Being Chinese Online: Discursive (Re)Production of Internet-Mediated Chinese National Identity

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Abstract : Much emphasis has been placed on the political dimension of digitised Chinese national(ist) discourses and their embodied national identities, which neglects other important dimensions constitutive of their discursive nature. A further investigation into how Chinese national(ist) discourses are daily (re)shaped online by diverse socio-political actors (especially ordinary users) is crucial, which can contribute to not only deeper understandings of Chinese national sentiments on China's Internet beyond the excessive focus on their passionate, political-charged facet but also richer insights into the socio-technical ecology of the contemporary Chinese digital (and physical) world. This research adopts an ethnographic methodology, by which 'fieldsites' are Sina Weibo and bilibili. The primary data collection method is virtual ethnographic observation on everyday national(ist) discussions on both platforms. If data obtained via observations do not suffice to answer research questions, in-depth online qualitative interviews with 'key actors' identified from those observations in discursively (re)producing Chinese national identity on each 'fieldsite' will be conducted, to complement data gathered through the first method. Critical discourse analysis is employed to analyse data. During the process of data coding, NVivo is utilised. From November 2021 to December 2022, 35 weeks' digital ethnographic observations have been conducted, with 35 sets of fieldnotes obtained. The strategy adopted for the initial stage of observations was keyword searching, which means typing into the search box on Sina Weibo and bilibili any keywords related to China as a nation and then observing the search results. Throughout 35 weeks' online ethnographic observations, six keywords have been employed on Sina Weibo and two keywords on bilibili. For 35 weeks' observations, textual content created by ordinary users have been concentrated much upon. Based on the fieldnotes of the first week's observations, multifarious national(ist) discourses on Sina Weibo and bilibili have been found, targeted both at national 'Others' and 'Us', both on the historical and real-world dimension, both aligning with and differing from or even conflicting with official discourses, both direct national(ist) expressions and articulations of sentiments in the name of presentation of national(ist) attachments but for other purposes. Second, Sina Weibo and bilibili users have agency in interpreting and deploying concrete national(ist) discourses despite the leading role played by the government and the two platforms in deciding on the basic framework of national expressions. Besides, there are also disputes and even quarrels between users in terms of explanations for concrete components of 'nation-ness' and (in)direct dissent to officially defined 'mainstream' discourses to some extent, though often expressed much more mundanely, discursively and playfully. Third, the (re)production process of national(ist) discourses on Sina Weibo and bilibili depends upon not only technical affordances and limitations of the two sites but also, to a larger degree, some established socio-political mechanisms and conventions in the offline China, e.g., the authorities' acquiescence of citizens' freedom in understanding and explaining concrete elements of national discourses while setting the basic framework of national narratives to the extent that citizens' own national(ist) expressions do not reach political bottom lines and develop into mobilising power to shake social stability.

Keywords : national identity, national(ist) discourse(s), everyday nationhood/nationalism, Chinese nationalism, digital nationalism

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