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# Invented Borders: The Tension Between Grassroots Patriotism and State-Led Patriotic Campaigns in China

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## ABSTRACT

Patriotic campaigns and mass mobilization draw on existing xenophobic attitudes of the public, reinforcing the ‘us vs. them’ dualism between China and ‘the West’. However, patriotic campaigns are not always top-down, state-led, nor are they always primarily driven by political ideology. Patriotic content appeals to a growing nationalist audience who consumes a mixed feeling of perceived victimization at the hand of foreign aggression and the pride arising from being a Chinese citizen. This paper argues that the profitability of patriotic content circulating on social media exacerbated the tension between market-driven grassroots patriotism and state-led patriotic campaigns. The tension grows out of, and is manifested in, the online popular debate around economically driven, grassroots ‘patriotic’ content that can challenge the state state-led patriotic rhetoric. While the state sometimes strategically co-opts some patriotic contents into its own patriotic narratives, it also delegitimises other undesired ones through labels such as ‘high-level black’ (*gaoji hei*) or ‘low-level red’ (*diji hong*). These labels were initially used to differentiate meticulously crafted political satire and parody from incompetent, illogical and vulgar propaganda pieces that unintentionally blemish the state’s patriotic campaigns, but later evolved into an exercise of power to distance the CCP from undesired patriotic content.

## KEYWORDS

nationalism; patriotic campaigns; propaganda; satire; social media; low-level red; high-level black

## 1. Introduction

How has the profit-seeking grassroots patriotism come to challenge the state-sponsored, politically driven patriotic campaigns and how has the state responded to this challenge? Some believe that as China integrated into the international community, there has been a merging of nationalism and geopolitical thinking, leading to growing assertiveness in Chinese foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> Others question the homogeneity of ‘Chinese nationalism’ as a state-led, top-down manifestation of elite instrumentalism.<sup>2</sup> Despite conventional wisdom, Chinese nationalism is not necessarily ‘on the rise’, as increasing economic inequality had eroded the loyalty of educated young Chinese.<sup>3</sup> The difficulty in observing the trend of Chinese

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<sup>1</sup>Christopher Hughes, ‘Reclassifying Chinese Nationalism: The Geopolitical Turn’, *Journal of Contemporary China* 20, no. 71 (1 September 2011): 601–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2011.587161>.

<sup>2</sup>Duan Xiaolin, ‘Unanswered Questions: Why We May Be Wrong about Chinese Nationalism and Its Foreign Policy Implications’, *Journal of Contemporary China* 26, no. 108 (2 November 2017): 886–900, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2017.1337312>.

<sup>3</sup>Rou-Lan Chen, ‘Trends in Economic Inequality and Its Impact on Chinese Nationalism’, *Journal of Contemporary China* 29, no. 121 (2 January 2020): 75–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2019.1621531>.

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nationalism lies in the fact that there more than one 'brand' of nationalism.<sup>4</sup> An increasingly hawkish population may hijack the state's foreign policy agenda and limit the range of foreign policy options.<sup>5</sup> We revisit Zhao Suisheng's observation of the increasing convergence of state nationalism and popular nationalism and argue that the state has developed its discursive strategy, using labels such as 'low-level red' and 'high-level black', to dismiss the unwanted 'brand' of popular nationalism that intentionally or unintentionally undermines state narratives. This discursive strategy of nomination reflects the state's anxiety that the top-down, politically driven patriotic campaigns may be diluted by the grassroots and profit driven 'patriotic' business that not only feeds upon but also monetizes the public's nationalist sentiments. We use 'grassroots' and 'popular' distinctively in this paper, as patriotic content considered undesirable by the state is not only produced by popular actors such as members of the general public, but also by local government authorities and state-owned enterprises at the grassroots level. Our key finding is that the discursive strategy is not only used to discern the producers of unwanted patriotic content, but it is a rhetorical device that allows the state to distance itself from such content.

This paper starts with a conceptual framework that sits at the intersection of Chinese nationalism, media, political satire and censorship. The literature review is thus divided into two parts. The first part contextualizes the dynamics of state/grassroots players in the politics of Chinese nationalism and the role of media commodification in intensifying power struggles between the two main sets of players. This is followed by a review of the scholarship of political satire as a form of resistance, which helps contextualise the state's anxiety toward, and fear of, satire. The methodology section explains how we employed the discourse-historical approach (DHA) to analyse power asymmetry between the state and grassroots actors. [Section 5](#) presents the case of 'invented borders', providing a detailed account of the videos in question, and the responses from the platform and the state respectively. [Section 6](#) focuses on the 'low-level red' and 'high-level black' labels that the state used to delegitimise and distance itself from patriotic content that might challenge and undermine the official patriotic narratives. [Section 7](#) discusses the tension between state-led and grassroots patriotic content. While the line between the two is not clear-cut or fixed, the tension becomes apparent as they compete with each other to benefit politically and economically through producing and disseminating patriotic materials.

## 2. Chinese Nationalism and Media

Much has been written on the CCP's top-down nationalism through patriotic education campaigns since 1994.<sup>6</sup> The 'Century of Humiliation' remains a central theme that is reproduced in official narratives and helps justify the CCP's legitimacy.<sup>7</sup> The CCP has promoted official patriotic discourses through institutional tools and resources such as textbooks, museums and commemorative rituals.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Suisheng Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004); Suisheng Zhao, 'Foreign Policy Implications of Chinese Nationalism Revisited: The Strident Turn', *Journal of Contemporary China* 22, no. 82 (1 July 2013): 535–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2013.766379>.

<sup>5</sup>Hailong Liu, ed., *From Cyber-Nationalism to Fandom Nationalism: The Case of Diba Expedition in China* (Routledge, 2019); 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 (3 September 2019): 679–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2019.1580427>; Zhao, 'Foreign Policy Implications of Chinese Nationalism Revisited'.

<sup>6</sup>Baogang He and Yingjie Guo, *Nationalism, National Identity and Democratization in China* (Aldershot; Brookfield USA; Singapore; Sydney: Ashgate, 2000); Christopher R Hughes, *Chinese Nationalism in the Global Era* (Routledge, 2006); Licheng Qian, Bin Xu, and Dingding Chen, 'Does History Education Promote Nationalism in China? A "Limited Effect" Explanation', *Journal of Contemporary China* 26, no. 104 (4 March 2017): 199–212, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2016.1223103>.

<sup>7</sup>William A Callahan, 'National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 29, no. 2 (2004): 199–218; Yi Wang, "'The Backward Will Be Beaten': Historical Lesson, Security, and Nationalism in China', *Journal of Contemporary China* 29, no. 126 (1 November 2020): 887–900, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2020.1744387>.

<sup>8</sup>Yinan He, 'Remembering and Forgetting the War: Elite Mythmaking, Mass Reaction, and Sino-Japanese Relations, 1950–2006', *History and Memory* 19, no. 2 (2007): 43–74, <https://doi.org/10.2979/his.2007.19.2.43>; Rana Mitter, 'Behind the Scenes at the

Political elites ‘invented’ national symbols, myths and traditions which serve as the glue for social cohesion.<sup>9</sup> The CCP has also carefully crafted official historiography to provide the nationalist appeals for political mobilization.<sup>10</sup>

However, it is increasingly challenging for the CCP to continue to engage the young people through nationalism, as educated Chinese have become disaffected due to rising inequalities and draconian COVID-19 policies.<sup>11</sup> Being acutely aware of the ‘double-edged sword’ effect of nationalism and its potential to cause social instability that may jeopardise the regime,<sup>12</sup> the CCP has to decide the extent to which and the context in which nationalist sentiments are to be co-opted, because nationalism can be potentially used as ‘a protective umbrella for domestic dissent’.<sup>13</sup> The CCP is often found to be under pressure to respond to popular nationalism which is not necessarily supportive of the party, especially when the government fails to deliver their nationalist promise or does not act tough towards the perceived enemies.<sup>14</sup> Popular nationalism can also direct people’s anger towards the government for not being able to tackle domestic problems such as social injustice and corruption; paradoxically, it is often accompanied by liberal views that reject the CCP’s nationalist rhetoric and call for democracy and freedom.<sup>15</sup>

The rise of nationalism is also attributed to media commercialization as market-oriented media look for contents which not only can sell commercially but also are politically safe.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, nationalism has become such a topic that is ‘enforced by the marketplace as well as the censors’.<sup>17</sup> Commercial media are adept at appealing to popular nationalist sentiments, turning nationalism into tradable commodities and taking the market rewards.<sup>18</sup> However, commercial media should not take the full blame of fanning nationalism as if they could operate independently from the government. In fact, the CCP keeps a tight grip on various media industries such as video games and TV dramas, to reinforce its own nationalist views by guiding and co-opting market forces, and integrating them into its own propaganda apparatus.<sup>19</sup>

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Museum: Nationalism, History and Memory in the Beijing War of Resistance Museum, 1987–1997\*, *The China Quarterly* 161 (March 2000): 279–93, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574100004033>; Zheng Wang, ‘National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory: Patriotic Education Campaign in China’, *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (2008): 783–806; Yiben Ma and Chi Zhang, ‘The Politics of Remembering: Commemorating the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea in an Era of China-US Rivalry’, in *China, Media and International Conflicts*, ed. Shixin Ivy Zhang and Altman Peng (Routledge, Forthcoming).

<sup>9</sup>Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger, and Eric Hobsbawm, eds., ‘Introduction: Inventing Traditions’, in *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1–14.

<sup>10</sup>Nicholas Smith and Tracey Fallon, ‘How the CCP Uses History’, *The Diplomat*, 7 July 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/how-the-ccp-uses-history/>.

<sup>11</sup>Chen, ‘Trends in Economic Inequality and Its Impact on Chinese Nationalism’; Li Yuan, ‘“The Last Generation”: The Disillusionment of Young Chinese’, *The New York Times*, 24 May 2022, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/24/business/china-covid-zero.html>.

<sup>12</sup>Peter Hays Gries, *China’s New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy* (University of California Press, 2004); James Reilly, *Strong Society, Smart State: The Rise of Public Opinion in China’s Japan Policy* (Columbia University Press, 2011); Susan L. Shirk, *China: The Fragile Superpower* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2007); Robert Weatherley and Qiang Zhang, *History and Nationalist Legitimacy in Contemporary China: A Double-Edged Sword* (Springer, 2017); Jessica Chen Weiss, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China’s Foreign Relations* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>13</sup>*Powerful Patriots*, 17.

<sup>14</sup>Peter Hays Gries, Derek Steiger, and Tao Wang, ‘Popular Nationalism and China’s Japan Policy: The Diaoyu Islands Protests, 2012–2013’, *Journal of Contemporary China* 25, no. 98 (3 March 2016): 2012–2013, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2015.1075714>; Shirk, *China*.

<sup>15</sup>Fengshu Liu, *Urban Youth in China: Modernity, the Internet and the Self* (New York: Routledge, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203833049>; Suisheng Zhao, ‘China’s Pragmatic Nationalism: Is It Manageable?’, *The Washington Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (1 December 2005): 131–44, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016366005774859670>.

<sup>16</sup>Daniela Stockmann and Mary E. Gallagher, ‘Remote Control: How the Media Sustain Authoritarian Rule in China’, *Comparative Political Studies* 44, no. 4 (1 April 2011): 436–67, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414010394773>; Yuezhi Zhao, *Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line* (University of Illinois Press, 1998).

<sup>17</sup>Shirk, *China*, 85.

<sup>18</sup>Sabina Mihelj and César Jiménez-Martínez, ‘Digital Nationalism: Understanding the Role of Digital Media in the Rise of “New” Nationalism’, *Nations and Nationalism* 27, no. 2 (2021): 331–46, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12685>.

<sup>19</sup>Hongping Annie Nie, ‘Gaming, Nationalism, and Ideological Work in Contemporary China: Online Games Based on the War of Resistance against Japan’, *Journal of Contemporary China* 22, no. 81 (1 May 2013): 499–517, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2012.748968>; Yi Wang and Matthew M. Chew, ‘State, Market, and the Manufacturing of War Memory: China’s Television Dramas

The internet is a marketplace where ordinary users are treated primarily as consumers and different ideas compete for users' attention.<sup>20</sup> Commodification is one of the key mechanisms that drive the operation of digital platforms, transforming 'online and offline objects, activities, emotions and ideas into tradable commodities'.<sup>21</sup> The media provide the venue for power struggles, allowing both 'the expansion and the commodification of the commons', so that they could exert and counter power.<sup>22</sup> In an authoritarian state like China, power struggles between the state and the commons became apparent as they constantly engage in exerting power and countering power. The commons not only challenge the hegemony of capital but also the monopoly of the state-sponsored official narratives. Riding the wave of nationalism, the commons have been seeking to share a piece of the pie from the business of patriotism and use sensationalized headlines, sad fishing, fearmongering and gloating content for clicks, likes, followers and thus profit. Their versions of the nationalist narratives compete with the official ones, which prompts the state to cooperate with commercial digital platforms to push officially endorsed version of nationalist ideology through a combination of digital strategies including censorship, manipulation of algorithmic and editorial systems.<sup>23</sup> Commercial platforms have little choice but to conform with the state's instructions in order to maintain their business operations in China's lucrative internet market.

Two players—Key Opinion Leader (KOL) and multi-channel network (MCN) – involved in the business of nationalism, and their attempts of commodifying nationalist contents can intensify the tension with the politically driven state-sponsored nationalism. Both KOL and MCN are imported concepts which were localized and matured in the social media market in China. KOLs are influential actors who can exert personal influence on the attitude and opinion of other people in a social network.<sup>24</sup> Based on Katz and Lazarsfeld's original concept of opinion leader, it entered the Chinese context and gained momentum as a collective term to refer to influencers who function as marketing agencies, constituting a US\$8 billion industry.<sup>25</sup> MCNs refer to companies working with content creators to perform business and marketing functions via a given platform.<sup>26</sup> Content creators join a MCN to utilize the resources it provides to gain wider exposure.<sup>27</sup> However, when adapted to the Chinese market, MCN companies have a higher level of control over influencers, including the content they produce.<sup>28</sup>

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on the War of Resistance against Japan', *Memory Studies* 14, no. 4 (1 August 2021): 877–91, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980211024319>; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

<sup>20</sup>Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez, 'Digital Nationalism'.

<sup>21</sup>José van Dijk, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal, *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 37.

<sup>22</sup>Thomas Allmer, *Critical Theory and Social Media: Between Emancipation and Commodification* (London: Routledge, 2015), 5, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315750491>.

<sup>23</sup>Xu Chen, D. Bondy Valdovinos Kaye, and Jing Zeng, '#PositiveEnergy Douyin: Constructing "Playful Patriotism" in a Chinese Short-Video Application', *Chinese Journal of Communication* 14, no. 1 (2 January 2021): 97–117, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2020.1761848>; Florian Schneider, 'China's Viral Villages: Digital Nationalism and the COVID-19 Crisis on Online Video-Sharing Platform Bilibili', *Communication and the Public* 6, no. 1–4 (1 March 2021): 48–66, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20570473211048029>.

<sup>24</sup>Shixi Liu et al., 'Identifying Effective Influencers Based on Trust for Electronic Word-of-Mouth Marketing: A Domain-Aware Approach', *Information Sciences* 306 (10 June 2015): 34–52, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ins.2015.01.034>.

<sup>25</sup>Carolina Wu, 'The Life of a KOL: Running a Mini Influencer Marketing Agency', *PARKLU* (blog), 22 February 2018, <https://www.parklu.com/kol-mini-influencer-marketing-agency/>; Low Lai Chow, 'Building an Influencer Strategy in China: Behind the USD8 Billion Industry | WARC', 12 March 2018, <http://origin.warc.com/Content/cef776db-e1af-441c-bc58-6fff27c53a1b>.

<sup>26</sup>Jacob Gardner and Kevin Lehnert, 'What's New about New Media? How Multi-Channel Networks Work with Content Creators', *Business Horizons* 59, no. 3 (1 May 2016): 293–302, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2016.01.009>.

<sup>27</sup>Gardner and Lehnert.

<sup>28</sup>Qi Li, 'MCN Is Not the Savior of Influencers [MCN不是网红们的救世主]', 13 December 2021, <https://t.cj.sina.com.cn/articles/view/6223113925/http%3A%2F%2Ft.cj.sina.com.cn%2Farticles%2Fview%2F6223113925%2F172ed2ec500100x2a4>; Ying Shi et al., 'Research on Localization Strategy of MCN Short Video', *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 08, no. 05 (29 May 2020): 411, <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2020.85028>.

### 3. Political Satire and State Responses

The internet has ended ‘the information monopoly of the state’,<sup>29</sup> preventing an authoritarian state from controlling ‘the free flow of information’.<sup>30</sup> Interactive media technologies provide new means for ordinary people not only to imagine the nation, but also to actively participate in the shaping of nationalist dynamics—in a way that is not necessarily aligned with the official nationalist agenda.<sup>31</sup> Much has been written on how the internet serves as the venue for the mobilization of nationalist sentiments and promotion of alternative nationalist discourses that pressured the government to respond.<sup>32</sup>

The state has developed a comprehensive censorship system that governs ‘Internet infrastructure, commercial and social use as well as legal domains’, to contain the influence of alternative discourses.<sup>33</sup> Through regulations such as the *Public Pledge on Self-Discipline for the China Internet Industry* (2002), the state puts the pressure on business owners to conduct self-censorship, resulting in their over-compliance to avoid potential penalties from the governmental authorities.<sup>34</sup> Private companies are co-opted to maintain the Chinese networked authoritarianism.<sup>35</sup> The censorship system has evolved from automated filtering to more sophisticated state-sponsored information campaigns to manipulate public discourse online.<sup>36</sup> For instance, government-hired ‘commentators’, also known as ‘50 Cent Party’ are used by the government in an attempt to manufacture consent by guiding public opinion to its desired direction.<sup>37</sup> Accompanying the ‘50 Cent Party’ is the so-called ‘voluntary fifty-cent army’, referring to those online discussants who claim to be independent from the government but voluntarily defend the regime and promote the state’s narratives.<sup>38</sup>

In response to censorship, netizens have developed various techniques to circumvent automatic filtering or the Great Firewall—this process is called ‘wall-climbing’.<sup>39</sup> They also adopt satirical tactics to engage with politically sensitive topics.<sup>40</sup> In China, where online contents are heavily censored,

<sup>29</sup>Stanley Rosen, ‘China Media Colloquium| Is the Internet a Positive Force in the Development of Civil Society, a Public Sphere and Democratization in China’, *International Journal of Communication* 4 (2010): 509–16.

<sup>30</sup>Yongnian Zheng, *Technological Empowerment: The Internet, State, and Society in China* (California: Stanford University Press, 2008).

<sup>31</sup>Shih-Diing Liu, ‘China’s Popular Nationalism on the Internet. Report on the 2005 Anti-Japan Network Struggles’, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7, no. 1 (1 March 2006): 149, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649370500463802>.

<sup>32</sup>Christopher Cairns and Allen Carlson, ‘Real-World Islands in a Social Media Sea: Nationalism and Censorship on Weibo during the 2012 Diaoyu/Senkaku Crisis’, *The China Quarterly* 225 (March 2016): 23–49, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741015001708>; Gries, Steiger, and Wang, ‘Popular Nationalism and China’s Japan Policy’; Yiben Ma, ‘Online Chinese Nationalism: A Competing Discourse? A Discourse Analysis of Chinese Media Texts Relating to the Beijing Olympic Torch Relay in Paris’, *The Journal of International Communication* 24, no. 2 (3 July 2018): 305–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13216597.2018.1444662>; Reilly, *Strong Society, Smart State*; Weiss, ‘How Hawkish Is the Chinese Public?’; Weiss; Weiss, *Powerful Patriots*.

<sup>33</sup>Bin Liang and Hong Lu, ‘Internet Development, Censorship, and Cyber Crimes in China’, *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 26, no. 1 (1 February 2010): 105, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043986209350437>.

<sup>34</sup>Human Rights Watch, ‘Race to the Bottom: Corporate Complicity in Chinese Internet Censorship’ (Human Rights Watch, 9 August 2006), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2006/08/09/race-bottom/corporate-complicity-chinese-internet-censorship>.

<sup>35</sup>Rebecca MacKinnon, ‘Liberation Technology: China’s “Networked Authoritarianism”’, *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 2 (2011): 32–46, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2011.0033>.

<sup>36</sup>Ronald Deibert and Rafal Rohozinski, ‘Liberation vs. Control: The Future of Cyberspace’, *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 4 (2010): 43–57, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2010.0010>.

<sup>37</sup>Jemimah Steinfeld, ‘The New “Civil Service” Trolls Who Aim to Distract: The Government in China Is Using Its Civil Servants to Act as Internet Trolls. It’s a Hard Management Task Generating 450 Million Social Media Posts a Year’, *Index on Censorship* 47, no. 4 (1 December 2018): 102–4, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306422018819361>; Jonathan Sullivan, ‘China’s Weibo: Is Faster Different?’, *New Media & Society* 16, no. 1 (1 February 2014): 24–37, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444812472966>; Rongbin Han, ‘Manufacturing Consent in Cyberspace: China’s “Fifty-Cent Army”’, *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 44, no. 2 (1 June 2015): 105–34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/186810261504400205>.

<sup>38</sup>Rongbin Han, ‘Defending the Authoritarian Regime Online: China’s “Voluntary Fifty-Cent Army”’, *The China Quarterly* 224 (December 2015): 1006–25, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741015001216>.

<sup>39</sup>Rongbin Han, *Contesting Cyberspace in China: Online Expression and Authoritarian Resilience* (Columbia University Press, 2018); Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

<sup>40</sup>Siu-yau Lee, ‘Surviving Online Censorship in China: Three Satirical Tactics and Their Impact’, *The China Quarterly* 228 (December 2016): 1061–80, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016001454>; Guobin Yang and Min Jiang, ‘The Networked Practice of Online Political Satire in China: Between Ritual and Resistance’, *International Communication Gazette* 77, no. 3 (1 April 2015): 215–31, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048514568757>; David Kurt Herold and Peter Marolt, *Online Society in China: Creating, Celebrating, and Instrumentalising the Online Carnival* (London: Routledge, 2011).



political satire thrives on censorship and plays a key role in reflecting on powerlessness, expressing discontent, rallying resistance, and inducing catharsis.<sup>41</sup> Satire, parody and spoofing (*egao*) have the potential to evade formal controls.<sup>42</sup> 'Parodic satire . . . mimics the language or logic of the subject and transplants it to a different context'.<sup>43</sup> Satire relies heavily on techniques of mimicry and recontextualization, making it difficult for automated machine to detect undesired content that challenges the official lines. To understand the underlying message encoded in the satire, readers have to be familiar the wider context and 'the original issue that the satire intends to scorn'.<sup>44</sup> The qualitative and contingent nature of satire makes it impossible for the state to rely on the conventional keyword detecting programmes to control online content. While the state recruited countless censors, they 'unfortunately are not noted for imaginative ability in distinguishing between the humorous and fantastic and the real'.<sup>45</sup> Despite the large number of internet monitors the state has already hired, it lacks the resources and manpower to suppress opposition given the even larger number of netizens.<sup>46</sup>

Challenging state legitimacy, political satire is risky and costly.<sup>47</sup> Ironic and parodic satires lend themselves to online activist campaigns, as their elements become widely 'perceived as symbols of resistance' and then extracted and adopted for activist campaigns.<sup>48</sup> Parodic satire, which employs the language of the powerful directly, has the highest chance of surviving censorship.<sup>49</sup> Once elements of parodic satire are adopted as symbols of resistance, it becomes difficult for the state to recuperate them. One of such notable examples in which netizens tampered with the official hegemonic discourse include turning the innocent-looking alpaca into a mysterious cultural symbol known as Cao Ni Ma (grass mud horse) which was used by netizens to ridicule the CCP's online censorship.<sup>50</sup> Given its ability to discredit official narratives in a highly censored country, political satire can incur up to 5 years of imprisonment in the name of 'picking quarrels and proving troubles'.<sup>51</sup> To suppress political satire, the state has hired human censors to filter negative posts and used intimidation, including summoning by the police, detention and even enforced disappearance, to silence influential individuals.<sup>52</sup>

#### 4. Methodology

We adopt a discourse-historical approach (DHA), which examines language as a form of social practice and the social and political contexts in which discursive 'events' are

<sup>41</sup>Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom, 'The Satiric Mode of Feeling: A Theory of Intention', *Criticism* 11, no. 2 (1969): 115–39, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23098525>; Lijun Tang and Syamantak Bhattacharya, 'Power and Resistance: A Case Study of Satire on the Internet', *Sociological Research Online* 16, no. 2 (1 June 2011): 10–18, <https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.2375>; Yang and Jiang, 'The Networked Practice of Online Political Satire in China'.

<sup>42</sup>Jessica Milner Davis, Jocelyn Chey, and Christopher Rea, eds., 'Spoofing (e'gao) Culture on the Chinese Internet', in *Humour in Chinese Life and Culture: Resistance and Control in Modern Times* (Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 149–72, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46n38n>; Ashley Esarey and Qiang Xiao, 'Digital Communication and Political Change in China', *International Journal of Communication* 5, no. 0 (17 February 2011): 22, <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/688>.

<sup>43</sup>Lee, 'Surviving Online Censorship in China', 1063.

<sup>44</sup>Lee, 'Surviving Online Censorship in China', 1066.

<sup>45</sup>Jessica Milner Davis, 'Satire and Its Constraints: Case Studies from Australia, Japan, and the People's Republic of China', *HUMOR* 29, no. 2 (1 May 2016): 214, <https://doi.org/10.1515/humor-2015-0080>.

<sup>46</sup>Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, 'How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression', *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 2 (2013): 326–43, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055413000014>; Qiang Xiao, 'Liberation Technology: The Battle for the Chinese Internet', *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 2 (2011): 47–61, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2011.0020>; Qiang Xiao, 'The Rise of Online Public Opinion and Its Political Impact', in *Changing Media, Changing China*, ed. Susan L. Shirk (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 202–24.

<sup>47</sup>Luwei Rose Luqiu, 'The Cost of Humour: Political Satire on Social Media and Censorship in China', *Global Media and Communication* 13, no. 2 (1 August 2017): 123–38, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742766517704471>.

<sup>48</sup>Lee, 'Surviving Online Censorship in China', 1065.

<sup>49</sup>Lee, 1068.

<sup>50</sup>Lijun Tang and Peidong Yang, 'Symbolic Power and the Internet: The Power of a "Horse"', *Media, Culture & Society* 33, no. 5 (1 July 2011): 675–91, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443711404462>.

<sup>51</sup>Luqiu, 'The Cost of Humour', 125.

<sup>52</sup>Luqiu, 'The Cost of Humour'.

embedded.<sup>53</sup> DHA lends itself to the studies of the Chinese official discourse<sup>54</sup> considering its explanatory power in revealing the historical dimension of discourses around topics of xenophobia and nationalism.<sup>55</sup> DHA allows us to ‘demystify’ the hegemony of the official discourse by deciphering the underlying contradiction between the state’s desire to forge loyalty among the public and the anxieties about the possibility of its official patriotic narratives being appropriated for parodic satire which undermines legitimacy. As we will discuss later in the paper, the CCP maintains its discursive power on nationalism through the creation and designation of ‘low-level red’ and ‘high-level black’. In other words, the discursive labelling of different nationalist contents as ‘red’ or ‘black’ reveals the power asymmetry in the contention of nationalist discourses, whereby the CCP attempts to legitimise the official discourse and delegitimise the grassroots narratives that can potentially be understood as parodic satire that mocks the former.

We collected news reports and commentaries in relation to grassroots patriotic content from around 20 official and commercial outlets in Chinese between June 2021 and November 2022. Official sources include state media platforms such as *Qiushi*, the leading official theoretical journal run by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the *Party Building* magazine, run by the Publicity Department, the Communist Party Member Net, supervised by the Organization Department of the CCP and administrated by China Central Television and *China Youth Daily*, run by the Communist Youth League of China. The readers of these official media are mostly Party members and government officials who are already relatively ‘loyal’ to the state, so the content in these outlets is not aimed at forging loyalty, but to consolidate the hegemony of the state in designating ‘red’ and ‘black’. Commercial responses include commentaries published on commercial platforms such as Souhu and Douyin Safety Centre—Douyin’s official account that is responsible for tackling and publicizing violations of Douyin regulations by its users. While commercial platforms in China are not directly controlled by the state, they have been co-opted by the state to perform self-censorship. Their responses help understand how platforms mediate between the state and the public. The audience of these outlets are generally less concerned about ‘loyalty’, so actors such as Douyin’s official account seek to help potential grassroots content producers discern unwanted and prescribe ‘permissible’ patriotic content.

We analyzed the label of ‘low-level red’ and ‘high-level black’, examining how they were used as rhetorical devices in a way that reinforces power asymmetry between the state and grassroots actors. We also analyzed the broader socio-political context which has contributed to the growing commercialization and commodification of nationalism. Our analysis reveals that the borderline between the ‘black’ and ‘red’ is often vague and confusing. What drives the state to legitimise certain patriotic discourses and disqualify others, is often its anxiety of not being able to discern whether the content producer is too clumsy to produce propaganda materials deemed ‘qualified’, or meticulously use disturbingly flattering language as parodic satire.

## 5. Sino-Japanese Border ‘Invented’

In September 2021, some videos with patriotic content went viral on Douyin, a short-video sharing platform popular in China with an estimation of daily active users up to 320 million by 2019.<sup>56</sup> Douyin’s alignment with the state’s political agenda and its role in facilitating the convergence

<sup>53</sup>Ruth Wodak, ‘The Discourse-Historical Approach’, in *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, ed. Michael Meyer and Ruth Wodak (London: Sage, 2001), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857028020>.

<sup>54</sup>Yifan Yang and Xuechen Chen, ‘Globalism or Nationalism? The Paradox of Chinese Official Discourse in the Context of the COVID-19 Outbreak’, *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 26, no. 1 (1 March 2021): 89–113, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-020-09697-1>.

<sup>55</sup>Martin Reisigl, ‘The Discourse-Historical Approach’, in *The Discourse-Historical Approach* (Routledge Handbooks Online, 2017), 44–59, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315739342.ch3>.

<sup>56</sup>Chen, Valdovinos Kaye, and Zeng, ‘#PositiveEnergy Douyin’.



between grassroots and state-led nationalism have been well documented.<sup>57</sup> The videos in question were highly similar in content, which raised questions about duplication and plagiarism, and were thus removed by the platform soon after they went viral.

In these videos, a common proud-to-be-Chinese template was replicated by multiple uploaders, with variations only in terms of the alleged locations where the videos were shot. Such videos are usually entitled 'We were not born in a peaceful era, but we were born in a good country'. These videos often share the same narrative, starting with the uploader who tried to record a video near a Chinese land border. Then suspense was created when some people in uniform, appearing to be the border police, came to interrupt the uploader. At the end, it turned out that the border police were merely worried about the uploader's safety, so they stood in a line between the uploader and the border to protect the former. These videos all ended with the same remarks below.

I am so proud to be a Chinese. I think about displaced Syrian refugees and bombarded Afghanistan, and I think about how safe and peaceful our country is. I am beyond proud to have been born in such a country. This is a blessing for every Chinese.

As such similar videos spread on social media, a particular variation invited a cascade of public criticism because the uploader claimed in the video that it was taken near the China-Japan land border, but in fact China and Japan are not connected by land at all. The uploader invented the Sino-Japanese land border to appeal to the fantasies of popular nationalists. There are two possibilities in terms of the uploader's decision to 'invent' the border. Given the quality of these videos, they were likely to be produced by amateurs and the 'invention' of the border may be an unconscious choice. On the other hand, uploaders quite often intentionally make mistakes which seems obvious to ordinary viewers, in order to attract people's attention by inviting them to correct the mistakes. Making the content controversial and sometimes ridiculous is one of the tactics to bring online traffic. At any rate, the reference to such a non-existent place reveals a persistent assumption that China is still threatened by Japan, an assumption that taps into the anti-Japanese sentiments that can be traced to the Second Sino-Japanese War. The *invention*, conscious or not, encapsulates how shared memories help mobilize nationalist sentiments and shape the group identity of a given community.<sup>58</sup>

While it is satirical to invent the Sino-Japanese border just to mimic official narratives, being satirical is unlikely the effect the uploaders were seeking. The proud-to-be-Chinese template echoes a Xinhua article published in April 2017 entitled 'Cherish it! You were not born in a peaceful era, but in a peaceful country'<sup>59</sup> with multiple photos showing how miserable life was in war-torn Syria. This is likely the source that inspired grassroots efforts to produce kitschy replicate of the official narratives to appeal to the nationalist audience. The fact that the uploader either did not *know*, or did not *care* about the geographical reality indicates that these videos were not designed to be seriously examined as the politically driven official narratives would have been; rather, they were crudely made and commercially-driven products to be circulated, consumed and forgot quickly.

Based on our observation and analysis, it is likely that an MCN created the proud-to-be-Chinese template for its influencers to adapt. Some would argue that influencers saw the ability of this template to draw online attention which could then be turned into money, and then duplicate the content. This argument is at odds with the fact that all the videos based on this template went viral at roughly the same time. This raises the possibility that an MCN company might be behind multiple accounts and provided the same script for these account holders to act out. These videos drew considerable attention by the time they were removed by the social media platform, when some had

<sup>57</sup>Chen, Valdivinos Kaye, and Zeng, '#PositiveEnergy Douyin'.

<sup>58</sup>Ma and Zhang, 'The Politics of Remembering: Commemorating the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea in an Era of China-US Rivalry'.

<sup>59</sup>Xinhua, 'Cherish It! You Were Not Born in a Peaceful Era, but in a Peaceful Country [珍惜！你没有出生在和平的年代，而是一个和平的国家]', 10 April 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-04/10/c\\_129528688.htm#pinglun](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-04/10/c_129528688.htm#pinglun).

already attracted over a hundred thousand likes and over ten thousand positive comments.<sup>60</sup> Public attention in the forms of clicks, likes and comments can be monetized by attracting brand partnership opportunities. The fact that these videos were able to get traffic indicates that there is a considerable market to which nationalist content can appeal.

In this case, Douyin did play a role in helping the state manage popular patriotic content by suspending/closing relevant accounts and removing unwanted content, even though its act to remove videos like these was mainly out of the consideration to reduce duplicate content, because duplicate content may undermine the originality of overall content circulating on the platform and thus drive away users' attention. Before the above videos went viral, Douyin had already established mechanisms to periodically remove duplicate content starting from June 2021. In the first stage, Douyin removed 26,718 videos and suspended 206 accounts.<sup>61</sup> From 1 to 30 November 2021, Douyin suspended 469 accounts and removed 86,226 videos.<sup>62</sup> Douyin treated duplicate 'patriotic' videos the same way as it treated other hyperbolic, fabricated, eye-catching and grandstanding topics which intended to satisfy and stimulate the public appetite for sensationalized contents. In response to the 'mastermind' – the MCN company behind multiple accounts—Douyin also set up a specialized group to improve its ability to detect 'organized violations', which means it would impose harsher penalties on those who seek to mobilise multiple accounts to reproduce content based on the same template.<sup>63</sup> To deter users from uploading duplicate content, Douyin also set up a database to help detect duplicate content, and accounts which violate the rule may face the consequence of having all their followers removed.<sup>64</sup>

The response from official media reflects a different concern. On 28 September, the Communist Youth League of China posted an article entitled 'The "Business of Patriotism" needs to stop' on its WeChat public account, which labelled these videos as 'low-level red' that base their blatant praises on fabrication.<sup>65</sup> It stated that it was 'shameful' to turn spontaneous patriotism into a trade and make money of it, and it is an act of 'blasphemy' which uses the banner of 'patriotism' to cash in on people's emotion.<sup>66</sup> The use of 'blasphemy' indicates the CCP gives certain patriotic content a near-sacred status which is distained by profit-seeking producers who pay no attention to the effect of their content on the legitimacy of official patriotic narratives.

In October 2021, the Cyberspace Administration of China—China's key internet regulator—held a video conference to launch Special Actions to regulate account registration and specify platforms' obligations and responsibilities, which aimed at imposing restrictions on platforms from harvesting online traffic through manipulating the public's emotions.<sup>67</sup> In December 2021, a commentary published on *China Youth Daily* criticized such content of misguiding and promoting a parochial and extreme nationalist view.<sup>68</sup> As *China Youth Daily* is the official newspaper of the Communist

<sup>60</sup>Lianhe Zaobao, 'Afternoon observation: when patriotism became a business' [下午察: 当爱国成了一门生意], 1 October 2021, <https://www.zaobao.com.sg/realtime/china/story20211001-1199227>.

<sup>61</sup>China Economy, 'Using Sadfishing, Duplicate Content to Gain Attention? Douyin: Suspend [利用卖惨、同质化文案博流量? 抖音:封]', 29 September 2021, [http://www.ce.cn/xwzx/gnsz/2008/202109/29/t20210929\\_36956863.shtml](http://www.ce.cn/xwzx/gnsz/2008/202109/29/t20210929_36956863.shtml).

<sup>62</sup>Southern Metropolis Daily, 'Douyin Announced Punishment of "Duplicate and Grandstanding Content" [抖音发布"同质化博流量文案"11月治理公告]', 2 December 2021, <https://m.mp.oeeee.com/a/BAAFRD000020211202630108.html>.

<sup>63</sup>Douyin Safety Centre, 'Banning Multiple Accounts, Douyin Launched a New Round of "duplicate Content" Purge [封禁多个账号, 抖音开展新一期"同质化博流量文案"治理]', 25 November 2021, [https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_15547213](https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_15547213).

<sup>64</sup>Douyin Safety Centre, 'Douyin Safety Transparency Report for the Fourth Quarter of 2021 - Comprehensive Governance [2021年第四季度抖音安全透明度报告-综合治理篇]', Weixin Official Accounts Platform, 14 January 2022, [http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?\\_\\_biz=MzkyMTE2MDc5MQ==&mid=2247485203&idx=2&sn=6580b01859db7efab626de77b825b288&chksm=c1869a2bf6f1133de6dd42736f23231e61b1045915779166aff5099c623f3b50b73ad46c87aa#rd](http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzkyMTE2MDc5MQ==&mid=2247485203&idx=2&sn=6580b01859db7efab626de77b825b288&chksm=c1869a2bf6f1133de6dd42736f23231e61b1045915779166aff5099c623f3b50b73ad46c87aa#rd).

<sup>65</sup>Lianhe Zaobao, 'Afternoon observation: when patriotism became a business' [下午察: 当爱国成了一门生意].

<sup>66</sup>Communist Youth League of China, 'Communist Youth League of China: The "Business of Patriotism" needs to stop 共青团中央: "爱国生意"当休矣', 29 September 2021, <https://news.ifeng.com/c/89vLkTRiQ79>.

<sup>67</sup>Cong Zhang, 'The Cyberspace Administration of China Carries out Special Action against the Chaos in the Operation of Internet User Accounts. 国家网信办专项整治互联网用户账号运营乱象', 20 October 2021, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2021/1020/c1001-32258382.html>.

<sup>68</sup>Kangni Li, 'Ill Intentions Hide behind Duplicate "patriotic" Feel-Good Content [批量复制的"爱国爽文"藏着磨刀霍霍]', 17 December 2021, [https://s.cyol.com/articles/2021-12/17/content\\_DMREaYhn.html](https://s.cyol.com/articles/2021-12/17/content_DMREaYhn.html).

Youth League (CYL) of China, its criticism has been considered representing the CCP's attitudes towards the feel-good 'patriotic' content. It remains unclear though to what extent Douyin's act to remove such duplicate 'patriotic' content was directed by the CCP. Nevertheless, the fact that Douyin's removal of these content took place around the same time with CYL's criticism suggests at least a synergy between the Chinese state and Douyin.

## 6. 'Low-Level Red' and 'High-Level Black'

Two labels are essential in understanding the state's attempts to discern the intention behind various patriotic contents created and circulated by non-officially endorsed players. These labels allow the state to discursively construct some contents as applaudable while delegitimise others. 'Low-level red' and 'high-level black' are not phrases that can exist independently from social contexts.<sup>69</sup> The symbolic implications of the colour red and black in contemporary Chinese political culture are key to unpacking these rhetorical devices which function as a medium of domination in the social order that is torn between single-party rule and the commercialization of media. The use of them is an exercise of power by the state over unwanted patriotic content.

'Low-level red' (*diji hong*), also translated as 'vulgar red', refers to the simplification and vulgarization of the 'noble' communist ideology. This phrase is usually used to express disappointment at certain propaganda which is originally intended to praise the Party or the nation but fails because the way it praises the regime is so out-of-touch with reality that such conducts come across as mocking the state's official lines and policies or the very need to praise them. It should be noted that 'propaganda' is not considered pejorative in the Chinese context. Some propose to translate the Chinese term *xuanchuan* into publicity, but the latter falls short to capture the comprehensiveness of the *xuanchuan* work in China.<sup>70</sup>

In the Chinese contemporary political context, 'red' content pertains to communist ideology, often symbolized by the colour red. The famous collection of quotations from Mao Zedong is known as the 'Little Red Book' given its signature bright red covers. The paramilitary force mobilized by Mao during the Cultural Revolution is called 'Red Guards'. Songs that praise communism, revolution, the CCP regime, its leaders and its armies are called 'Red Songs'.<sup>71</sup> The inherent, heartfelt loyalty to the communist regime is called 'Red Genes'.<sup>72</sup> Pilgrimages to locations of historical and symbolic importance to Party history are called 'Red Tourism'.<sup>73</sup> The sons and daughters of the pioneering elites of the CCP is called 'Second-Generation Reds'.<sup>74</sup> When the 'low-level red' is used to label media content, it indicates that while the producer may have a genuine intention to praise the Party state by adopting a blatantly patriotic tone and using 'red resources', the quality of the production is too poor and thus it yields unwanted effects.

'High-level black' (*gaoji hei*), refers to the situation in which the given content seems to be flattering at first glance, but upon close examination, the praise is deliberately made illogical and distasteful to mock and ridicule official ideology.<sup>75</sup> A key aspect of the 'black' is that the creator

<sup>69</sup>Bernhard Forchtner, 'Critique, the Discourse—Historical Approach, and the Frankfurt School', *Critical Discourse Studies* 8, no. 1 (1 February 2011): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2011.533564>.

<sup>70</sup>see Kingsley Edney, *The Globalization of Chinese Propaganda: International Power and Domestic Political Cohesion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 4; Gary D. Rawnsley, Yiben Ma, and Kruakae Pothong, eds., *Research Handbook on Political Propaganda* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022), <https://www.e-elgar.com/shop/usd/research-handbook-on-political-propaganda-9781789906417.html>.

<sup>71</sup>Junxi Qian, 'From Performance to Politics? Constructing Public and Counterpublic in the Singing of Red Songs', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 17, no. 5 (1 October 2014): 602–28, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549413515256>.

<sup>72</sup>David Bandurski, 'Red Genes', *China Media Project* (blog), 18 May 2021, [https://chinamediaproject.org/the\\_ccp\\_dictionary/red-genes/](https://chinamediaproject.org/the_ccp_dictionary/red-genes/).

<sup>73</sup>Hongyan Lu, 'Red Tourism Revs up in Yan'an', 2 November 2018, [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/regional/2018-11/02/content\\_37188972.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/regional/2018-11/02/content_37188972.htm).

<sup>74</sup>David Bandurski, 'Second-Generation Reds', *China Media Project* (blog), 18 April 2021, [https://chinamediaproject.org/the\\_ccp\\_dictionary/second-generation-reds/](https://chinamediaproject.org/the_ccp_dictionary/second-generation-reds/).

<sup>75</sup>On the translation of the two terms, see David Bandurski, "'Low-Level Red" and Other Concerns—China Media Project', 11 March 2019, <https://chinamediaproject.org/2019/03/11/low-level-red-and-other-concerns/>; Guoguang Wu, 'The King's Men and Others: Emerging Political Elites under Xi Jinping', *China Leadership*, 1 June 2019, <https://www.prcleader.org/wsummer>.

*intends* to be sarcastic and counter propaganda. In comparison to other forms of resistance, the sarcastic nature of 'higher-level black' content has made it almost impossible for the state to detect it through traditional censorship mechanisms which is based on keyword filtering. Human censors must be employed to understand the satire the creator is trying to convey, but there are occasions when even human censors cannot be certain about the *intention* of the creator because the satire is so sophisticated and subtle.

The pejorative connotation associated with 'black' in contemporary Chinese politics is reflected in phrases like 'black market' (*heishi*), 'black curtain' (*heimu*, dark secret), 'black society' (*heishehui*, mafia), 'black money' (*heiqian*, dirty money). It not only refers to clandestine and illegal activities, but also those who refused to align with the communist ideology for example in the time of Cultural Revolution. The state used 'Five Black Categories' to demonise landlords, rich farmers, counter-revolutionaries, bad influencers and right-wingers, as opposed to the 'Five Red Categories' who were poorer and more devoted to the communist ideology.<sup>76</sup> The CCP's attempt to differentiate between 'red' and 'black' inherits its propensity to categorise people according to their potential to be loyal.

'Red' and 'black' are always used in pairs to indicate a dualistic relationship between the benevolent and the malevolent. Before his downfall, Bo Xilai launched a neo-Maoist 'Sing Red and Strike Black' campaign to revive Mao-era revolutionary songs and crack down on organized crimes and corruption. When referring to patriotic content, 'Red' and 'black' indicate benevolent and malevolent intentions. The former pertains to a well-intended attempt to display loyalty that is undermined by ignorance or a lack of communication skills, whereas the latter pertains to ill-intended meticulous attack on the CCP through the uses of humour and satire.

Despite the state's attempt to discern political satire from blatant flattering, it is difficult to tell whether the content creators are intentionally seeking to undermine the Party's credibility, or they are simply ignorant and clumsy. Official documents, such as the 'Opinions on Strengthening the Political Construction of the Party' (hereafter the Opinions),<sup>77</sup> provide the conceptual basis to which commentaries and discussions about 'good' and 'bad' patriotism are anchored.

The state seeks to discern 'red' from 'black' because it is important to endorse its loyalists and delegitimise the dissidents. The very efforts to differentiate 'good' from 'bad' patriotism may result in alienating a well-intended support base, which the Party has to rely on to contain political satire. However, the boundary between the two is malleable. Unwilling to acknowledge the existence of satire, state media sometimes portray patriotic content producers as 'inexperienced', 'unskilled', 'unable' and 'parochial'<sup>78</sup> propagandists who are careless at their job, seeking to 'satisfy the leader at the expense of disappointing the people'.<sup>79</sup> The denialist approach to satire suggests that for the CCP, incompetence is less of a problem than 'faked loyalty'.<sup>80</sup>

Sometimes the state chooses to denounce 'red' and 'black' altogether, which gives it the power to evaluate the given content according to its effects. The Opinions consider 'low-level red' and 'high-level black' as equally damaging.<sup>81</sup> A 2022 article published by the Propaganda Department of Zhejiang Provincial Party Committee no longer seeks to differentiate between 'red' and 'black', but provides a typology based on the effects of the propaganda materials.

<sup>76</sup>Ivan Franceschini, Nicholas Loubere, and Christian Sorace, eds., *Afterlives of Chinese Communism: Political Concepts from Mao to Xi* (Verso Books, 2019).

<sup>77</sup>Xinhua, 'Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Strengthening the Political Construction of the Party [中共中央关于加强党的政治建设的意见]', 31 January 2019, [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2019-02/27/content\\_5369070.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2019-02/27/content_5369070.htm).

<sup>78</sup>Jin Wu, 'Beware of "Low-Level Red" and "High-Level Black" Due to Mis-Reporting [谨防报道失当产生“低级红”“高级黑”]', 24 June 2019, [http://www.qstheory.cn/lqikan/2019-06/24/c\\_1124664983.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/lqikan/2019-06/24/c_1124664983.htm).

<sup>79</sup>Fujun Zuo, 'Be Highly Vigilant of "Low-Level Red" and "High-Level Black" and Always Remain Politically Sober and Firm [高度警惕“低级红”“高级黑” 始终保持政治上的清醒坚定]', 6 November 2020, [http://lzs.jiuzhou.gov.cn/xwzx/sjdt/202011/t20201106\\_2213372.shtml](http://lzs.jiuzhou.gov.cn/xwzx/sjdt/202011/t20201106_2213372.shtml).

<sup>80</sup>Xinhua, 'Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Strengthening the Political Construction of the Party [中共中央关于加强党的政治建设的意见]'.

<sup>81</sup>Xinhua.

This development allows the state to distance itself from poorly crafted propaganda according to the effects of propaganda. Low-quality propaganda is not only produced by KOLs and MCNs which create patriotic materials for attracting and monetizing attention, but also by local authorities and state-owned enterprises to display their political loyalty. The tension between the state and grassroots patriotic narratives is thus not only exacerbated by the rise of the business of patriotism per se, but also by the fact that the state's use of 'low-level red' and 'high-level black' gave the vocabulary to the public to evaluate the quality of state propaganda.

The best example of a well-intended propaganda effort that has gone awry is a report posted on the China Railway Nanchang Group detailing how a newly wedded couple—the Group's employees—celebrate their wedding night by hand-copying the Constitution of the Communist Party of China.<sup>82</sup> The producer is from a state-owned enterprise, so it was not meant to be satirical. However, the story comes across so absurd, as the act of copying the constitution happened in a situation in which it was not commonly expected to exist. The surrealist rendering of these disturbingly flattering stories arouses a deep discomfort that only makes sense if the story was a dark-humour style criticism of the morbid political environment in which the most private, important moment in one's life is used to sing praise of the Party. An official's commentary of this case is that it makes a propaganda effort that was supposed to be serious and positive look like 'high-level black'.<sup>83</sup> This example demonstrates that the boundary between red and black is vague, which leaves space for interpretation. When such content became a laughingstock, the state disqualified it regardless of its original intention.

Ironically, the state's attempt to denounced poorly crafted propaganda by the local authorities gave the public the vocabulary to mock the state propaganda apparatus. Propagandists at the local level are often under pressure to produce a massive amount of propaganda materials to sing praise of state policies. In October 2022, two years into the pandemic, a children's song entitled 'Doing Nucleic Acid Tests while Reciting Ancient Poems' was jointly produced by the 'Social Service Base in Tianjin Xincun' affiliated to the Jiangsu Provincial Committee of the Democratic League and the Tianjin Xincun Community Party Committee. Netizens were both amused and disgusted by it, asking whether it counts as 'low-level red' or 'high-level black'.<sup>84</sup> It is disturbing to see children's cheerful celebration and glorification of China's multifaceted draconian Covid policy which had incurred painful economic and humanitarian costs, and the contrast between children's innocence and vulnerability and the fact that they become part of the all-encompassing, comprehensive and powerful propaganda apparatus.<sup>85</sup>

## 7. Tension Between State-Led and Grassroots Patriotic Contents

Despite the state's attempts to delegitimise alleged low-quality patriotic content which backfired and exposed the incompetence of some local governmental propagandists, public discussions around 'low-level red' and 'high-level black' bring MCNs and the state's desire to regulate them further to the forefront. In China, MCN companies not only function as incubators of influencers, but also provide content development services.<sup>86</sup> The number of MCN companies surged from less than

<sup>82</sup>China Railway Nanchang Group, 'China Railway Nanchang Group Employees Copied Party Constitution at Wedding Night [南昌铁路局员工新婚之夜抄党章]', 16 May 2016, [http://m.cnr.cn/news/20160517/t20160517\\_522156244.html](http://m.cnr.cn/news/20160517/t20160517_522156244.html).

<sup>83</sup>Zuo, 'Be Highly Vigilant of "Low-Level Red" and "High-Level Black" and Always Remain Politically Sober and Firm [高度警惕“低级红”“高级黑” 始终保持政治上的清醒坚定]'.

<sup>84</sup>Vision Times, 'Li Bai and Su Shi both did COVID-tests? Chinese children's song provoked controversy and was urgently removed by Weibo [李白、苏轼都做核酸? 中国儿歌再惹议 微博急下架], 看中国, 28 October 2022, <https://www.secretchina.com/news/gb/2022/10/28/1020290.html>.

<sup>85</sup>China Digital Times, 'Selected trending topics | Mobile cabin hospital is amazing, and the person who composes the song is even more amazing [刷屏精选 | 方舱医院真神奇, 编歌的人更神奇], 中国数字时代, 17 March 2020, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/638821.html>.

<sup>86</sup>Yirui Zhang, Baobao Feng, and Yifan Zhang, 'MCN Institutions: Measures for the Administration of Cyber Performance Brokerage Institutions—Path or Curse? [MCN机构:《网络表演经纪机构管理办法》——“轨道”还是“紧箍咒”?]', China Law Insight,



200 in 2015 to around 40,000 in 2022, and the industry of MCNs is estimated to be worth RMB ¥ 43.2 billion (US\$6 billion).<sup>87</sup> Realizing the potential of these companies to influence online public opinion, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism issued 'the Measures for the Administration of Cyber Performance Brokerage Institutions' on 30 August 2021, which requires MCN companies to help monitor the content produced by their users.<sup>88</sup>

In line with the 2022 'Clear and Bright' Special Action which was launched by China's internet regulators to clean up content deemed harmful and maintain online information order, Douyin started to publicize IP address of online influencers and the name of MCN company to which they belong.<sup>89</sup> This move revealed the traffic-attracting tactic of a given MCN company to manufacture trending topics by assigning different views to its influencers for them to interact with each other and thus manipulate public opinion. For example, the MCN *Lan'an Zhiku* (蓝岸智库) owns various 'patriotic' KOLs, including Sima Nan, Zhang Jie, and Brother Sway, to ensure its share in the business of patriotism. The absence of a political motivation is evident from how MCN companies operate. To draw as much online attention as possible to the same company, an MCN company would support multiple KOLs to promote different contents that cater to audiences who hold different and sometimes even opposing opinions.<sup>90</sup>

The requirement for media platform such as WeChat and Weibo to publicize IP address of content publishers unveils that many 'patriotic' influencers—who swore never to leave China and asked their followers to do the same—are in fact based outside China.<sup>91</sup> The famous 'anti-US fighter' Sima Nan is reported to have bought a house in the US.<sup>92</sup> The fact that they are not even in China makes it particularly ironic considering that they gained their fame by gloating over the failure of Western countries and praising China. Netizens sarcastically call such 'patriotic' influencers living outside China 'offshore patriots'.<sup>93</sup>

Motivated not so much by a certain political stance as online traffic, some KOLs may produce self-contradictory contents. They can be 'left-hand *fenhong*, right-hand *fenqing*'<sup>94</sup> – they sometimes act as critics of the state to resonate with 'angry youth' (*fenqing*),<sup>95</sup> and yet other times they act as nationalists to resonate with 'Little Pink' – jingoistic Chinese nationalists.<sup>96</sup> In other words, they cash in on either patriotism and discontents against the CCP according to their potential to bring traffic.

Anti-foreign content not only enables the content producer to monetise online traffic, but also allow the producer to attract capital investment. The most well-known influencer as such

27 October 2021, <https://www.chinalawinsight.com/2021/10/articles/intellectual-property/mcn机构：《网络表演经纪机构管理办法》-轨/>.

<sup>87</sup>iiMedia, '2022–2023 MCN Industry Development Research Report in China [2022–2023年中国MCN行业发展研究报告]', 20 July 2022, <https://www.iimedia.cn/c400/87027.html>.

<sup>88</sup>Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 'Notice by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Issuing the Measures for the Administration of Cyber Performance Brokerage Institutions [文化和旅游部关于印发《网络表演经纪机构管理办法》的通知]', 30 August 2021, [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2021-09/02/content\\_5635020.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2021-09/02/content_5635020.htm).

<sup>89</sup>CMP Staff, "'Clear and Bright' for the CCP Congress', *China Media Project* (blog), 19 July 2022, <https://chinamediaproject.org/2022/07/19/clear-and-bright-for-the-ccp-congress/>.

<sup>90</sup>The Paper, 'Emotions Come First, Rationality Is Absent, and Consensus Is Rare. Banyuetan: The "Angry Provokers" Should Stop [情绪先行、理性缺位、共识难得, 半月谈: "带怒党"该消停了]', 24 November 2021, [http://m.thepaper.cn/kuaibao\\_detail.jsp?contid=15527091&from=kuaibao](http://m.thepaper.cn/kuaibao_detail.jsp?contid=15527091&from=kuaibao).

<sup>91</sup>BBC, 'Weibo marks the main IP address of the post: Chinese "patriotic writer" Lian Yue claims to be treating illness in Japan, netizens "do not buy it" [中国"爱国作家"连岳称在日本治病 网友"不买帐"]', *BBC News 中文*, 3 May 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-61305604>.

<sup>92</sup>Huang Chunmei, "'Anti-US is work, staying in the United States is life" Sima Nan recognizes buying a house in the United States "[反美是工作、留美是生活] 司马南认了美国买房]', *Radio Free Asia*, 17 August 2022, <https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/zhengzhi/hcm-08172022073219.html>.

<sup>93</sup>Cha Ke, 'Afternoon observation: IP location status ignites "offshore patriotism" controversy [下午茶:IP位置现形点燃"离岸爱国"争议]', 1 September 2022, <https://www.zaobao.com.sg/realtime/china/story20220502-1268714>.

<sup>94</sup>The Paper, 'Emotions Come First, Rationality Is Absent, and Consensus Is Rare. Banyuetan: The "Angry Provokers" Should Stop [情绪先行、理性缺位、共识难得, 半月谈: "带怒党"该消停了]'

<sup>95</sup>Lijun Yang and Yongnian Zheng, 'Fen Qings (Angry Youth) in Contemporary China', *Journal of Contemporary China* 21, no. 76 (1 July 2012): 637–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2012.666834>.

<sup>96</sup>Liu, *From Cyber-Nationalism to Fandom Nationalism*.



is Huang Sheng, a ‘patriotic’ Big V<sup>97</sup> who, for a time, had 5 million followers.<sup>98</sup> Acting as an anti-American patriot, he gained his fame for his sensational ‘patriotic’ commentaries. The catchphrases he uses – ‘the US is scared’ ‘Japan freaks out’ – appeal to a nationalist audience who takes pleasure in reading about how weak other nations are. His reputation allowed him to set up a peer-to-peer lending platform Xitouwang, where he persuaded his followers to invest based on conspiracy theories about the Diaoyu Islands dispute and fabricated collapses of the US and Japan. Huang profited tremendously from his followers.<sup>99</sup> By the time he was arrested in August 2021, he owed 662 million RMB to 5,635 people.<sup>100</sup> Judging from its effects – ‘self-deceiving’, ‘distorting’ and ‘giving ammunition to others’ – the official media designated Huang’s ‘patriotism’ as ‘typical low-level red and high-level black’.<sup>101</sup> This example further demonstrates the state’s exercise of power by interpreting content as ‘red’ or ‘black’ according to its effects, rather than intentions.

Traffic-driven patriotic content can cause serious troubles for the state. In April 2020, an article titled ‘Why Kazakhstan is eager to return to China’ went viral on WeChat, detailing how some Kazakh citizens claimed to be the descendants of either the famous Chinese poet Li Bai or the Chinese Han ethnicity and how they longed to return to China. While similar articles were circulating on Chinese social media describing how eager people in neighbouring countries including India, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Mongolia and Vietnam feel to return to China, this particular version about Kazakhstan touched on the nerves of Kazakhs at a time when China was struggling to maintain good relations with countries where post-COVID anti-China sentiments were on the rise. Kazakhstan’s Foreign Ministry summoned the Chinese ambassador Zhang Xiao to protest against the article.<sup>102</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson’s Office had to emphasise that the article was from an individual account and did not represent the position of the Chinese government.<sup>103</sup> *People’s Daily* rebuked the ‘morbid’ profit-driven ‘patriotic’ articles for promoting a kind of parochial nationalism that jeopardises national interests.<sup>104</sup> The state-owned nationalist tabloid, the *Global Times*, sought to distance official stance from these ‘nationalist misleading articles which spread fake information online about China’s neighbouring countries and regions’.<sup>105</sup> WeChat also responded rapidly by removing 227 similar articles and closing 153 accounts by April 2020.<sup>106</sup>

Although popular nationalism found itself contradicting official narratives, it was inspired by official nationalism, and non-state patriotic content producers were motivated by the profitability of patriotism. Therefore, when the state criticized non-state producers, the tension between state-led politically driven patriotism and popular economically driven patriotism was exacerbated, especially because both were profitable. State-endorsed patriotic campaigns are so profitable that the box office

<sup>97</sup> ‘Big V’ is verified Weibo users followed by more than 500,000.

<sup>98</sup> Lianhe Zaobao, ‘Afternoon observation: when patriotism became a business’ [下午察:当爱国成了一门生意].

<sup>99</sup> on fan economy, see Yilu Liang and Wanqi Shen, ‘Fan Economy in the Chinese Media and Entertainment Industry: How Feedback from Super Fans Can Propel Creative Industries’ Revenue’, *Global Media and China* 1, no. 4 (1 December 2016): 331–49, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2059436417695279>.

<sup>100</sup> GT Staff reporters, ‘China Cracks down on Illegal Online Financial Information Accounts to Ensure Market Stability’, 29 August 2021, China cracks down on illegal online financial information accounts to ensure market stability.

<sup>101</sup> Wu, ‘Beware of “low-Level Red” and “High-Level Black” Due to Mis-Reporting [谨防报道失当产生“低级红”“高级黑”].’

<sup>102</sup> Reuters Staff, ‘Kazakhstan Summons Chinese Ambassador in Protest over Article’, *Reuters*, 14 April 2020, sec. Emerging Markets, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kazakhstan-china-idUSKCN21W1AH>.

<sup>103</sup> Yang Danxu, ‘Online rumors of “desire to return to China” ge the nerves of neighboring countries. Scholar: naive nationalism will hinder the country [网传“渴望回归中国”挑动邻国敏感神经 学者:幼稚民族主义会掣肘国家]’, 17 April 2020, <https://www.zaobao.com.sg/special/report/politic/cnpol/story20200417-1046083>.

<sup>104</sup> ‘People’s Daily, “Many Countries Are Eager to Return to China” Was Deleted, and the Morbid Self-Media Should Be Regulated [“多国渴望回归中国”被删, 病态的自媒体该治了]’, 17 April 2020, <https://wap.peopleapp.com/article/5399227/5313358>.

<sup>105</sup> Xiaoci Deng, ‘China-Kazakhstan Ties Unaffected by Online Article amid Joint Fight against Pandemic: Chinese Envoy’, 17 April 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1185885.shtml>.

<sup>106</sup> BBC, ‘Kazakhstan, said to be “desiring to return to China”, summoned the Chinese ambassador, WeChat and Weibo deleted the post [被称“渴望回归中国”的哈萨克斯坦召见了中国大使]’, *BBC News 中文*, 16 April 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/world-52306918>.

of *Wolf Warrior II* reached \$5.68 million on the 31<sup>st</sup> day in release, second only to the 2015 *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*.<sup>107</sup> The sheer size of its record-breaking box office speaks volumes about the market for Chinese nationalism. The wolf warrior genre became hugely popular among Chinese nationalists. Films like this have a strong state support, evidenced by multiple reviews in *People's Daily* that praise them. As the state criticized the popular players for profiting from patriotism, some netizens blamed the CCP and the Youth League for having started, or at least facilitated, the commercialization and commodification of patriotism, exemplified by a sarcastic comment 'Only official media are allowed to do this business [of patriotism]?'.<sup>108</sup> After the release of another patriotic film, the *Battle at Lake Changjin*, some netizens criticized Wu Jing who directed and starred in the film, for 'doing the business of patriotism' and 'profiting from patriotism', and pressured him to donate the income from the film to veterans or state building.<sup>109</sup> While such hostility might have arisen from a natural mentality of being jealous of the rich, these comments did highlight the tension between the state's desire to manipulate and benefit from legitimacy-inducing nationalism and grassroots' desire to profit from traffic-attracting 'patriotism'. While there is also a convergence between official and popular nationalisms when both the state and commercial actors benefit from this business, the state's patriotic campaigns backfired when people realized not only did it help the state to consolidate the nationalist support base, but it also generated huge revenues, *making people pay for being patriotic*.

Riding the wave of the commercial success of the *Battle at Lake Changjin*, which grossed nearly RMB ¥ 5 billion (USD\$779.13 million) within a week,<sup>110</sup> many Douyin users made videos of themselves or their children eating frozen potatoes, to pay tribute to the volunteers who fought with North Korea and ate frozen potatoes while American soldiers who fought with South Korea enjoyed Christmas turkeys, as shown in the film.<sup>111</sup> This seemingly odd practice is in line with CCP's long tradition of 'appreciating the present happiness by recalling past sufferings' (*yiku sitian*) which was widely carried out during the Cultural Revolution as part of propaganda campaigns.

The line between state-led patriotism and grassroots patriotism is not always clear-cut, and the responses by the state and platforms were not always consistent. The Xinhua Net commended such videos using the hashtag 'girl tasted frozen potato after watching *The Battle at Lake Changjin*', which encouraged more people to post similar videos.<sup>112</sup> This indicates the state's approval of patriotic videos that do not contradict state-led efforts. The state's approval and public attention encouraged more Douyin users to replicate the potato-tasting video, to the extent Douyin had to remove such videos in one of its regular removals of duplicate content.<sup>113</sup> Given that the potato eating videos were the only grassroots videos that had gone viral for a time, it is likely that Douyin removed some of them even though the state media did not express objections. This example supports the observations we made throughout this paper. First, the state and the platform are not always on the same page because the former is driven by the need to forge loyalty and the latter is more concerned about duplicate content. Second, the state does not have clear criteria as to which kind of grassroots patriotic content is permissible. The state responds to these videos on an ad-hoc basis, according to the actual effects of

<sup>107</sup>Rob Cain, 'China's "Wolf Warrior 2" Becomes 2nd Film In History To Reach \$800 M In A Single Territory', *Forbes*, 27 August 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robcairn/2017/08/27/chinas-wolf-warrior-2-becomes-2nd-film-in-history-to-reach-800m-in-a-single-territory/>.

<sup>108</sup>Lianhe Zaobao, 'Afternoon observation: when patriotism became a business' [下午察: 当爱国成了一门生意].

<sup>109</sup>Liang Jia, '<The Battle at Lake Changjin> Succeeded at the Box Office yet Faced Extortive Donations. Morality Cannot Be Kidnapped in the Name of Patriotism' [《长津湖》票房大卖遭逼捐 不能以爱国名义道德绑架], 13 October 2021, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/yl/2021/10-13/9585288.shtml>.

<sup>110</sup>Sophie Yu and Tony Munroe, 'Frozen Potatoes vs Turkey: Patriotic Chinese-Made War Epic Tops Global Box Office', *Reuters*, 19 October 2021, sec. Lifestyle, <https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/frozen-potatoes-vs-turkey-patriotic-chinese-made-war-epic-tops-global-box-office-2021-10-19/>.

<sup>111</sup>Souhu, 'The Battle at Lake Changjin Is Trending Again' [《长津湖》又上热搜了], 24 December 2021, [https://www.sohu.com/a/www.sohu.com/a/512699020\\_120099886](https://www.sohu.com/a/www.sohu.com/a/512699020_120099886).

<sup>112</sup>Bohetang busuan, 'Are the Frozen Potatoes Eaten by the Volunteers in "Changjin Lake" Delicious? Everyone Who Tried It Cried' [《长津湖》志愿军吃的冻土豆好吃吗? 试吃过的人都哭了], 5 October 2021, <https://new.qq.com/omn/20211005/20211005A08TON00.html>.

<sup>113</sup>Douyin Safety Centre, 'I Found You, Lol' [你们被我发现了, 嘿嘿嘿], 21 October 2021, <https://www.douyin.com/video/7021731666007837960>.

the given patriotic content, and uses 'low-level red' and 'high-level black' to delegitimise and distance itself from poorly made patriotic content that might challenge state legitimacy.

## 8. Conclusion

This paper is not a manual for differentiating 'low-level red' from 'high-level black'. We argue that the attempt at differentiating them reproduces the CCP's discursive strategy of evaluating the given content based on its loyalty to the state and its actual effects in eliciting positive/negative attitudes towards the state. The rapid development of social media platforms and state-led patriotic campaigns encouraged the grassroots—including citizens, local governments and state-owned enterprises—to take advantage of the highly profitable industry of patriotism that feeds upon the public's nationalist sentiments. The state's use of 'low-level red' and 'high-level black' is an exercise of power to allow the state to distance itself from unwanted patriotic content, regardless of who produced it.

We unpacked the discursive construction of 'low-level red' and 'high-level black' and highlighted how the state used these labels to indicate the intentions of 'patriotic' content producers, delegitimizing, and distancing itself from, 'patriotic' content that turned out to be damaging to the image of the state. A discourse-historical approach reveals the continuity of the CCP to categorise people according to their potential to be loyal.

Analyzing the interplay between the state, local authorities, and grassroots 'patriotic' content producers (KOLs) who are embedded in the booming MCNs industry, we find that non-state actors came to challenge the state's monopoly of nationalist narratives, and more importantly, the interplay gave the vocabulary 'low-level red' and 'high-level black' to the public to mock the failure of the propaganda apparatus of local authorities. In a highly censored regime, the subtle, insinuating, and sophisticated satire provoked the state into overreaction, as existing censorship mechanisms, even including human censors, are ineffective in differentiating satire from bad propaganda. Although we did not focus on the reception of such patriotic content, a glance at viewers' comments to them indicates that the state's use of 'low-level red' and 'high-level black' has unwittingly given citizens the language to express their distrust of and antipathy to official propaganda.

This paper contributes to the understanding of Chinese nationalism by providing new empirical evidence on how grassroots, profit-driven patriotism has challenged the state's ability to claim legitimacy through patriotic campaigns and forced it to respond. We showed how Chinese nationalism is shaped by and torn between multiple forces including state agenda, public sentiments and business interests. While the state has sought to regulate grassroots patriotism, it has not always been successful as its own authority has been eroded by poorly crafted propaganda by either local authorities or those who desperately sought to display loyalty. At the time of writing this paper, we have also observed that many foreigners sell products on social media by appealing to Chinese nationalist sentiment and chanting how much they love China, thus further research is needed to investigate their role in shaping the commodification and monetization of nationalism.

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