpora³, to categorize sentiments as either positive or negative (Xu et al., 2008).

Based on the sentiment analysis results, we subsequently conduct time series analysis to analyze the evolution of positive and negative sentiments linked to each form of nationalist discourse over the 3-year period. In addition, we employ t tests to compare the positive and negative sentiments across posts related to each of the three forms of nationalist discourse.

Reactions to each form of nationalism

We examine the public's reactions to each form of nationalist propaganda over time by analyzing the number of likes, reposts, and comments on individual posts. We adopt time series analysis to reveal the trends in public reactions to the different forms of nationalist discourse

³ The 'cnsenti' package is a sentiment analysis tool designed for Chinese texts, facilitating sentiment extraction and quantification. This package assigns sentiment scores to individual words in sentences, where a score of 0 indicates neutrality. However, the relative scores do not signify absolute sentiment meanings, hence there is no definitive highest score (Xu et al., 2008).

(Chan and Fu, 2017). For a more in-depth understanding of the public's reaction, we employ *t*-test analysis to compare the nationalist discourse forms in terms of the number of likes, reposts, and comments. In short, we aim to elucidate the dynamics of different forms of nationalist propaganda as well as the public's online response over time.

Findings

Trends for different forms of nationalist discourse in PD

Our analysis reveals that 57% of all *PD*'s Weibo posts contain nationalist content, with inward-oriented, outward-oriented, and liberal nationalism accounting for 32.7%, 15.96%, and 8.34% of the discourse, respectively. Notably, all three forms of nationalist discourse are consistently observed over the three years.

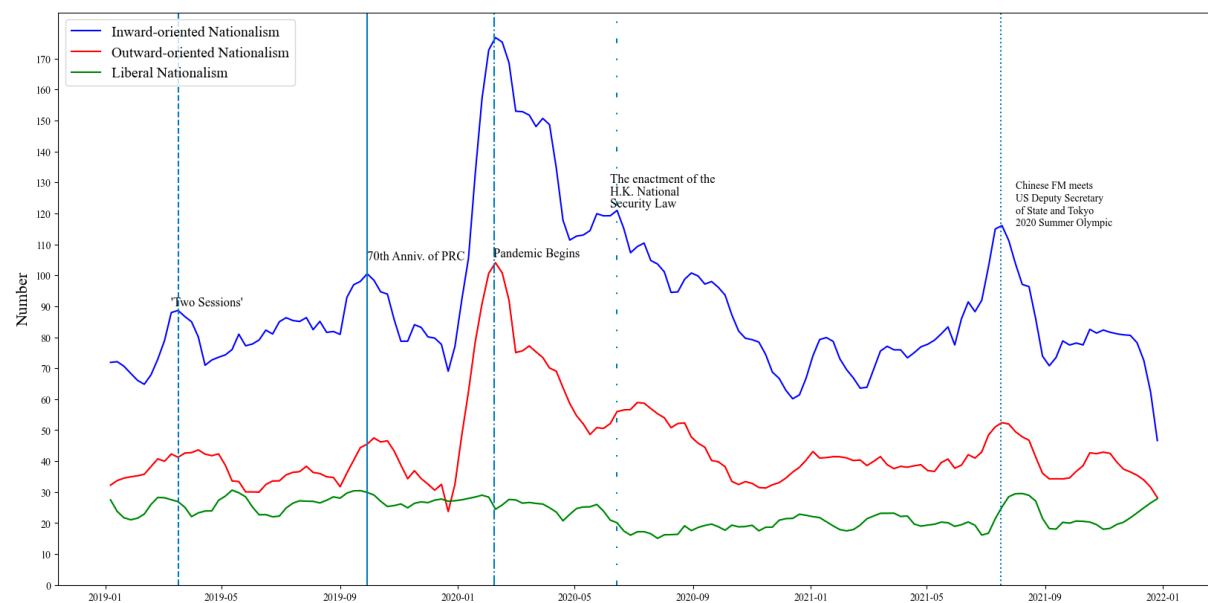


Figure 2. Trends in inward-oriented, outward-oriented, and liberal nationalism in *PD*'s Weibo account from January 2019 to December 2021

The inward-oriented and outward-oriented nationalist discourses exhibit similar trends over the study period, differing markedly from liberal nationalist propaganda (Figure 2). We observe five temporal peaks in the inward-oriented and outward-oriented nationalist discourse,

corresponding to key events and focal points in the Chinese government's nationalist propaganda.

- The first peak occurs in March 2019 during the 'Two Sessions,' which refers to the annual National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.
- The second peak coincides with the 70th National Day celebrations in 2019.
- The third and most pronounced peak is in early 2020, during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, when both inward-oriented and outward-oriented nationalist content significantly increased.
- The fourth peak occurs in June–July 2020, corresponding to the enactment of the Hong Kong national security law.
- The fifth peak aligns with two international events in late July 2021: the meeting between China's State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi and US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, and the Tokyo Summer Olympics in August 2021.

However, other events also triggered nationalist propaganda during the study period, as evidenced by the consistent presence of all three forms of nationalism throughout the three years.

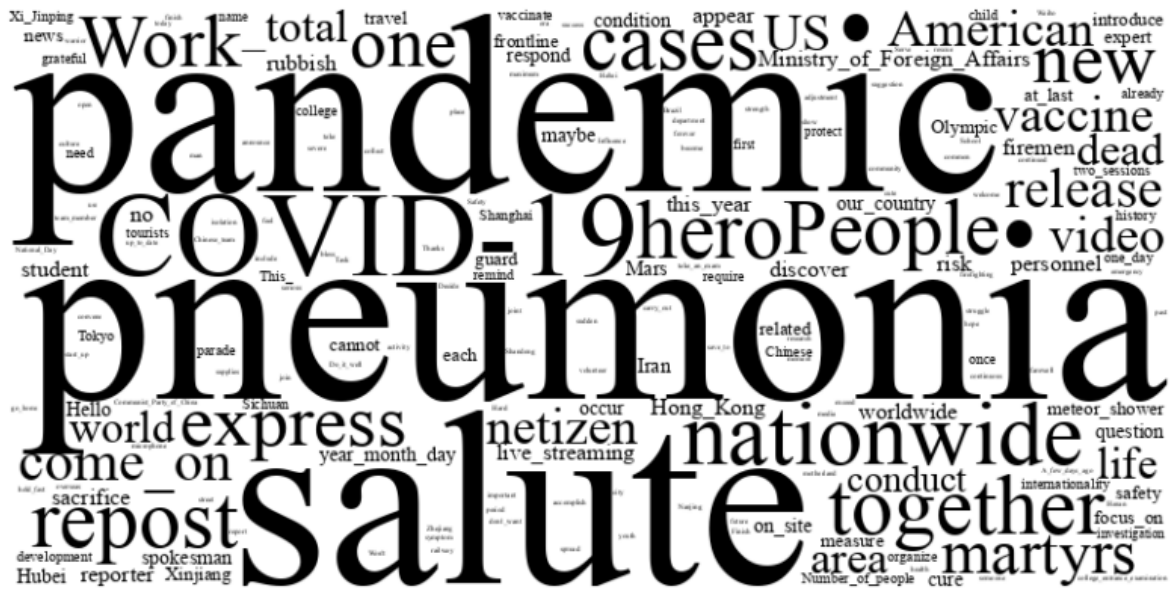
Word Frequency Analysis

Our word frequency analysis reveals that keywords related to COVID-19, such as 'pandemic' (疫情), 'COVID-19' (新冠), 'pneumonia' (肺炎), and 'cases' (病例), dominate the lists of the top 500 words in nationalist propaganda. This result is expected given the increase in *PD*'s Weibo posts during the pandemic.

Inward-oriented nationalist discourse (Figure 2) primarily focuses on showcasing China's national glory, upholding Chinese ethics, and highlighting the accomplishments of the Chinese government. Terms such as 'nationwide' (全国), 'the people' (人民), 'Xi Jinping' (习

近平), ‘development’ (发展), and ‘economic’ (经济) express unity and pride, while references to successful space missions, such as ‘launch’ (发射), ‘Chang’e’ (嫦娥), and ‘Shenzhou’ (神舟), emphasize national achievements. These posts exhibit inward-oriented nationalism because they focus on domestic events, including major occurrences such as the Olympics, the COVID-19 pandemic, National Day celebrations, and the two space missions. Inward-oriented nationalist discourses prominently feature keywords such as ‘Olympic’ (奥运会), ‘motherland’ (祖国), ‘two sessions’ (两会) and ‘National Day’ (国庆).

However, inward-oriented nationalist propaganda does not solely focus on domestic events; it also involves international concerns, as evidenced by the references to historical events, such as in the posts commemorating the victory in China’s War of Resistance against Japanese aggression and the campaign of resisting US aggression and aiding Korea. Keywords such as ‘martyrs’ (烈士), ‘sacrifice’ (牺牲), ‘Japan’ (日本), ‘history’ (历史), ‘against US’ (抗美援朝), ‘memorize’ (纪念) and ‘hero’ (英雄) are popular in inward-oriented nationalist propaganda posts. Situations that involve foreign criticism of the Chinese government or challenges to the CPC and China’s interests also stimulate inward nationalism; examples of such situations include a Human Rights Watch’s report accusing China of human rights abuses in Xinjiang, the enactment of the Hong Kong national security law, and the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement. Posts in this category often contain words such as ‘America’ (美国), ‘United States’ (美方), ‘Hong Kong’ (香港), ‘Xinjiang’ (新疆), ‘national security’ (国安), ‘violence’ (暴行), ‘Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ (外交部), and ‘overseas’ (境外).



Notably, the term ‘repost’ ranks among the 10 most popular terms in both inward- and outward-oriented nationalist propaganda posts, whereas it does not feature prominently in liberal nationalist posts. Furthermore, liberal nationalism propaganda posts markedly differ from that of posts related to outward- and inward-oriented nationalism. In liberal nationalist posts, keywords such as ‘life’ (人生), ‘live’ (生活), ‘self’ (自我), and ‘two sessions’ (两会) are linked with events or themes focusing on individual well-being. Similarly, terms such as ‘supervise’ (监督) and ‘development’ (发展) highlight societal progress when used along with keywords such as ‘Chang’e’ (嫦娥) and ‘Shenzhou’ (神舟), which denote the Shenzhou 12 launch and Chang’e 5 mission. Notably, liberal nationalist posts frequently feature terms related to positive values such as ‘hardworking’ (努力), ‘hope’ (希望), and ‘persistence’ (坚持).

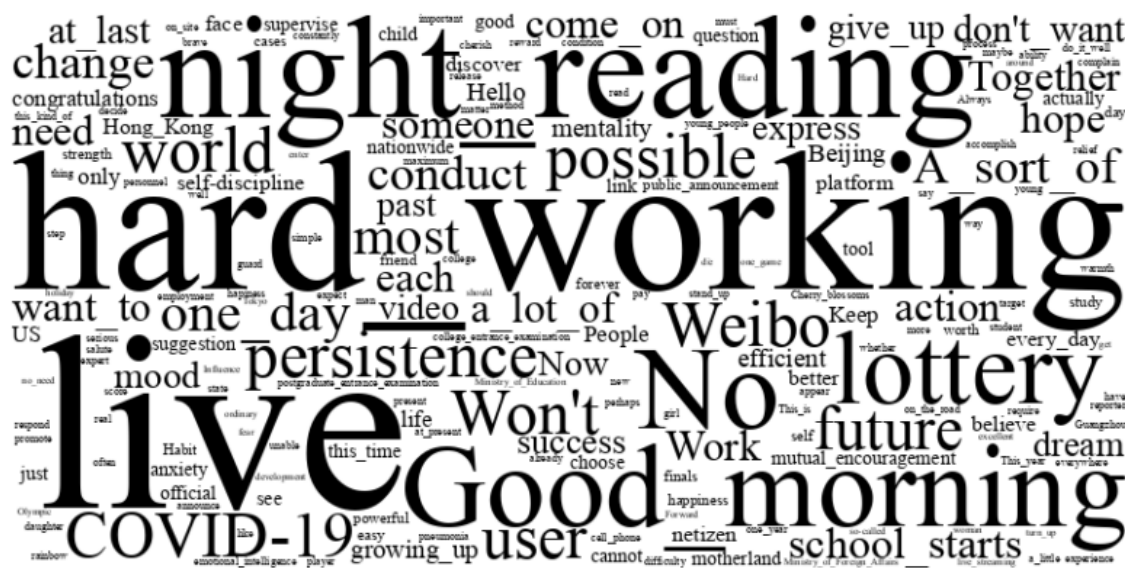


Figure 5. Top 500 words related to liberal nationalism

Sentiments of the nationalist propaganda

Our analysis reveals that the sentiment in nationalist propaganda is overwhelmingly positive (Figures 6-8). The greatest shifts in sentiments are observed for nationalist propaganda related to the two political challenges in Hong Kong.

The greatest peak in sentiment for all three forms of nationalist discourse is observed between June and July 2020, during the enactment of the Hong Kong national security law, with another substantial spike in sentiment occurring during the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement in Hong Kong (August 2019). During this period, both inward-oriented and outward-oriented nationalist propaganda exhibit a notably negative sentiment, whereas liberal nationalist posts consistently exhibit a positive sentiment. This highlights the government's focus on promoting positive values and individual well-being as a counterbalance to the prevailing negativity.

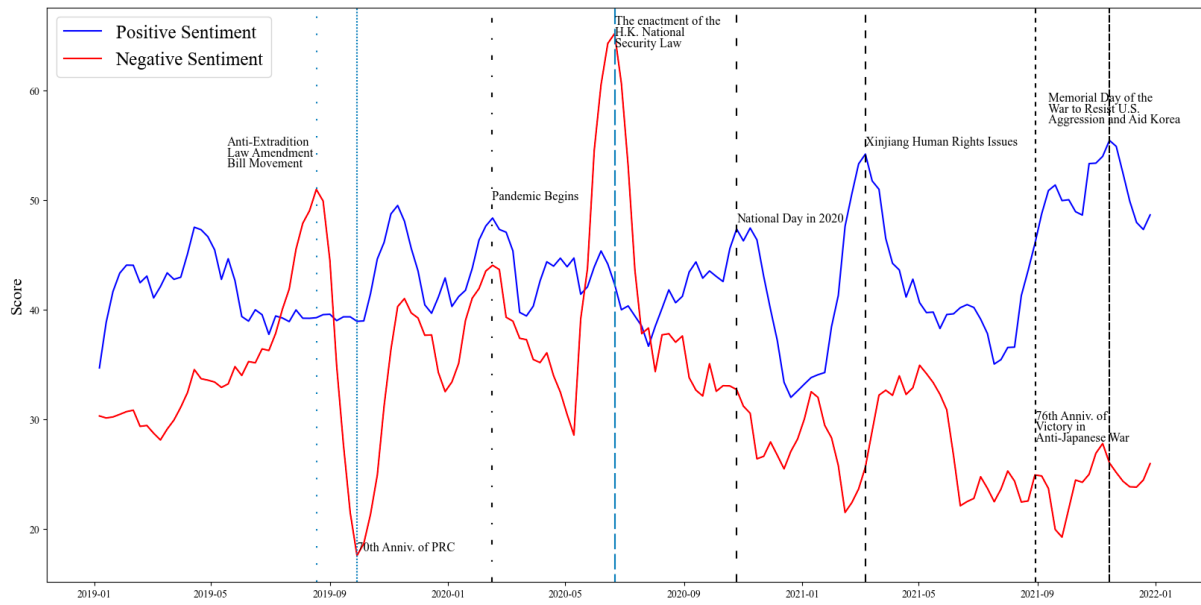


Figure 6. Sentiments of inward-oriented nationalist posts

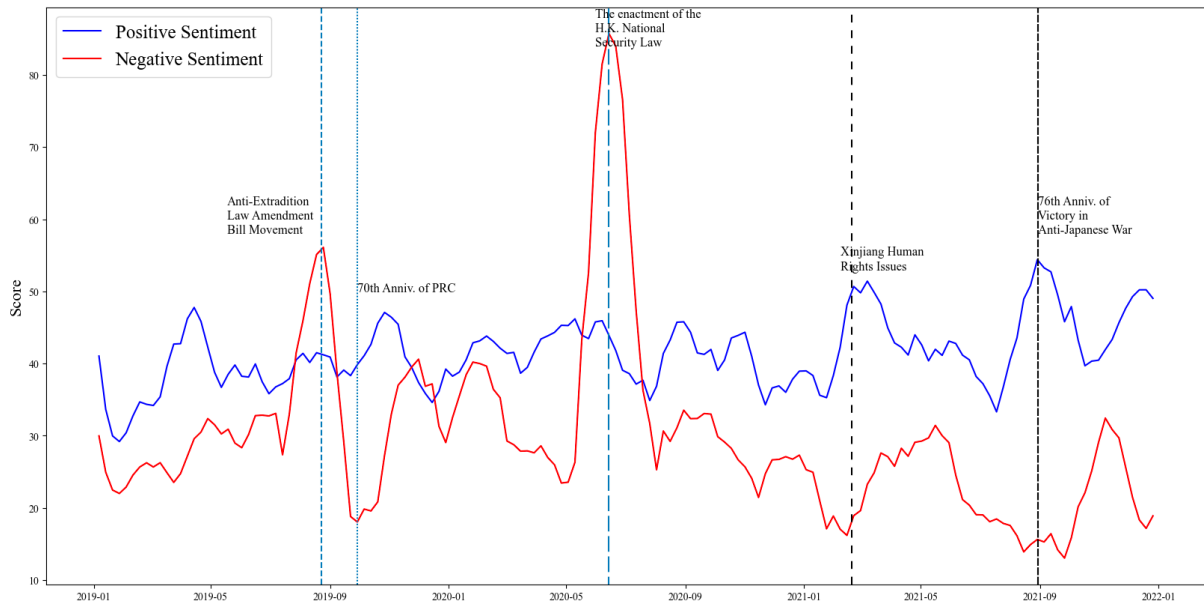


Figure 7. Sentiments of outward-oriented nationalist posts

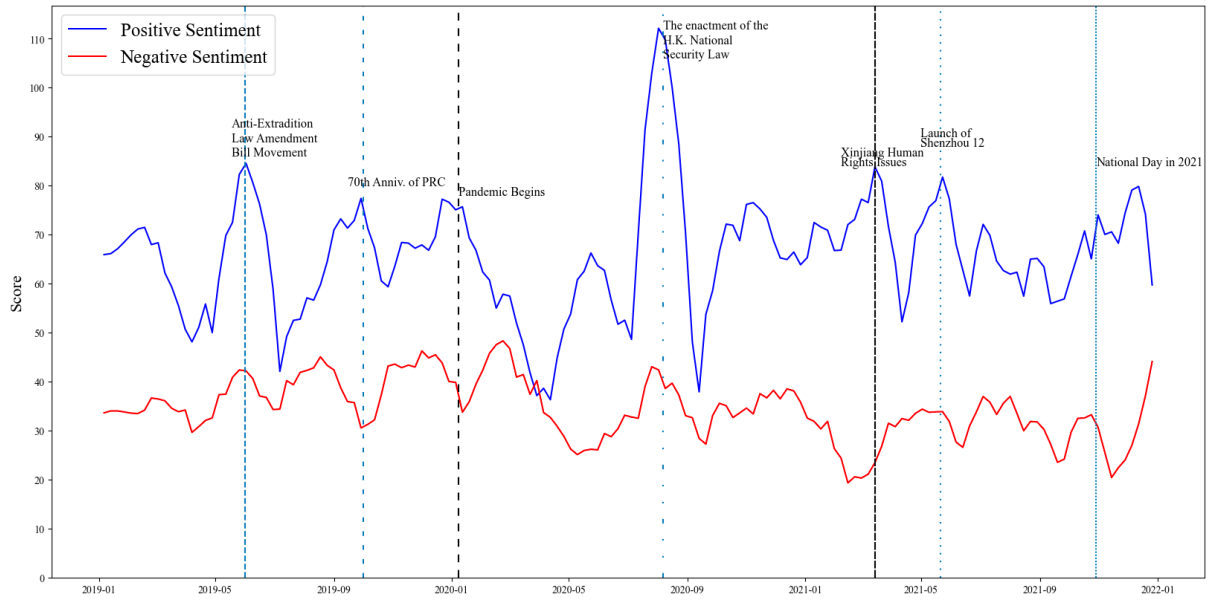


Figure 8. Sentiments of liberal nationalist posts

Our comparative sentiment analysis reveals that inward-oriented nationalist propaganda has significantly higher levels of both positive sentiment ($p = 0.05$; Table 1) and negative sentiment ($p = 0.004$) than do outward-oriented nationalist propaganda. In addition, liberal nationalist propaganda has a significantly higher level of positive sentiment than do inward-oriented nationalist propaganda ($p = 0.04$).

Datasets	Sentiment	t-statistic	p-value
Outward-oriented & Liberal Nationalism	Positive	-19.2568	3.016
	Negative	20.209	8.114
Liberal & Inward-oriented Nationalism	Positive	0.939	0.04*
	Negative	4.2733	1.9359
Outward-oriented & Inward-oriented Nationalism	Positive	-1.863	0.05*
	Negative	-2.824	0.004***

Table 1. Comparison of positive and negative sentiments among three forms of nationalist posts

Reactions to nationalist propaganda

Our analysis indicates that the public is more inclined to ‘like’ or ‘repost’ nationalist posts rather than to comment on them (Figures 9–11). In terms of inward-oriented nationalist discourse, the public’s like activity partially coincides with the aforementioned five peaks in *PD*’s nationalist propaganda (Figure 9); however, we note minimal like, repost, and comment activity for the ‘Two Sessions in 2019’ event. By contrast, a considerable peak in ‘like’ activity can be observed in August 2019, following the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement. Additionally, repost activity for inward-oriented nationalist posts does not completely coincide with the five peaks in nationalist posts. Beyond the peak during the 70th National Day celebrations, we observe three additional peaks in repost activity: September 2020, the 75th anniversary of China’s War of Resistance against Japanese aggression; the launch of Shenzhou 12 in June 2021; and the Memorial Day for resisting US aggression and aiding Korea in October 2021.

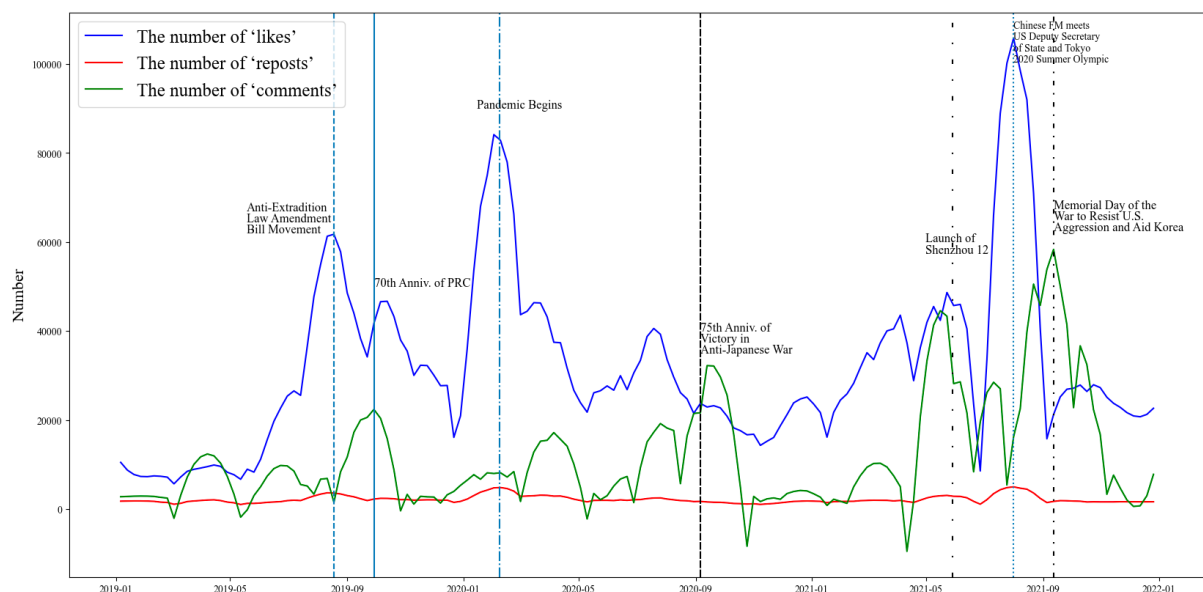


Figure 9. Number of likes, reposts, and comments for posts related to inward-oriented nationalism

Concerning outward nationalism propaganda, in addition to the peaks in like activity in February 2020, when COVID-19 was prominent, and August 2021, when China–US meetings

and the Olympics were held, we observe two additional major peaks in likes: in August 2019 during the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement and in April 2021 following the Human Rights Watch's report accusing China of human rights abuses in Xinjiang (Figure 10).

The peaks in reposts additionally coincide with notable events such as the 70th National Day in October 2020 and the China–US meetings and Olympics in August 2021. We also observe two further peaks in repost activity in September 2020, which marked the 75th anniversary of China's War of Resistance against Japanese aggression, and the Memorial Day for resisting US aggression and aiding Korea in October 2021, which is consistent with the repost activity observed in the inward nationalist propaganda posts.

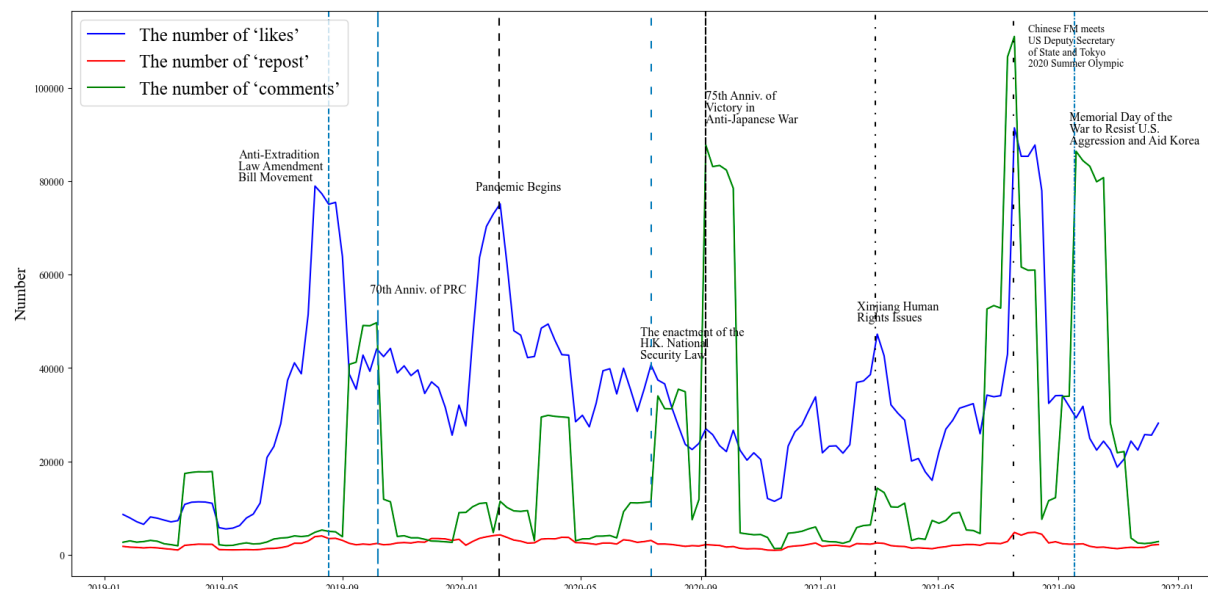


Figure 10. Number of likes, reposts, and comments for posts related to outward-oriented nationalism

Regarding liberal nationalism propaganda, the peaks in like activity correspond to key events: the 70th National Day celebrations in October 2019, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, claims of human rights abuses in Xinjiang in 2021, the late July 2021 meeting between China's State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi and US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, the Tokyo Summer Olympics in August 2021, and the Memorial Day for resisting US aggression and aiding Korea in October 2021. In addition, the two most

prominent peaks in repost activity correspond to the successful launches of Shenzhou 12 in June 2021 and of Chang'e 5 in November 2020.

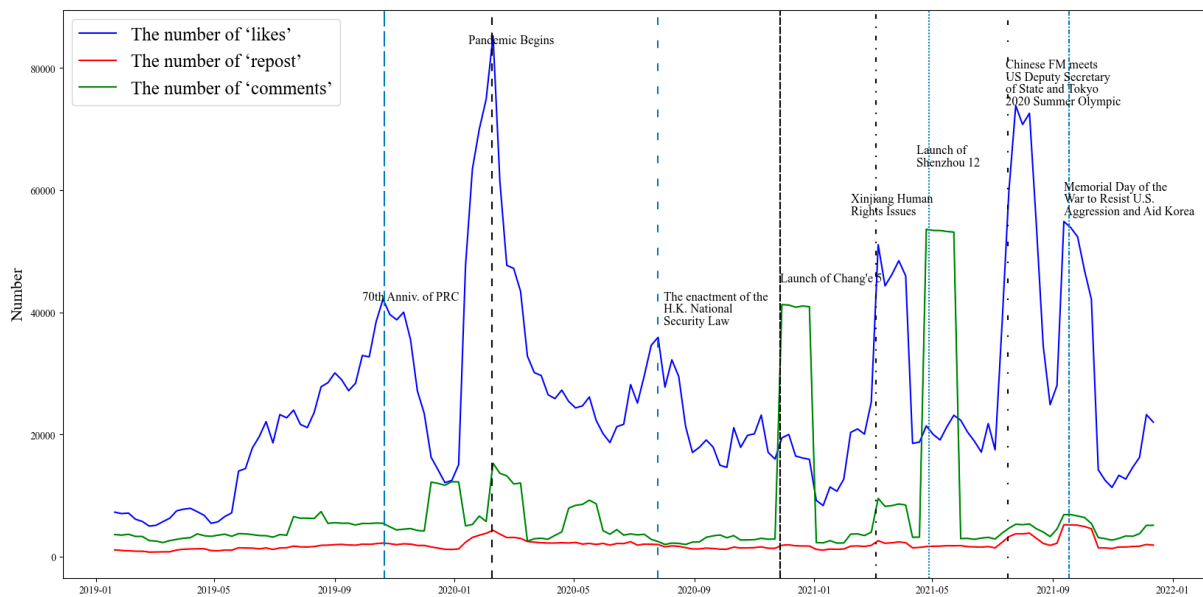


Figure 11. Number of likes, reposts, and comments for posts related to liberal nationalism

Our analysis (Table 2) reveals significant differences in audience engagement for different forms of nationalism. Outward-oriented nationalist propaganda appears to be a catalyst for heightened audience engagement, generating a greater number of comments than inward nationalist posts do ($p = 0.04$). Moreover, inward-oriented nationalist posts have a higher number of comments than liberal nationalist posts do ($p = 0.0006$), signifying they have greater resonance with the audience. Finally, outward-oriented nationalist propaganda have a propensity for fostering reposts, surpassing the level of engagement observed for liberal nationalist propaganda ($p = 0.048$).

Datasets	Items	t-statistic	p-value
Inward- & Outward-oriented Nationalism	Likes	-0.2946	0.7683
	Comments	-2.0476	0.0406*
	Reposts	-1.5603	0.1186

Inward-oriented & Liberal Nationalism	Likes	4.2733	1.9359
	Comments	3.3976	0.0006***
	Reports	1.1169	0.2640
Outward-oriented & Liberal Nationalism	Likes	4.3247	1.5409
	Comments	4.1319	3.6245
	Reposts	1.9739	0.048*

Table 2. *t* test results for likes, comments, and reposts for inward, outward, and liberal nationalist posts

Discussion and Conclusion

In the discourse surrounding Chinese nationalism propaganda, there is an ongoing debate about whether the Chinese government promotes nationalism to stabilize its control (Zhao, 2004; Chen et al., 2023; Zhang and Xu, 2023) or suppresses it to deter collective action (Lu, Huang, and Meng, 2023). Through this study, we observed a consistent promotion of nationalism by the Chinese government over the course of three years, with over half of the posts related to nationalism. Our findings indicate that nationalist propaganda predominantly adopts an inward-oriented approach, followed by outward-oriented and liberal nationalist approaches. Hence, liberal nationalist propaganda, which emphasizes individual rights, received less attention from the *PD*, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since 1989, Chinese nationalist propaganda has tended to downplay such rights to avoid fueling extreme nationalism (Modongal, 2016; Sullivan and Wang, 2023; Zhao, 2013) and deter collective actions (Lu, Huang, and Meng, 2023). In this context, we acknowledge that while nationalism propaganda is a popular strategy of the Chinese government, it is also carefully managed.

The Chinese nationalism propaganda is largely regard as aggressive and responsive (Zheng, 1999; Friend and Thayer, 2017). However, in contrast to the anti-Western sentiments in Chinese nationalism commonly highlighted in related research (e.g., Friend and Thayer, 2017; Weiss, 2013), the nationalism propaganda identified in the present study has a strong

undercurrent of language intended to promote a homogeneous Chinese identity. This observation underscores the pragmatic nature of Chinese nationalism, which is designed to reinforce CPC and governmental control (Zhao, 1998, 2004, 2000; Zhang and Xu, 2023; Zheng, 1999) while also emphasizing patriotism (Sullivan and Wang, 2023). In this context, Chinese nationalist propaganda reinforces the obligation of citizens to support China, the CPC, and the government with the aim of cultivating domestic allegiance (Zhao, 2013; Sullivan and Wang, 2023). That is, by focusing on China, the government seeks to stimulate national solidarity (Guang, 2005; Han, 2015; Weiss, 2013; Zheng, 1999). In this sense, nationalist propaganda emphasizes the party's supremacy and seeks to establish a stronger connection between the people and the CPC than that among the people themselves (Qin and Hernandez, 2018).

Inward-oriented and outward-oriented nationalist propaganda exhibit similar peaks in frequency and focus on historical invasions, the CPC's guerrilla warfare successes, and contemporary foreign interference in Chinese politics (Duan, 2017; Wang, 2012; Zhao, 2004). However, inward-oriented nationalist propaganda address both domestic and international matters, whereas outward-oriented nationalist propaganda predominantly pertain to international affairs. Outward-oriented nationalism is highly sensitive to international political events (Zheng, 1999), whereas inward-oriented nationalism is proactive and influenced by a broader range of political concerns. In this context, outward-oriented nationalist propaganda seems to be more reactive, while inward-oriented nationalist propaganda is more actively promoted, serving as the cornerstone of Chinese nationalist propaganda. This observation also reflects that inward-oriented nationalism is the prevailing discourse within Chinese nationalist propaganda.

Our analysis indicates that the prevailing tone in nationalist propaganda is positive, which is consistent with findings indicating the Chinese media exhibits a tendency to foster a

positive atmosphere (Zhang, Zhang, and Shao, 2023). However, the presence of negative sentiments in nationalist posts, particularly during challenges from abroad, highlights the government's use of nationalist anger to highlight perceived threats to the nation (Mattingly and Yao, 2020; Zhang, 2022). Notably, we observe mostly negative sentiment regarding the enactment of the Hong Kong national security law, which was supported by the CPC, although the topic includes some positive aspects. The complexity of the matter is exemplified by the following typical statement: 'The Hong Kong national security law targets a very small number of individuals who pose a serious threat to national security, and it demonstrates the political inclusiveness of the central government.' Here, the CPC-supported enactment of the Hong Kong national security law is portrayed positively to improve the image of the CPC, but it also includes criticism of CPC opponents. This duality explains the synchronous trends observed in inward-oriented and outward-oriented nationalist propaganda. Nationalist propaganda responding to criticism both counter the criticism and express inward-oriented praise of China. Consequently, Chinese nationalist propaganda is not homogeneous; a single event can be framed using various forms of nationalism and diverse sentiments.

Our results indicate that *PD* encourages the reposting of both inward-oriented and outward-oriented nationalist content. Users generally prefer liking or reposting rather than commenting on nationalist posts. We also observe that users comment the most on outward-oriented nationalist posts, indicating that outward-oriented topics effectively stimulate public debate, despite the general tendency for caution in political discussions (Gries, 2006; Han, 2019; Mattingly and Yao, 2020; Song and Chang, 2017; Zhang et al., 2018). In addition, across the three forms of nationalist propaganda, the public tends to express support for notable developments that benefit China and its people. Inward-oriented nationalist propaganda receives the greatest support when the Chinese government acts assertively on domestic

political matters, such as those related to Hong Kong. Conversely, outward-oriented nationalist propaganda receives the greatest public support when domestic matters gain international attention. Posts that highlight historical victories and technological successes in China garner the most reposts, reflecting users' eagerness to publicly demonstrate pride and support for the country's achievements. Consequently, perceived violations of national sovereignty can effectively mobilize nationalist sentiment (Mattingly and Yao, 2020).

In summary, China's state-driven efforts to shape public opinion have become increasingly sophisticated, blending various forms of nationalism to consolidate government control. However, social media users are not merely passive recipients of the CPC's nationalist propaganda; they exhibit a strong tendency to celebrate China's victories and achievements, and they focus intently on domestic matters related to national integrity. These findings align with Gries' (2006) assertion that collective self-esteem is a critical element of Chinese nationalism. Our study hence provides valuable insights into the interplay between nationalism propaganda and social media user responses.

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