Amherst College

WeChat, China, Information and Communication Technologies, and Nationalism:

What Happens When Nationalism Goes Digital?

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HIST 419 On Nationalism

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In this world, a hundred streams faithfully return to the ocean, Serving as a measure for Chinese civilization.
The sediments of 5,000 years settle and give rise to the light of new thinking.
Incorruptibility is the nation's clear ripples. We unite at the centre of heaven and earth,
Our faith and devotion course the great distances of the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers.
Internet superpower! The net is where glorious dreams are.
Internet superpower! From the distant cosmos to the home that we long for.
Internet superpower! Tell the world the China Dream is lifting up the great China.
Internet superpower! Each of us represents our country to the world.
在这个世界百川忠诚寻归海洋
担当中华文明的丈量
五千年沉淀点亮创新思想
廉洁就是一个民族清澈荡漾
我们团结在天地中央
信仰奉献流淌万里黄河长江
网络强国 网在哪光荣梦想在哪
网络强国 从遥远的宇宙到思念的家
网络强国 告诉世界中国梦在崛起大中华
网络强国 一个我在世界代表着国家

"These lyrics are part of a song that the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC, Zhongguo renmin gongheguo guojia hulianwang xinxi bangongshi 中华人 民共和国国家互联网信息办公室) wrote to illustrate its understanding of digital media." (196-197)[1]

[1] Schneider, Florian. *China's Digital Nationalism*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

Case Study

Every time I come back home to Shanghai, I witness radical change. Shanghai Disneyland, a 5.5 billion dollar investment that took Bob Iger 17 years to wrangle into fruition, opened in 2016.[2] Bike-sharing was such a revolutionary shift in urban dwellers daily life that the Chine state media hails it as one of China 'four new inventions' – high-speed railway, online shopping, mobile payment and bike-sharing – after the "four great inventions" of ancient China, papermaking, gunpowder, printing and the compass.[3] The earliest companies launched in 2016 and by the start of 2017 Shanghai had 100,000+ bikes, making it the world's largest bike-share city at the time.[4]

What shocks me is not just the speed and scale of development, but its sheer physicality, of watching towering skyscrapers rising from wasteland to join the gods in the clouds over the span of a single year. Yet, the most impactful and memorable revelation I had was virtual. When I came back home the winter of 2016, I never felt so foreign, because of WeChat Pay.

First, some context. WeChat, an app developed by Chinese technology and gaming giant Tencent and first specializing in messaging and social media, released in 2011 and took off, reaching more than 1 billion monthly active users by 2018, making it one of the largest standalone mobile apps.[5] However, WeChat's killer feature that laid the foundation for its current status as a super app is WeChat Pay. There are no equivalents to the size and scope of WeChat Pay currently in other markets – the closest analogy I can think of is if Facebook had its own Venmo-like payments system and linked bank accounts and credit cards.

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[2] Yoon, Eunice. "Shanghai Disneyland Visitors Top 11 Million in Its First Year, Blowing past Expectations, CEO Iger Says." CNBC. June 16, 2017. Accessed December 21, 2018. https://www.cnbc.com/2017/06/16/shanghai-disneyland-visitors-top-11-million-in-its-first-year-blowing-past-expectations-ceo-iger-says.html.

[3] Jakhar, Pratik. "Who Really Came up with China's 'four New Inventions'?" BBC News. April 03, 2018. Accessed December 21, 2018. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-43406560.

[4] 网易. "摩拜上海运营单车达十万辆——上海成全球最大智能共享单车城市_网易新闻". news.163.com. Retrieved 21 December 2016.

[5] "WeChat now has over 1 billion active monthly users worldwide · TechNode". *TechNode*. 5 March 2018.

Even the way Tencent popularized WeChat Pay is marked by distinctive genius. During Chinese New Year, it is a tradition to gift red envelopes of cash to friends and family, instead of the frenzied and anxiety-laden gift shopping in Western cultures. WeChat Pay launched a feature in 2015 that allowed users to send each other virtual red envelopes, and this feature became an instant hit. More than 40 million red envelopes, totaling to more than 400 million RMB, was exchanged. When Tencent combined social media with your credit card, it was suddenly endowed with what Connie Chan, a partner at Andreseen Horowitz, termed "Kingmaking power where commerce (not just content!) is king."[6]

I already had a WeChat account – you're essentially not considered mainland Chinese if you don't – but to use WeChat Pay you had to link a Chinese bank account or credit card. It wasn't until January 2018 that you were allowed to link a foreign credit card.[7] While it was a distinctively humiliating experience to beg my parents for their credit cards after my newfound financial independence, it was the sudden exclusion from an entire technological ecosystem that prompted a rude awakening. I had always enjoyed the privileges of my status as a US citizen in Shanghai, frequenting the expatriate community but tiring of the awestruck admiration of my "American-accented English." Now, I was not a marginalized elite, but a marginalized underclass shut out of a payments system that granted you access to not only peer to peer payments but your electric bill, hospitals, convenience stores, vending machines, restaurants – the list is endless. You may think I'm exaggerating WeChat Pay's pervasiveness, but as recently as August 21, 2018, the South China Morning Post reported that the Chinese Central Bank was cracking down on merchants refusing to accept cash payment, stating that "The central bank had

[6] Chan, Connie, and Sonal Chokshi. "When One App Rules Them All: The Case of WeChat and Mobile in China." Andreessen Horowitz. December 09, 2018. Accessed December 21, 2018. https://a16z.com/2015/08/06/wechat-china-mobile-first/.

[7] *"You Can Now Add a Foreign Credit Card on WeChat". 25 January 2018.*

first taken aim at the issue in July, when it said in a public notice that some tourist attractions, restaurants and retailers had been refusing to collect cash and were requiring customers to pay via electronic payment services."[8] As the Wall Street Journal headlined on December 21, 2018, ***The Cashless Society Has Arrived— Only It's in China:*** *Mobile payments surge to $9 trillion a year, changing how people shop, borrow—even panhandle*.[9]

One of Anderson's three paradoxes of nationalism argues that "Nationalism is universal in that every individual belongs to a nation, yet each nation is supposedly completely distinct from every other nation."[10] What is distinctive about the Chinese case and my personal experience, is that contemporary Information and Communication Technologies seem to know no borders. Facebook, Google, Youtube – the list of American technology companies that have conquered the planet and achieved near universal status continues to grow. The only distinction between nations when it comes to certain internet platforms that I can identify is language. And yet China has managed to develop its own unique technological ecosystem by fiercely imposing its sovereignty on cyberspace, marking digital boundaries with "The Great Firewall of China," (another term that harkens back to past achievements of Chinese civilization).[11] And so here I was, a technology-addled millennial, suddenly cast aside from the warm – or stifling – digital embrace of the motherland and set adrift in the dark corners of cyberspace.

What gave this experience a distinctly national twist was not just the feeling of foreignness, but the strong nationalistic sentiment and content on WeChat and the Chinese

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[8] "Yuan Is Still King as China Central Bank Cracks down on Merchants Who Refuse Cash." South China Morning Post. August 21, 2018. Accessed December 22, 2018. https://www.scmp.com/business/companies/article/2160703/china-takes-action-against-merchants-who-refuse-cash-e-payment.

[9] Abkowitz, Alyssa. "The Cashless Society Has Arrived- Only It's in China." The Wall Street Journal. January 04, 2018. Accessed December 22, 2018. https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-mobile-payment-boom-changes-how-people-shop-borrow-even-panhandle-1515000570.

[10] Chan, Sewell (December 14, 2015). "Benedict Anderson, Scholar Who Saw Nations as 'Imagined,' Dies at 79". The New York Times. ISSN 0362-4331. Archived from the original on December 17, 2015. Retrieved December 15, 2015.

[11] Denyer, Simon (23 May 2016). "China's scary lesson to the world: Censoring the Internet works". The Washington Post. Retrieved 5 September 2017.

cybersphere in general. Xu Wu, an assistant professor of strategic media and public relations at Arizona State University, argues in his book *Chinese Cyber Nationalism: Evolution, Characteristics, and Implications: Evolution, Characteristics, and Implications* that Chinese Cyber Nationalism is "…certainly not the simple addition of the three separate concepts: Chinese, cyber sphere, and nationalism," defining it as a "…non-government sponsored ideology and movement that has originated, existed, and developed in China's online sphere over the past decade. (1994-present)" (155). [12] Many of the prominent cases of online nationalism Wu chronicles are before my time, including, as Wu argues: "Third, Chinese cyber nationalism was ignited and reinforced by a series of international events, including 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, 1998 Indonesia anti-Chinese riot, 1999 U.S. bombing of Chinese Embassy, 2000 Taiwan presidential election, 2001 U.S.-China spy plane collision, and 2005 nationwide anti-Japan demonstrations, to name a few. From a foreign policy perspective, Chinese cyber nationalism is not an abstract concept, but an influential force…" (3).[13]

Nationalism on the internet, however, is not unique, and has to be situated in the wider context of the crucial interaction between nationalism and communication technology. Anderson's defining work of the modernist school of nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, laid out the importance of communication technologies, arguing that "[T]he convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation" (46).[14] Gellner's equally monumental work, *Nations and Nationalism*, characterizes nationalism as "It [nationalism] means that generalized diffusion of a school-

[12] 155, Wu, Xu. Chinese cyber nationalism: Evolution, characteristics, and implications. Lexington Books, 2007.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso Books, 2006.

mediated, academy-supervised idiom, codified for the requirements of reasonably precise bureaucratic and technological communication"(57).[15] Thus nationalism and communication technologies are inextricably linked, and changes in one will inevitably lead to adaptation in the other. Further exploration of how scholars have identified and extricated these complex interactions will be explored in the Literature Review.

The interaction between nationalism and technology does not end there. Technology, as a force for modernity, can come to embody the national dream. As Robert Lawrence Kuhn published article in the NYTimes Opinion section, *Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream*, argues, ""Modernization" means China regaining its position as a world leader in science and technology as well as in economics and business; the resurgence of Chinese civilization, culture and military might; and China participating actively in all areas of human endeavor."[16] Thus it's no surprise that Chinese state media frequently imbues technological development with nationalistic fervor, as the previous examples of the 'four new inventions' and the 'The Great Firewall of China' demonstrate. This tie between nationalism and modernization was first broached by Gellner, as Eriksen summarizes, "…the theory presented nationalism as a compatible ideological companion to industrialisation, filling the voids of existential belonging and political legitimation left by the demise of feudalism and agrarian society" (4).[17] Furthermore, Gellner later realized how technological development had transformed our conceptions of modernity and nationalism, as Eriksen argues:

> "Yet, in one of his very last statements on nationalism, Gellner speaks of the 'de-territorialisation of nationalism', adding that the power of a nation now 'depends on its annual rate of growth . . . and not on how much of the map it manages to paint with its own colour' (Gellner 1997: 107)… But although he mentions the possibility that 'two or more TV networks [may be] equally accessible in the same ''land''' (ibid.: 108), Gellner

[15] Gellner, Ernest, and John Breuilly. Nations and nationalism. Vol. 1. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983.
[16] Kuhn, Robert Lawrence. "Opinion | Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream." The New York Times. October 19, 2018. Accessed December 22, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/05/opinion/global/xi-jinpings-chinese-dream.html.
[17] Eriksen, T. H. (2007), Nationalism and the Internet. Nations and Nationalism, 13: 1-17. doi:10.1111/j.1469-8129.2007.00273.x

> left it to others to work out the implications of these and other new communication technologies for nationalism" (3).[18]

A deeper examination of how nationalism scholars understand the ties between economic development, modernity, and nationalism will be further explored in the Literature Review.

To conclude, I have established two key claims: that nationalism and ICT are inextricably linked, and that the development of ICT is a core feature of modern nationalism. Given these claims, we can raise a few questions regarding China, WeChat, ICTs, and Nationalism. First, how does the state understand and govern China's digital ecosystem, and what forms of discourse and engagement does this encourage? Chinese media controls and censorship have been often characterized as totalitarian institutions aiming to indoctrinate the population with official propaganda, even in academic scholarship. Qinglian He, in *The Fog of Censorship: Media Control in China* argues that state media employees and bureaucrats are "…unapologetic spouters of lies."[19] However, as demonstrated by other scholars, such as Wu above, we cannot simply discard online nationalism as an artificial, state-enforced, top-down phenomenon. Second, once we establish the parameters of state, policy and ICT networks, how is nationalism, received, reproduced, and expressed amongst the populace, with a particular focus on horizontal, or peer-to-peer dynamics? As Eric Kaufmann argues in his paper *Complexity and Nationalism*, "Classic theories of nationalism, whether modernist or ethnosymbolist, emphasise the role of elites and spread of a common imagined community from centre to periphery. Recent work across a range of disciplines challenges this account by stressing the role of horizontal, peer-to-peer, dynamics alongside top- down flows" (6).[20]

Literature Review

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[18] Ibid.
[19] He, Qinglian (2008), The Fog of Censorship: Media Control in China. New York: Human Rights in China.
[20] Kaufmann, Eric. "Complexity and nationalism." *Nations and Nationalism* 23, no. 1 (2017): 6-25.

To examine how state and ICT mutually inform and interact, we need to first understand nationalism's drive for modernization. As Gellner argues, "Mankind is irreversibly committed to industrial society, and there- fore to a society whose productive system is based on cumulative science and technology" (39).[21] With this commitment to industrialize and modernize, Gellner then advances the inextricable link between industrialization and nationalism, arguing that "All this being so, the age of transition to industrialism was bound, according to our model, also to be an age of nationalism, a period of turbulent re-adjustment, in which either political boundaries, or cultural ones, or both, were being modified, so as to satisfy the new nationalist imperative which now, for the first time, was making itself felt" (40).[22]

This 'period of turbulent re-adjustment' was first experienced in the European and American context during their astronomical rise from technological and economic backwater to the pinnacle of global domination. The most turbulent re-adjustment, however, was to be experienced by the former colonies of the European and American hegemons.

As Westad notes, "From the mid-nineteenth century up to 1920 more than 450 million people in Africa and Asia came under direct colonial rule" (73).[23] These empires, granted newfound powers by modernization, were ravenous, as Westad notes, "While the capacity for expansion arose from the changes in technology, organization, and communication that took place in the nineteenth century, the motives varied from the search for markets and raw materials to religious zeal and national pride" (73).[24] However, as their grip on empire weakened, the

[21] Gellner
[22] Gellner
[23] Westad, Odd Arne. *The global Cold War: third world interventions and the making of our times*. Cambridge University Press, 2005.
[24] Ibid.

imperative to develop their vast backwaters was not lost on the colonial powers. As Cooper argues:

> "Britain, beginning in I940, and France in 1946 also promoted a new economic and social vision for their empires. "Development" became the new keyword. Both governments renounced the old colonial doctrine that each colony should pay for itself and proposed to spend metropolitan pounds and francs on communications, transportation, housing, schools, and health facilities, as well as industrial and agricultural projects. The goal was to raise the standard of living for colonized people, ease conditions for wage workers, and set the stage for long-term improvements in productivity. Development promised to make empires richer and more politically legitimate at the same time" (420).[25]

However, while empire-led development imbued the colonized with a belief in progress and development, it was primarily extractive and trampled over the dignity of the colonized. As Westad argues, "Many features of the colonial proto-state were to be found in the successor regimes, not least the predilection for big projects, mass mobilization, and the basic concept that continuous economic development is possible and desirable. But while the empires taught local elites to think big, they also left a legacy of warped, one-sided economies, rigid social stratification, and racism" (86).[26] The colonies, once granted independence through either force or concession and severed from the umbilical cord attaching them to their former imperial masters, were thus still dependent. As Cooper notes, "But the horizontal unity of third world nations did not replace vertical connections between the leaders of rich states with those of poor ones… Ex-colonial states sought foreign aid or military assistance against internal or external enemies… Poor countries had an immediate need for relations of clientage with rich ones, more so than with countries With the same incapacities they faced themselves" (427).[27]

As the empires crumbled under their own weight and two World Wars, the former imperial powers were loath to support their once precious colonial territories, leaving them high

[25] Burbank, Jane, and Frederick Cooper. Empires in world history: Power and the politics of difference. Princeton University Press, 2010.
[26] Westad
[27] Cooper

and dry. And as the world became increasingly polarized between the American and Soviet camps, so too did the former colonies radicalize, as Westad notes, "A key reason for the radicalization of many Third World regimes in the 1960s was their leaders' discovery of the immense poverty in which most of their countrymen lived" (92).[28] Third world countries now had new masters to align themselves with and beg for assistance, especially with regards to scientific and technological development, as movingly articulated by Nehru, "For many years past we have looked with very great interest toward the Soviet Union for many reasons… Inevitably, when we want to produce great changes in India, we want to learn from your example... Among the many things that you have done is this tremendous flowering of science in the Soviet Union and the application of that science to the betterment of human beings who live in those vast territories" (93).[29]

China faced the same imperative to modernize and close the vast gap between its agrarian society and the modern superpowers, while also trying to maintain its independence and not fall subservient to the reigning hegemons. And China can be said to be uniquely successful in fighting with blood, sweat, and tears through this conundrum. As Cooper argues, "Neither capitalist, anticommunist western powers nor the Soviet Union could get their way in China, with its long-lasting imperial tradition and commercial, agricultural, and political resources… By the end of the twentieth century, this long-lived empire was reversing the geographies of power that had held for two hundred years, becoming the creditor of the United States, the purchaser of raw materials in the west's ex-colonies, a consumer of Europe's luxuries." (440 - 442).[30]

[28] Westad
[29] Westad
[30] Cooper

A central component of the struggle to modernize, as repeatedly identified in the above narrative, is technological development, as noted, "In the European colonies, technology was at once the means by which the colony was established and the pathway to its dismantling"(39).[31] As Adria details, "A complex of literacy, a universal postal system, railways, and government subsidies for the postal delivery of newspapers contributed to this conquest (Osborne and Pike 2004). Colonized peoples were conquered through the new economic and cultural technologies of train and telegraph, rather than the older methods of fortress and firepower" (40).[32] Thus, as technology developed, soon nations came to further identify with their technologies. Adria notes how technology may help support elite-led national cohesion, arguing that "Technology may bolster and support the authority of elites in the promotion of nationalism, as aeronautical technology did for the Indonesian nationalist government of the 1970s and 1980s (Amir 2004)" (35).[33] This identification with technology, however, might even be so extreme as to prevent national progress, as Adria identifies "The optical telegraph illustrates how technology becomes associated with national cohesiveness in ways that involve changes to economic and social structures. By the 1850s, France had joined other nations in adopting the electrical telegraph, but for several years France continued to use the older technology while other countries had adopted the new one" (37).[34]

Edgerton largely concurs with Adria in emphasizing the prominence of technological nationalism and its emphasis on modernization, but also provides a critique of Western fear-mongering. Edgerton traces how technological nationalism was highly prevalent amongst modernizing western powers, whether it be the British proclaiming "had a body of youth fitted

[31] Adria, Marco. *Technology and nationalism*. McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP, 2010.
[32] Ibid
[33] Ibid
[34] Ibid

by temperament for the work of the air..” to national museums of science and technology, such as “…the Science Museum in London, the Deutsches Museum in Munich, and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington”(3).[35] With this evidence, he critiques how “…the term techno-nationalism is used by Western analysts primarily in relation to Japan and now China, to describe a potentially, perhaps actually, dangerous thing”(2).[36] A general conclusion he draws is that “Modern nationalism was thus vital to modernity, not as a way of escaping from a globalized cosmopolitan modern world, but a means of participating in it while retaining one’s dignity, and indeed creating one’s capacity to participate”(2).[37]

For a more precise definition of ‘technological nationalism’, we turn to Maurice Charland, who allegedly coined the term first, and which he defines as “…rhetoric of technological nationalism in anglophone Canada which ascribes to technology the capacity to create a nation by enhancing communication”(197).[38] As Charland argues, this rhetoric “…undergirds Canada's official ideology and guides the formulation of federal government policy, at least in the area of broadcasting: the CBC is legitimated in political discourse by the CPR. Furthermore, I will argue that the rhetoric of technological nationalism is insidious, for it ties a Canadian identity, not to its people, but to their mediation through technology” (197).[39]

Thus, it should be no surprise China has actively fostered domestic technologies as a key component of national development by blocking or restricting foreign competition and providing ample governmental support such as subsidies and strategic investments. As The Economist reports, “China is unique in the breadth and heft of its industrial policy. For years the

[35] Edgerton, David EH. "The contradictions of techno-nationalism and techno-globalism: A historical perspective." *New Global Studies* 1, no. 1 (2007).
[36] Ibid
[37] Ibid
[38] Charland, Maurice. "Technological nationalism." *CTheory* 10, no. 1-2 (1986): 196-220.
[39] Ibid.

government concentrated on modernising what it classified as nine traditional industries such as shipbuilding, steelmaking and petrochemical production. In 2010 seven new strategic industries, from alternative energy to biotechnology, also became targets. And two years ago it announced its "Made in China 2025" scheme, specifying ten sectors, including aerospace, new materials and agricultural equipment, which are now at the heart of its planning."[40]

Next, to examine the interaction between nationalism and communication technologies, and how that impacts popular reception, reproduction, and expression of nationalism, we need to place the internet and new social networking technologies in the context of historical developments.

The advent of the internet led to widespread optimism and starry-eyed predictions by leading technologists such as Nicholas Negroponte, a World Wide Web (WWW) founder at the MIT Media lab, who declared "the role of the nation-state will change dramatically and there will be no more room of nationalism than there is for smallpox" (237).[41] Habermas, a renowned German philosopher who created the term 'public sphere' when his first major work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, was published in 1962, argued that digital media would allow for the creation of a "post-national constellation."[42][43]

However, as ICTs have advanced and expanded, we have still not seen a post-national turn in human society, and nations and nationalism seem to be rising to fearful heights under popular demagogues such as Trump. How have scholars addressed this contradiction? Is the internet the bane of nationalism, or is it adding fuel to the fire?

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[40] "China Sets Its Sights on Dominating Sunrise Industries." The Economist. September 23, 2017. Accessed December 22, 2018. https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2017/09/23/china-sets-its-sights-on-dominating-sunrise-industries.
[41] Negroponte, N. Being Digital. Vintage Series. Vintage Books, 1995. https://books.google.com/books?id=LcvR9WHvXmAC.
[42] Habermas, Jürgen (1962/1990), Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit—Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerliche Gesellschaft (The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society). Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.
[43] Habermas, Jürgen (2001), The Postnational Constellation. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

One answer comes from *Technology and Nationalism* by Marco Adria, who is a Professor of Communication at the University of Alberta. Adria refines the modernist school of thought on nationalism by arguing that it fails to include the contestation of social identities and the role of local actors. By addressing questions such as the pathways for the nationalizing state and why nationalism succeeds in certain contexts but not others, Adria demonstrates how Canadian policy and discourse on technology shaped social experiences in regional and local contexts. A conclusion he draws is that the internet and other communication technologies enabled regional and local communities to have an equal role in crafting a national identity. Beyond his own research and conclusions, Adria also offers an important overview of nationalism from the perspective of communication studies.

Adria offers a unique twist on Gellner, placing him within a long tradition of 'medium theorists' who joined media into the broader category of technology, such as "…Innis (1951), Marshall McLuhan (1964), and, more recently, Ronald Deibert (1997)." (Aria, 8) Aria argues that "Ernest Gellner (1983) draws from Innis the fateful insight that media create an environment in which the linguistic idiom of that environment is a required condition of participation in it." (Aria, 8) Or, as Ernest Gellner puts it, "The most important and persistent message is generated by the medium itself, by the role which such media have acquired in modern life. That core message is that the language and style of the transmissions is important, that only he who can understand them, or can acquire such comprehension, is included in a moral and economic community, and that he who does not and cannot is excluded." (Gellner, 127)

Adria also offers a critique of Deutsch's characterization of the relation between technology and nationalism. As he notes, "The earliest study of the relationship between technology and nationalism was that of the US sociologist Karl Deutsch (1966), who argued that

communications technologies (the printing press, newspaper, telegraph, radio, television) supported the establishment of nationalist movements by allowing for the convenient and frequent exchange of ideas within a geographical area" (41).[44] Outlining Deutsch's argument that before the expansion of the printing press and other communication technologies, "…cultural sharing occurred only in small groups"(41).[45] He finally critiques Deutsch, however, for "…unlike Innis, Deutsch did not give attention to differences among technologies and their varying capacities for social structuring…" (42).[46]

Finally, Adria, building on his critique of Deutsch, argues for the internet's distinctive impact on nationalism relative to other media, stating "Also in common with older media, the internet's appearance represents a break with the effects of previous media. The internet's social meaning in connection to nationalism is related to its capacity to connect the user at once to the culture of the local and the global, as well as to those of the regional and the national" (156)[47]

Another key scholar of the intersection between the internet and nationalism is Eriksen, who was noted by Ozkirmli in *Theories of Nationalism* as a key example in the opening of nationalism to new epistemological perspectives (218).[48] Eriksen approaches the relation between nationalism and internet by examining how new diasporic or virtual nationalisms that are mediated by the Internet extend or contradict Gellner's theory of nationalism, which due to its empirical observations of 19th century nationalisms did not consider the rise of new information and communication technologies. He characterizes the current era as marked by increased mobility and migration in conjunction with revolutionary new information technology.

[44] Adria
[45] Adria
[46] Adria
[47] Adria
[48] Ozkirimli, Umut. *Theories of nationalism: A critical introduction*. Palgrave, 2017.

As part of a historical overview, he notes that many invoked the cliched notion of McLuhan's *global village* as the ultimate end of how the "de-territorialized, supra-national character of the Internet would contribute to the fragmentation of populations and the breakdown of stable national identities" (6).[49] Eriksen argues that if nationalism submerged many small differences between groups with few but large differences, then the internet would help foster a world where "heterogeneity is the norm and monoculturalism the exception" (6).[50] However, he also shows how "…recent research on Internet use is that this technology often strengthens rather than weakens national identities, and that it can be exceptionally efficient in reproducing such identities across vast distances, uniting dispersed populations in virtual communities" (7).[51] What might have been forgotten or left behind in past generations with poor communications technologies that could not close the vast distances between diasporic communities can now be reproduced instantly and effortlessly. Eriksen traces the evolution of ICTs on diasporic communities, from how the increasing availability of the telephone fostered interpersonal communication, to new media on the Internet that moved from the micro to the macro. Eriksen notes that "The content may be rich and multifaceted, ranging from cool, factual news to personal confessions and engaged political statements" (7).[52]

Eriksen then attempts to differentiate what he terms as 'virtual nations' from traditional territorial nationalism. Eriksen first notes that internet communities are particularly interested in the outside word's perception of itself, arguing that "A main objective for most of the nationalist websites I have visited is to make the plight, the virtues or the beauties of this or that nation known to members of the 'global village'" (15).[53] Another key difference is with internet

[49] Eriksen
[50] Eriksen
[51] Eriksen
[52] Eriksen
[53] Eriksen

nationalisms' relationship to their home country, as "Some minorities clearly envision going back to an improved, or newly independent nation; others accept that they have no home other than the diaspora" (15).[54] He then argues for its inherent instability, concluding that unlike the Gellnerian model nation-state that is both territorial and bounded, the virtual nation is inherently unstable.

The most recent and relevant work is by Florian Schneider, a senior lecturer at the University of Leiden, and managing editor of the academic journal 'Asiascape: Digital Asia,' an interdisciplinary journal that draws from research in "…the area studies, arts, communication and media studies, information and computer sciences, and social sciences," and focuses on the impact of digital media in Asia. Schneider published *China's Digital Nationalism* in 2018, offering a critical lens of technology and nationalism that he then applies to the China case.

Schneider first criticizes many approaches to technology and nationalism. Drawing from Lewis Mumford, an American historian, sociologist, and philosopher of technology, who argued that the human being is "pre-eminently a mind-making, self-mastering, and self-designing animal," (9)[55] Schneider argues we need to move beyond considering technology to be just physical applications like the stone axe or airplane, to the ways humans create meaning together. Furthermore, Schneider also criticizes overly deterministic views of technology, arguing that "Such perspectives frequently rely on problematic understandings of human psychology and the brain, a conservative view of culture and change, and an often blatant disregard of empirical evidence" (29).[56] He concurs with scholars of nationalism such as Michael Billig who argued that this was the "…error of describing how things happen in the social world without

[54] Eriksen
[55] Schneider, Florian. *China's Digital Nationalism*. Oxford University Press, 2018.
[56] Schneider

mentioning how people might make them happen, or, indeed, who the people are who make them happen" (142)[57] The historian of technology Melvin Kranzberg first law of technology is that "Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral" (545).[58] Instead, technology is conditional. Schneider thus argues that "How technologies work is the outcome of design choices, socio-political and economic conditions, and psychological processes, and, in this sense, a knife is no different from, for instance, nations and their states" (31).[59]

Schneider then turns to address the mechanisms through which nationalism and communications technologies intersect. Similarly to Gellner, he argues that members of a community need a common frame of reference. Importantly, he rebuts critiques of Anderson that "…talk of 'imagination' reduces the nation and other large communities to a set of immaterial, symbolic interactions and cognitive processes, thereby denying that the politics of nations are demonstrably grounded in real institutions, material production processes, and lived experiences" (44).[60] Instead, he argues that Anderson was trying to hone in on the methods, as he stated, "All communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps in even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (6).[61] Similarly, just as Anderson aimed to "..combine a kind of historical materialism with what later on came to called discourse analysis…" (227).[62] Schneider aims to bring in advances in communications, media studies and psychology. He ultimately concludes that even though elites with control of communication technology have a strong position to shape national sentiment, nationalism is not indoctrination. Instead,

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[57] Schneider
[58] Kranzberg, Melvin. "Technology and History: "Kranzberg's Laws"." *Technology and Culture* 27, no. 3 (1986): 544-60. doi:10.2307/3105385.
[59] Schneider
[60] Schneider
[61] Anderson
[62] Anderson

nationalism's success comes from psychological and social features of humans, and modern communication technologies directly target and exploit these social features.

Preliminary Answer

Schneider's work is I believe most relevant and directly applicable to the Chinese context. Before proceeding to directly answer the questions raised in the case study, I want to first establish two of Schneider's innovative and constructive answers regarding nationalism and ICTs.

First, he argues that nationalism, the state, and other political concepts need to be understood within the framework of technologies. He defines technology here broadly, as "…any systematic, practical application of human knowledge," (27) [63] rather than the dictionary definition of "the application of scientific knowledge to the practical aims of human life,'" (26)[64] which he argues misplaces the emphasis on the process in which knowledge was created, not on the application of knowledge. Consequently, he believes that nationalism should be "…treated as technologies in their own right. They are designed by people, in specific socio- historical contexts, to solve perceived problems of their time, for instance how to assure large-scale economic production and political organization. As with any technology, coming up with such solutions is 'path dependent', meaning that the perceived problems as well as their solutions are grounded in specific socio-historical condition" (7).[65]

Second, Schneider argues that we should bring in concepts from network science, a recent field which draws on methods from mathematics, physics, computer science, statistics, and sociology. Schneider argues that we should treat nations as networks, arguing that "The idea

[63] Schneider
[64] Schneider
[65] Schneider

of the network is itself a metaphor, but I believe it is a useful one that draws much needed attention to the features of complex communities, for instance what roles real or potential network linkages play in such communities, how the nature of power changes when people and things are networked, and how important the architecture of a network is for shaping the behavior of its members" (7).[66]

Critically, understanding nations as networks force recognition of the complexity of human communities. Schneider argues that "…nationalism is an emergent property of communication networks. It is the outcome of complex interactions that are bound by the network, but that ultimately construct community discourses and sentiments outside of any single actor's direct control" (7).[67]

Schneider's treatment is, I believe, an application of Kaufmann's paper *Complexity and Nationalism*, which argues that "…complexity theory – the notion the complex social phenomena may emerge from seemingly uncoordinated individual acts – can enhance our understanding of national identity, nationalism, and ethnic conflict" (6).[68] Kaufmann argues that in the nationalism literature, the established modernist-ethnosymbolist, or constructivist-perennialist theoretical axis is complicated by a vertical ('top-down') and horizontal ('bottom-up') dimensions, and that the 'horizontal' process of nationalism is poorly understood. Kaufmann traces how thinkers such as Hobsbawm noted these new axes of exploration: "If I have a major criticism of Gellner's work it is that his preferred perspective of modernization from above, makes it difficult to pay adequate attention to the view from below.... Official ideologies of states and movements are not guides to what is in the minds of even the most loyal

[66] Schneider
[67] Schneider
[68] Kaufmann

citizens or supporters... national identification and what it is believed to imply, can change and shift in time."[69] Kaufmann argues that his approach to complexity and nationalism is distinct because it reframes 'bottom-up' critiques of nationalism in the framework of Complexity, identifying four key aspects: Emergence, or "the idea that a complex system is not controlled from a central node but instead emerges from the interaction of interdependent parts on the basis of a small number of coordinating rules," Feedback loops, Threshold Effects or 'Tipping Points', where small changes can lead to large impacts, and Distributed Information, or the 'wisdom of the crowds'.[70]

Thus, Schneider argues that if we are to understand Chinese nationalism and ICT, we need to consider nationalism and government as technologies, and we need to understand nationalism from the perspective of networks. With these claims established, I now move on to provide a preliminary answer to the questions raised in my case study.

First, to answer how the Chinese state, policy, and digital systems interact, we need to understand politics "…not so much as the processes of either democratic or authoritarian systems, but rather as processes of combining egalitarian and hierarchical governing technologies"(198).[71] By characterizing certain regimes as authoritarian, we miss how such regimes "…also include meaningful consultation and participation (Salmenkari 2006; Teets 2013). Political systems, regardless of their make-up, can only be effective if they are able to justify themselves to their subjects; that is, if they are able to legitimate themselves."[72] Legitimacy in China is not simply bought by economic growth, but also because local and regional governments are able to identify and respond to grievances on the ground. Furthermore,

[69] Hobsbawm, E. J. 1990. Nations and Nationalism since 1780. Programme, Myth, Reality. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[70] Kaufmann
[71] Schneider
[72] Schneider

we cannot simply view democracy as a checklist, such that if a nation has competing political parties, human rights, or an independent press it is suddenly labeled as 'democratic' and seen as a beacon of liberalism and freedom. Instead, as Schneider argues, we should characterize nation-states as drawing from "…a variety of governing technologies, or what Mumford (1964) has called democratic and authoritarian technics. Democratic technics are those mechanisms that emphasize egalitarian participation and ensure consensus-building, whereas authoritarian technics emphasize centralization of power and compliance with decisions" (201).[73]

Applying this concept in China reveals that state policy regarding media systems deploy both authoritarian and democratic technics, but "…places a particularly high premium on mechanisms that reinforce hierarchies, relegate discussion to carefully circumscribed spaces, and concentrate power in the hands of elite actors such as professional media workers, state administrators, and party cadres"(202).[74] However, western media's often near hysterical portrayal of Chinese censorship, especially with the rise of Xi Jinping, fails to understand the nuanced and strategic use of media controls in China. As the state media outlet The China Daily argues in the article *State media should play due role in properly guiding public opinion*:

> "Domestic media institutions that cannot adapt to the new situation continue reporting the world as they used to, which is different from the daily experiences of ordinary people. This has resulted in people's lack of trust in State-run media outlets… The Party has always held "the mass line", maintaining an open attitude toward people's opinions, as an essential principle of governance. That applies to its journalistic work, too. If the current split continues, the legitimacy of the Party might decline… even good guidance needs proper forms; sermons only make people tired. Besides, while the media needs to report the positive aspects of the society, it must also cover the negative side, too, so that social progress is possible."[75]

[73] Schneider
[74] Schneider
[75] 吴哲钰. "State Media Should Play Due Role in Properly Guiding Public Opinion." Pressure Leaves Millions of Youth Exposed to Suicide Risk - China - Chinadaily.com.cn. Accessed December 22, 2018. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2016-02/22/content_23580181.htm.

Instead of respecting Chinese calls for fair, even-handed reporting, Western media instead paints China's digital media system as a totalitarian monolith.[76]

To understand Chinese policy regarding digital media, we need to consider it own its own terms, and not from a neo-liberal, Western perspective. Chinese media policy is informed by a Confucian belief in elite actors serving as moral example and compass, blending directly "…with the Leninist concept of a vanguard whose task is to enlighten the people and help them to see their own interests."[77] China also advocates a significantly more paternalistic policy that many Western libertarians would dismiss out of disgust. However, China's historical experience, marked particularly by the recent Cultural Revolution, has embedded a belief in the leadership of a "…'blank slate' view of the mind, in which the human psyche is easily moulded by external influences, for better or worse… and this leads to an unapologetically moralist stance in which it is a core part of the party's mandate to educate, cultivate, and ultimately emancipate 'the masses'."(204).[78]

Furthermore, Western media and scholarship also overlook how the Chinese media system actively monitors and receives feedback from the public. Ever since Mao Zedong's policies of sending government cadres down to the countryside in order to be 'close with the masses', the CCP has emphasized understanding and addressing the 'average folks' (普通老百姓) concerns. While this may be perceived as authoritarian surveillance, the CCP "…also deploys democratic technics, for instance policy consultations with local citizens, hotlines for feedback on policy implementation, cadre assessments that include the opinions of local citizens,

[76] Phillips,Tom(2016,February28),'LovetheParty,ProtecttheParty:HowXiJinpingIsBringingChina's Media to Heel'. The Guardian, retrieved 1 September 2017 from http://www.theguardian.com/ world/2016/feb/28/absolute-loyalty-how-xi-jinping-is-bringing-chinas-media-to-heel.
[77] Zhao, Yuezhi (1998), Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
[78] Schneider

online polls about future policy choices, and so forth" (205)[79] Tsang argues that this system evolved as China's Leninist political system confronted the enormous social, political and economic challenges it faced after the 2009 financial crisis, terming it "Consultative Leninism."[80]

Next, we examine how the design of China's media system, specifically with regards to WeChat, impacts popular reception, reproduction, and express nationalistic sentiment. WeChat, though not a revolution in the dynamics between nationalism and ICT, changes media to become participatory, social, and personal. Whereas in previous systems, such as print and broadcasting, where only an elite had 'write permissions' and could publicize their opinions, now individual users have both 'read' and 'write' permissions. Furthermore, network architectures change usage patterns. As Schneider notes these new networks, "…encourage users to talk back at content, for instance in the comment sections of online posts and articles, or by discussing media and links in social networks. Through these new practices, media are meant to become a conversation" (169).[81] Finally, the business model of social networks encourage users to share and generate as much data as possible, as "To fully benefit from the affordances that such flows offer, users have to collaborate with the service providers by submitting their social graphs, geo-location, and user-generated content" (169).[82] This is especially true in the case of WeChat, as to access many features, including payments and group chats with more than a 100 people, you need to have real-name verification, directly tying your WeChat account with your identity.[83]

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[79] Schneider
[80] Steve Tsang (2009) Consultative Leninism: China's new political framework, Journal of Contemporary China, 18:62, 865-880, DOI: 10.1080/10670560903174705
[81] Schneider
[82] Schneider
[83] "WeChat Real Name Verification: How to Verify WeChat." WeChat Based Solutions & Services. Accessed December 22, 2018. https://chinachannel.co/wechat-real-name-verification/.

Moreover, today's media systems include both the new, populist model of social communication, and the legacies of mass media elitism and professionalism, where knowledge is carefully crafted and disseminated by specialists. This can be seen in WeChat, whereby individual users can not only chat individual and post to Moments, which is the equivalent of the Facebook Wall, but also subscribe to public accounts that publish professional content.

Some scholars argue that the design of WeChat civilizes discourse. Yu Guoming argues that WeChat creates 'overlapping friend circles' that allow for 'narrowcasting.'[84] He argues these strong ties tame extreme or indecorous nationalistic sentiment, stating "The sudden rise of Weixin is grounded in trust, responsibility, and the right to choose an alternative where people can promote their good taste and social upbringing."[85]

However, government surveillance and censorship is also pervasive. As Citizen Lab reports, keyword filtering is commonplace but only for users with accounts registered with mainland Chinese phone numbers. Furthermore, when a message is blocked, users do not even receive notification.[86] Analysis of public accounts found "Censored content included posts which contained outright falsehoods, tabloid gossip, and sensationalism—a number of which appear fairly harmless. This may be a reflection of the ongoing "anti-rumor campaign" sweeping Chinese social media," as well as "…sensitive keywords are found in a greater percentage of censored posts than normal (uncensored) posts. Political keywords and keywords related to corruption are particularly likely to be found in censored posts as compared to uncensored posts."[87]

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[84] Yu, Guoming (2014) (ed.), Zhongguo shehui yuqing niandu baogao (Annual Report on Public Opinion in China). Beijing: Remin University Press.
[85] Ibid.
[86] "One App, Two Systems: How WeChat Uses One Censorship Policy in China and Another Internationally." The Citizen Lab. August 29, 2018. Accessed December 22, 2018. https://citizenlab.ca/2016/11/wechat-china-censorship-one-app-two-systems/.
[87] "Tracking Censorship on WeChat's Public Accounts Platform." The Citizen Lab. July 08, 2017. Accessed December 22, 2018. https://citizenlab.ca/2015/07/tracking-censorship-on-wechat-public-accounts-platform/.

Thus, while WeChat may seem more genuine, certain values and sentiments are not allowed on the platform. Furthermore, the intimate and personal nature of WeChat connections promotes group conformity. As Schneider argues, "Such concerns can increase civility, but group conformity also implies adhering to the values that are programmed into the community network. If the dominant value of a community network is a sentiment like nationalism, then group pressures are likely to exacerbate such sentiments rather than providing spaces to critically question them"(193).[88]

Larger Research Project

First, the private nature of WeChat and limited access to the platform means the large-scale research regarding WeChat has unfortunately been limited. However, innovative methods such as bot accounts or automatic scraping has helped with collecting a representative sample of public accounts, but information regarding private chats is limited and anecdotal. A potential area of further research and investigation could be mega group-chats in WeChat, usually considered group chats with more than a 100 members. These mega group-chats usually form around a specific purpose – for example, I personally have seen chats focused on high school parents, college applications, subletting in New York, and more. While often task of demographic specific, some of these mega group-chats also include political discussion and some serve as networking devices. Further investigation of these mega group-chats could be fruitful.

Another potential extension would be to apply the same questions regarding state and ICT, and the populace and ICT, to other contexts. As David Graeber argues, modern liberal democracies also employ coercive measures on digital media:

[88] Schneider

> "The rarity with which the nightsticks actually appear just helps to make the violence harder to see. This in turn makes the effects of all these regulations—regulations that almost always assume that normal relations between individuals are mediated by the market, and that normal groups are organized by relations of hierarchy and command—seem to emanate not from the government's monopoly of the use of force, but from the largeness, solidity, and heaviness of the objects themselves."[89]

Recent events also demonstrate how other nations and regions are catching up on China's strict enforcement of sovereignty in the cybersphere. New EU laws regarding privacy, and multiple antitrust prosecutions attacking American technology companies such as Facebook and Google demonstrate the Europe is aiming to force American technology companies to adapt to local contexts, if not completely limiting their access altogether.[90]

The rise of extremist, racist, populist, and other forms of nationalism have also shocked contemporary observers. Facebook, Twitter, Google and other internet platforms have played indispensable roles in facilitating, amplifying, and disseminating these messages. As Schneider argues, "While these developments are indeed harrowing, even terrifying, they should not strike anyone as surprising… They are a direct consequence of what happens when the inherent contradictions of advanced capitalist societies rob people of their sense of personal agency and meaning, and when poorly designed communication technologies invite the losers of modernity into the comforting and safe spaces of imagined community" (232).[91] Applications of communication studies, digital literacy, and nationalism studies in these contexts would help bring to bear a inter-disciplinary effort to confront new contemporary challenges.

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[89] Graeber, David (2011a), Revolutions in Reverse: Essays on Politics, Violence, Art, and Imagination. New York: Autonomedia.

[90] Solon, Olivia. "How Europe's 'breakthrough' Privacy Law Takes on Facebook and Google." The Guardian. April 19, 2018. Accessed December 22, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/apr/19/gdpr-facebook-google-amazon-data-privacy-regulation.

[91] Schneider

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