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The Covid-19 Pandemic as a Test Case of Cultural Values: Reconstructing China's Nationalist Discourse in Social Media

Abstract: A variety of nationalisms are said to have emerged worldwide since the Covid-19 pandemic; however, scholars struggle to determine the mutual impact of nationalism and the pandemic, and they do not agree on what constitutes Chinese nationalism in particular. China's national narratives of the 1990s and digital nationalism in the first decades of the 21st century have highlighted the unique characteristics of Chinese culture, so it comes as a surprise that the vast body of research about China's Covid-19 pandemic nationalism has not yet determined the specific role cultural factors played in fostering nationalist sentiment. Hence, this article first uses the concept of national identity in Blank et al. as an analysis grid in its literature review to reconstruct a potential shift from patriotism to nationalism within China's Covid-19 discourse and explore the political and cultural factors that allegedly impacted the handling of the crisis by different countries. Second, a thematic analysis of a randomly selected sample of Chinese media articles and social media posts published in 2020 and 2021 aims to carve out the specific set of values that various Chinese discourse participants – ranging from the political and social elite to ordinary internet users – proclaim to be the reason why China succeeded to contain the first wave of the epidemic.

This literature review shows that the patriotic media campaign, launched after the official announcement of the epidemic, was led by the Chinese Communist Party to counteract Chinese public criticism of media censorship during the outbreak and maintain political stability. After the epidemic became a pandemic and China had successfully contained the first wave, Chinese internet users, as well as political and social elites, jointly engaged in the construction

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of a nationalist narrative to counteract international anti-Chinese discourse. Furthermore, this thematic analysis of Chinese social media discourse showcases how Chinese online publics ideologically constructed themselves as a homogeneous group defined by descent, race, and culture. This nourished nationalistic sentiment and helped to establish a boundary to the external other by ascribing the failure of foreign countries to contain the disease to their lack of certain Confucian values. In doing so, Chinese discourse evoked centuries-old Western orientalist stereotypes on 'Confucianist collectivism' that they used to foster nationalism while rejecting international criticism. Othering narratives in the pandemic discourse of China and liberal Western countries were based on nationalism, culturalism, racism, and the larger 'orientalist' idea of China versus 'the West' as homogeneous, transnational and imagined communities.

Keywords: China; Covid-19 pandemic; public discourse; cultural values; Confucianism; nationalism; social media; health (crisis) communication; critical digital social research

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1 Introduction

1.1 Nationalism(s) and the Covid-19 Pandemic

Political scientists describe nationalism as a political ideology that assists territorial communities to refer to themselves as nations, with the right of self-determination within world politics.¹ After a period of 'methodological statism' (equating the state with the nation and treating nationalism as a state policy), international relations scholars have come to regard nationalism as a dominant discursive shaped by different groups who socially construct bounded, imagined communities. Herein, the state is viewed as a governing apparatus, the nation as a cultural community, and nationalism is viewed as a cultural and discursive practice in everyday life that regulates order within the state, serves as

¹ Eric Taylor Woods et al., "Covid-19, Nationalism, and the Politics of Crisis: A Scholarly Exchange," *Nations and Nationalism* 26 (June 2020): 808, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12644>.

a source of political legitimacy, helps to reinforce collective identity, and constructs group identity from within while making sense of the world around.²

Nationalism can be activated by any country, especially during a crisis. The Covid-19 pandemic (with its outbreak in China in December 2019) is a crisis that has challenged both democratic and authoritarian states, as the legitimacy of their leaders stems from their capacity to protect their own populace first and foremost.³ In early 2020, many governments worldwide managed to create a dominant narrative to guide public reactions to the pandemic. However, the user-generated content that flooded public discourse in the following months helped many alternative narratives emerge, which made it more difficult for the public in many countries to agree on a strategy for epidemic containment.⁴

International studies scholar, Benedict Anderson, who coined the term *imagined communities* in the 1980s,⁵ traced the “cultural artifacts” of nation-ness and nationalism back to the bureaucratic and commercial middle-class of late eighteenth century literate bourgeoisie who had immigrated to “the New World” of the Americas. He points out the crucial role of mass media, print language, and print-capitalism for the emergence of solidarity on a solely “imagined basis” (one that goes far beyond the solidarity constructed by ancient and pre-modern dynasties based on kinship, clientship, and personal loyalties).⁶ With the emergence of the internet and digital communication technology, classical critical theories of nationalism such as Anderson’s have been revived by media theorists to analyze the rise of “new nationalisms” in digital capitalism.⁷

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, scholars have noticed the emergence of a variety of nationalisms in both democratic and authoritarian states (e.g., “pandemic nationalism”,⁸ “corona-nationalism”⁹). Other national-

² Jennifer Sterling-Folker, “Nationalism, World Order, and the Covid-19 Pandemic,” in: Forum: Thinking Theoretically in Unsettled Times: Covid-19 and Beyond, *International Studies Review* 23, no. 3 (2021): 1108, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viab018>.

³ *Ibid.*, 1109.

⁴ Annette Freyberg-Inan, “Separating the Old from the New, or the Death of Liberal Order (Not from Covid-19),” in: Forum: Thinking Theoretically in Unsettled Times: Covid-19 and Beyond, *International Studies Review* 23, no. 3 (2021): 1104, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viab018>.

⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, New York: Verso, 2006), revised edition.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 4, 77.

⁷ Christian Fuchs, *Nationalism on the Internet. Critical Theory and Ideology in the Age of Social Media and Fake News* (New York, London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 13, 16.

⁸ Pichame Yeophantong et al., “A Relational Reflection on Pandemic Nationalism,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 26 (June 2021): 550, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-021-09736-5>.

⁹ Unmut Ozkirimli, “Coronationalism?” OpenDemocracy, April 14, 2020, accessed May 30, 2022, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en-europe-make-it/coronationalism>.

isms identified include “medical nationalism”¹⁰ and “vaccine nationalism”,¹¹ which refer to countries competing to develop the first vaccine, and also hint at a global North/South divide regarding an unequal distribution of vaccines and medical resources. “Biopolitical nationalism” has been identified in both East Asian states like China¹² and Western countries,¹³ and is characterized by public discourse that depicts state-imposed public health measures with metaphors of war (e.g., the population being at war with the viral invader, reproducing inside/outside borders,¹⁴ and medical personnel being staged as soldiers fighting at the ‘frontline’).¹⁵

“Exclusionary ethnonationalism” refers to governments that employ medicalized prejudice to justify restrictive immigration policies,¹⁶ and “exclusionary nationalism”, while similar, is based on racist, xenophobic sentiments.¹⁷ Yeophantong et al. reconstruct “exclusionary nationalism” as a legitimizing ideology in the pandemic nationalism of both China and Taiwan, and observe two types of “nationalist othering”.¹⁸ Chinese nationalism was observed to employ *discursive othering*, (e.g., “othering the virus as an alien intrusion; othering Wuhan’s residents as the virus”¹⁹), whereas *mutual othering* was observed in Taiwan (e.g., labeling the coronavirus as “the Wuhan virus” after China rejected Taiwan’s offer to repatriate travelers on government-chartered flights who had travelled to Mainland China to visit their relatives for the Chinese New Year Festival).²⁰ This self-other binary was based on Taiwan discursively treating those Taiwanese citizens as ‘Wuhan’ residents and excluding them from re-

¹⁰ Jeremy Youde, “How ‘Medical Nationalism’ Is Undermining the Fight Against the Coronavirus Pandemic,” *World Politics Review*, March 23, 2020, accessed May 30, 2022, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28623/how-medical-nationalism-is-undermining-the-fight-against-the-coronavirus-pandemic>.

¹¹ Bollyky et al., “The Tragedy of Vaccine Nationalism: Only Cooperation Can End the Pandemic,” *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 5 (2020): 96–108.

¹² Jeroen de Kloet et al., “We Are Doing Better: Biopolitical Nationalism and the Covid-19 Virus in East Asia,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 4 (2020): 635–40.

¹³ Lauren Wilcox, “The Biopolitics of the Wars on Covid-19,” in: Forum: Thinking Theoretically in Unsettled Times: Covid-19 and Beyond, *International Studies Review* 23, no. 3 (2021): 1111, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viab018>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1110.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1112.

¹⁶ Erin K. Jenne, “Varieties of Nationalism in the Age of Covid-19,” *Nationalities Papers* 50, no. 1 (2022): 29, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2021.104>.

¹⁷ Yeophantong et al., “A Relational Reflection on Pandemic Nationalism,” 552.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 564.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 563.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 564.

turning to Taiwan, while allowing other returnees from the United States and Europe.²¹

“Othering the virus” was not only a discursive strategy employed by the governments in China and Taiwan, but also by Western countries in January and February 2020. Observing public discourse in Australia, the UK, USA, and Germany, sociologist Meinhof argues that the West underestimated the virus and did not prepare to contain the epidemic in a timely manner because of three prevailing attitudes: (1) *sinophobic racism*, which blames Chinese cultural traits for the outbreak (e.g., eating wild animals); (2) *new orientalism*²², which establishes a boundary between liberal countries and the authoritarian ‘other’, and interprets the outbreak as a symptom of the failure of authoritarian regimes; (3) *colonial temporality*, which establishes a boundary between the healthcare systems of the “backward other” in contrast to “modern” countries that can handle a health crisis.²³ These three prevailing notions prevented Western countries from “relating Chinese disasters to ‘us’”, taking necessary precautions, and learning lessons from Asian countries (including liberal democratic countries like South Korea or China, whose “authoritarian disease control” was staged as impossible to be implemented in democratic countries). After the first wave was successfully contained in China and Western countries proved incapable (as a result of othering the virus), the Chinese population embraced the propaganda narrative of the Communist Party of China (CPC) that equates the CPC with China, with many Chinese perceiving the governments of the United Kingdom and United States as “malign, caring more about economic stability than the health of their people”.²⁴

Meinhof’s observation about sinophobic racism in Western media should be supplemented by Liao’s observation that Chinese nationalist discourse contributed to the racialization of the virus during the pandemic. Some liberal

²¹ Yeophantong et al., “A Relational Reflection on Pandemic Nationalism,” 564–65.

²² The term ‘orientalism’ was conceptualized by Edward Said who regarded it as an integral part of a Eurocentric perspective on the world during the nineteenth century, when contemporary scholars and intellectuals judged non-European societies on the basis of what they ‘lacked’ in comparison to Europe, which was depicted as ‘modern’ and ‘civilized’. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage books, 1979). In contrast to Said, Dirlik considers orientalism not to be a phenomenon of the past. According to Dirlik, Eurocentrism has continued to characterize Western world views during the 20th century, as exemplified in post-World War II modernization theory. Comp. Arif Dirlik, “Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism,” *History and Theory* 35, no. 4 (Dec., 1996): 100, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2505446>.

²³ Marius Meinhof, “Othering the Virus,” *Discover Society*, March 21, 2020, <https://archive.discover society.org/2020/03/21/othering-the-virus/>.

²⁴ Ibid.

countries, such as the USA and UK, depicted the virus as “Chinese”²⁵ and ethnically Chinese U.S. citizens were physically and verbally attacked, with verbal abuse prevalent within Western social media networks. In response, Chinese pandemic nationalism staged the West as a ‘racist other’ before and during the first four months of the pandemic. Employing Lacan’s differentiation between *the other* (another person that the self faces) and *the Other* (a thing distinct from the self and the other), Liao observes that despite the construction of the ‘racist other’, the Chinese government and (social) media (specifically Weibo) attempted to shift the blame of Western countries of *the other* (China) to *the Other*, that is, the virus itself.²⁶ According to the author, this strategy was informed by former president’s Hu Jintao’s statement of a “community of shared future for mankind” and aimed at strengthening the notion of a community of common destiny and appealing to global solidarity.²⁷

Despite these varieties in “exclusionary nationalism” and allegedly new types of nationalism proclaimed during the health crisis, scholars point out that some already existed before the pandemic. Bieber observed a discursive and social shift since the 2010s towards exclusionary nationalism in the UK (Brexit), European member states (migration crises) and the USA (election of Donald Trump).²⁸ Nationalism has also reportedly been on the rise in authoritarian China since the 1990s. During the post-Cold War period, the Chinese government launched patriotic education campaigns to deal with the internal legitimacy crisis of Communist ideology.²⁹ These campaigns actively promoted a sense of national greatness and emphasized the unique characteristics of Chinese culture. While the Chinese government architected the campaigns, other groups also participated in the nationalist discourse to promote their own in-

²⁵ During a press conference, former U.S. president Donald Trump labeled the Coronavirus as a “Chinese virus”, see: Donald Trump, News briefing in Washington on March 16, 2020, *Los Angeles Times*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pjsx94m8qA>. One year later, anti-Asian hate in social networks continued, see: Queenie Wong, “Twitter, Facebook and Others Are Failing to Stop Anti-Asian Hate,” *C/net*, April 7, 2021, <https://www.cnet.com/news/twitter-facebook-and-others-are-failing-to-stop-anti-asian-hate/>.

²⁶ Lois Liao, “The Two-Way Othering during the Covid-19 Pandemic: The Role of Political Statement and Media,” *Journal of Behavioral Economics for Policy* 4, no.3 (2020) (=Covid-19 special issue): 68–69 and 74, <https://sabeconomics.org/journal/RePEc/beh/JBEPv1/articles/JBEP-4-S3-5.pdf>.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 70, 74.

²⁸ Florian Bieber, “Global Nationalism in Times of the Covid-19 Pandemic,” *Nationalities Papers* 50 (2022): 16, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2020.35>.

²⁹ Suisheng Zhao, “A State-Led Nationalism: The Patriotic Education Campaign in Post-Tiananmen China,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 31, no. 3 (1998): 287, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0967-067X\(98\)00009-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0967-067X(98)00009-9).

terests, including ordinary citizens and social elites (e.g., intellectuals, journalists) who amplified these messages and guided public opinion.³⁰

Carving out the specific characteristics of disaster³¹ nationalism in the Chinese context, Zhang observes that the party state narrated national tragedies (e.g., Sichuan earthquake in 2008) with stories of people's heroic sacrifices, the Party's strong leadership, and the unity of both to construct national community and national identity. Disaster nationalism has also combined an older notion of victimhood identity (suppression and semi-colonization by Western powers) with a more recent "historical imaginary that frames the nation as rising from a traumatic past".³² Similarly, in order to address the perceived hostility from the international community, official and popular narratives of Covid-19 regenerated the collective memory of humiliation to emotionally mobilize the people and reinvent national history as a "seemingly timeless past".³³

There is no agreement over the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on nationalism,³⁴ so scholars have recently attempted to elaborate on the mutual impact of nationalism and the pandemic. Some political scientists conclude that in contrast to previous pandemics, it was "ethnic nationalism" that shaped many states' responses to the current health crisis. They argue that the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the future development of nationalism could be a deepened divide along ethnic and national boundaries.³⁵ Furthermore, although there is no consensus over what constitutes Chinese nationalism,³⁶ scholars have observed a transformative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Chinese nationalism, as the country's successful containment of it over the last two years has fostered a sense of national pride and belief in the "superiority of the 'Chinese Model' of politics".³⁷

³⁰ Simon Shen, *Redefining Nationalism in Modern China. Sino-American Relations and the Emergence of Chinese Public Opinion in the 21st Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 165.

³¹ When speaking of disaster, Zhang includes both natural and human-made disasters, as it is the way in which the state and the public frames a certain event that counts. Chenchen Zhang, "Contested Disaster Nationalism in the Digital Age: Emotional Registers and Geopolitical Imaginaries in Covid-19 Narratives on Chinese Social Media," *Review of International Studies* 48, no. 2 (2022): 220, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210522000018>.

³² *Ibid.*, 223.

³³ *Ibid.*, 223–24.

³⁴ Yeophantong et al., "A Relational Reflection on Pandemic Nationalism," 550.

³⁵ Woods et al., "Covid-19, Nationalism, and the Politics of Crisis: A Scholarly Exchange," 809.

³⁶ Jessica Chen Weiss, "How Hawkish Is the Chinese Public? Another Look at 'Rising Nationalism' and Chinese Foreign Policy," *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, no. 119 (March 2019): 682, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2019.1580427>.

³⁷ Woods et al., "Covid-19, Nationalism, and the Politics of Crisis: A Scholarly Exchange," 814.

1.2 Nationalism in China's Cyberspace

In line with Anderson's claims that the evolution of mass media enabled the global spread of imagined communities of nationality, we must consider the role of the internet in transforming nationalism. Recent literature has emphasized the role of the internet and social media in fostering *digital nationalism* in China. Schneider (2018) observes that nationalist discourse in China's online public sphere is fostered by the spread of digital information and communication technologies, state governance of the internet, and social groups as networked communities (e.g., digital nationalists).³⁸ Schroeder considers social media to be the major communication tool of Chinese right-wing populist movements in opposing allegedly liberal mainstream media.³⁹ Although the term 'right-wing' in China ranges from advocating Mao's Communist values, to traditional Confucian values, or capitalism, a sense of the superiority of Confucian civilization is identified as a central characteristic of contemporary Chinese nationalism.⁴⁰ Online Chinese nationalists advocate a distinctive path of national development and praise the superiority of the Han-Chinese people.⁴¹ Current literature on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Chinese nationalism suggests that China's relative success in handling the spread of the virus and the failure of Trump's administration has further nourished nationalist sentiment, national pride and a confidence among the youth in the 'Chinese model', as opposed to that of the United States.⁴²

It is important to consider the communicative possibilities of digital space when investigating recent transformations of Chinese nationalism during the pandemic because its multi-channel direction may transform the state-encouraged nationalism of the 1990s into a nationalism carried not only by politicians and social elites, but by ordinary internet users as well. This is supported by further observations that despite the CPC using 'emotional mobilization' as a crucial part of its propaganda since the Maoist era, affective governance has become less top-down with the emergence of the internet. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the CPC appeared to allow internet users to become "thought

³⁸ Florian Schneider, *China's Digital Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

³⁹ Ralph Schroeder, *Social Theory After the Internet. Media, Technology, and Globalization*, (London: UCL Press, 2018), 60, esp. Chapter 3: "Digital Media and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism", 60–81.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 74–76.

⁴² Hongying Wang, "The Global Pandemic and China's Relations with the Western World," Opinion series "Global Cooperation after Covid-19," Center for International Governance Innovation (CIGI), July 22, 2020, accessed February 25, 2022, <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/global-pandemic-and-chinas-relations-western-world/>.

work collaborators' through social media engagement"⁴³, and express themselves as long as they communicated "positive" energy and emotions that foster a "feel-good politics of cohesion".⁴⁴ Expressing negative feelings against the 'hostile' foreign countries that were criticizing China's national pandemic politics was also accepted by Chinese authorities because it helped to nourish a "dichotomous framing of ideological competition" whereby China appeared superior to Western liberal democracies (who failed to contain the spread of the virus).⁴⁵ In the past decade, scholars have observed a discursive shift in digital space from "a largely 'legitimacy-challenging imaginary grounded in (Western) democratic reference' towards a more regime-supportive framework of 'civilizational competition'".⁴⁶ This new form of affective governance (i.e., allowing users to express their feelings online) is combined with direct persuasion, hegemonic intervention, and online censorship.⁴⁷ However, it was not only the scientific concept of herd immunity and Western countries' alleged prioritization of 'freedom over life' that Chinese online users mocked;⁴⁸ a variety of different political and cultural factors were addressed and juxtaposed by Chinese debaters in their reflections of different countries' performance in epidemic control. These factors were crucial in fostering a sense of national superiority among the Chinese online publics and in discursively constituting a binary between China and the West.

1.3 'Competitive Nationalism'

Despite China being an authoritarian capitalist country,⁴⁹ U.S. American and Chinese media fell back into Cold War rhetoric over the course of 2020 by staging the pandemic as a proxy war between the allegedly two competing ideologies of "capitalism/anti-communism" and "communism".⁵⁰ Nationalism has been used by political leaders in both democratic and authoritarian-ruled countries to pursue their own goals, so the Covid-19 health crisis has become

⁴³ Zhang, "Contested Disaster Nationalism in the Digital Age," 233.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁴⁶ Angela Xiao Wu, "The Evolution of Regime Imaginaries on the Chinese Internet," *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 25, no. 2 (2020), 139–61, quoted after Zhang, "Contested Disaster Nationalism in the Digital Age," 237.

⁴⁷ Zhang, "Contested Disaster Nationalism in the Digital Age," 225.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁴⁹ Michael A. Witt et al., "China: Authoritarian Capitalism," Faculty & Research Working Paper, INSEAD, The Business School for the World (2012), accessed October 20, 2021, <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2171651>.

⁵⁰ Pan Wang, "Reporting and Combating the Health Crisis: An Analysis of the PRC Media During the Covid-19 Pandemic (2019–2020)," *Media Asia* (November 2020): 47, no. 3–4 (2020): 158, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2020.1847995>.

another means for both China and the USA to further engage in “competitive nationalism”.⁵¹ Zhang describes “the imaginaries of geopolitical and ideological opposition between China and the West” as having been mutually produced through “othering narratives from both sides”,⁵² and “co-producing binary oppositions between the self and the other”.⁵³ As described previously, Meinhof speaks of a new form of orientalism, with Western liberal countries depicting China as the authoritarian ‘other’ by interpreting the outbreak as a symptom of the failure of authoritarian regimes and the coming end of the Communist Party’s rule. As a result, China similarly started to regard pandemic management as a “contest between ‘our’ and ‘their’ political systems”.⁵⁴

Dirlik has demonstrated that such processes of ‘self-orientalization’ are not new, but a historical phenomenon of Chinese nationalism. In contrast to Said’s conceptualization, orientalism has not only been a construction of Asia made by Europeans, but also by Asians, particularly by intellectuals who studied abroad. Since the 19th century, Euro-American intellectuals jointly participated in a culturalist construction of the orient as an internally coherent culture bound together by a common spirit.⁵⁵ With the presence of Western powers, nationalism emerged in China, and culturalism and nationalism entered into a partnership in China’s new national narration, when 20th century Chinese integrated European-American images of the Chinese past into a new national identity. Chinese liberals and conservatives as well as Chinese diaspora identified China with Confucianism, despotism, bureaucratism, familism, and particular racial characteristics that are all traceable to 19th-century orientalist representations.⁵⁶ Dirlik concludes that “Confucianism [was codified] as an emblem of Chinese society not just for Euro-Americans, but also for twentieth-century Chinese who drew not only on Chinese but also Euro-American scholarship in their own evaluations of China’s past”.⁵⁷

Nationalist narration has undergone a change since the 1980s, when China’s economy rapidly grew and globalized. Although Dirlik regards contemporary Chinese nationalism as a form of *cultural nationalism* and an expression of *orientalism*, the depiction of the significance of Confucianism has been transformed from being an obstacle to China’s modernization to being functional to capitalist development.⁵⁸ Hence, since the 1980s, Asian intellectuals (e.g., in

⁵¹ Yeophantong et al., “A Relational Reflection on Pandemic Nationalism,” 549.

⁵² Zhang, “Contested Disaster Nationalism in the Digital Age,” 238.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁵⁴ Meinhof, “Othering the Virus”.

⁵⁵ Dirlik, “Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism,” 98, 107, 109, 115.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

Singapore and Malaysia), Chinese scholars, state leaders, and businessmen as well as Western sociologists and futurologists have proclaimed a Confucian revival or *new Confucianism*.⁵⁹ Dirlik regards new Confucianism as an expression of a new sense of power in East Asian societies that “reassert themselves against earlier Euro-American domination” and “against Euro-American cultural hegemony”⁶⁰ by highlighting “Asian cultural differences” in discussions about democracy. This has helped the Chinese government to suppress differences within the nation, justify oppression inside the country, and reject “democracy” and “human rights” as a form of “cultural imperialism”.⁶¹ Ironically, Dirlik uncovers that new Confucianism actually reinforces ‘Western’ ideological hegemony by “internalizing the historical assumptions of orientalism”,⁶² such as the use of modern Europe as a benchmark for judging non-European countries, regarding Confucian values of harmony, familism, patrimonialism as synonymous with Chinese culture,⁶³ and overlooking differences within individual societies and between Asian societies, i.e., “culturalist essentialism”.⁶⁴

Hence, the combined arguments of Zhang, Meinhof, and Dirlik suggest that the mutually constructed competitive nationalism observed in the othering narratives of Chinese and liberal Western countries’ pandemic discourse during the outbreak was not only based on culturalism and racism, but on the idea of competing political systems. Furthermore, beyond nationalist sentiments, there was also a larger ‘orientalist’ idea of China versus ‘the West’ in this discourse. As shown below, in contrast to the pre-internet age, it is ordinary Chinese internet users who now join the social and political elites within these processes of self-orientalization, as witnessed in China’s digital pandemic nationalism.

One year after the outbreak, in early 2021, worldwide media finally started to debate the cultural (rather than political) reasons for why some East Asian countries handled the pandemic ‘better’ than their Western counterparts. Despite having different political systems, citizens in Confucian-based societies like China, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan were perhaps more accepting of social tagging (tracking) technologies, because they saw this as part of a social contract and civic responsibility to contribute to the public good in times of crisis, rather than an invasion of personal privacy.⁶⁵ However, such explana-

⁵⁹ Dirlik, “Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism,” 108–9.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 109–10, 114.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 114.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁶⁵ Victor Cha, “Asia’s Covid-19 Lessons for the West: Public Goods, Privacy, and Social Tagging,” *The Washington Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2020): 10–13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2020.1770959>.

tions were rejected as an ‘Oriental fantasy’ created by the West, because it does not acknowledge that East Asian countries are neither harmonious nor communitarian-spirited societies.⁶⁶ Kleine suggests that it would be “more fruitful for comparative cultural studies, [...] to ask which external attributions and self-perceptions are evoked in the discursive competition for the best cultural and religious preconditions for fighting the pandemic than for actual causalities”.⁶⁷

2 Aims and Methodology

Scholarly studies exploring varieties of nationalism during the Covid-19 pandemic have overlooked the role of cultural factors in fostering nationalist sentiment in China’s debate of its own and international epidemic containment responses. This is astonishing since scholars have highlighted their crucial role over the last three decades. For example, Zhao emphasizes the unique characteristics of Chinese culture in state-led nationalism of the 1990s⁶⁸ and Schroeder observes a sense of superiority of Confucian civilization in China’s digital nationalism.⁶⁹ Against this backdrop, Section 3 of this article reconstructs how China’s patriotic discourse evolved into nationalistic discourse after the first wave of the epidemic had been contained. Describing *patriotism* and *nationalism* as specific expressions or ‘consequences’ of the more general concept of national identity, Blank et al. consider patriotism as a ‘counter-concept’ to nationalism.⁷⁰ Here, nationalism is characterized by: (1) idealization of one’s nation and its history; (2) feelings of national superiority; (3) uncritical acceptance of authorities; (4) strong connection of one’s self-concept to national affiliation; (5) suppression of ambivalent attitudes towards the nation; (6) defining one’s belonging to the group by descent, race, and culture; (7) perception of this group as homogeneous; (8) derogating comparison with other groups.⁷¹ Whereas ‘patriotism’ is characterized by: (1) critical opinion-making of the nation; (2) support of the nation ends as soon as it violates humanist values; (3) multiple viewpoints of group history are cherished; (4) rejection of a state-authoritarian ‘culture of subjects’; (5) rejection of an uncritical ac-

⁶⁶ Christian Kleine, “Has Confucius Won the Corona War?” ReCentGlobe Blog #40, University of Leipzig, January 12, 2021, accessed March 03, 2021, <https://recentglobe.uni-leipzig.de/zentrum/detailansicht/artikel/blog-has-confucius-won-the-corona-war-2021-01-12/>.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Zhao, “A State-Led Nationalism,” 287.

⁶⁹ Schroeder, *Social Theory After the Internet*, 77.

⁷⁰ Thomas Blank et al., “National Identity in a United Germany: Nationalism or Patriotism? An Empirical Test with Representative Data,” *Political Psychology* 24, no. 2 (June 2003): 291–93.

⁷¹ Blank et al., “National Identity in a United Germany: Nationalism or Patriotism?” 292.

ceptance of national authorities; (6) acceptance of negative emotions towards the nation; (7) no overemphasis of national affiliation in the individual's self-concept; (8) relevance of temporal comparisons; (9) rejection of objectivist criteria for one's group.⁷²

Notwithstanding the challenge of applying a 'Western' concept of national identity to the Chinese context, the current paper uses the absence of cultural factors in the definition of patriotism as a guiding reference point for its literature review. Since the paper explores the cultural factors that were addressed in Chinese public discourse during the pandemic, nationalism's characteristic of "defining one's belonging to the group by descent, race, and culture" has been selected as a potential indicator of a shift in public discourse from patriotism to nationalism. As such, Blank et al.'s conceptualization is used as an analysis grid in this review of the scholarly literature, which covers China's pandemic nationalism to identify the tipping point from patriotism to nationalism within Chinese Covid-19 pandemic discourse.

In a text mining analysis of more than 5000 user comments on Weibo published between the end of December 2019 and the end of May 2020,⁷³ Wang et al. found that out of six criteria for identifying nationalism, "the inclination to define one's own group by criteria of descent, race, cultural affiliation" was not identified very often,⁷⁴ while "the suppression of ambivalent attitudes toward the nation" and "feeling of national superiority" made up the largest proportions in Chinese public discourse on the pandemic.⁷⁵ However, the authors overlook that the "feeling of national superiority" can stem from internet users' attempts to construct a group identity based on cultural values, which groups outside this imagined community are said to be lacking. Hence, this literature review has two goals. Firstly, to assess whether a turning point from patriotism to nationalism in China's public discourse could have formed the basis for a growing consciousness of not only political, but cultural factors that allegedly impacted the handling of the crisis by different countries. Secondly, to identify the main actors who promoted either patriotic or nationalist sentiment during different stages of the health crisis (i.e., from the outbreak of the epidemic until after the successful containment of the first wave by March 2020). A closer examination of the initiators, facilitators or 'bandwagoners' before and after a presumed turning point can shed light on whether contemporary Chinese na-

⁷² Blank et al., "National Identity in a United Germany: Nationalism or Patriotism?," 292–93.

⁷³ Zhenyu Wang et al., "Many Nationalisms, One Disaster: Categories, Attitudes and Evolution of Chinese Nationalism on Social Media during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 26 (2021): 532, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-021-09728-5>.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 538.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 535.

tionalism is still led by the CPC as it was in the 1990s, when the internet was not yet being used on a large scale.

In a second step (Section 4), within the context of Kleine's (2021) recommendation above, this critical digital social research study will reconstruct the cultural values proposed by China's nationalist public discourse and explore how they allegedly equipped China to handle the health crisis. The empirical analysis presented here of China's self-perception of its pandemic management shows that from mid-March 2020 onwards, a nationalist discourse emerged in leading social networks (e.g., Weibo, Weixin/WeChat, Bilibili, and Toutiao) ascribing the failure of foreign countries to contain the disease to their lack of certain Confucian values.

Social media is the dominant channel for debating current affairs in contemporary China, so this study conducts an elaborate search on prominent platforms where individuals, companies, government offices, media outlets,⁷⁶ and other organizations run public accounts to provide information and communication offers. These platforms include Tencent's WeChat (Weixin), microblogging service Sina Weibo, Bytedance's TikTok (Douyin), Bytedance's information release and recommendation platform Toutiao, video platform Bilibili, discussion forums like Baidu post bar, and the question-answer forum Zhihu.

To reconstruct the nationalist discourse of 2020 and the first half of 2021, my research assistant and I conducted a manual search using the Chinese search engine Baidu and screened the aforementioned social media platforms. The first search was conducted in June and July 2020, with a second search one year later in July and August 2021. We used certain key words (e.g., "Covid 19/Corona, 新型冠状病毒肺炎, xīnxíng guānzhhuàng bìngdú fēiyán", "epidemic, 疫情, yìqíng", "war, 战, zhàn") in combination with phrases such as "national culture (国家文化, guójiā wénhuà)," or "Confucian culture (儒家文化, Rújiā Wénhuà)," and "China's success (中国的成功, Zhōngguó de chénggōng)" to randomly collect a sample of dozens of media articles, user posts, and short video clips. The search revealed hashtags such as #Join forces to win the battle against epidemic prevention and control# (#众志成城打赢疫情防控阻击战#, #Zhòngzhìchéngchéng dǎyíng yìqíng fángkòng zǔjízhàn#),⁷⁷ and discussion threads initiated by state media on Weibo such as #Prevention and Control of Epidemic Highlights the Advantages of Chinese Culture# (#疫情防控彰显中国

⁷⁶ Media outlets such as Xinhua News Agency, Guangming Daily, The Paper and Beijing News. The platform Toutiao, for example, covers 3700 media outlets. Cf. "Search Word 'Toutiao,'" Baidu Encyclopedia, accessed August 2, 2021, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E4%BB%8A%E6%97%A5%E5%A4%B4%E6%9D%A1/4169373?fr=aladdin>.

⁷⁷ Dongdong Yang, "Lu Yanhai: Mobile Cultural Volunteers in Residential Areas," Beitun Convergence Media, Weibo, March 2, 2020, <https://m.weibo.cn/2884508570/4478074425284851>.

文化优势#, # Yíqíng fángkòng zhāngxiǎn Zhōngguó wénhuà yōushì#).⁷⁸ Next, a close reading of the collected articles and posts was conducted to identify the particular values highlighted by different discourse participants to explain (the success of) China's epidemic control and containment of Covid-19 during the first wave. Texts that reflected the role of culture in China's pandemic nationalism in detail were selected rather than using the most frequently quoted/read/liked articles, or those appearing first in the search order.

While the main platform for discussion in 2020 was the microblogging service Sina Weibo, in 2021 the short video sharing platform Bilibili became another prominent platform. Bilibili targets young online users, with some videos being viewed by millions of netizens. We also observed that some of the media articles and posts collected in summer 2020 were no longer accessible one year later (e.g., discussion threads on the platform Toutiao that had highlighted the advantages of Chinese culture in epidemic control).

To avoid stereotyping on the one hand or providing single, non-generalizable cases on the other,⁷⁹ the analyses of media reports and 'netizens's' self-expressions (micro-analytical approach) from a one and a half-year period (2020 and the first half of 2021) are linked to the following question: what kind of media regulations, national values (specifically the Confucian core value of harmony and national unity) and cultural traditions impact the representation of China's management of health crises in online publics (macro-analytical approach)?

3 From Patriotism to Nationalism – The Role of Different Actors and the External Other

When Covid-19 broke out in Wuhan (Hubei province) in December 2019, the Chinese government tried to suppress online rumors about the spread of an unknown pneumonia by deleting social media posts of doctors like Li Wenliang or Ai Fen who warned their colleagues about an unknown, SARS-like virus

⁷⁸ People's Daily Online, "Weibo Discussion Topic: #Prevention and Control of Epidemic Highlights the Advantages of Chinese Culture#", Weibo, July 14, 2020, <https://s.weibo.com/weibo?q=%23%E7%96%AB%E6%83%85%E9%98%B2%E6%8E%A7%E5%BD%B0%E6%98%BE%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E6%96%87%E5%8C%96%E4%BC%98%E5%8A%BF%23>.

⁷⁹ Jürgen Bolten, "Kultur und kommunikativer Stil," in *Deutsche Sprachgeschichte nach 1945. Diskurs- und kulturgeschichtliche Perspektiven*, ed. Martin Wengeler (Hildesheim, Zürich, New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 2003), 103–24. Quoted from a pdf-version provided on the website "Prof. Dr. Jürgen Bolten, Seniorprofessur Interkulturelle Wirtschaftskommunikation, Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena," 8, accessed August 3, 2021, <http://www.iwk-jena.uni-jena.de/iwk/team/juergen-bolten/>.

within private chats on the platform WeChat.⁸⁰ Such ‘offensive’ censorship of unauthorized, negative information, in combination with ‘defensive’ mechanisms (e.g., filtering and lists of taboo-words) are common⁸¹ and considered essential in times of national (health) crisis.

The official announcement of the epidemic’s outbreak to Chinese audiences on 20 January 2020 was accompanied by the launch of a patriotic media campaign, appealing to national unity. The percentage of front-page news reports covering the ‘people’s war’ against the epidemic increased considerably.⁸² State media like People’s Daily used their public social media accounts (e.g., on Weibo and Douban) to not only mobilize collective support, but also let netizens actively join the patriotic discourse with short personalized videos showing support for Wuhan.⁸³ When live streams documented the construction of emergency hospitals, netizens flooded live broadcasting rooms and gave nick names to site vehicles.⁸⁴ Artists⁸⁵ and museums represented China’s “heroic battle” in art form.⁸⁶ Hence, patriotism served as cement to hold official politics and the populace together. However, after the “whistle blowing doctor” Li Wenliang died from Covid-19 in the first week of February 2020 and the hashtag “I want freedom of speech” went viral, the unified spirit was at risk. As a result, all related online debate on Weibo was quickly removed by internet

⁸⁰ Yang Gao, “Doctor Wenliang Li, Who Was the First to Warn about the Disease, Passed away,” *Shanghai Xinmin Evening News*, February 7, 2020, paper.xinmin.cn/html/xmwb/2020-02-07/4/57160.html.

⁸¹ Ying Jiang, *Cyber-Nationalism in China. Challenging Western Media Portrayals of Internet Censorship in China*, (Adelaide: Adelaide University Press, 2012), 81–83.

⁸² Changkun Cai et al., “Campaign-Style Crisis Regime: How China Responded to the Shock of COVID-19,” *Policy Studies* 43, no. 3 (2022): 605–6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2021.1883576>.

⁸³ Wang, “Reporting and Combating the Health Crisis,” 155.

⁸⁴ The construction of provisional hospitals in Wuhan was broadcasted online via livestreaming. From January 30, 2020 onwards, internet users who witnessed the construction process in real time started to give nick names (e.g. nick name “Guangwu Di” for a particular forklift) to the construction vehicles and created images with new buzzwords that were spread as internet memes on popular social media platforms like Weibo. This phenomenon is typical for the so called Fanhuan subculture where fan communities follow certain stars or, as in this case, follow certain topics collectively to influence the ranking list of trending topics. For a collection of such images, see: Zhang et al., “Behind the Epidemic – New Words, New Images During the Epidemic,” WeChat public account named “Yuming Peak Nursing Home,” March 24, 2020, mp.weixin.qq.com/s/_SRsU05qk9m_jt9UCAvQiA.

⁸⁵ “Artists Create Works for Fight Against Epidemic,” *China Daily*, February 13, 2020, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202002/13/WS5e44d465a3101282172774c4.html>.

⁸⁶ “China Promotes its ‘Heroic’ Battle Against Coronavirus in a New Exhibition,” *South China Morning Post*, August 11, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3096916/china-promotes-its-heroic-battle-against-coronavirus-new>.

censors.⁸⁷ China's Cyber Administration Office also enacted a law in March 2020 to allow any social media accounts that spread online rumors about unconfirmed details of the epidemic (e.g., government mismanagement) to be deleted.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, state media tried to address internet users' criticism of the government's lack of timely dissemination of information at the initial stage by rehabilitating doctor Li Wenliang as a hero who had tried to save his colleagues and students from the virus.⁸⁹ Despite public criticism of China's initial response to the crisis, one scholarly study found that online users still supported the government.⁹⁰ Ultimately, the state media's patriotic campaign had shifted "the focus of public opinion from interrogating state censorship to combating the disease".⁹¹ In the initial stages of the epidemic, the CPC launched a patriotic campaign in collaboration with journalists to counteract public criticism of how the government had handled the outbreak.

As China slowly recovered from the epidemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced on 11 March 2020 that it had turned into a global pandemic. Anti-Chinese discourse had already manifested in Western media reports (e.g., Denmark, the USA, Australia) since the end of January, portraying SARS-CoV-2 as a "Chinese virus"⁹² or a "communist coronavirus",⁹³ but this remained largely unaddressed by China as it was preoccupied with epidemic containment. Authors found that nationalism emerged on the Weibo platform only after China had successfully contained the first wave of the epidemic,⁹⁴ when Western countries started to become overwhelmed by it. Wang et al. identified two categories of nationalism (as defined by Blank et al.) to be the most frequent in comments on Weibo: (1) a "feeling of national superiority" stimulated by a "comparative response to international competition" in epidemic containment, and (2) "the suppression of ambivalent attitudes toward the nation",

⁸⁷ Josephine Ma et al., "Death of Coronavirus Doctor Li Wenliang Becomes Catalyst for 'Freedom of Speech' Demands in China," *South China Morning Post*, February 7, 2020, www.scmp.com/print/news/china/politics/article/3049606/coronavirus-doctors-death-becomes-catalyst-freedom-speech.

⁸⁸ Long Qiao, "China Steps up Social Media Censorship with Mass Account Deletions," *Radio Free Asia* (RFA), March 2, 2020, www.rfa.org/english/news/china/deletions-03022020114458.html.

⁸⁹ Gao, "Doctor Wenliang Li, Who Was the First to Warn about the Disease, Passed away".

⁹⁰ Xiaoyu Zhao, "A Discourse Analysis of Quotidian Expressions of Nationalism during the Covid-19 Pandemic in Chinese Cyberspace," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 26 (2021): 290, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-020-09692-6>.

⁹¹ Wang, "Reporting and Combating the Health Crisis," 156.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 157.

⁹³ "Opinion: A Communist Coronavirus," *Wall Street Journal*, January 29, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/video/opinion-a-communist-coronavirus/3C311BB5-4526-4A17-ADD6-E7240443FA55.html>.

⁹⁴ Wang et al., "Many Nationalisms, One Disaster," 538, 544.

stimulated by discursively counteracting an “external threat” – that is, other countries’ criticism and stigmatization of China.⁹⁵ Another study found that internet users regarded claim damages from China and “potential anti-China coalitions” in the United States and the ‘West’ as an “external provocation”.⁹⁶

Highlighting the different expressions of nationalism among Chinese internet users, Zhao described “external provocation” and “stand firm” as major aspirations characterizing the nationalist discourse of netizens who had shown a “tough stance”.⁹⁷ Zhao even observed internet users displaying a “confrontational and xenophobic” posture,⁹⁸ as they not only related China’s “impressive performance” (in epidemic containment and provision of international aid) to the “advantages” of China’s political system and the discipline of its citizens, but also juxtapose it to the ineffective responses of other countries, which they trace back to “the indiscipline” of the populace and the “nonfeasance” of foreign governments.⁹⁹ Li and Meinhof demonstrate how the state’s censorship of social media comments – made by journalists, intellectuals, and internet users who criticized officials’ silencing of the outbreak¹⁰⁰ – and the need to address unfair accusations (raised by either Chinese citizens or the international community), helped to re-imagine the pandemic from a narrative of failure to a narrative of success.¹⁰¹ They argue that the dynamics of social media, fostered by the entanglement of official discourse and counter-official accounts of the health crisis,¹⁰² contributed to a horizontal nationalist discourse.

In summary, rather than assuming that a state-encouraged nationalism characterized China’s discourse on the pandemic,¹⁰³ these studies suggest that the internet transformed the top-down approach that characterized Chinese nationalism in the 1990s¹⁰⁴ into a horizontal relationship with the government, journalists, and internet users, jointly fueling nationalist sentiment after the

⁹⁵ Wang et al., “Many Nationalisms, One Disaster,” 525, 544.

⁹⁶ Zhao, “A Discourse Analysis of Quotidian Expressions,” 285.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 285, 291.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 289.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 289–90.

¹⁰⁰ Lisa DeTora et al., “Introduction. Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) and International Media – Issues, Challenges, and Opportunities,” in *Covid-19 in International Media. Global Pandemic Perspectives*, ed. John C. Pollock and Douglas A. Vakoch (Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2022), 13.

¹⁰¹ Yawen Li and Marius Meinhof, “Imagining Pandemic as Failure: Writing, Memory, and Forgetting under Covid-19 in China,” in *Covid-19 in International Media. Global Pandemic Perspectives*, ed. John C. Pollock and Douglas A. Vakoch (Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2022), 83–92.

¹⁰² Lisa DeTora et al., “Introduction,” 13.

¹⁰³ Wang, “The Global Pandemic and China’s Relations with the Western World”.

¹⁰⁴ Zhao, “A State-Led Nationalism,” 287.

first wave was contained. However, this is in contrast to the patriotic discourse during the initial phase, which was initiated by the government in collaboration with state-media and aimed to promote a spirit of unity after netizens criticized online censorship by the CPC.

Interestingly, none of the reviewed studies discuss the effect of cultural factors in shaping public debate. Scholars explored political factors by pointing out ordinary internet users' focus on the benefits of China's political system for epidemic containment.¹⁰⁵ They describe nationalist sentiment as stemming from a sense of national superiority,¹⁰⁶ but fail to identify what this sentiment draws upon. Hence, this final section showcases how Chinese online publics ideologically construct nationalism based on a collective political *and* cultural identity that allegedly helped China to succeed where other countries failed.

4 Constructing an Imagined Community Based on Cultural Identity

The patriotic discourse at the initial stage of the pandemic did not refer to cultural values to foster a common spirit among the populace. After the outbreak was officially announced, media, academics, and internet users were eager to stage the 'war' against the epidemic as a 'united fight' to mobilize the people.¹⁰⁷ Media outlets acknowledged the efforts of different social groups, including the restless standby duty of medical professionals, community workers,¹⁰⁸ volunteers distributing household supplies and singing in residential communities to cheer up the "impetuous mood"¹⁰⁹ as well as college students translating epidemic control measures into local dialects.¹¹⁰ They reported how workers were supported by local trade and labor unions to post and recite poems like "Salute to the Angel in White" in WeChat groups (e.g., Liaoning Workers' Cultural National Reading WeChat group), to pay tribute to medical professionals and to "build an indestructible spiritual great wall through the power of words

¹⁰⁵ Zhao, "A Discourse Analysis of Quotidian Expressions," 290.

¹⁰⁶ Wang et al., "Many Nationalisms, One Disaster," 525.

¹⁰⁷ Cai et al., "Campaign-Style Crisis Regime," 8.

¹⁰⁸ Ping Zheng, "#Prevention and Control of the Epidemic, We Are Together#," Weibo video account of Tianjin Binhai Civilization, Zheng Ping at District Cultural Center, Weibo, March 12, 2020. <https://m.weibo.cn/5284546164/4481683560986207>.

¹⁰⁹ Yang, "Lu Yanhai: Mobile Cultural Volunteers in Residential Areas".

¹¹⁰ China Gannan.com, "#Gannan is United in the Fight Against the Epidemic.# #Epidemic Prevention and Control, Gannan is in Action#. The Villagers Need Me, so I Must Take Responsibility," Weibo, February 11, 2020, <https://m.weibo.cn/3182957143/4470794199098089>.

and voices”.¹¹¹ Party-affiliated Youth Leagues at universities reassured young audiences that victory was in sight.¹¹² Internet users participated in the patriotic discourse and appealed to the unity of people.¹¹³ Despite the stigmatization of China by some foreign countries as the virus began to spread outside China, Chinese netizens appeared to stay focused on their own lot in January and February 2020.

However, once China had successfully contained the first wave of Covid-19 in March 2020, public debate appeared to shift from patriotism to nationalism, as the public turned its attention to the epidemic containment approaches of the international community. However, I argue it was the tendency of the general public to imagine itself as a homogeneous group defined by descent, race, and culture (one of the major characteristics of nationalism outlined by Blank et al.) that nourished nationalistic sentiment and helped to establish a boundary to the external other. As one user suggested, the Chinese public started to view the pandemic as a “test case of a country’s culture and values”.¹¹⁴

Chinese media showcased academics that used cultural factors to explain the success of China and the “failure” of the U.S. government. Presenting China as an “unbeatable nation”, the quick containment of the epidemic was credited to the efficiency of the government, “the concerted effort of the whole country and the cohesion of Chinese culture”, and “our patriotism” (e.g., “When the motherland needs us, none of us will be absent. This is our culture”).¹¹⁵ China’s three-level administrative system that has evolved over centuries (i.e., central government; provinces including cities and autonomous regions; communities and villages), was described by lawyers as being better equipped to manage crises and natural disasters compared to the federal systems of the West (e.g., the European Union and the United States) since the federal systems have re-

¹¹¹ Xu Liu, “Three Crafts Court. Sound Liaoning · Support Wuhan,” *Worker’s Daily*, February 16, 2020, fourth version, http://media.workercn.cn/sites/media/grrb/2020_02/16/GR0401.htm; see also: Chinagong.com, “Three Crafts Court. Shengdong Liaoning · Support Wuhan,” Weibo, February 16, 2020, <https://m.weibo.cn/2292896411/4472551780795340>.

¹¹² Shandong Campus, “#Fighting the Epidemic, Colleges and Universities Are in Action#.” Weibo account of Shandong Normal University Youth League Committee, 1801 Youth League Branch of History and Culture College, Weibo, February 28, 2020, <https://m.weibo.cn/2340515697/4477022237853046>.

¹¹³ Goose Does Not Gugu, “The Power of Cultural Rendering Can Be Said to Be a Booster That Ignites the Enthusiasm of the People,” Weibo, January 29, 2020, <https://m.weibo.cn/5491372381/4466197192282037>.

¹¹⁴ Hollow-Conscience Xu Kaiwen, “A City, Thanks to the Country,” Weibo, March 21, 2020, https://share.api.weibo.cn/share/241427301.html?weibo_id=4484996175811513.

¹¹⁵ Huimin Wang, “Talking about ‘Cultural Self-Confidence’ during the Epidemic,” College counselors online, March 15, 2020, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/UqZn49_m0ebG_KfvspVh5w.

duced power to enforce instructions in a top-down manner.¹¹⁶ The individual contributions of everyone in society were acknowledged, including children, the elderly, poor villagers who donated money and food,¹¹⁷ and female nurses who shaved their hair.¹¹⁸ These were ascribed to the Confucian concept of benevolence and kindness towards others.¹¹⁹ Collectivism as a traditional cultural value would have motivated Chinese people to give up their individual interests for the interests of the country when accepting lockdowns and self-isolation. The Confucian values of self-discipline, self-restraint, preparedness, and diligence helped prepare people to accept loss of income, take precautions for emergency deposits and supervise each other's compliance with epidemic containment rules.¹²⁰ Interestingly, the social elites (media outlets' coverage of academics) describe these traditional cultural values as being inscribed in the populace's blood,¹²¹ with collectivism "run[ning] through the blood".¹²²

When China sent medical support teams and supplies to foreign countries in March 2020, media outlets organized campaigns alongside charity organizations to collect donations.¹²³ State media asked netizens whether the "demeanor of a great power demonstrated by this initiative [was] worthy of praise?".¹²⁴ The news outlet *People's Daily* used the hashtag #Prevention and

¹¹⁶ Hubei Chuyun Law Firm, "Peng Dejiang, Interpreting the Cultural Code of China's Success in Preventing the Corona Epidemic," Toutiao's Headlines – Lawyer Peng's opinion, March 27, 2020, <https://www.toutiao.com/a6808846266542326285/>.

¹¹⁷ Wang, "Talking about 'Cultural Self-Confidence' During the Epidemic".

¹¹⁸ Before medical teams from different provinces were sent to the epicenter of the epidemic in Wuhan in February 2020, hospitals instructed female employees to shave their head, to reduce the risk of contagion. This triggered heated online discussions which, in the course of year 2020, transformed into a wider public discourse of women's rights and discrimination against women in contemporary Chinese society. A reconstruction of this debate can be found here: Cornelia Bogen, "Was There a Countersphere in China's Nationalist Narration of the Covid-19 Pandemic in 2020? A Perspective from Feminist Internet Studies," *Interculture Journal* 21, no. 36 (2022), special issue: "Cyber Dystopia/Utopia? Digital Interculturality between Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism," 133–39.

¹¹⁹ Cuiyan Yang (Associate Professor, School of Foreign Languages, Shandong Normal University), "The Prevention and Control of the Epidemic Demonstrates the Advantages of China's Excellent Traditional Culture," *Toutiao Dazhong Daily – Today's headlines*, April 28, 2020, <https://www.toutiao.com/a6820485218701410829/>.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Wang, "Talking about 'Cultural Self-Confidence' During the Epidemic".

¹²² Yang, "The Prevention and Control of the Epidemic Demonstrates the Advantages".

¹²³ Phoenix Satellite TV, "Phoenix Satellite TV, Mammoth Foundation and BGI Gene Signed a Contract for the Global Public Welfare Action against the Corona Epidemic," March 23, 2020, https://share.api.weibo.cn/share/241222146.html?weibo_id=4485706300461965.

¹²⁴ CCTV, "Chinese Anti-Epidemic Expert Team Sets off for Italy," Official account of CCTV, March 12, 2020, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1660923826184164179&wfr=spider&for=pc>;

Control of Epidemic Highlights the Advantages of Chinese Culture# (with 1,55 million readings), concluding that:

In contrast to the Western cultural confines of individualism, liberalism, and isolationism, China has always adhered to the values of collectivism, family, patriotism and shared destiny, fully demonstrating its cultural advantage [...] in unifying the whole country [...].¹²⁵

Chinese scholars pointed out that it was the Confucian concept of benevolence and kindness towards others that prompted the government to send medical teams and materials to foreign countries.¹²⁶

Similar to the social elites of journalists and academics, internet users on platforms like Weibo, Toutiao, and WeChat praised Chinese cultural values for having played a crucial role in epidemic control. Commenting on a CCTV news report about people in India burning a puppet symbolizing the Corona virus,¹²⁷ one user remarked that instead of such religious practices, the “spirit of mutual help in China’s excellent traditional culture” served as a guiding reference point.¹²⁸ This idea of India as “backward” and “superstitious” was, as Li showed, employed in Chinese pandemic public discourse against India, but did not explain why the EU or the USA failed to contain the virus.¹²⁹ Li argues that while Chinese internet users interpreted the alleged refusal of Europeans and U.S. Americans to home quarantine and to wear masks as a sign of cultural difference, they ridiculed and labelled the behavior of Indian people (e.g., bathing in the Ganges River during a religious festival) as “backward”. In doing so, Chinese internet users would have repeated the discursive strategy of ‘otherization’, a strategy employed by Western media when referring to China’s pandemic policies during the early stage of the pandemic.

see also: Huan Li et al., “Chinese Anti-Epidemic Expert Team Sets off for Italy Today,” *Sichuan Daily* (reposted by *Beijing Daily*), March 11, 2020, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1660846149827401797&wfr=spider&for=pc>.

¹²⁵ People’s Daily Online, “Weibo Discussion Topic: #Prevention and Control of Epidemic Highlights the Advantages of Chinese Culture#”.

¹²⁶ Yang, “The Prevention and Control of the Epidemic Demonstrates the Advantages”.

¹²⁷ CCTV News Client, “A Statue of a Corona Virus Monster Was Burned in the Streets in India. A Total of 61 Cases Have Been Confirmed,” Minnan Net, March 11, 2020, <http://www.mnw.cn/news/world/2259784.html>.

¹²⁸ Poet and Orion_, “Although I Don’t Think It Is Good, I Respect the Local Culture,” Weibo, March 11, 2020, <https://m.weibo.cn/5850773857/4481215853669765>.

¹²⁹ Yawen Li, “Can we ‘Breathe together’ with Fate: Revisiting Sino-Indian pan-Asianism under the Crisis of the Epidemic in India,” *The Paper*, May 8, 2021, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_12541750.

Moreover, similar to the social elite, social media users employed metaphors of blood and genes to describe Chinese people's deep internalization of traditional Confucian values that successfully guided them through the pandemic. Users claim that values like collectivism¹³⁰ and "feeling like a family"¹³¹ rooted in the "blood"¹³² enabled a united fight against the epidemic. Fearless medical workers, an "incredible unity", and the willingness of people to contribute to society are described as Confucian values "engraved in our genes".¹³³ Commenting on a news report by state television CCTV featuring the return of Chinese medical teams by mid-March from abroad,¹³⁴ a user ascribed the willingness of people to help each other to the "family culture" rooted "in the genes of every Chinese person".¹³⁵

Online users also employ body metaphors when they attribute cultural values to foreign countries. Chinese media reported that the U.S. Department of Health made a television statement on 9 March 2020 urging the younger generation in the USA to not be afraid of the coronavirus because it was mostly the elderly that died.¹³⁶ Commenting on that report, a user described the Confucian concept of "filial piety" as being fundamentally opposite to the concept of "natural selection" "in the bones" of Europeans and Americans.¹³⁷

¹³⁰ ANNA_Y_B, "#Italy Asked China for Urgent Help. ## Chinese Anti-Epidemic Expert Team Sets off for Italy #," Weibo, March 15, 2020, https://share.api.weibo.cn/share/241432143.html?weibo_id=4482758308954737; see also: Celia-Nele, "The Covid-19 Epidemic Has Overwhelmed the World, and Culture, Ideology, Capital, Medical Resources, Social Structure, People's Consciousness... Are All Vividly Displayed in the Process of Responding to This Epidemic," Weibo, March 13, 2020, https://share.api.weibo.cn/share/241438088.html?weibo_id=4482060742030466.

¹³¹ Sage turtle, Untitled, Weibo, April 4, 2020, https://share.api.weibo.cn/share/241205218.html?weibo_id=4489902295028037.

¹³² Host Wangtian, "#Confirmed Cases Outside China Reach 1050828 Cases#," Weibo, April 13, 2020, https://share.api.weibo.cn/share/241206217.html?weibo_id=4490707831667117.

¹³³ Celia-Nele, "The Covid-19 Epidemic Has Overwhelmed the World".

¹³⁴ Boyu Sui, "'Thank You for Working Hard for Hubei!' The National Emergency Medical Rescue Teams of Shaanxi and Hainan Returned Today," *CCTV News Client*, March 17, 2020, <http://m.news.cctv.com/2020/03/17/ARTIL510FYmEYABXUrSl1i0B200317.shtml>.

¹³⁵ Dream, User Comment to CCTV News "Medical Teams Have Started Their Evacuation from Hubei!#," Weibo, March 17, 2020, https://share.api.weibo.cn/share/241429197.html?weibo_id=4483442563315650.

¹³⁶ YZM, "US Medical Director Says 'Relax' on Covid-19: Because Young People Are More Likely to Die from Influenza," *Global Times*, March 11, 2020, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1660850929286342385&wfr=spider&for=pc>.

¹³⁷ One of the Hundred Schools of Scholars, "Facing the epidemic, Europeans and Americans exposed the concept of 'natural selection and natural elimination', which makes people feel a bit stunned," User comment on Weibo, March 12, 2020, <https://m.weibo.cn/2490734504/4481572696420835>.

Although the sketched discourse supports scholars' observation that attempts by media outlets to spur nationalist sentiment were primarily to cultivate a sense of self-assurance in domestic audiences,¹³⁸ the emphasis of cultural factors after China had contained the first wave also suggests that it was meant to counteract international anti-Chinese discourse. The findings presented here support the observations by other researchers that the struggles of other countries to contain the pandemic were often mocked or even celebrated by internet users in Chinese public discourse.¹³⁹ This is further supported by the numerous videos posted on Bilibili in 2020 and 2021, watched by millions of internet users, that comment on how other countries were handling the pandemic, with netizens proclaiming "the collapse of Western values"¹⁴⁰ and Western democracy.¹⁴¹ Netizens concluded that young Chinese people would no longer look at the West as a role model.¹⁴² Since youth are the target audience of the video sharing platform Bilibili, with three-quarters of users in 2017 being below 25 years old,¹⁴³ we can assume that this young generation was part of an online public promoting nationalistic sentiment during the pandemic, either as active media producers of such videos, as passive viewers, or as active discussants (e.g., commenting on videos with barrage subtitling, where registered users add a large number of text comments that appear onscreen and follow the timeline of the video).¹⁴⁴ These findings support Wang's observation that China's relative success in handling the spread of the virus during the first wave nourished nationalist sentiment among the youth.¹⁴⁵

¹³⁸ Wang, "Reporting and Combating the Health Crisis," 158.

¹³⁹ Yeophantong et al., "A Relational Reflection on Pandemic Nationalism," 552.

¹⁴⁰ Xianjian, "The Collapse of Western Values during the Epidemic," Bilibili, March 25, 2020, <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1hE411w7S1?from=search&seid=10662298040820423441>.

¹⁴¹ Guanchacn, "[Yi Sharp Language] From Biden's 100-Day Rule to India's Corona Virus Epidemic, Is Western Democracy Alive? Please See for Yourself," Bilibili, April 30, 2021, <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Cv411L7Zf?from=search&seid=10662298040820423441>; see also: Guanchacn, "Macron: China Has Successfully Delivered Vaccines to Other Countries, and Western Leaders Feel a bit Ashamed," Bilibili, February 5, 2021, <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1pV411B7eL?from=search&seid=16725095386509425190>.

¹⁴² Li Paian Zhao, "Chinese People No Longer Look up to the West. Chinese Young People Are Becoming More and More Confident! The Epidemic Reveals the Failure of the System in Western Countries," Bilibili, April 3, 2021, <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV11K4y1N7gq?from=search&seid=10662298040820423441>.

¹⁴³ Seio Nakajima, "The Sociability of Millennials in Cyberspace: A Comparative Analysis of Barrage Subtitling in Nico Nico Douga and Bilibili," in *China's Youth Cultures and Collective Spaces: Creativity, Sociality, Identity and Resistance*, ed. Vanessa Frangville and Gwennaël Gaffric (Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2019), 106.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁴⁵ Wang, "The Global Pandemic and China's Relations with the Western World".

5 Conclusion

After China had contained the first wave of the pandemic, the sentiment in public discourse shifted from patriotism as an expression of special concern for one's country, to nationalism as an expression of defensive feelings justifying (discursive and actual) hostile acts against others.¹⁴⁶ This shift appeared to be fueled by the interaction of negative Western media coverage of China's initial epidemic policy, China's comparatively quick epidemic containment between 20 January and mid-March 2020, the time delay for the outbreak to reach Western countries, and the Chinese general public's urge to counterattack foreign criticism.

After the outbreak had been officially announced, patriotic discourse was directed towards domestic audiences. It was mainly initiated by the CCP and state media to appeal to national unity at a time when public criticism of government policies (online censorship of user statements about the outbreak of an unknown virus) endangered political stability. In contrast, nationalistic discourse stemmed from the urge to counterattack criticism raised by some Western media. It was mainly carried forward by internet users (including youth) and social elites, who not only praised China's own efforts in containing the epidemic but contrasted it to the poor handling of it by foreign countries. The flames of nationalist sentiment were fanned by depicting the populace of China as a coherent community (defined by descent and Confucian culture, which was allegedly inscribed into Chinese blood and genes) that were culturally better equipped to handle the epidemic than most Western countries. In doing so, Chinese discourse evoked older orientalist stereotypes on 'Confucianist collectivism', used it as a source for nationalism and for rejecting criticism from the international community (e.g., staging human rights as incompatible with Confucianism).

Five conclusions can be derived from these findings. First, critical reactions of some Western countries to China's initial response to the outbreak were considered to be external threats that provoked a 'counterattack posture' in Chinese public discourse. Hence, external attributions and self-perceptions dynamically interact in a globalized world of interconnected online publics to construct imagined communities of nationality. Second, by demonstrating how Chinese online publics ideologically construct nationalism based on a collective

¹⁴⁶ Yeophantong et al., "A Relational Reflection on Pandemic Nationalism," 559.

political *and* cultural identity, it has been shown that the identification of specific nationalism categories within a certain time frame of a given discourse can help to identify a tipping point from patriotism to nationalism. This case study suggests it was the debate of distinctive cultural factors allegedly shaping the responses of different countries to the pandemic that helped promote this turning point. Third, interactive, multi-directional, digital communication channels have transformed the relationships between the Chinese government, elites, and general public. This was a vertical relationship within the CCP-led nationalism of the 1990s but became horizontal during the Covid-19 pandemic with state media outlets and internet users having jointly stirred up nationalistic debate. As the availability of social media has further spurred participation in public online discourse, any future study on varieties of nationalism should shed light on different actors' contributions to shaping the social construction of imagined communities. As this study did not consider how nationalist discourse related Confucian values to Chinese Han culture, future studies could explore the role of ethnic minority groups in fostering, challenging, or not impacting (due to the absence of their voice in public discourse) the social construction of a national identity based on the notion of a culturally homogeneous group. Another outlook for future research is to inquire into the sustainability of Chinese pandemic nationalism, since this study of Chinese pandemic nationalism focused on 2020 and 2021 without comparing the findings to events in 2022, when the second wave hit China.

Fourth, despite the fact that Asian intellectuals (e.g., from China, Malaysia or Singapore) and the Chinese leadership from the 1980s onwards have proclaimed a Confucian revival (i.e., that is a “deterritorialized” or new Confucianism represented as a general characteristic of East and Southeast Asian societies¹⁴⁷), we have seen how Chinese pandemic nationalism again reduces Confucianism to Chinese territory. This is similar both to what 19th-century missionary Jesuits – inspired by the contemporary self-image of the Chinese bureaucratic elite – did in their representations of China as a Confucian state,¹⁴⁸ and to what 20th-century Chinese intellectuals did when writing Chinese history.¹⁴⁹ There is even a parallel between the Confucian revival and Chinese pandemic nationalism in that they both seek to refute Western orientalist evaluations of Confucianism. The Confucian values of harmony, familism, and patrimonialism that Max Weber considered to be an obstacle to the development of capitalism in China have been re-interpreted by advocates of the Con-

¹⁴⁷ Dirlik, “Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism,” 109–10.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 105.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

fucian revival as functional to capitalist development.¹⁵⁰ As this study has demonstrated, it is exactly these Confucian values, combined with collectivism, benevolence, and self-restraint, that are re-interpreted by today's Chinese discourse participants as functional to China's successful epidemic containment. In this respect, ironically, Chinese pandemic nationalism scales down Chinese intellectuals' millennia-old debate of Confucianism to a reduced set of values which rather corresponds to Western orientalist ideas of Confucian mentality. Finally, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on nationalism suggests that the future development of Chinese nationalism could center around a sense of superiority of the Chinese Model of politics and an imagined community based on Confucian cultural identity.

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¹⁵⁰ Dirlik, "Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism," 109.

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