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Online Chinese Nationalism and the Discursive Construction of a Nationalist Hero: The Case of Jin Jing

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ABSTRACT

The rise of popular online Chinese nationalism has been interpreted by many researchers largely as a response to the alleged hostility and threat from foreign enemies. While the perceived enemies play a key role in shaping the dynamics of contemporary Chinese nationalism, little has been discussed so far as to the importance of a nationalist hero in the creation and mobilisation of online Chinese nationalism. This research attempts to address this gap by analysing the online discussion about the case of Jin Jing. Jin Jing, a disabled torchbearer and Paralympic fencer, was praised by Chinese netizens as a national hero after protecting the torch during the Paris leg of the 2008 Beijing Olympic torch relay. By using a critical discourse analysis of online posts relating to Jin Jing and the incident, this paper aims to discuss the processes and interactions in the making of a national hero in a popular media discourse, and how the online discursive practices of creating, worshipping and defending a hero can contribute to the building of the nation.

Keywords: Chinese nationalism; critical discourse analysis; hero; Jin Jing; national identity.

1. INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The emergence of popular online Chinese nationalism has been viewed by many researchers largely as a response to the alleged hostility and

threat from the West, particularly the US and Japan, and much has been discussed about the dynamics of such reactive nationalism and its impact on China's domestic and foreign policies (Gries 2004; Wu 2007; Reilly 2012; Weiss 2014). While scholarly attention has been paid to the role of enemy (whether imagined or real) in the conceptualisation and perception of contemporary Chinese nationalism, it is also essential to shed light on the importance of national heroes as another key factor in shaping and mobilising Chinese nationalism.

A national hero is eulogized for his/her determination and self-sacrifice to defend a nation's independence, interest and pride, and his/her role in enhancing national unity and shaping nationalist identity is at the forefront (Smith 1991; 1999; 2009). Telling and retelling the stories of national heroes and martyrs has been a fundamental theme in Chinese "patriotic education", initiated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during the 1990s, in an attempt to enhance the nationalist awareness of the Chinese public, especially young people (Zhao 2004; Hughes 2006). Model citizens from various sectors of Chinese society have been selected and established as heroes, and their devotion to the independence, modernisation and pride of China is extensively promoted and extolled throughout mass education and state media outlets (Einwalter 1998; Landsberger 2001; Wang 2011; Funari and Mees 2013). Lei Feng, for example, is probably one of the most publicized national heroes in contemporary Chinese society. As a soldier, he was characterized by the state propaganda apparatus as a model citizen, who was selfless, devoted and patriotic (Sheridan 1968). After his death in 1962, the CCP launched a nationwide campaign, "Learning from Comrade Lei Feng", to encourage the public to emulate his love for his country and its people.

From the above example, it is not difficult to realize that the creation and publicizing of a national hero in China is largely through top-down political propaganda, with the aim of enhancing people's identification with the nation, as well as promoting an officially desired model citizen for the rest of the nation to follow. However, such a top-down approach to the understanding of nation-building is being challenged, because the development of new information technologies, especially the internet, creates various mechanisms which enable ordinary people to imagine and support their nation. In China, regardless of information censorship (Wacker 2003; MacKinnon 2011; Morozov 2011), the internet has brought fundamental changes to the ways in which information is produced and consumed, and has enabled an increasing number of popular players to engage in social activism through Chinese cyberspace

(Tai 2006; Yang 2009). The role of the internet in the production and dissemination of Chinese nationalism has also been widely discussed, as have the cases of popular players using the internet to express alternative nationalist views and mobilize nationalist sentiments (Liu 2006; Nyíri, Zhang, and Varrall 2010; Ma 2015 and 2018).

Despite an increasing volume of research into online Chinese nationalism, few scholars pay adequate attention to the space the internet can create for popular players to single out and create their own national heroes, or interrogate how these online practice of hero-making can play a role in reinforcing people's nationalist awareness and identification. This empirical research aims to address this gap and focuses on the case of Jin Jing. As a Paralympic fencer and torchbearer, Jin Jing was attacked by a pro-Tibet protestor during the Paris leg of the international torch relay of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and the protestor almost succeeded in wrenching the torch away from her. Stories of Jin Jing in her wheelchair, tenaciously shielding the torch with her body, were rapidly circulating on the internet, and earned her overnight fame as a national hero for protecting the so-called symbol of China's national pride. Through a critical discourse analysis of online posts relating to Jin Jing and the incident, this paper aims to discuss the processes and interactions relating to the making of a national hero in a popular media discourse, and how the online discursive practices of creating, worshipping and defending a hero can contribute to the building and imagination of the nation.

2. CHINESE NATIONALISM AND THE MAKING OF HEROES

The Chinese Communist Party has long been using nationalism as an effective means of mobilizing state actions and enhancing the legitimacy of its rule (Zhao 2004). This was particularly true after the crackdown on the pro-democracy demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in 1989, when the CCP realized that the orthodox official doctrine of Marxism-Leninism was losing its ability to legitimize the state, and should therefore place greater emphasis on nationalism (Zheng 1999; Zhao 2000). To address this ideological bankruptcy, the CCP launched the "patriotic education programme" in 1994, stipulating that nationalist topics should be taught in schools at all levels on a daily basis, and should include the rise of the CCP, its great achievements in modernising China, its legendary and heroic stories, and so forth (Zhao 1998, 293).

The concept of “hero” is one of the most important themes in this patriotic education, but hero-making has been prevalent in the CCP’s propaganda since it took power in 1949, as heroes have been constantly created, not only as a means through which ideological messages can be conveyed, but also as officially desired role models for the rest of the citizens to emulate. In Mao’s era, several young People’s Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers were heroized, including Wang Jie and Ouyang Hai, who sacrificed their own lives for the sake of others (Landsberger 2001). Among those PLA soldiers who were proclaimed heroes, Lei Feng was the most prominent. As an ordinary soldier, Lei’s heroism was shown in the many good but unspectacular deeds he performed, his patriotism and his willingness to struggle with everyday hardship and serve the socialist nation and its people (Einwalter 1998). Being young, ordinary and prepared to serve the socialist cause were the common characteristics of soldier heroes in the 1960s. Most importantly, according to Sheridan (1968), they became heroes mainly because of their daily application of Mao’s teaching about serving the socialist country and its people, and their use of Mao’s thought as a weapon in the conquest of difficulties.

In the post-Mao era, Communism and Socialism were still being taught through patriotic education, but according to Hughes (2006, 57), they were “reduced to the stories of revolutionaries who illustrated the virtues of self-sacrifice for the interests of the collective and the need to always put the state before the individual”. Wang (2011, 361) finds that slogans such as “serving the people”, which were often used in Mao’s time, are still being used in the construction and popularization of heroes; however, they are “no longer connected to highly politicized ‘love for revolutionary comrades and class brothers’, but are reinterpreted as having the more humanistic and universal connotation of taking pleasure in helping those in need”. The party state continues to carefully select role models and heroes from all walks of life to provide political and moral guidance. Zhang Haidi, for instance, a paraplegic, was selected as a role model for her qualities which were seen as valuable for the public to emulate: her hunger for knowledge and her determination to overcome obstacles (Landsberger 2001). Even though times have changed, Wang (2011) argues that the *modus operandi* adopted by the state in the publicity of selected heroes remains similar to the one used in Mao’s era. The promotion of heroes normally takes place in the form of nationwide campaigns, with incessant official media reporting about their exploits and with their stories being transformed into artistic work, such as films and posters.

The existing literature has provided an abundance of useful insights into the techniques, rationales and ideologies relating to the hero-making processes in the Chinese official discourse. What is lacking, though, in the existing literature is a discussion about the possible roles that popular actors could play in the creation and commendation of heroes as a means of contributing to the building of a nation. The lack of a bottom-up view regarding the making of heroes becomes a problem that needs to be addressed, especially in the context where modern communication technologies have created opportunities for growing political participation. Much has already been discussed about the role of non-state actors in the production and dissemination of popular nationalism in contemporary China, and the ways in which they co-opt, challenge and compete with the state-led nationalism (Gries 2004; Liu 2006; Reilly 2012; Ma 2018). While this may be useful evidence to suggest that the CCP's domination of the Chinese nationalist discourse is under challenge, it does not necessarily mean that the CCP is losing its grip on nationalist politics. Researchers such as Weiss (2014) and Ma (2015; 2018) argue that, in fact, the CCP carefully and strategically engages with online popular nationalism to forward its own political interests, allowing some freedom for internet users to express their nationalist views, and occasionally co-opting online nationalist opinions into its policy-making. The power contests between state and popular actors over Chinese nationalist discourses make it relevant to discuss the extent to which online popular nationalism can challenge the CCP's domination of Chinese nationalist politics. With regard to this paper, one of the questions to be investigated is how the making of a nationalist hero from ground level can challenge the state-led nationalist hero-making politics.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts Norman Fairclough's approach (Fairclough 1995) to critical discourse analysis as the main research method, and pays close attention to the ways in which online discussants discursively construct their nationalist identities and relations through the manipulation of language. Fairclough (1995) claims that social actors use language through a discursive structure, in order to establish identities and interpersonal relations between different groups involved in social interactions. Based on Fairclough's ideas on critical discourse analysis, this paper examines

various linguistic features of the collected data, such as the choice of word and sentence structure. Special attention is also paid to the use of pronouns, because they are frequently used in the discursive construction of identities and relations. As Bloor and Bloor (2007, 22) point out, the use of pronouns indicates “where a participant in the discourse positions himself/herself as a member of a social group and where others position him or her”.

All the data used in this paper were collected from *Tianya Forum*, which is one of the most visited online forums in China. Using a keyword search “Jin Jing + torch relay”, this research collected approximately 6,000 posts. Despite the large quantity of the collected data, they were actually highly repetitive¹. However, I by no means intend to ignore these repetitive online texts, because they enable me to understand the general attitudes of online participants. The sheer corpus of the data also allows me to make some claim to representativeness, because the data led to a saturation point where evidence arose for identifying the main trends, characteristics, and arguments relating to the online discussion about Jin Jing. It should also be noted that all the data were originally in Chinese, and the translation is mine. Moreover, for ethical reasons, the real IDs of the discussants quoted in this paper have been anonymized and replaced by Forum User A, B, C and so on.

4. THE CASE OF JIN JING

4.1. *Nationalist identification and the creation of a hero*

As Jin Jing’s stories spread widely and reached a large audience, praises for her patriotic deeds were prevalent in Chinese online forums, and she was eulogized by many Chinese netizens as an “angel in a wheelchair” and “the most beautiful torchbearer”. Such online passion for praising Jin Jing and identifying with her reached a climax when she posted a thread in *Tianya Forum*, expressing gratitude to all the supporters of the

¹ In the collected texts, slogans such as “Well done, Jin Jing!” and “You are the most beautiful girl” were repeatedly seen. Moreover, repetition also takes place in the form of numerous red, heart-shaped icons and the Chinese national flags, which were used by netizens to show their nationalist passion.

Beijing Olympics, especially those who had supported her in the Paris leg of the torch relay. She insisted that she was not a hero, because she had just done what any patriotic Chinese should do; but, irrespective of that, the post still attracted a large number of replies with an overwhelmingly pro-Jin Jing tone. These comments enable us to understand not only the processes of hero-making in online popular discourse, but also how Chinese netizens assert and reinforce their nationalist identity through discursive practices of identifying with the alleged hero. Here are some comments by the forum participants:

The moment you used your body to protect the torch, my tears burst out. That moment I was completely touched. Not just me, but all the Chinese people around the world who love their own motherland were touched. You are the pride of the Chinese nation, you are the pride of the People's Republic of China. Your deed has told the whole world that: every individual of us Chinese who love the motherland would protect her, regardless of personal safety, when the pride of our country is under threat. (by Forum User A)

Jin Jing, every time I see the news about your protection of the torch, [I] am touched by your beauty, your determined expression, and your brave performance. It is never too exaggerated to use all the beautiful and sacred words to describe you. [...] In the picture, you look like a pure and holy angel, sacred and inviolable. Your splendid glory made the ugly look of the thugs even more despicable [...]. Many thanks for your protection of the dignity of our motherland and the Chinese nation. Their contemptible actions can only enhance the cohesion of our nation [...]. Jin Jing, we all feel proud to have such a compatriot as you, and [we all feel proud] that our motherland has children like you. Jin Jing, we all love you, too!!! (by Forum User B)

You are our angel, and your determination and smile inspire every Chinese. We become strong because of you, and we need to learn from you, [because you] fought the evil forces for our nation. (by Forum User C)

We love you, because you bear the Chinese soul. We love you, because you are the embodiment of the nation. (by Forum User D)

Someone becomes a national hero when s/he has done something for the sake of a nation, and the people of the nation firmly believe that what s/he has done is great. A national hero is in fact a discursive product, as the creation, publicity and cult of a hero are intrinsically related to the use of language in a particular socio-cultural practice. Whether or not someone becomes a national hero depends not only on how his/her nationalist deeds have been publicized and reproduced, but, more importantly, depends on how his/her nationalist deeds have been ele-

vated to a point where people believe that what s/he has done is a great contribution to the shared community. Jin Jing's story of protecting the torch was frequently reiterated in the online forum, and, as exemplified in the above online comments, the tendency to elevate Jin Jing's deeds to a nationalist height through the manipulation of language is obvious. As in the above texts, Jin Jing is hailed as "the pride of the Chinese nation", "the pride of the People's Republic of China" and the "embodiment of the nation". These particular words significantly contribute to the creation of Jin Jing as a national hero, and elevate her to a height that few people can reach. When Jin Jing has been extolled as the "pride" and "embodiment" of the Chinese nation, she is no longer an ordinary individual Chinese, but rather, has been turned into a symbol that represents a collection of values, wills and dreams of the Chinese community as a whole. It frequently seems to occur in a variety of cultures that someone who is upheld as a hero becomes more or less sacred (Smith 1991; 1999; 2009). In other words, Jin Jing is endowed with some divine features, and becomes an incarnation of a deity. Apotheosizing Jin Jing is frequent throughout the discussion in the forum, and the above selected posts provide some indication of this trend. In Forum User B's post, s/he comments, "You look like a pure and holy angel, sacred and inviolable". Similarly, Forum User C tells Jin Jing directly, "You are our angel". Thus, both Forum Users B and C choose the specific word "angel" to address Jin Jing. Forum User B even uses the adjectives "pure", "holy", "sacred" and "inviolable" to reinforce her divine quality. The binary opposition between hero and devil further underpins the sacredness of Jin Jing. The protestors are demonized by Forum User B as "thugs" and "devils" who are "ugly", "despicable" and "contemptible"; while, on the other hand, Jin Jing is depicted as a guardian angel who has divine strength for conquering the evil forces, and hence protects the "the dignity of our motherland and the Chinese nation".

The zeal for apotheosizing Jin Jing and amplifying her nationalist deeds is prominent, but the interesting thing is that many netizens do not seem to realize that the compliments they pay to Jin Jing may have exceeded what she is supposed to deserve. Rather, as Forum User B adds, "It is never too exaggerated to use all the beautiful and sacred words to describe you". The posts quoted above provide some examples that illustrate the efforts of netizens to establish Jin Jing's heroic status and their belief in the greatness of what she did. In Forum User A's post, for example, s/he proclaims that Jin Jing's action "completely" touched him/her. The word "completely" accentuates the extent to which s/he

was impressed by what Jin Jing did. Likewise, Forum User C stresses the greatness of Jin Jing by saying that “we become strong because of you”. The causality enabled by the phrase “because of” underlines the importance of Jin Jing to “us”, indicating that Jin Jing is the one who gives “us” strength and makes us “strong”, and without her, “we” would not be so strong.

The importance of Jin Jing in the discursive construction of the nationalist identity of “us” can be sensed from the above online comments. What is then worth examining in netizens’ language is the frequent mentioning of “you” (referring to Jin Jing) in relation to “we”. The coupling of “you” with “we” in a single sentence is common in the commentary of the netizens, and netizens attempt to clarify who “we” are by constantly interpreting and reinterpreting the relationship between “you” and “we” in the online popular discourse. There are many instances regarding how “we” is defined through the discursive identification with “you” (Jin Jing). In Forum User B’s claims, “You look like a pure and holy angel [...] many thanks for your protection of the dignity of our motherland and the Chinese nation”; and similarly in Forum User C’s sentence, “You are our angel, and your determination and smile inspire every Chinese”. The linguistic presence of “you” and “we” is apparent in both sentences. To put it in a more straightforward way, the former sentence can be translated as, “Thank YOU for protecting the dignity of OUR motherland”; and for the latter, “YOUR determination and smile inspire every Chinese (of US)”. The relation between “you” and “we” is clear: it is “you” who protected the dignity of our motherland”, and it is “your” determination and smile that inspire every Chinese (of us). In both sentences, the “you” is portrayed as an angel, and it gives the feeling that the “you” does not seem to be a member of “us”, but rather as a deity above the “we”, who is believed to look after “our” motherland and whose spirit enlightens “us”. The sense of “we-ness” is therefore underlined by a shared angel; that is to say, believing in and identifying with Jin Jing as an angel becomes a shared identity which determines whether or not one belongs to the “we”.

As has been illustrated in the above example, netizens attempt to circumscribe and construct who “we” are through identifying with Jin Jing. A similar example can also be found in Forum User A’s language: “Not just me, but all the Chinese people around the world who love their own motherland were touched”. The relationship between the “you” and “we” is not as explicit as the one in the previous examples; however, it becomes clearer once the sentence is put back into context. The “you” is

hidden because of the passive voice. To reorganize the whole sentence, it should read like this: “Not just me, but all the Chinese people around the world who love their own motherland were touched by you (or by your action of protecting the torch)”. By a careful examination, the sentence actually deals with the relationship amongst the three: “me” (Forum User A), all the Chinese people, and “you”. What Forum User A intends to express is that all the Chinese people around the world, including “me” (the forum user himself/herself), were touched by Jin Jing. The inclusion of “me” in the “we” is indicated by the conjunction “not just ... but”, emphasising that “me” and “all the Chinese around the world who love their own motherland” form the collective of the “we”. The attributive clause, “who love their own motherland” tries to show that it is not any Chinese around the world, but only those Chinese who love their own motherland, who constitute the “we”. By stressing that, Forum User A seems to suggest that those Chinese who love their motherland must have been touched by Jin Jing’s action, and those Chinese who were not touched are not considered as loving their motherland, and therefore do not belong to the “we”. Jin Jing’s nationalist action to some significant extent contributes to the identification of the “we”, because the “we” is defined by whether or not one was touched by her nationalist deed. From Forum User A’s perspective, who “we” are is what “we” feel; in other words, it is the same emotional feeling about Jin Jing’s action that defines and binds the “we”.

As Jin Jing’s nationalist story continued to spread through the forum, the netizens’ passion for embracing Jin Jing showed no signs of abating. Jin Jing is not only identified as the one whom “we” respect and whose nationalist deed “we” need to learn from, but also the one whom “I” want to associate with in “my” personal life. This inclination can be understood in the following two forum posts:

I have a daughter, and really hope that she will become a girl like you, who are determined and have great love for the nation. (by Forum User E)

Jin Jing, are you married? Do you have a boyfriend? If you don’t ... [...] I’m serious! To be honest, from the moment you instinctively acted to protect the torch, I knew you were my dream! You were my white swan! (by Forum User F)

From the two posts above, the netizens’ enthusiasm of self-identification with Jin Jing is obvious. Forum Users E and F were not alone, and there were many other peer users expressing similar wishes in the forum. Regardless of their longings for a daughter or a girlfriend like Jin Jing,

this shows that Jin Jing is no longer merely a national hero, but really has become the netizens' model of the ideal girl. In other words, the netizens' love for Jin Jing has grown from seeing her as a solemn angel or a model compatriot in the public domain for people to pay tribute to, to regarding her as a beloved girl that they could actually associate with in their private life. Both forum users highlight Jin Jing's nationalist deeds, and they seem to suggest that loving the motherland and being determined to protect its pride are the essential qualities for an ideal daughter or girlfriend to possess. Having a connection with the girl that many dream about is something that one can show off; however, in the case of Jin Jing, publicising one's strong wish to have a daughter or a girlfriend like Jin Jing means something more important. It may genuinely reflect what they think, but nevertheless, such blatant expressions appear more likely to be a way of declaring one's nationalist identity. Netizens seem to believe the notion "who I am is who I am with", and claiming association with Jin Jing or even imagining a connection with her could help them manifest and strengthen their nationalist position.

All the above paragraphs have illustrated how forum users made a clear statement of their nationalist identity and stance by passionately embracing Jin Jing as a national hero. It also demonstrates that the applications of language play an important role in the discursive construction of one's nationalist identity. In the online context of discussing Jin Jing's nationalist deeds of protecting the torch, the attempts of netizens to highlight their nationalist identity are evidenced not only by the specific words they choose to address Jin Jing (for instance, "great", "pride", and "angel", as a way of showing their appreciation of and support for her nationalist determination); but also by employing certain sentence structures that help establish the relationship between "we" or "I" and Jin Jing, as a means of stressing their identification with her. When Jin Jing becomes a primary symbol of the "we" community, and identification with her asserts one's nationalist identity, the problem arises that any voices that intend to question Jin Jing or netizens' efforts to elevate Jin Jing as a national hero can easily trigger fierce resistance.

4.2. Defending Jin Jing's heroism

Although pro-Jin Jing comments were dominant throughout the online discussion, and space for challenging voices was limited, there were still a few discussants who succeeded in expressing different views. They ques-

tioned netizens' excessive praise of Jin Jing, and argued that the online hype of Jin Jing's nationalist deeds should be cooled down, because they believed that Jin Jing only did something that anyone else would do. Most netizens, however, did not seem to be open to different opinions, and their tolerance of opposition was considerably low. The following series of posts provides examples that explain the intensity of attacks that a post challenging Jin Jing's heroic status could evoke:

(I) did not pay much attention to this incident, just feel that the hype of this small thing has made (me) a bit sick. Not until I had a look at the picture did I realize that she was just embracing an extinct torch. Was that torch very expensive? What would happen if the torch were snatched away? Was she just driven by her instinct? Look at the omnipresent publicity (about the incident), as if (she) suddenly becomes a national hero, is that too exaggerated? (by Forum User G)

How do you deserve to be a Chinese? You are bringing shame to the motherland!! (by Forum User H)

Her instinctive reaction was to protect national pride, what about you? Your fucking instinct is to squirt shit out of your mouth. What the fuck is flowing in your vessels? Is that urine? If I know you, I must open your shitty head to see what kind of fucking rubbish is used to make you as such? (by Forum User J)

The three above posts feature the opposing voice of Forum User G and the fierce attacks s/he received as exemplified by Forum Users H and J's replies. Although voices that challenge Jin Jing's heroic status are limited in number, the small number of these different opinions does provide an opportunity to understand how a discussant could articulate opposition in a space where certain voices already dominated. On the other hand, Forum User G's post was one of the few challenging posts that attracted significant resistance, and the replies to this post also enabled me to assess how netizens attempted to secure their nationalist stance through defending Jin Jing's heroic status. By looking at Forum User G's comment, it is not surprising to understand the attacks s/he received. First of all, Forum User G thinks that Jin Jing just did "a small thing". Secondly, s/he does not share the view held by many forum users that the torch was an epitome of China's pride, and his/her indifference to the torch is evidenced by the questions s/he poses: "Was that torch very expensive?" and "What would happen if the torch were snatched away?". Thirdly, s/he denies the greatness of Jin Jing's action by insinuating that Jin Jing's action in protecting the torch was only an instinctive reaction

and should not be excessively publicized. This is the point actually raised by some other netizens, who argued that it is a natural instinct for someone to turn and protect the thing s/he is holding if someone suddenly tries to grab it. Forum User G's comment is provocative in the sense that s/he not only denies Jin Jing's heroic deeds, but also criticizes people's enthusiasm for identifying her as a national hero.

As said earlier, Jin Jing has been transformed through massive online publicity into a national hero, and identification with her has become an effective way of asserting one's nationalist identity. Jin Jing's status as a nationalist hero needs to be defended, primarily because the netizens' identification with her as a means of declaring their nationalist identity can only make sense when Jin Jing's role as a national hero remains unchallenged. She is embraced by netizens as a nationalist symbol and, by identifying with her, netizens practise their nationalist identity and express their nationalist stance. Since Jin Jing did not regard herself as a hero, and her status as a national hero was largely bestowed by netizens, questioning Jin Jing's heroic status is actually questioning netizens' collective actions of creating and worshipping her as a hero. From this perspective, when netizens' nationalist credentials are determined by the discursive efforts they make to associate with Jin Jing, comments that challenge her supposedly heroic status are considered threatening, because netizens know that the collapse of Jin Jing as a national hero, if it happens, means the collapse of a form of nationalist identification that they have created. That is to say, the collapse can not only make their passion for identifying with Jin Jing irrelevant and meaningless; but, as a nationalist symbol to which netizens attach so many nationalist emotions and hopes, the collapse can also result in a crisis of nationalist identification. As a result, it is not difficult to understand why the challenging voice of Forum User G can provoke such aggressive replies.

Since a large number of netizens believe that embracing Jin Jing as a national hero is a shared nationalist belief, determining who "we" are as Chinese, Forum User G's indifference to Jin Jing's nationalist deeds and criticism of netizens' hype of her protection of the Olympic torch certainly deviate from and undermine the nationalist norms established by the majority of other online discussants. A person's membership of a community is obtained not only through identification with a figure that people of the community accept as a hero, but also through the efforts of defending the hero when his/her status is questioned. As soon as Forum User G makes the comment, s/he receives replies with strong emotions, and becomes exposed to nationalist attacks. While netizens like Forum

Users H and J attack Forum User G, they are also trying to draw a sharp line between themselves and Forum User G, in order to stress that s/he is not a member of “us”. This sense of demarcation can be felt in Forum User H’s post, and his/her rejection of Forum User G as a member of “we” the Chinese is clear in the rhetorical question, “How do you deserve to be a Chinese?”. Contrary to the “we” who are concerned with the national pride and praising Jin Jing’s nationalist action in Forum User H’s view, what Forum User G says disqualifies him/her from being considered a Chinese.

Forum User J’s strong determination to defend Jin Jing’s heroic status can be sensed in his/her frequent use of offensive words towards Forum User G. Interestingly, the way that s/he attacks Forum User G pretty much resembles the way that many Chinese netizens attack their nationalist enemies. When China’s national pride is supposedly under foreign threat, Chinese nationalists usually spare no effort to tarnish the alleged enemy, and the more they enthusiastically defame the enemy, the more they feel nationalistic. From what s/he says in the post, Forum User J’s hostility to Forum User G is overt, and it is clear that s/he treats Forum User G more as a hateful enemy than as a fellow citizen with a different point of view. Forum User J’s response does not show any patience to elaborate on how far and on which point(s) s/he disagrees with Forum User G; instead, s/he targets his/her anger and linguistic violence directly at Forum User G’s personality, and insults him/her by associating him/her with “shit”, “urine” and “rubbish”. When praising, idolising and defending Jin Jing as a nationalist symbol has been established by an overwhelming number of forum users as a nationalist norm, they consider any acts that aim to challenge the norm as threatening, because questioning Jin Jing’s role as a nationalist hero is actually questioning their nationalist credentials. As linguistic violence is considered a means of fighting back the enemy that threatens the established nationalist idol and norm, using violence becomes not only legitimized but also a means of claiming one’s nationalist ideals. In the Chinese cyberspace, as soon as certain nationalist voices dominate, there is little room for uttering different views and, because of the fear of becoming a target of nationalist fury, many netizens may choose to play safe by either joining the collective celebration of the hero, or simply remaining silent.

5. FURTHER DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Through discursive analysis, this paper has provided some empirical findings about the ways in which the online creation and discussion of a hero can contribute to the building of a nation. From what has been explained in the paper, it can be argued that online Chinese nationalism is largely about the politics of defining who “we” are. The concept of “hero” plays a considerable role in the mobilization of Chinese nationalism, and the online discussions about Jin Jing and her alleged heroism mirror the processes of defining the “we” community. A person’s nationalist identity is claimed and reinforced by, on the one hand, identifying with a national hero who is believed to have protected “our” pride; and on the other hand, by defending the hero when s/he is under challenge. As a consequence, “we” is defined as a community that shares the same “hero” to love and worship.

More importantly, this paper also suggests an alternative perspective for understanding Chinese nationalism, because the traditional idea of nationalism as an élite-led and top-down manipulation is under challenge, especially in the age of the internet. As illustrated in this paper, netizens demonstrated enormous enthusiasm for establishing and defending a nationalist hero, and, by discursively framing and interpreting the notion of “hero”, netizens have taken on some independent roles in mobilizing and sustaining Chinese nationalism. In discussing the power struggle between state and popular actors over Chinese nationalist discourses, Callahan (2010, 25) points out that “while it is popular to see the state as the actor and the masses as the audience, here the actor is the audience, and the audience is the actor”. This is true in Jin Jing’s case, where popular actors took the lead in the creation of a nationalist hero, while the state was pushed to respond. The official media such as the *People’s Daily* (the leading mouthpiece of the CCP) joined the netizens’ chorus of celebrating Jin Jing’s heroism three days after the incident occurred on 7th April 2008. On 10th April, the *People’s Daily* published an editorial entitled, “The Disabled Girl Who Protected the Torch with Her Life”, and praised Jin Jing for protecting China’s national pride. However, this does not mean that the CCP has lost its control over nationalist discourses. If the CCP had really felt challenged by such an online development, it could have stopped it at the beginning before it loomed large, given that the CCP has maintained a firm control of the internet where such online nationalism might emerge and be disseminated (Ma 2018). The reason why the CCP allowed the discussion about Jin Jing to circulate

on the internet was because such online discourses in fact showed some significant alignment with the Party's nationalist lines: for example, netizens believed that the Beijing Olympic torch was an epitome of China's national pride and that Tibet was an inseparable part of China.

Latest studies have also found that the CCP has actually been successful in co-opting online popular nationalist discourses into its own propaganda régime and using them to promote nationalist ideals and agendas approved by the Party (Schneider 2016). Soon after Jin Jing emerged as a hero hailed by netizens, she was adopted into the official propaganda régime and was constantly invited by the Chinese mainstream media to tell audiences around the country of her heroic story in Paris. Despite being a hero created by Chinese netizens, Jin Jing also fits well with the official hero-making system. When compared with most officially-created heroes in the post-Mao era, Jin Jing shares some common features: for example, she is young, ordinary and determined, and she performed some small but good deeds which she believed were something that she ought to do. Like Zhang Haidi, Jin Jing's disabled body yields extra value for official propaganda, because she shows that even a disabled person can make her own contribution to the defence of China's national honour and pride. Lastly, unlike the official hero-making régime which involves complex and strict selection criteria (Wang 2011), Jin Jing's case tells us that in the internet era, someone can become a national hero as long as s/he has done something that attracts enough attention from netizens; and instead of being treated as a political campaign, the online glorification of Jin Jing looks more like a loud and collective celebration by netizens. As Qiu (2003, 14) echoes, Chinese netizens "care less about the grand narratives of modernity – be it rationality, liberalism, or 'socialist democracy' – than subjects that can be discussed and celebrated, generating instant gratification for mass consumption".

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