

RGC Ref. No.:

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**RESEARCH GRANTS COUNCIL
COMPETITIVE RESEARCH FUNDING SCHEMES FOR
THE LOCAL SELF-FINANCING DEGREE SECTOR**

FACULTY DEVELOPMENT SCHEME (FDS)

Completion Report

(for completed projects only)

Submission Deadlines: 1. Auditor's report with unspent balance, if any: within six months of the approved project completion date.
2. Completion report: within 12 months of the approved project completion date.

Part A: The Project and Investigator(s)

1. Project Title

**Cyber State-Society Relations in China: The Dynamics of Patriotism and
Nationalism on the Internet**

2. Investigator(s) and Academic Department(s) / Unit(s) Involved

Research Team	Name / Post	Unit / Department / Institution
Principal Investigator	Dr. Shiru WANG /Assistant Professor	Department of Social Science/The Hang Seng University of Hong Kong
Co-Investigator(s)	Dr. Kin Yat Gary TANG/Associate Professor;	Department of Social Science/The Hang Seng University of Hong Kong;
Others	Prof. Yuk Tai SIU/Professor	School of Communication/The Hang Seng University of Hong Kong

3. Project Duration

	Original	Revised	Date of RGC / Institution Approval <i>(must be quoted)</i>
Project Start Date	2020.01.01	-	
Project Completion Date	2022.12.31	2023.06.30	Approved by HSUHK on 23 July 2020

Duration (<i>in month</i>)	36	42	Approved by HSUHK on 23 July 2020
Deadline for Submission of Completion Report	2023.12.31	2024.06.30	Approved by HSUHK on 23 July 2020

- 4.4 Please attach photo(s) of acknowledgement of RGC-funded facilities / equipment.
N/A

Part B: The Final Report

5. Project Objectives

5.1 Objectives as per original application

1. Develop a dictionary of key terms and concepts in the discourses of patriotism and popular nationalism to facilitate relational and comparative analyses.
2. Compare the patriotist discourse on the state-controlled old media with that on the new media to illustrate the extent to which the Chinese state has modified its tactics of political indoctrination to adapt to the Internet.
3. Map out and explain the dynamic processes between patriotism and popular nationalism in cyberspace to explore the way in which the Internet has shaped the state and society relations in China.

5.2 Revised objectives

Date of approval from the RGC: N/A

Reasons for the change:

- 1.
- 2.
3.

5.3 Realisation of the objectives

(Maximum 1 page; please state how and to what extent the project objectives have been achieved; give reasons for under-achievements and outline attempts to overcome problems, if any)

1. To accomplish Objective 1, our research team has constructed a comprehensive dictionary of key terms and concepts utilized in nationalist discourse. This dictionary serves as a valuable resource for future discourse analyses. Our data collection process involved gathering digital texts related to nationalism from various Weibo accounts. These accounts encompassed a range of sources, including state-affiliated agents, private platform companies, and individual influencers. The collected digital texts provided a diverse and extensive dataset, covering numerous instances that exemplified nationalist sentiments. Examples included the violent engagement on the disputed territorial border between

China and India, the tension between China and the United States, and the publication of Fang Fang's Wuhan Diary. We also compiled Weibo posts that contain terms such as "Chinese nation" (中華民族) and "Chinese people" (中國人民) to conduct comparative analysis of nationalist narratives employed by state-affiliated accounts, private platform companies accounts, and individual accounts. In the meantime, we expanded our data collection efforts to include content from People's Daily, the core state traditional mass media outlet. By incorporating the official version of nationalist narratives from this source, our dictionary offers a comprehensive representation of the various perspectives of nationalist discourse.

2. To address Objective 2, we conducted a quantitative content analysis, comparing nationalist narratives from multiple sources: People's Daily (traditional mass media), most Weibo accounts of government agencies, private platform company, and individual influencers. The aim of this analysis is to examine the degree to which the discursive regime constructed by recent state's efforts is successful in aligning nationalist narratives across most popular social media platforms with the official narrative. Our research paper, entitled "*The Leak of the Discursive Regime in China: An Examination of Nationalist Narratives in Social Media*," has been completed. Before submission, we plan to make a few minor revisions. We intend to submit the paper for review to a reputable academic journal, such as China Quarterly.

By conducting this comparative analysis, we seek to shed light on the efficacy of the state's efforts in shaping and influencing nationalist narratives in the realm of social media. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between official discourse and popular sentiment in the context of nationalist narratives in China.

3. Objective 3 focuses on examining the influence of the internet, particularly social media, on the relationship between the Chinese state and society. Two research papers have been prepared to speak to this objective. Since 2013, the Chinese state has been gradually adapting to internet language and narratives for political persuasion. The state is actively engaging in intensive campaigns to systematically utilize the internet for political communication, aiming to sustain regime support and legitimacy.

One of the two papers focuses on the case of Fang Fang's Wuhan Lockdown Diary. Using the constructed dictionary, we conducted a discourse analysis of Weibo content that contain references to Fang Fang or her Lockdown Diary. The analysis intends to illustrate the patterns of nationalist narratives that emerged in response to regime criticism in the Diary, particularly in the context of its upcoming publication in the United States. This case serves as an example of popular nationalism discourse without direct state intervention.

This paper was initially submitted to the Journal of Contemporary China (JCC) for review in June 2023. After the first round of review, we received the revision request on August 12, 2023. Following the submission of the revised paper, unexpected delays occurred during the second round of review, resulting in a prolonged review process. The final decision on the paper was received from JCC on May 21, 2024. Please refer to the attached documents for detailed information. We will carefully revise the paper based on the reviewers' comments and promptly resubmit it for further consideration.

The second paper concentrates on the analysis of prevailing nationalist narratives over time on social media platforms, aiming to investigate the dissemination and resurgence of dominant nationalist discourse on the Chinese internet. The research intends to understand how the state influences public communication on the internet through their social media outlets against the backdrop of its intensified information control and participatory propaganda efforts.

By examining the evolution of nationalist narratives, the study seeks to understand the strategies employed by the state in shaping public opinion and discourse through online platforms. It aims to explore how these narratives are disseminated, reinforced, and mobilized to garner support and strengthen the state's influence over public communication channels.

Identifying the prevailing nationalist narratives entails conducting extensive comparisons of all the tokens (segmented parts in paragraphs) within approximately 2 million Weibo posts containing keywords such as "Chinese nation" and "Chinese people" over a period of seven years. Due to the sheer volume of data, this process requires several months to complete using our regular PCs. Moreover, we need to repeat these practices multiple times to accommodate different coding and data presentation strategies, as parameters and strategies are revised during the inductive analysis process.

Once the prevailing nationalist narratives have been identified, the next step involves specifying the diffusion trajectories of the dominant discourse for each year. This entails determining which types of social media outlets—whether state-controlled platforms, private companies, or social influencers—initiate, disseminate, diffuse, or revise the discourse. Such analysis involves a significant amount of coding work, and we are considering using Machine Learning techniques to assist this task. Currently, we have successfully identified the prevailing discourse for each year and are in the process of mapping out the diffusion paths. We expect to complete the paper's draft within several months.

5.4 Summary of objectives addressed to date

Objectives <i>(as per 5.1/5.2 above)</i>	Addressed <i>(please tick)</i>	Percentage Achieved <i>(please estimate)</i>
1. Develop a dictionary of key terms and concepts in the discourses of patriotism and popular nationalism to facilitate relational and comparative analyses.	√	100%
2. Compare the patriotist discourse on the state-controlled old media with that on the new media to illustrate the extent to	√	100%

which the Chinese state has modified its tactics of political indoctrination to adapt to the Internet.		
3. Map out and explain the dynamic processes between patriotism and popular nationalism in cyberspace to explore the way in which the Internet has shaped the state and society relations in China.	√	100%

6. Research Outcome

6.1 Major findings and research outcome

(Maximum 1 page; please make reference to Part C where necessary)

The research project illustrates how the state employs social media to engages in nationalist propaganda, exert information control, and directly influence public communication. It investigates the extent to which the state successfully aligns public discourse on the web with official narratives.

The paper entitled *Weibo Criticism of an ‘Enemy Within’: Rhetorical Tactics and Discourses of Voluntary Propaganda in China during the COVID-19 Pandemic* [Research Output 1] illustrates the effect of participatory propaganda by the state via social media. This study examines the rhetorical tactics and discourses of participatory propaganda in response to Fang Fang’s Wuhan Lockdown Diary during the COVID-19 pandemic in China.

Analysis of Weibo data reveals the use of negative labeling and grouping tactics to discredit Fang Fang as a “public intellectual” and a traitor in the anti-‘public intellectual’ discourse. Additionally, the positive mobilization tactic was employed through moral teaching in the ‘positive energy’ discourse to portray her as negative energy in contrast to the prototype of a good citizen. The analysis highlights the adept use of rhetorical tools by grassroots voluntary propagandists in adapting their discourses to specific events. However, it also exposes loopholes in voluntary propaganda, where ambiguous discourses may legitimize criticism of the regime and uphold the liberal sphere in cyberspace. This study sheds light on the practices of voluntary propaganda on social media and their implications for political communication in contemporary China.

The paper entitled *The Leak of the Discursive Regime in China: An Examination of Nationalist Narratives in Social Media* [Research Output 2] examines the actual discursive outcomes resulting from nationalist propaganda and information control implemented by the state. While previous scholarly studies have primarily concentrated on understanding the mechanisms through which information control strategies and propaganda approaches sustain political support and legitimacy in China’s online landscape, there has been relatively limited research exploring the tangible discursive effects of these strategies. This paper aims to address this research gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of the state’s efforts in constructing a discursive regime. It conducts a comparative analysis of the nationalist narratives pertaining to the “Chinese nation” on most popular social media platforms, including those operated by the government, private companies, and individual influencers. These narratives will be contrasted with the official version disseminated through traditional state media channels. The study seeks to investigate the power and efficacy of the discursive regime established through the state’s information control and propaganda efforts over the internet. Especially, it examines whether this regime is capable of effectively preventing significant deviations from the official narrative. The findings of this research indicate that while the discursive regime is effective in guiding popular nationalist discourse on social media, particularly on the platforms of the government and private companies, it does not fully suppress the diverse expressions found on individual influencers’ social media accounts, even in the context of nationalist discussions.

The paper entitled *Centralization of the Discursive Regime: State Dominance in Nationalist Communication on Social Media* [Research Output 3] particularly investigates the prevailing nationalist narratives and how these narratives are diffused on social media. The research employs an innovative method that involves comparing text segments between each pair of paragraphs within the dataset and calculating the similarity rates. This allows for the identification of the most prevalent paragraphs that exhibit the highest average similarity rates with all other paragraphs for each year over the period between 2017 and 2023, which was characterized by intensified information control and nationalist participatory propaganda.

Next, the study maps out the diffusion trajectories of these prevailing nationalist narratives in each year to examine how the nationalist discourse is generated and spread. Findings indicate that the most prominent nationalist narratives are often created by core state mass media outlets such as CCTV news and People's Daily. Individual netizens and state-affiliated social media promptly propagate these narratives within their respective networks through retweets or shares. Consequently, despite the perception that the internet levels the playing field for public communication, the framework of nationalist discourse remains hierarchical and centralized.

This research project encompasses the development of a comprehensive dictionary of key terms and concepts related to nationalist discourse, both in state traditional mass media and new social media platforms. It further compares nationalist narratives between state-controlled traditional media and emerging social media to illustrate the outcomes of the state's information control and nationalist propaganda efforts through social media channels. The findings demonstrate that the Chinese state's strategies for information control and participatory propaganda effectively align nationalist narratives on the Chinese internet with the official discourse. Additionally, this project focuses on analyzing the prevalent nationalist narratives and their diffusion trajectories, which further confirms the centralized nature of the discursive regime. However, it is worth noting that the discursive regime established on the internet is not all-encompassing, allowing room for critical or independent ideas to exist within cyberspace. Despite the effectiveness of the state's approaches, there are still spaces where alternative viewpoints can emerge.

In summary, this research project contributes by providing a comprehensive understanding of the nationalist discourse, its diffusion patterns, and the centralized nature of the discursive regime in the context of China's internet landscape.

6.2 Potential for further development of the research and the proposed course of action (Maximum half a page)

This research project presents the discursive outcomes and manifestations of the Chinese state's innovative information control and propaganda approaches via social media, with a specific focus on nationalist discourse and narratives. For the next step of the research, I plan to study the discourse related to political persuasion in other sectors. For instance, some colleagues and I have started analyzing policy persuasion patterns on state-owned or affiliated social media platforms since May 2024. Our main focus is to explore how the state advocates for science and technology policies on social media and whether it relies on evidence-based or emotion-based persuasion and advocacy. Furthermore, I intend to investigate the institutional framework established for Chinese government's new "Digital China" strategy (數字中國建設), which was published in 2023. I will also the concept of "digital government all in one" (數字政府一體化) that emerged in 2024. Lastly, I plan to conduct a survey experiment to examine the extent to which positive and participatory propaganda approaches contribute to the level of regime support and legitimacy. This survey will help us understand the causal mechanism in which the state efforts influence public perceptions and acceptance of the regime.

7. Layman's Summary

(Describe in layman's language the nature, significance and value of the research project, in no more than 200 words)

This research project encompasses the development of a comprehensive dictionary of key terms and concepts related to nationalist discourse, both in state traditional mass media and new social media platforms. It further compares nationalist narratives between state-controlled traditional media and emerging social media to illustrate the outcomes of the state's information control and nationalist propaganda efforts through social media channels. The findings demonstrate that the Chinese state's

strategies for information control and participatory propaganda effectively align nationalist narratives on the Chinese internet with the official discourse. Additionally, this project focuses on analyzing the prevalent nationalist narratives and their diffusion trajectories, which further confirms the centralized nature of the discursive regime. However, it is worth noting that the discursive regime established on the internet is not all-encompassing, allowing room for critical or independent ideas to exist within cyberspace. Despite the effectiveness of the state's approaches, there are still spaces where alternative viewpoints can emerge.

Part C: Research Output**8. Peer-Reviewed Journal Publication(s) Arising Directly From This Research Project**

(Please attach a copy of the publication and/or the letter of acceptance if not yet submitted in the previous progress report(s). All listed publications must acknowledge RGC's funding support by quoting the specific grant reference.)

The Latest Status of Publications				Author(s) (denote the corresponding author with an asterisk*)	Title and Journal / Book (with the volume, pages and other necessary publishing details specified)	Submitted to RGC (indicate the year ending of the relevant progress report)	Attached to this Report (Yes or No)	Acknowledged the Support of RGC (Yes or No)	Accessible from the Institutional Repository (Yes or No)
Year of Publication	Year of Acceptance (For paper accepted but not yet published)	Under Review	Under Preparation (optional)						
		Yes		Shiru Wang*, Daan Wang, and Trevor Yuk Tai Siu	Weibo Criticism of an 'Enemy Within': Rhetorical Tactics and Discourses of Voluntary Propaganda in China during the COVID-19 Pandemic /Journal of Contemporary China	No	Yes (Annex I)	Yes	No
			Yes	Shiru Wang, Daan Wang*	The Leak of the Discursive Regime in China: An Examination of Nationalist Narratives in Social Media	No	Yes (Annex II)	Yes	No
			Yes	Shiru Wang*, Min Qiang Zhu	Centralization of the Discursive Regime: State Dominance in Nationalist Communication on Social Media	No	No	Yes	No

9. Recognized International Conference(s) In Which Paper(s) Related To This Research Project Was / Were Delivered

(Please attach a copy of each conference abstract)

Month / Year / Place	Title	Conference Name	Submitted to RGC <i>(indicate the year ending of the relevant progress report)</i>	Attached to this Report <i>(Yes or No)</i>	Acknowledged the Support of RGC <i>(Yes or No)</i>	Accessible from the Institutional Repository <i>(Yes or No)</i>
10-15 July 2021/Virtual Conference	Discourse Analysis of Cyber-Patriotism in China	26 th IPSA World Congress on New Nationalism in an Open World	No	Yes (Annex III)	Yes (oral acknowledge)	Yes
15-19 July 2023 Buenos Aires, Argentina	Effectiveness of Digital Propaganda in China: Comparing Nationalist Discourse on Social Media	27 th IPSA World Congress on Politics in the Age of Transboundary Crises: Vulnerability and Resilience	No	Yes (Annex IV)	Yes (oral acknowledge)	Yes

10. Whether Research Experience And New Knowledge Has Been Transferred / Has Contributed To Teaching And Learning

(Please elaborate)

The research experiences and findings have contributed to the development of a new module on Risk Governance in the Digital Era for our Master of Social Sciences in Public Policy and Risk Governance programme. The module emphasizes the significance of digital governance and the Digital China strategy as integral components.

Besides, in the upcoming academic year, I will be teaching a course on Government and Politics of China. The course will cover topics such as the information control strategies employed by the Chinese government, the development of the discursive regime on social media within the Chinese internet, the Digital China strategy, and the concept of "digital government all in one." These subjects will be incorporated into lectures and class discussions.

I am also planning to construct a new course on Digital China in the subsequent year. This course aims to explore how China adapts itself in public communications on the internet and social media platforms. It will examine how China proactively utilizes information technologies and other emerging technologies for governance, leveraging them as instruments to increase regime support, enhance legitimacy, and maintain political stability.

11. Student(s) Trained

(Please attach a copy of the title page of the thesis)

Name	Degree Registered for	Date of Registration	Date of Thesis Submission / Graduation
NA			

12. Other Impact

(e.g. award of patents or prizes, collaboration with other research institutions, technology transfer, teaching enhancement, etc.)

The understandings gained through this project have led to the development of new ideas, as mentioned in section 6.2 regarding the potential for further research. Presently, I am engaged in collaboration with a colleague from a local university to analyze discourse in policy persuasion.

Furthermore, I am actively seeking to establish collaborations with scholars from mainland universities for an upcoming project focused on the institutional structure of the Digital China strategies and the practices of digital governance all in one. I am particularly interested in collaborating with a scholar from a mainland university to conduct a survey experiment that investigates the impact and extent to which positive and participatory propaganda approaches contribute to the level of regime support and legitimacy.

13. Statistics on Research Outputs

	Peer-reviewed Journal Publications	Conference Papers	Scholarly Books, Monographs and Chapters	Patents Awarded	Other Research Outputs (please specify)	
No. of outputs arising directly from this research project	One paper is currently undergoing "revision and resubmission" for the second time before publication	2	NA	NA	Type	No.
					Papers under preparation	2

14. Public Access Of Completion Report

(Please specify the information, if any, that cannot be provided for public access and give the reasons.)

Information that Cannot Be Provided for Public Access	Reasons
Sections 5.3, 6.1, and 6.2	These sections are not intended for public access as they contain discussions regarding unpublished research and ongoing work.