China's Gaze Towards the West: Anti-*Baizuo* Discourse and Digital Nationalism During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is my original work and has been written entirely by me.

I have duly acknowledged all the sources of information which

have been used in this thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted, either partially or in full, for any degree

at any university previously.

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Abstract

With the rise in cross-border news consumption on social media in China, internet users have become increasingly exposed to current affairs in the West. With this exposure, Chinese netizens are increasingly engaged with, and able to construct their own opinions about, current affairs. Amid the ongoing tensions between China and the United States in particular, social media research provides a unique insight into grassroots perspectives and popular sentiments that differ from the more widely studied top-down discourses. In light of such advances, this thesis develops an understanding of how Chinese netizens utilise, engage with, and perceive the liberal West vis-à-vis the popular neologism, "*baizuo*" (白左). The term, meaning "white left", serves as a derogatory neologism that encapsulates both racial and political dimensions and is used to criticise Western liberals or "lefties" who align with left-leaning, politically correct, or "woke" perspectives.

Through conducting discourse analysis of over 330 Weibo posts containing the term, this study delves into the intricacies of anti-*baizuo* discourse by tracing the term's development during the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring its racial and cultural connotations, and uncovering its connection to broader Chinese nationalist ideologies. The findings reveal the fluid and context-specific nature of the term and how it serves as a tool for Chinese netizens to express nationalist and anti-Western sentiments, particularly in response to global geopolitical tensions and the pandemic. The study uncovers how "*baizuo*" is used not only to highlight and critique Western liberalism – underscoring perceived shortcomings in Western responses to global challenges – but also to express deeper frustrations with Western values and to bolster Chinese national pride and unity. By examining how such sentiments are constructed at the grassroots level by netizens, this research aims to further understandings of contemporary Chinese nationalism beyond the assumptions that it is solely state-driven.

Keywords *baizuo*, Western liberalism, COVID-19, pandemic, Chinese nationalism, digital nationalism, discourse analysis, netizen, Self-Other

1. Introduction

In December 2019, the first known case of COVID-19 was reported in the city of Wuhan in China. Within weeks, the coronavirus spread all over the world. In the months following the outbreak, countries one by one fell victim to the colossal challenge of managing and mitigating the spread of the virus and the number of lives it would claim. While the threat of the coronavirus itself posed enough of a legitimate danger to the global population, simultaneously, the threat of perception was also a concern for countries due to the judgment that would fall upon them for failing to adequately respond to the global health crisis. Indeed, for the first time of such magnitude, governments' performance in curbing contagion and saving lives was being compared and scrutinised by the public on a global scale. Due to the role of China during this period, particularly in terms of the disputes regarding the virus' origins, the country quickly became of notable interest for many scholars and general observers alike. Many have noted how China had concealed or limited the amount and type of information about the coronavirus which largely exacerbated international tensions and led to increased scrutiny of the country's transparency and handling of the pandemic. Ultimately, this highlighted the complexities of global information sharing and the significant impact of political and cultural factors on international relations.

The growth of reciprocal or mutual judgements, and sometimes misinterpretations, saw a rise in predominantly antagonistic and villainising narratives of countries that were deemed as failing or inadequately handling the pandemic. Naturally, this primarily involved targeted and aggressive criticisms of China, with many blaming the country, or more specifically its government, for failing to act in accordance with international standards and the unwritten rules for communicating such threats during global health crises. As COVID-19 took the world by storm, such discourse and various harmful narratives became highly prevalent. While news media sources often took a similar stance in their reporting of China's role in the pandemic, the internet saw some of the loudest and most colourful commentary on such developments. Concurrently, members of the Chinese public began to express growing rage online about the accusations waged against China and its government, and to highlight China's impressive performance in containing fatalities as compared to liberal democracies and their citizens, encapsulated by the label "*baizuo*" (白左)– meaning "white left". This thesis examines this phenomenon as a lens to explore the shifting dynamics of Chinese patriotism

and nationalism. By analysing online discourse and public sentiment, it delves into how national pride and identity are being reshaped in the context of global events, particularly through the reactions of Chinese netizens to issues like COVID-19. The study thus offers insights into the evolving expressions of patriotism, reflecting a more assertive and sometimes defensive form of nationalism in the digital age.

In the autumn of 2020, amidst the peak of the pandemic, I began my academic journey as a master's student at the University of Oxford China Centre. During this time, I found myself increasingly intrigued by a new social media trend that seemed to be politically engaging beyond domestic politics in China. My curiosity was piqued by just two or three posts that appeared on my recommended feed on X, formerly known as Twitter. These posts caught my attention not just because of the language, but because they seemed to embody a growing sentiment that I had not previously encountered. As I delved deeper into these posts, I came across a term that stood out to me: *baizuo*. While I knew exactly what those two characters meant literally and separately, together, I could not quite make sense of it; this term meant something more than the sum of its parts—it carried with it a wave of thrill and confusion that I felt compelled to understand. Without knowing yet what it meant in its entirety, it struck a chord with me, resonating in a way that no other had before. What started as a moment of curiosity quickly transformed into a full-fledged research project, one that I would dedicate myself to for the next four years, three of which would form this doctoral thesis. This term, and the phenomenon it represented, became the cornerstone of my academic work, shaping my research and my perspective on global and transcultural dynamics.

In two characters, *bai* (白) and *zuo* (左), the term *baizuo* encapsulates a sentiment of being critical of, or hostile towards, "the liberal West" (King 2017). For some years, the epithet has long registered an interest among China watchers and scholars alike and as a result is widely accepted as being an amalgamation of both racial and ideological characteristics to target 'Westerners holding left –or more precisely politically correct– opinions' on various social, political, and economic topics (Y. Cheng 2019a:288). Specifically, it seems to reflect a scepticism toward what is perceived as the Western left and its focus on identity politics, social justice, and political correctness. The term is often used to imply that these individuals are more concerned with virtue signalling—showing off their moral superiority—than with addressing the practical implications or complexities of these issues (Kohnhorst 2018; K. Kuo 2018b; F. Huang 2021). Politically, it suggests a naïveté

or impracticality, accusing these *baizuo* of being totally out of touch with everyday reality, the concerns of ordinary people, and overly influenced by academic or elitist perspectives. Online discussions also make clear that netizens do believe that the *baizuo* can be sincere and do care very much about these social and economic problems or inequalities. What netizens are frustrated by, however, is that the concern itself is actually hypocritical, and consists of mostly verbal advocation, and are so far removed from these troubles that there is little to no end of "fighting" against such problems (Zhang 2017).

The usage, and weaponisation, of "*baizuo*" has been widely noted by netizens and China watchers alike as part of a broader critique of the imposition and heavy influence of Western values on non-Western societies, like China. While its origins are still largely disputed, most agree that the term was coined on the Chinese internet sometime in the mid-2010s and then became popularised in the late-2010s (K. Kuo 2018b). As a result of such increased globalisation, particularly through cross-border news consumption and interaction, politically engaged netizens in China have increasingly shown interest in certain social, political, economic, and environmental developments in the West. Such interactions and exchanges between such different cultures, driven by globalisation and the rise of internet connectivity, have become a significant area of observation and analysis for scholars, journalists, and experts on China. It has also grown to be of particular interest for these netizens because these transcultural encounters, or cross-cultural interactions, are increasingly shaping how societies understand and influence one another. More importantly, understanding China's role in this is becoming increasingly relevant and significant.

Research context

While Western conceptions and perceptions of the East have been extensively studied over many decades, scholarly research on how the East views the West has not yet fully accounted for the historical and sociocultural contexts that shape these contemporary perspectives. In examining the anti-*baizuo* sentiment as it unfolded within Chinese online discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic, this research explores Chinese nationalism at the confluence of interconnected ideologies—such as nationalism, civilisationism, populism, anti-Westernism, and racism—and their relevance to netizens' critiques of the West. Although these concepts are often intertwined and can influence one another, they represent crucial frameworks that shape the narratives around anti-*baizuo* discourse. While the following chapters will delve deeper into these, it is important to

understand that the nature of the antagonistic and highly critical attitudes toward the West in China is part of a broader phenomenon of anti-Western sentiment. Contemporary anti-Westernism in China can be traced back to what is commonly known as the Century of Humiliation, or *bainian guochi* (百年国耻), a period from 1839 to 1949 marked by successive invasions, exploitation, and subjugation by Western powers. It is widely acknowledged that 'the glorious memory of Imperial China and the bitter memory of a "century of humiliation" serve as unifying factors' for nationalists (Jaworsky and Qiaoan 2021:298), and fosters sentiments of wrongdoing, resentment, and simultaneously shaping a nationalistic narrative that is inherently suspicious of – and generally antagonistic towards – the West. Chinese nationalism, specifically, has evolved to emphasise the restoration of national pride and the rectification of historical injustices, often positioning Chinese civilisation in opposition to perceived Western hegemony (Xia 2014; Shan 2024). In the years following this period, particularly under President Xi Jinping, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) solidified these anti-Western sentiments within its ideology and foreign policy, framing Western imperialism and capitalism as threats to China's sovereignty and development (S. Zhao 2021). Today, this anti-Western sentiment is evident in the response to what is perceived as Western interference or criticism of the Chinese government. These responses are often dressed up or accompanied by a narrative that emphasises national pride, Chinese superiority, and a cautionary stance against Western influence, which is reinforced by state-controlled media and education systems.

Through these mechanisms, the Chinese state actively promotes a sense of national unity and pride while positioning Western ideas and actions as potential dangers to China's progress and cultural identity. This historical context and ongoing reinforcement by the government play a crucial role in shaping contemporary Chinese attitudes towards the West, reflecting a complex interplay of historical grievances, nationalism, and political ideology. Thus, alongside the state of geopolitical tensions between China and the West (Gupta 2024), some have gone so far as to describe these grassroots manifestations as part of a "global culture war" (Levine 2024). Under President Xi, the CCP has evidently prioritised fostering a civilisational "spirit of struggle" as a key part of its mission, viewing the West's diminishing confidence in self-defence and stability as a historically significant development (see Yu 2021; Rudd 2022).

Due to the strict lockdowns, travel restrictions, and health risks associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, conducting fieldwork in China became virtually impossible during this period. These challenges significantly

impacted my ability to engage in in-person interviews or conventional ethnographic research, making digital ethnography and analysis of online discourse the most viable methods for this study. Ya-Wen Lei's (2018a) book chapter 'What Should We Know about Public Opinion in China?' challenges the common perception of China's political and civic life as strictly repressive and devoid of public discourse due to censorship. Despite China's global reputation for limiting freedom of speech and press, Lei highlights that political discussions, debates, and public engagement are, in fact, far more widespread than perhaps assumed.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many China scholars increasingly shifted their research focus toward online platforms, as conventional fieldwork and in-person data collection were severely restricted. Social media, in particular, became a crucial space for examining contemporary phenomena. Platforms like Weibo, WeChat, and other online forums allowed researchers to observe and analyse how Chinese netizens responded to current events, political developments, and global crises, including the pandemic itself (see Han et al. 2020; C. Zhang 2020b; Wang et al. 2020; Schneider 2022; Zhang 2022; Chen et al. 2023). These digital spaces provide rich, real-time data on public opinion, government policies, nationalist sentiments, and the ways in which online communities engaged in debates, shared information, or mobilised collective action. This shift to online research not only enabled scholars to continue their studies amid physical distancing, but also highlighted the growing significance of digital platforms in shaping public discourse and revealing the dynamics between state control and grassroots expression, particularly in China. Through social media, scholars have been able to explore online spaces as a means to witness the formation of new discourses, the circulation of ideas, and thus realise the increasing importance of online civic engagement in shaping both domestic and international narratives.

Since the mid-2000s, expressions of public opinion in China have increased, and this has mostly been seen in the increased number of contentious events, or 'public opinion incidents' (Lei 2018b:1). Such contemporary developments in China frequently capture public attention and ignite debates, particularly online, thus illustrating the complexity of political life in China despite government censorship. Understanding Chinese public opinion has been a long and perplexing endeavour that is, despite significant barriers to the freedom of expression, slowly beginning to make progress. While there is substantial scholarship on the rise of China from other perspectives, including from Western countries and their political leadership, there is comparatively less on the westward gaze. As noted in Chapter 2, recent literature on China's perceptions of, and approach towards, the West have observed how Chinese observations have shifted from admiration of Western progress to

scepticism and critique, driven by nationalism and other political tensions. Most recently, scholars highlight how events like the COVID-19 pandemic intensified this critical stance, with China's self-identity as a global power shaping its view of the West as hypocritical and morally declining (see Bickers 2017; Boylan, McBeath, and Wang 2021; Fang, Li, and Liu 2022). Others have looked more closely at how such perceptions are influenced by state media, public discourse, and digital platforms, reflecting broader Sino-Western tensions (see Guo 2018; Lams 2019). With the rapid expansion of social media across China, increased cross-border news consumption has resulted in Chinese netizens becoming far more engaged with news coverage of international affairs than they had been previously. This opening up has seen Chinese citizens become far more exposed, and thus receptive to the world in a way that it had not been able to do so previously.

Unlike the common internet user, or "lurker" (Sun, Rau, and Ma 2014), "netizens" are active participants in online communities and digital spaces, who frequently use the internet to express opinions, share information, and interact with others (Cho et al. 2018; Guo 2018). The "general public", or common internet user, encompasses a broader and more inclusive group, incorporating those who are not as active or engaged in contributing to spaces and discussions. Netizens can influence public sentiments by amplifying certain issues, spreading information rapidly, and shaping narratives through social media and other online platforms (see Fuchs 2016). The deliberate use of the term "netizen" in this thesis reflects its focus on those who are proactively engaged in contributing to and expanding the vibrant online public sphere (Lei 2018b:131). It also underscores the recognition that netizens' perspectives and behaviours may not represent those of the general public, as online communities often display distinct biases and demographic characteristics. Analysing the discourse produced by netizens is essential, as their contributions provide critical insights into the prevailing social attitudes, cultural dynamics, and political debates within society. These online expressions extend beyond mere anonymous grievances, constituting a significant part of a larger public discourse that reflects societal narratives. Those who engage with the term *baizuo* are not merely passive observers; they are individuals who are familiar with its meaning and contribute to its circulation and evolving relevance. This engagement highlights the interactive nature of the discourse, where participants actively respond to, critique, and amplify ideas within a broader digital and social ecosystem. As explored in Chapter 6, this discourse is far from isolated, fostering a dynamic exchange of perspectives that reinforces collective ideologies and amplifies the impact of anti-*baizuo* rhetoric on Chinese nationalist sentiment. By examining such texts, there is ample opportunity to uncover how terms like *baizuo* not only mirror but also reflects broader societal trends and

values, thereby offering valuable perspectives on contemporary issues in both digital and offline realms. By focusing on netizens, rather than "Weibo users" or "social media users", the thesis highlights the unique agency of netizens in driving online discourse while acknowledging the reciprocal influence of public sentiments in shaping the topics and trends that gain traction in digital spaces. This conceptual distinction is essential for understanding how phenomena like the anti-*baizuo* discourse emerge, evolve, and reflect broader sociopolitical dynamics.

Over the last two decades, China's social media landscape has witnessed significant developments and has marked a significant shift away from a more conventional and easier to control system of media to a far more decentralised and less controllable web of networks (see Yang 2003; Shirk 2011; Yuan 2021). Despite the expressively high levels of censorship and surveillance on the Chinese internet, user-generated social media platforms allow citizens to produce and reshare content and, to a limited extent, express their opinions and contribute towards various topics of discussion (see Zhou 2006; Cai and Zhou 2019; Creemers 2017). Naturally, this highly varies depending on the nature of the content, topic, and how much of a threat it poses to the legitimacy of the state. As a result, the state continuously adjusts its strategies to balance control while still allowing some degree of – or rather, not being able to fully control – expression and innovation in digital spaces. The development of the internet, as it has and continues to do so around the world, has unquestionably revolutionised news consumption and popular culture in China (see Jin 2021). More specifically, these developments have been fostered by the expansion of social media platforms which have seen rapid developments over the last two decades (see Yang 2009; Guo 2020; Yuan 2021). Increasingly, such trends reflect how 'the spread of the Internet is so central to the process of "globalisation"' in contemporary China (Hughes 2006:206). Of these transformations, both domestic and international news production and consumption on social media in China has seen great developments in the various forms of debate and political discussions which, when uncensored, transcend the confines of state, or even state-affiliated, media. Some have gone so far as to argue that, as a result of such globalisation, there has been an increasing 'diversification of nationalistic consciousness' in China among the most educated and urban youth (C. Zhang 2020b:94).

Amidst the growing prevalence of this 'new variety of Chinese language online' (Gao 2004:10), there is also a greater interest in internet slang, and discourse, as a social language that not only reveals more about

contemporary Chinese society and culture but also netizen psychology (see Chen, Liu, and Zhang 2022). These new forms and varieties of language, as notable as the discourse itself, have become an unmistakably 'important and indispensable part of everyday Chinese linguistic communication' (Carson and Jiang 2021:145). In this context, *"baizuo"* emerged due to Chinese internet users becoming more aware of and increasingly participating in discussions about global current affairs. As mentioned, the term's usage in online discussions are generally reflective of criticising 'Westerners holding left —or more precisely politically correct— opinions' on domestic and global issues which are deemed by the online community as being trivial or insignificant (Y. Cheng 2019a:288; see also King 2017; The Center for Strategic Translation n.d.; Urban Dictionary n.d.).

The overtly critical and derogatory nature of "*baizuo*" is therefore particularly evident given how and when the term appears in discussions on Chinese social media platforms, especially under trending topics that resonate in the West and beyond. For example, during the 2020 US Presidential Elections, many Chinese netizens used the term to comment on the candidates' policies and the perceived excesses of political correctness in American political discourse (F. Huang 2021). Similarly, figures like Greta Thunberg and movements like Black Lives Matter have also become focal points for the use of the term. In these contexts, "*baizuo*" is employed to criticise what is seen as an overemphasis on issues such as climate change activism and social justice, which are often viewed as distractions from more pressing concerns. This trend underscores the increasing divergence in worldview between China and the West, with Chinese online communities often rejecting what they see as Western moral superiority and political correctness. The popularity of *"baizuo"* as a term and concept provide valuable insights into contemporary Chinese perspectives on global sociopolitical issues and the growing cultural and ideological divide between China and the West.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the term was used among many Chinese netizens across social media to spotlight and criticise the West for their reaction and responses to the global health crisis. Through their critiques, social media discourse evolved into more politicised and antagonistic narratives whereby netizens became more reactive to such trending news stories. The discourse surrounding *baizuo* thus illuminates how online platforms can rapidly intensify nationalist sentiments, ultimately contributing to what can be characterised as digital nationalism, or "cybernationalism" (see Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez 2021; Schneider 2022). While those who use the term are not always necessarily "cybernationalists" as explored in other studies,

the anti-*baizuo* discourse reveals that such netizens represent a complex blend of attitudes, where nationalistic elements emerge without overtly or consistently following the expected patterns of nationalist or cybernationalist behaviour. This research therefore approaches the relationship between anti-*baizuo* netizens' online expressions and nationalism as being more of an evolving, fluid construct than a fixed ideological stance. Understanding the anti-*baizuo* is not merely about analysing a viral term; it provides deeper insight into the digital age's role in shaping global political narratives, reflecting broader societal anxieties and ideological divides. By investigating the anti-*baizuo* discourse, this research aims to uncover the complex interplay between online critiques of Western liberalism and the evolving Chinese gaze on Western politics and society. This exploration promises to shed light on how online discourse can both reflect and shape public sentiment, offering valuable insights into contemporary Sino-Western relations and the broader implications for global digital communication.

Research question and objectives

Considering *baizuo* as a 'vehicle' for netizens to '[rationalise] their views on Western democratic systems in relation to China's domestic politics' (A. Peng et al. 2020:76), this project seeks to understand the ways in which the term is used as a lens through which individuals engage with both domestic and international political discourse. The study effectively explores how Chinese netizens utilise *"baizuo"* to critique and thus differentiate themselves from what they perceive as inferior, or at best mediocre, Western liberal values and systems. It examines how this term serves not only as a critique of the West but also as a tool for self-reflection and assessment of China's own political and social structures. By analysing the usage of *"baizuo"* on China's 'most popular microblogging service' (Cui and Kertész 2023:2), *Weibo* (微博), particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study investigates how these discussions articulate Chinese netizens' perceptions of themselves, their government, and Western liberalism. The discourse surrounding *"baizuo"* often reveals deeper sentiments about national identity, governance, and societal values. It provides insights into how Chinese citizens view their own system of government in comparison to Western democracies, often using the label to highlight perceived flaws or excesses in Western political and social practices. Thus, the principal research question of this doctoral research project is:

What does the anti-baizuo discourse on Weibo during the COVID-19 pandemic reveal about Chinese netizens' perceptions of themselves, how their country is run, and of Western liberalism?

By addressing this question, the study aims to shed light on the broader implications of online discourse for understanding contemporary Chinese nationalism, as well as the evolving relationship between China and the West. This examination of *"baizuo"* and its connected topics and discussions helps to uncover the complex ways in which Chinese netizens interpret and respond to global political narratives, and how they construct their own sense of cultural and political identity in these processes. By exploring the ways in which netizens interact with this anti-Western epithet, this thesis develops an understanding of: (1) grassroots nationalism in China, (2) China's global identity as it is articulated and performed online, (3) the role of social media in domestic and international politics (i.e., cybernationalism as a form of civic engagement), and (4) perceptions of the liberal West, particularly in North America and Western Europe. This thesis will critically analyse how anti-*baizuo* sentiments, as a manifestation of Chinese digital nationalism, utilise specific themes and criticisms to shape anti-Western discourses. It will investigate how netizens view and critique Western liberalism, contributing to a deeper understanding of contemporary Chinese nationalism and the dynamics within China's online public sphere. Specifically, this research will address how Chinese citizens, or netizens, perceive and interpret the liberal West, and how these perceptions reinforce their belief in China—and its people—being superior to the West.

The primary objective of this thesis is multifaceted: it aims to explore the term *"baizuo"* in depth, investigating its origins, connotations, and evolving meanings while also highlighting the socio-cultural dynamics intensified by the pandemic that have fuelled anti-*baizuo* sentiments. By analysing online discourse, especially using Weibo posts, this research seeks to understand grassroots nationalism in China and the construction of nationalist narratives within historical and political contexts. This study situates the concept of *baizuo* within the broader scholarship on Chinese nationalism and anti-Western sentiments, offering a unique and nuanced perspective on contemporary nationalist attitudes in China. Additionally, it aims to contribute to the conceptualisation of China's global identity and self-perception, particularly in light of recent political tensions that have heightened these sentiments. This project further investigates Chinese cybernationalism as a form of civic engagement, examining whether these discourses emerge from top-down or bottom-up processes. By exploring the role of social media in shaping both domestic and international politics, this thesis

aspires to illuminate current Chinese views on the West, liberalism, and democracy, and to understand how the anti-*baizuo* discourse articulates broader perspectives on Chinese identity, culture, and society.

Conceptualising "baizuo"

While it is somewhat widely understood by those who are aware of the term that "*baizuo*" functions as a popular political and racial epithet, there has not yet been much of an examination into how and why Chinese netizens employ the term in their assessments and criticisms of the Westerners and the liberal West. While anti-Western discourse is not a particularly new field of study among China scholars, this research seeks to further unravel the discourse which Chenchen Zhang describes as 'right wing populism with Chinese characteristics' (C. Zhang 2020b). Considering the development of the anti-*baizuo* discourse over the last five or so years, this research seeks to provide an insight into the 'changing ways in which self–other relations are imagined in Chinese popular geopolitical discourse' (C. Zhang 2020b:88). While several scholars, most notably Zhang, have examined the populist aspects of this discourse within specific political contexts, this thesis departs from Zhang's work by focusing specifically on the COVID-19 pandemic as a unique historical event that magnified such narratives. Although her (2020a) essay on COVID-19 as 'impetus for nationalism' does not specifically address the anti-*baizuo* discourse, it would be a mistake to overlook it. She concludes that the rise of nationalistic sentiments online highlights that 'the diversity of opinions and the creative expression of criticism, despite strict censorship, should never be underestimated,' demonstrating a key dynamic in the online landscape during such times.

Chenchen Zhang's work provides an important foundation by examining "*baizuo*" as a form of populism while also addressing the broader processes of Othering through which social identities are constructed. Building on Zhang's analysis and responding to her call for further research on the political implications of "*baizuo*" in the context of COVID-19, this thesis extends the discussion by focusing specifically on how Othering is amplified and reshaped during the pandemic. While Zhang's work explores Othering as a critical framework, this research contributes a distinct case study that examines how the global health crisis created fertile ground for the intensification of anti-*baizuo* sentiment in Sino-Western relations. By centring on this pivotal historical moment, the thesis underscores how COVID-19 catalysed and reconfigured existing patterns of Othering, with human survival and public health at stake. The pandemic not

only intensified accusations of *baizuo* behaviour but also linked these critiques to perceived recklessness and inadequacy in managing public health crises. This marked a significant shift, as the perceived failures of Western liberal values moved beyond ideological disputes to matters of life and death, thereby heightening the emotional weight and urgency of these accusations. By situating the anti-*baizuo* discourse within the broader dynamics of Othering, this thesis provides a nuanced understanding of how social identities and power hierarchies are constructed and contested in the Chinese context during moments of global crisis.

This study examines the term *"baizuo"* as a notable example of the sociological concept known as Othering, which involves defining and marginalising a group that is seen as different or outside the accepted norm. Othering is a process through which social identities are constructed by contrasting "us" with "them," emphasising differences to justify unequal treatment or exclusion (see Rawls and David 2005; Given 2008; Mountz 2009). As the findings of this thesis demonstrates, the term is used in order to criticise and even condemn those 'easily identifiable' Others, and effectively serves to reinforce the boundaries between "us" and "them" (Rawls and David 2005:469). This process of Othering serves two main functions within the particular context of contemporary Chinese nationalism. On one hand, it reinforces a sense of cultural and ideological superiority among the in-group, allowing them to position themselves as defenders of authentic values against what they perceive as foreign ideologies and misguided values and principles. On the other, it enables the "in-group" to dismiss or delegitimise the perspectives and arguments of the "out-group" (Chen, Su, and Chen 2019:514), by framing them as products of a fundamentally different or deeply flawed worldview.

As it is defined and understood in this research study, the term is predominately used pejoratively in Chinese online discourse to criticise Western liberals for their perceived excessive political correctness, multiculturalism, and focus on social justice issues. Thus, this thesis refers to the discourse as "anti-*baizuo*" rather than "*baizuo*" to emphasise the critical and oppositional nature of the rhetoric. By focusing on the "anti-*baizuo*," the thesis highlights how Chinese netizens actively reject and criticise the values and ideologies associated with *baizuo*, rather than simply describing the concept itself. This crucial framing underscores the discourse's strong, reactive stance against perceived Western liberal ideals. By labelling a group or individuals as *"baizuo,"* netizens who employ this term create a distinct separation between themselves, who are perceived as rational, pragmatic, or realistic, and the "Other," who are viewed as overly idealistic, naive, or hypocritical. In employing the term, social media users and online communities reinforce a clear dichotomy between an in-group—those who align with "Chinese" or certain nationalistic and broadly conservative values—and an out-

group—those perceived to hold liberal Western views. This distinction not only highlights cultural and ideological differences but also serves to marginalise and discredit the out-group by portraying them as fundamentally misguided or inferior.

Over time, the popularisation of *"baizuo"* and the adoption of similar terms in such online communities and networks reinforces these divisions, shaping collective attitudes and perceptions. It contributes to a broader narrative that positions the in-group as superior, more rational, and more aligned with "correct" social and political ideals, further entrenching social divisions and fostering a sense of unity against a common Other. In this specific context of Chinese netizen culture, the in-group is characterised by a self-perception of rationality, pragmatism, and adherence to traditional values. Members of this group see themselves as being grounded in a far more practical understanding of the world compared to their Western counterparts, often expressing this through their criticism of the *baizuo* for lacking social order and stability. These netizens, therefore, distinguish themselves from the negatively perceived out-group by labelling them as *"baizuo,"* thereby creating a divide between the "negative Other" and the "positive self" (Yang, Cao, and Chen 2021). However, as this thesis explores in greater depth, the undefinable and highly subjective nature of the term means that *baizuo* is ultimately defined by virtue of who is mentioned as part of it. These discrepancies highlight the fluid and context-dependent nature of the term, revealing underlying tensions within Chinese netizen discourse and its impact on public opinion.

Furthermore, this study finds that the concept of *"baizuo"* reflects deeper anxieties about Western influence and globalisation, highlighting a desire to maintain cultural integrity and resist what is seen as cultural imperialism. By creating a label that encapsulates negative perceptions of Western liberalism, Chinese netizens are able to articulate their discontent with global trends that they perceive as threatening to their own cultural identity and national sovereignty. This broader sociocultural context helps to explain why terms like *"baizuo"* have gained traction and why they resonate with so many people, as they provide a means of expressing resistance to perceived cultural and ideological encroachments. Thus, while the populist dimensions of this discourse are important to understand as Chenchen Zhang (2017; 2020a, 2020b; 2022, 2024) has successfully examined, it is also crucial to scrutinise the history and depths of such politics and attitudes, as well as the sociocultural factors that contribute to the Othering embodied in terms like *"baizuo."* This thesis therefore centres on the question of how the anti-*baizuo* discourse operates as a politically charged narrative in discussions on COVID-19 on Chinese social media. More critically, it addresses the deeper question of

"why" by investigating the underlying social, cultural, and political dynamics that fuel its emergence and popularity, examining how this discourse functions as a tool for articulating broader political critiques, shaping identities, and reflecting societal anxieties over globalisation and Western liberalism.

The study of Chinese nationalism is inherently complex and diverse, capturing a wide range of ideologies, sentiments, and expressions that reflect the multifaceted nature of this phenomenon. This research underscores the importance of examining the intricate historical, cultural, and socio-political roots that form the foundation of Chinese nationalistic ideologies. As it will be detailed in Chapter 2, contrary to monolithic depictions of the Chinese state's overwhelming influence over society, Chinese nationalism is not a singular ideology but rather a tapestry woven from various strands that have evolved over time. While many scholars have explored the complexities of ethnic groupings and nationhood in Chinese history and identity, this thesis focuses more so on the ways in which Chinese nationalism is deeply intertwined with anti-Western sentiments, a connection that has been shaped by a range of historical events and ideological movements. For instance, the Century of Humiliation—a period between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries marked by Western imperialist aggression, territorial losses, and national humiliation—left an indelible mark on the Chinese collective consciousness. This period in Chinese history has fostered a strong sense of victimhood and resentment toward Western powers, which continues to influence contemporary nationalist rhetoric, especially in official state discourse. The Chinese government has long used nationalism as a tool to unify the nation and consolidate its power, promoting a narrative that emphasises national pride, historical grievances, and the need for vigilance against foreign interference. However, with the decentralisation of media and the advent and rapid expansion of the internet, the expression of nationalism has become more dynamic and less controlled by the state (see Yang 2003; Guo 2020; Yuan 2021). The rise of online platforms has facilitated a bottom-up process in which ordinary citizens, or netizens, play an incredibly active role in shaping nationalist discourse. These digital spaces allow for a more spontaneous and diverse expression of nationalist sentiment, as individuals can engage in discussions, share opinions, and mobilise around nationalist causes.

This doctoral thesis aims to delve into how the discourse surrounding *"baizuo"* articulates broader Chinese nationalist sentiments. By examining the usage of *"baizuo"* in online discussions, this research uncovers how contemporary Chinese nationalism is expressed in digital spaces and how it relates to China's global identity

and perceptions of the West. The anti-*baizuo* discourse, with its strong critique of Western liberals and their perceived moral superiority, serves as a window into the broader sentiments of Chinese nationalism. Through meticulous discourse analysis, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of nationalism – particularly Chinese nationalism, revealing it as a dynamic and evolving phenomenon shaped by historical legacies and modern digital practices, and taking on particular connotations in relation to specific historical moments– such as the study illustrates in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. It sheds light on how nationalist sentiments are not merely preserved and propagated by state mechanisms but are also actively constructed and contested by individuals in the public sphere. By exploring the intersection of nationalism, anti-Western sentiment, and digital discourse, this research provides valuable insights into China's evolving identity on the global stage, public opinion, and China's ever-complex relationship with the West.

Research design

In order to achieve the desired objectives of this study, the research project design was carefully planned and refined, guided by a commitment to both ethical and methodological rigor. This research project is built upon the findings and discourse analysis of 337 Weibo posts containing the term alongside a selection of keywords related to the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining the language and narratives used in these posts, this thesis aims to uncover how Chinese netizens critique the "liberal West", highlighting broader ideological, political, and cultural discourses that have emerged during the global crisis. The analysis provides insight into how terms like "*baizuo*" are employed to frame Western actions and values in contrast to East Asian approaches to governance and crisis management. By approaching and studying social media 'as a cultural text', this thesis adopts 'digital discourse analysis' (Caliandro 2016:670) to study the significance and usage of *baizuo* in the Chinese cyberspace. Through such analytical means, this study focuses on the use of language, tones, and expressions in order to explore internet users' interactions, the development of concepts and trends, and ultimately construct discourses. Through conducting discourse analysis of the interactions, posts, comment section discussions, and accounts, this thesis highlights the ways in which netizens criticise "leftist" ideologies and individuals, and perceived *baizuo*-ness, while also examining the broader socio-political contexts of these critiques, particularly in relation to contemporary Chinese nationalism and China-West relations.

By understanding how the West is perceived and understood in relation to pandemic crisis management, this research project investigates – through Chinese netizens' perceptions and criticisms of the West – of popular attitudes and beliefs that contemporary Chinese society holds about itself and China's global identity. Additionally, due to the focus of this research, the project will enhance understandings of how new, particularly nationalist, discourses emerge and spread beyond state-led narratives in online platforms like Weibo. Ultimately, the research methodology can be summarised in two ways: first, it examines how anti-Western sentiments are generated online, and second, it contributes to the limited existing conceptualisations of the 'Chinese gaze at Western democratic systems' (A. Peng et al. 2020:76). In terms of how this project will address these questions in practical terms, the bulk of the thesis is broken down into three chapters which respectively, i) delves into the evolution and racialisation of "*baizuo*," ii) analyses netizen critiques of Western pandemic management, and iii) explores the implications of Chinese netizen culture on Chinese nationalist discourse and online public culture. By undertaking this investigation, the thesis illuminates how contemporary nationalistic discourses in China are intertwined with its historical context, particularly through its self-reflection against the Western Other and the boundaries it delineates. Writing on how China views the world through the lens of self-Other relations, William Callahan (2023) posited that China's international relations can be understood as intercultural relations that engage with, rather than simply exclude, the Other. This doctoral research thus seeks to utilise this framework in its exploration of the *baizuo* in order to provide valuable insights into the evolving nature of Chinese nationalism, as well as a critical perspective on how China navigates and interacts with global narratives. Moreover, this thesis highlights the significant role that digital spaces play in shaping and reflecting national identity in the twenty-first century. This research therefore contributes to broader discussions on global power dynamics and the influence of online discourse in shaping public opinion, thereby enhancing our understanding of how nationalist sentiments are constructed and expressed in the digital age.

Thesis structure

This thesis is structured as follows. While this first chapter introduces and contours the research project itself, this chapter also provides the background of and important context behind the research. It introduces the nature of Chinese netizen culture and, most crucially, introduces and defines the term "*baizuo*" in tandem with a

consideration of key concepts such as anti-Western nationalism and its manifestations on social media in China. Finally, before tracing the outline of the thesis' structure, it outlines the central research question and study objectives, and points to the significance of this research project and its broader contributions to scholarship and beyond. Chapter 2 therefore examines the various bodies of pertinent literature in order to establish the conceptual and theoretical foundation for this thesis. The chapter is structured into thematic sections that systematically address gaps in the existing literature and identify potential areas for further research. It begins by establishing a clear definition of Chinese nationalism, examining how this concept is interpreted and understood across various scholarly perspectives. This chapter effectively sets the stage for a deeper exploration of how contemporary manifestations of Chinese nationalism, especially those expressed online, can be contextualised and comprehended. By pinpointing specific lacunae in the literature, the chapter highlights where current research falls short and to suggest new avenues for investigation, thus contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how modern forms of nationalism are articulated and perceived in the digital age. From there, the review then explores how nationalism has been studied in relation to contemporary events, trends, and discourses particularly in relation to China's status and involvement in international affairs. In addition to contextualising the contemporary literature on Sino-American relations, the chapter also focuses heavily on China's and Chinese people's self-perceptions in relation to its attitudes and behaviour on the international stage. Moreover, it also accounts for the existing literature on internet mobilisation and trends in civic engagement in China. Building on the concepts of Self-Other reflections, the study reveals how netizens perceive Chinese identity. It also explores the integration of cybernationalism into social networks by drawing on scholarly interpretations of cybernationalist sentiments expressed on social media.

Chapter 3 provides a comprehensive overview of the research methodology used in this study, detailing the approaches taken to ensure rigor and validity. This chapter is divided into four main sections, each addressing a crucial aspect of the methodological approach: social media as the field site, ethical considerations in social media research, data collection, and data analysis. The first section of the chapter outlines the ethical guidelines followed in conducting research on social media, ensuring that the study adheres to ethical standards while engaging with online data. Then the chapter's second section details the procedure for manually collecting and documenting Weibo posts, emphasising the meticulous process involved in gathering, recording, and cleaning the data. The third section focuses on the process of data analysis – namely, qualitative coding and discourse analysis – explaining how the principles of validity and reliability are upheld

through systematic coding and discourse analysis. Together, these sections underscore how the methodology prioritises understanding how Chinese netizens interact with and interpret the term *"baizuo,"* rather than merely quantifying its popularity or prevalence on Weibo. This methodological approach is detailed in such depth in order to provide readers a deeper insight into the nuances of netizen interactions and interpretations, highlighting the study's commitment to capturing the complexity of online discourse in China.

Chapter 4, the first chapter of this thesis based on empirical data, explores the nature, definition, and connotations of the term *"baizuo."* This chapter examines how netizens explicitly identify and critique specific countries, organisations, and groups—ranging from Western governments and media outlets to NGOs and social or political movements. By analysing which entities are most frequently targeted—whether the US government, the European Union, international NGOs, or major media platforms—it reveals the geopolitical and ideological fault lines shaping Chinese online discourse. Given that *baizuo* connotes "whiteness," this chapter explores how this form of anti-Western discourse engages with race, perceptions of Western decline, and, more significantly, what such rhetoric reveals about Chinese netizens' self-perception within the framework of Self and Other (Koenig and Chaudhuri 2017). By tracing netizens' explicit identification of targets, this analysis sheds light on broader patterns of anti-Western sentiment and nationalist positioning. Furthermore, it demonstrates how *baizuo* functions as a flexible and evolving term, adapting to different political and social contexts. By exploring the intricate cultural, racial, and ideological dimensions tied to the term, this chapter deepens our understanding of how politically engaged netizens perceive and interpret who the *baizuo* are.

Building on the discussions in Chapter 4, which examines the broader usage and evolution of *baizuo* as a term, Chapter 5 shifts focus to anti-*baizuo* critique itself. The chapter situates these critiques of Western responses to the COVID-19 pandemic within the context of growing Chinese superiority and anti-Western nationalism, highlighting how the pandemic intensified such sentiments. While Chapter 4 explores the general ideological and rhetorical functions of *baizuo* as a term, Chapter 5 delves into the historical and socio-cultural factors that fuel anti-Western criticisms, particularly during the pandemic. First, the chapter examines the criticisms that are directed at political institutions and leaders, focusing on how specific sociocultural values are reflected in Western governance, as well as the perceived ramifications of such approaches, especially in influencing pandemic responses and the policies associated with them. The second section therefore expands upon this by examining broader critiques of *baizuo* more broadly, exploring how its usage reflects perceptions

of it as a representation of the general public in the West. The penultimate section of the chapter investigates the interplay between anti-*baizuo* rhetoric and pandemic nationalism, exploring how such a dynamic shapes political discourse, public opinion, and national identity during global health crises. Finally, in the fourth section, the chapter provides a critical examination of the perceived sociocultural factors that elucidate the basis and formation of the recent surge of Chinese anti-Western sentiments. By doing so, it explores how these criticisms reflect Chinese public opinion and shape Self-Other perceptions in the context of the global health crisis. Chapter 5 therefore provides a thorough examination of the complex ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has shaped and intensified existing anti-Western narratives in China, thus furthering our understanding of the interplay between global health crises and evolving nationalistic ideologies.

Chapter 6, the final empirical chapter of the thesis, explores how the anti-*baizuo* discourse offers critical insights into netizen interactions with political topics, focusing on how these online engagements shape public opinion and discourse within Chinese online spaces. The chapter examines the various ways in which Weibo users engage with posts, interact with one another, and respond to verified news sources, while also investigating the specific mechanisms of Weibo that facilitate the creation and popularisation of neologisms such as *baizuo*. While Chapter 5 critically examines the discourse itself, Chapter 6 shifts focus to the different forms of user interactions and platform functions, analysing their role in amplifying public sentiment and shaping online political discourse, particularly within anti-*baizuo* narratives. In doing so, the chapter highlights how digital tools are employed to construct and disseminate ideological narratives, fostering emotional resonance and political engagement among Weibo users. By examining the mechanisms of netizen interactions and their impact on emotional resonance, the chapter offers valuable insight into how Chinese nationalism manifests at the grassroots level, particularly within China's online public sphere. Ultimately, the chapter explores the complexities of online culture and its evolving dynamics, especially in relation to political engagement and debate in contemporary Chinese society.

Together, the findings in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 emphasise the complex relationship between digital culture and nationalist sentiment in the Chinese context, highlighting the ways in which online discourse reflects and reinforces nationalistic views. These chapters also illustrate how the digital realm serves as a battleground for ideological expression and national identity formation, especially in the face of global challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining this discourse in the context of the pandemic, the study seeks to uncover the underlying motivations driving the sentiments expressed online, revealing how they

intertwine with historical narratives of humiliation, victimhood, and resilience. Ultimately, this analysis highlights the complexity of contemporary Chinese nationalism, where cultural pride and historical grievances converge to shape a distinct national ethos.

The conclusion calls for continued and deeper explorations into this evolving relationship, recognising the rapid changes in the global landscape and the growing significance of digital culture in shaping contemporary nationalist sentiment. Chapter 7, the final and concluding chapter of this thesis, effectively summarises how and why netizens have interacted with the term *"baizuo"* during the COVID-19 pandemic. This reveals deep insights into how Chinese netizens perceive their national identity and how contemporary anti-Western sentiments have evolved, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The conclusion also rather crucially underscores the importance of understanding the socio-political dynamics between China and the West, highlighting the need for scholars and future research to move beyond simplistic stereotypes and adopt a more nuanced perspective on these relations. By addressing the limitations and implications of the study, the conclusion positions this thesis as a significant contribution to the academic discourse on digital culture, nationalism, and public opinion in contemporary China. It also sets the foundation for future research in this dynamic and ever-evolving field. By doing so, this thesis not only enhances our comprehension of the intricate interplay between online discourse and national identity in contemporary Chinese society but also provides a well-needed insight into how these digital interactions shape broader social and political perceptions of the world, particularly regarding the West.

2. Literature Review

As outlined in the introductory chapter, this thesis embarks on an investigation into the multifaceted realm of "*baizuo*," examining its evolution, political and racial connotations, and the implications of its popular usage in online discourse. Additionally, it delves into the critique of Western pandemic responses and strategies and explores, through close examinations of Weibo content, netizen discourse in the public sphere. Given this emphasis, this chapter positions the research inquiry within the scholarship concerning Chinese identity, nationalism, social media, and the online public sphere, all of which are well-established subjects of study across the social and political sciences. The confluence of these areas is increasingly of academic interest, particularly among China scholars who find that their research becomes ever more timely in the context of current tensions between China and the West (Schneider 2022). By dissecting these interconnected themes, the following unravels the intricate dynamics of contemporary nationalist sentiments, internet culture, and political engagement within the Chinese cyberspace. In doing so, this chapter contextualises the contemporary socio-political dynamics in China and provides a more nuanced understanding of public opinion and societal narratives in the context of global events and geopolitical tensions. Positioning this study within these relevant existing bodies of literature allows for this thesis to be grounded in nuanced perspectives to scholarly dialogue, thereby enriching current discourse and addressing essential questions about the evolving dynamics of ideological conflicts and global affairs.

The first section of this literature review accounts for the scholarship that explores the various approaches to conceptualising the intricate processes of identity construction and nationalism within the Chinese context. To situate this research endeavour within the multi-layered conceptualisations of identity and nationalism in the Chinese context, the section addresses the key relevant literature on China and Chinese identity, notions of Chineseness, and the evolution of nationalist discourses. The second section in this chapter addresses some of the crucial literature that has contributed towards our understanding of China on the international stage amidst international affairs and, specifically, the intricacies of its relations with the West. This section therefore also addresses some of the key scholarship on China's global identity and Chinese exceptionalism, surrounding China's global identity and exceptionalism, while also incorporating research on recent developments such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The third and final section of the literature review addresses the various ways in

which scholars have approached researching the Chinese internet, with a specific focus on trends of the online public sphere, netizen culture, and the development of cybernationalism. Crucially, the chapter will also position this project within the sparse body of existing research concerning the discussions surrounding the *baizuo*.

Identity formation and nationalism in China

The first section of this literature review addresses the differing scholarly approaches to conceptualising the intricate mechanisms that have and continue to shape Chinese identity and the importance of nationalism within China. This section thus contextualises this research project by focusing on scholarly investigations into the various understandings of identity formation in China, and the broader Sinophone context, and the evolving narratives of contemporary Chinese nationalism. Nationalism, as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, has been historically studied across disciplines such as political science, sociology, history, and cultural studies (Dar 2022:2). While early thinkers such as Johann Gottfried Herder and Johann Gottlieb Fichte focused on cultural and historical connections as the foundation of nationalism (Dar 2022:4), modernists like Ernest Gellner (2008) and Benedict Anderson (2006) emphasised political definitions and linked the emergence of nationalism to industrialisation as well as the rise of print capitalism. Most commonly, nationalism is understood as a political ideology that promotes the interests of a particular nation, aiming to establish and maintain sovereignty over its homeland, and views the nation as the ideal foundation for political authority (Gellner 2008; Hechter 2000). However, nationalism manifests in diverse forms, reflecting varying bases for collective identity. For instance, civic nationalism emphasises shared political values and commitment to a common civic framework, while ethnic nationalism focuses on common ancestry, language, and cultural heritage. Among various forms, such as religious and ethnic nationalism, this thesis focuses on the reactive nature of nationalism in the context of anti-*baizuo* discourse. Michael Alan Brittingham defines the reactive model of nationalism as one that 'seeks to defend its identity against challenges (real or perceived) from the other' in conflict (Brittingham 2005:136). This research examines the reactive nature of contemporary anti-Western nationalism in the specific context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been driven by collective nationalist sentiments responding to external stimuli perceived as threats to national identity or interests.

As this thesis explores, the anti-*baizuo* discourse aligns with Brittingham's definition of reactive nationalism as its proponents interpret and portray Western ideologies and values as existential threats to China's cultural and political identity, thereby cultivating a defensive and oppositional nationalist stance. Reactive nationalism, as a broader term, serves as a fitting and nuanced framework for analysing anti-Western sentiments, as it demonstrates how anti-*baizuo* rhetoric emerged in direct response to Western ideologies, shedding light on the complex interplay between global tensions and domestic narratives of cultural and political identity. Still, pandemic nationalism, arguably a form or manifestation of reactive nationalism, is a concept central to this analysis, and will be explored in greater detail later in the chapter to contextualise anti-*baizuo* rhetoric. Moreover, while ethnic nationalism holds relevance to this study, it is important to highlight that as there is no singular "Chinese ethnicity," nationalism in this context transcends ethnic distinctions, emphasising a collective national identity rooted in cultural, historical, and political unity. Such distinctions are essential for establishing the conceptual framework and arguments underpinning this thesis, which contends that Chinese identity – and by extension, nationalism – extends beyond the boundaries of conventional frameworks proposed by theorists like Gellner (2008). As James DeShaw Rae and Xiaodan Wang's (2016) article on Chinese identity demonstrates, situating Chineseness within broader nationalism literature highlights the complexities and difficulties of conceptualising it. Given that different forms of nationalism draw upon 'different notions of Chinese identity from civic, cultural, and racial perspectives', Chinese identity is 'in perpetual contestation' (Rae and Wang 2016:475). Expressions and self-identifications of identity play a pivotal role in understanding the beliefs and notions held by individuals engaged in the anti-*baizuo* discourse. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, these elements warrant careful and critical examination to uncover the underlying ideas shaping such discourse.

As discussed in the following, it is widely acknowledged that 'the official Qing view of China as a multiethnic entity has persisted into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, contributing directly to the construction of the modern Chinese national identity' (Zhao 2006:23). It is essential to understand Chinese nationalism, as presented in this thesis, as extending beyond, for instance, the concept of the nation-state. The complexity of defining China and Chinese identity lies in the vast historical changes and diverse cultural influences the country has experienced over millennia. From dynastic eras to its modern transformation, China has shifted in territorial size, political structures, and social values, making it difficult to pinpoint a single, unchanging

essence of a single "China." Over three decades ago, Lucian Pye (Pye 1990) coined the term 'civilization-state' as a characterisation of China that accounted for the ways in which it is drastically different from the Western nation-state model. Proponents of the term assert that China's unique political tradition, historical continuity, and cultural unity—and by extension, Chinese identity—are best understood within this framework, which stands in contrast to the development of European nation-states (see Xing and Shaw 2013). Indeed, the broad category of "Chineseness" also complicates defining and understanding Chinese nationalism, especially across the Greater China region, which includes mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the broader Chinese diaspora. While mainland China promotes a unified national identity, regions like Taiwan and Hong Kong have differing political and cultural experiences, leading to competing ideas of identity. Among the diaspora, "Chineseness" blends with local influences, further challenging the notion of a singular national identity. While culture and civilisation traditionally served as the primary criteria for belonging to the historical political community of "classical China", Chinese identity has also encompassed primordial concepts of race, ethnicity, homeland, and state declarations regarding territory and ideology at different junctures. In other words, China and Chineseness as 'imagined communities' (Anderson 2006) are shaped by a complex interplay of historical continuity, cultural similarity and diversity, and the ever-evolving political narratives that transcend geographical boundaries. In fact, some findings in this study suggest the existence of a broader collective identity, rooted in Chineseness but extending beyond it to encompass a shared historical and cultural heritage, or rather an imagined community in its own right, spanning the wider East. These fluid constructions of identity – as illustrated in this thesis, particularly in Chapter 4 – enables diverse interpretations not only of what it means to be "Chinese" but also, more generally, of what it means to be "like us."

For years, Sinologists and China scholars have amassed an extensive body of research on China, "Chineseness", race, ethnicity, and Chinese identity in broader terms (Li 2019). Existing understandings of Chinese identity encompass a broad spectrum of perspectives and interpretations, with some emphasising cultural aspects like historical traditions and language, while others focus on political factors such as political ideology and governance. More crucially, in order to adequately contextualise the anti-*baizuo* discourse from the perspective of Chinese citizens and their perceptions of China and Chinese identity, this thesis builds on the observations made in the following key texts. Through this exploration, we gain insights into the intricate dynamics that influence the formation of identities and nationalist sentiments in the Chinese context, setting the stage for the

subsequent analysis in this thesis. These insights will be further explored in subsequent chapters, where the analysis delves into how these perceptions shape broader discussions of nationalism and identity in the Chinese digital sphere. As it will be detailed in Chapters 4 and 5 in particular, this thesis explores how Chinese netizens perceive their identity through a strong sense of cultural pride, often using specific language and rhetorical devices to define clear boundaries about who they deem "Chinese," with anti-*baizuo* discourse excluding those who embrace Western liberal values. The complex and overlapping intricacies surrounding the concepts of "China" and Chinese identity continue to be, and likely will always be, subjects of intense debate. However, it is within this ambiguity, through reflection and the construction of the Self and the Other, that this research seeks to flesh out.

Race and identity in China

Of the many ambitious endeavours to conceptualise "Chineseness", ethnicity and race play a significant role, which scholars have explored with specific foci on Han dominance, minority integration, and diasporic Chinese communities, which contribute to evolving understandings of Chinese identity. Crucially, while the focus of this research is primarily concerned with the Chinese national identity in the mainland, it is important to address the literature regarding the nuances of Chinese identity which includes those beyond as well as those within the mainland and identify with being Chinese, either by race, ethnicity, or nationality (Wang 1993; Barabantseva 2012; Chang and Holt 2014). There is a significant subsection within this scholarship that explores the ways in which racial classifications and biases have historically shaped the concept of a unified Chinese identity which dates back to the Qing Dynasty (Leibold 2006; Zhao 2006; Kowner and Demel 2012a; Dikötter 2019). For instance, Kevin Carrico's *The Great Han* (2017) confronts the idea of a "real" monolithic Chinese identity by critically examining the contradictions of an ethnically homogenous society and its complex socio-political landscape by spotlighting the various challenges facing the state. Through his critical assessment of a majority racial nationalist movement in contemporary Chinese society, Carrico problematises and deconstructs the myth of a single unified China and Chinese identity. With regards to situating this research project, *The Great Han* offers a valuable framework for "researching China" as Carrico crucially highlights the intricate interplay of race, ethnicity, and class within contemporary China. Others have attempted this endeavour by investigating specific terms and concepts such as "Greater China", or *da zhonghua* (大中華)

(Zhao 2006), 'cultural China' (Wei-ming 2005), and 'common origin (*tongyuan*)' (Leibold 2006:181). Others, such as James DeShaw Rae and Xiaodan Wang (2016) highlight the concepts of *han* (汉), *hua* (华), and *zhongguo* (中国), and problematises the Eurocentric conceptualisations of Chineseness by analysing the interplay between racial, cultural, and civic dimensions of Chinese identity.

Numerous scholarly works on race and identity in China written by historian Frank Dikötter – the most notable being *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (2019) – examine a wide range of issues pertaining to the evolution of racialised thinking in China (see also Dikötter 1994, 1997, 2012). In the book, he critiques Eurocentric considerations of racialisation and highlights, most crucially, the concept of Othering, demonstrating how the Chinese have historically utilised racial classifications and biases in shaping notions of a single, united Chinese identity. While Dikötter's critical examination is appreciated as a generalised account of how notions and expressions of identity have been shaped over time in China, the book falls somewhat short of delivering a more nuanced examination of how contemporary discourse shapes new subjectivities and how individuals utilise and alter dominant discourses. Learning from these limitations, this thesis acknowledges the risks of oversimplification, and endeavours to investigate these developments by critically analysing how the anti-*baizuo* discourse intersects with historical discourses and notions of race and identity.

As a key point of reference on general trends and concepts of race and identity in contemporary China, Yinghong Cheng's (2019a) *Discourses of Race and Rising China* provides great insight into various interpretations of race as a concept as well as its relevance to Chinese expressions of identity. Besides painting a clear image of how Chinese identity has been historically conceptualised, Cheng also closely examines anti-Manchu Hanism and the role of civilisational supremacism in the context of existing ethno-racial notions and anti-Western Chinese thought (Y. Cheng 2019a:23). Cheng's examination of Chinese identity and its historical evolution, including the exploration of anti-Manchu Hanism and civilisational supremacism, offers valuable perspectives on ethno-racial notions and anti-Western Chinese thought. By highlighting the political agendas of the party-state and the historical context of non-Western racial discourses, Cheng's analysis underscores the complexities of racial discourse in China. Furthermore, Cheng's discussion of discourse-production beyond state narratives sheds light on the evolution of racism and racial thought within Chinese politics and society.

Others have investigated these complex dynamics by deconstructing specific and racialised notions of identity. In particular, studies on the notions of whiteness as well as "yellowness" (Wyatt 2012; see also

Keevak 2011), allow for the crucial contextualisation of race relations and how it influenced contemporary Chinese identities. Firstly, to contextualise race relations and contemporary Chinese identity, recognising its influence from interactions with Western and imperial powers, including varying notions of whiteness, is imperative to this study. Secondly, given the research focus on Chinese perceptions and criticisms of Others, it is important that this thesis accounts for the literature that examines historical encounters, narratives, and cultural depictions of whiteness that have impacted current attitudes and interactions. Here, the importance of racialisation and nationalism are underscored, given that there continues to be considerable research interest in the evolving dynamics of racialisation, self-identification, and Han-centrism, particularly as they pertain to nationalism. For instance, Parvati Raghuram's *New Racism or New Asia* accounts for the ways in which 'Asian race debates are influenced by global discourses' and does so by closely examining the translation of Western race discourses in Asia (Raghuram 2022:1). Crucially, Raghuram emphasises the importance of contextualising race relations and discourse in Asia due to the region's historically different engagement with racism and concepts like "whiteness". Raghuram further argues that future research ought to contribute toward the development of 'anti-racist coalitions in theory and practice and using these to inform where and how race matters' (Raghuram 2022:1).

In *Race and Racism in Modern East Asia: Western and Eastern Constructions (2012b)*, Rotem Kowner and Walter Demel presented an impressive and convincing corpus of chapters written by a number of well-regarded scholars on concepts of race in China and the Sinophone world. Specifically, and quite importantly, Don J. Wyatt (2012) and Frank Dikötter (2012) demonstrate in their respective chapters that the words "culture" and "race" in China have historically been used interchangeably and therefore suggest that the "early Chinese" leaned towards more culturalist interpretations of human differences. Somewhat similarly, Sufen Lai (2013) argued in her chapter that, regarding Chinese interpretations of the racialised Other, Chinese feelings of inferiority towards white Westerners were primarily rooted in economic and technological inferiority, rather than cultural and racial inferiority, as non-Chinese were generally viewed as the barbaric other within a Sinocentric worldview. In their co-authored chapter, the editors convincingly argued that East Asia was the only region in relatively modern times that had formulated clear theories and explicit policies aimed at actively dismantling the Western racial worldview, despite its initially 'willing and rapid adoption of the racial idea … and its subsequent emulation of common Western racial policies' (Kowner and Demel 2012a:12). It is in this

nature that anti-Western and anti-white sentiments in China are contextualised for the purposes of making sense of the anti-*baizuo* discourse.

As outlined in the Introduction, this thesis contributes towards existing understandings of 'the different material configurations of race and racism in Asia today' (Raghuram 2022:9). Therefore, alongside the conceptualisations of Chinese identity, this thesis adopts Weiyu Zhang's framework of 'Chineseness as Method.' Drawing on a significant portion of the literature discussed above and in subsequent sections of this chapter, Zhang advocates for viewing 'Chineseness' as an evolving and open-ended process of 'identity construction', allowing for the globalisation of Chineseness or the simultaneous development of multiple forms of Chineseness (Zhang 2023:514). Indeed, while terms like *huaxia* (华夏) may provide historical and cultural context in terms of understanding "Chineseness", its essentialist and state-aligned implications make it inadequate for capturing the complexities of Chinese identity and nationalism today. Such perspective is crucial in this thesis, as it challenges state-centric frameworks of nationalism by emphasising the fluid and multifaceted nature of Chinese identity. Understanding nationalism as more than just a function of the state opens up new ways of analysing how Chinese identity is shaped and performed in diverse social and cultural contexts, particularly in the digital sphere. Although the aforementioned elements are crucial in the discussion of Chineseness, Allen Chun challenges the notion of a definable and singular Chinese identity, highlighting how ethnicity and Chinese civilisation itself is perceived to historically transcend the rigid boundaries often associated with the nation-state (Chun 1996:113). Moreover, in the context of the modern world system, Chun argues that *huaxia* has evolved into a symbol of cultural distinctiveness and resistance to Western imperialism (Chun 1996:116). Such perspective crucially underscores the fluidity and adaptability of Chinese identity, shaped by both historical continuities and contemporary global dynamics, thus providing essential insights into understanding modern nationalist discourse and expressions of Chinese identity explored in this thesis. As the following further addresses, this project highlights how exploring anti-Western nationalist discourses can enrich our understanding of China's, and broadly Chinese, global identity and outlook (Hughes 2005).

Nationalistic discourses in China

The study of "Chinese nationalism" is marked by substantial debate and diversity, reflecting the complex and multifaceted nature of the phenomenon (see Zhou 2021). This diversity stems from the fact that Chinese

nationalism is not a singular, uniform ideology but rather a collection of multiple strands, discourses, and expressions. From examinations of state-driven nationalist policies and propaganda, including studies on the 50 Cent Army, or *wumao dang* (五毛党) (Han 2015), to the intricate dimensions of ethnic nationalism, it is essential to place this study within the broader literature that provides context for its findings. Considering the intricate nature of nationalism and its manifestations, it is crucial to acknowledge and determine the diverse definitions and interpretations of Chinese nationalism, especially considering the complex historical, cultural, and socio-political underpinnings that shape its evolution. Defined as 'the convergence of territorial and political loyalty irrespective of competing foci of affiliation', nationalism is widely understood as promoting identification with one's own nation, and its interests, and is therefore studied widely both as a concept and as an expression (Haas 1986:709). Like patriotism, nationalism suggests a principle of identity that centres on ties to common symbols and patterns of communication. Thus, the following thus addresses the historical and political elements that have and continue to shape manifestations of Chinese nationalism and, more crucially, situates this in the context of other forms of contemporary nationalistic sentiment.

In order to adequately grasp the nuances of contemporary Chinese nationalism and, more specifically, the nature of anti-Western sentiments, this research engages with existing scholarship on nationalism in the Sinophone context, literature on "Chineseness" as an identity, and Chinese self-perceptions of identity and nation. To situate how the anti-*baizuo* discourse fits into the 'production and construction of nationalist discourse', it is important to explore how nationalism is expressed, how it relates to ethnonationalism, and what the Other signifies within the Chinese context (Ma 2018:305; see also Zhu et al. 1997). As mentioned previously, notions of race, ethnicity, and society have historically been mobilised to affirm the presence of a Chinese populace forming a nation and to champion cultural and national unity. It is essential to recognise that Chinese nationalism is not limited to anti-Western sentiments; it also encompasses anti-Japanese, anti-Muslim, and anti-Taiwanese sentiments, among others, as extensively explored in existing literature. These broader dimensions of nationalism highlight the multifaceted and context-dependent nature of Chinese nationalist discourse, which cannot be reduced to a single binary opposition. The anti-*baizuo* nationalism presented in this thesis may appear binary, focusing primarily on the China-West dichotomy, but this is a consequence of the thesis' specific scope, which aims to understand China's perceptions of the West. This narrower focus necessarily overlooks or obscures other significant "others," such as Japan (see Ng and Han 2018), Taiwan, and Muslim minorities, among others, within China. While these forms of Othering and discrimination

preceded this contemporary period, multiple recent studies have documented the surge in anti-Black and anti-Muslim racism in China during the pandemic, with the latter intensified by backlash against senior minority ethnic party members like Guoqiang Ma and Xianwang Zhou (see Adebayo 2021; Ouassini, Amini, and Ouassini 2022; Stroup 2024). While anti-Black and anti-Muslim racism in China has been historically well studied, during the pandemic, African migrants, particularly in cities like Guangzhou, faced highly discriminatory practices – such as forced evictions, quarantines, and denial of access to public spaces – fuelled by unfounded claims linking them to the spread of the virus (Gu and Ho 2023; Vhumbunu 2024). For instance, fixating on Jiapei Gu and Janet Ho's critical discourse analysis examines the discursive strategies employed to construct a dichotomy between the "positive Chinese" and the "negative Black people" (Gu and Ho 2023:846). Similarly, anti-Muslim sentiments were exacerbated by nationalist rhetoric and scapegoating during this period (Stroup 2024:1057). These instances highlight how the pandemic amplified existing racial biases within Chinese society, reflecting both global patterns of crisis-driven scapegoating and the specific racialised hierarchies within China. This study does not explore the nuances of Othering processes in China; however, failing to acknowledge their existence risks oversimplifying the broader landscape of Chinese nationalist discourses, which can either overlap with or differ from the anti-*baizuo* framework, depending on the context.

It is widely known that traditional Chinese nationalism 'was rooted in an arrogant belief in the superiority of Chinese civilization and justified China's cultural and demographic hegemony in Asia' (Xu 2001:152). This sense of cultural supremacy was historically cultivated and propagated through a top-down approach, with state authorities and elite institutions playing a central role in shaping and disseminating nationalist narratives. By positioning itself as the cultural and moral center of Asia, the Chinese state historically employed its authority to reinforce this ideology, ensuring its dominance within both domestic and regional contexts. Nationalism, Chen Zhimin argues, was beckoned in response as 'a non-Chinese remedy to the problem of Chinese survival' (Chen 2005:38). In his paper on the translations of "China", Arif Dirlik (2019) explores the historical and political factors that led to the renaming of the country and concludes that scholars and historians' decision to do so recentred China in such a way that incorporated the concept of *tianxia* (天下), meaning 'all-under-heaven', thenceforth enabling a nationalist discourse with heavy undertones of imperialism (Dirlik 2019:145). China scholars, particularly historians, have examined how the Century of Humiliation between

1849 and 1949 has been and continues to be used by the state as an empowering source for nationalism, to 'stir up consciousness of suffering' and provoke sentiments of being in the hands of Western powers (Xu 2012:116; see also Bickers 2017). In particular, William Callahan's thorough examination of 'Communist Chinese historiography and identity' delves into the rationale that sentiments of humiliation remain central to the construction of modern Chinese nationalism (Callahan 2004:199; see also Tang and Darr 2012). After the First Opium War, China's humiliation not only represented that it was 'no longer the centre of the universe' and effectively thrown out into the margins of the world 'as a semi-colonised land in a Eurocentric world' (Chen 2005:38). Indeed, Pan-Asianism transpired as a result of the continent-wide development of Asian peoples' awareness and heightened belief in the need to detach themselves from colonial legacies, modernise on their own terms, and establish independent states (Xu 2001:151). Besides the political significance of Pan-Asianism, the movement was understood as a sociocultural, as well as political, one as it fundamentally critiqued the hegemonic culture of 'human rights standards' and the imposition of Western values 'as universal standards' (Xu 2001:152)– a sentiment that is undoubtedly echoed today by increasingly powerful non-Western countries (see Aydin 2007).

While nationalism emerged in China 'well before Westerners came to East Asia' (Xu 2001:152), modern nationalism did not gain acceptance in China until the nineteenth century, when Sun Yat-sen championed the ideas of national independence free from imperial domination and the principle of equality among nations. Then, with the exception of the government's 'campaigns against "U.S. imperialism" and "Soviet hegemonism"' (Xu 2001:152), nationalism as an ideology did not gain significant traction in China until the 1990s. Nationalism is widely associated with top-down or state-affiliated discourses and used to promote a collective identity as a form of "rationalisation" that is utilised to help or hinder 'domestic and international harmony' (Haas 1986:708). In the name of 'protecting the People's Republic' under Mao Zedong, sentiments of national humility and insecurity were exploited in order to secure the loyalty of the masses and thus 'make China "physically" stronger' (Weatherley 2014:113–14). China scholars have studied nationalism during the Mao era through various perspectives, examining its role in state-building and ideological mobilisation, in establishing a 'socialist-oriented state nationalism after the civil war' in order to establish 'a sense of nationhood among all citizens' (Modongal 2016:2; see also Womack 1991). Others have investigated the ways

in which Maoist ideology promoted revolutionary nationalism and remains an influence on domestic governance and foreign relations (Meisner 1999:42).

In the post-Mao era, Party ideology steered toward a rhetoric of 'nationalism and patriotism' as opposed to 'socialism and ... communism' (M. Cheng 2019:253). During the social and economic reforms of the 1980s, China was also influenced by Pan-Asianism and developed into a 'self-critical examination of Chineseness' and, consequently, a remodelled adoration of the nation (Callahan 2004:200). Consequently, many saw this economic miracle as a sign of China's resurgence and revitalisation and, in such rationalisation, have attributed it to the country's rich civilisational heritage. The impressive degree of expansive economic development, and subsequent social progress, has widely been observed by scholars as a core factor in reinstating national pride and confronting its history of humiliation. Mirroring a change from a state of recovery to renaissance, the evolution of the economic miracle into 'economic nationalism' has effectively sent a message to the rest of the world that China can rightfully reassert itself on the international stage as a superpower (Callahan 2004:200; see also Raghuram 2022). Naturally, this has been further accelerated by heightened geopolitical tensions between China and the West (Boylan et al. 2021). Such narratives not only serve to foster national pride among the Chinese populace but also aim to redefine international perceptions of China's role in the world.

Chen Zhimin observes the transition, during the 1990s, from the 'top-down construction' of nationalistic discourses to one that is 'bottom-up' and constructed by Chinese intellectuals (Chen 2005:49–50). While public opinion polls indicate that the Chinese generally hold favourable views toward the United States, lingering suspicion over the West's motives persists, rooted in historical experiences like the Century of Humiliation. Such sentiments have been further fuelled by the Patriotic Education Campaign, which promotes a narrative of foreign threat and national resilience and thus reinforces top-down anti-Western discourse (2021; Zhao 1998). In their co-authored paper, Jonathan Sullivan and Weixiang Wang (2023) argue that the intersection of top-down "wolf warrior diplomacy" and grassroots cyber-nationalism creates bottom-up incentives for a "wolf warrior" stance, reinforced by President Xi Jinping's push to represent China's "confident rise." In official political rhetoric, it has been widely observed that President Xi frequently emphasises the concept and expression of *zhonghua wenming wuqian nian* (中华文明五千年), which translates to "Five thousand years of Chinese civilisation". In evoking this notion of a civilisational resurgence on the international stage, President Xi's speeches and official Party statements frequently reference historical

examples in his speeches, urging the Chinese people to cultivate a sense of 'historical self-confidence' that is grounded in their 'splendid civilization' (Shan 2024:32–33). This blend of historical pride, nationalism, and anti-Western sentiment reflects a strategic narrative that positions China's past and present as central to its confident rise on the global stage under President Xi's leadership.

As with other studies on the development of social and political narratives, current scholarly understandings of contemporary nationalism have examined the different top-down and bottom-up dynamics of (re)producing ideology and expression. With the decentralisation of media and cross-border news exposure, nationalism cannot be strictly tied to state propaganda as netizens 'now play a central role in how nationalism is conceived and develops' (Jiang 2012:57). As a result of such increased access to the internet, China's newfound "righteous pride" can be seen to have been projected through online circles and this has been seen in a number of discourses whereby netizens vigorously ridicule the decline of the West (Gries 2004; Weatherley 2014). This research project therefore explores how the discourse of China as a global power intersects with the anti-*baizuo* discourse, as it feeds into the broader project of China having the self-confidence to assert and boast its superiority. The increased convergence of such top-down and bottom-up forces illustrates how state-led narratives are increasingly embraced and amplified by the public, creating a feedback loop of nationalist sentiment (Kent, Ellis, and Xu 2017). The resulting synergy between official discourse and popular nationalism contributes to the entrenchment of anti-Western views, shaping China's global posture and its citizens' perceptions of foreign powers.

Although there has been significant interest in understanding 'the Chinese mind' (Allinson 1989; see also Brown and Deng 2021), much of the existing scholarship lacks a deep engagement with how Chinese nationalism is particularly articulated by netizens. Guangqiu Xu has called for Western scholarship to move beyond merely observing Chinese society and instead endeavour to comprehend 'the minds of the Chinese' (Xu 2012:124). This study therefore strives to begin filling this gap by building a new understanding of how Chinese netizens perceive the West, its 'democratic politics', and how it is 'accessed' and assessed in China's online public sphere (A. Peng et al. 2020:89; see also Johnston 2017). While the development of the Chinese internet will be discussed in the final section of this chapter, it is worth noting here that the development of media forms, such as the internet, has led to the proliferation of platforms enabling the expansion of the Chinese

public sphere, thus fostering boundless discourse, including cybernationalism (Guo 2020; see also Tai 2006). It is crucial here to situate such contemporary phenomena, like the anti-*baizuo* discourse, within the broader historical context, as anti-Western nationalism in China is far from a novel development. In *Never Forget National Humiliation*, Zheng Wang thoroughly explores the transition from internal-oriented, anti-corruption democratic social movements towards the 'external-oriented, anti-Western nationalism of the 1990s and 2000s' by critically examining the contemporary trends of people's collective memory and history education (Wang 2012:2). Through a comprehensive investigation of various forms and displays of contemporary Chinese nationalism protests to history textbooks in schools, Wang demonstrates how the study of 'historical memory is the gateway to understanding China's worldview, interests, and intentions' (Wang 2012:16). By examining anti-*baizuo* discourse as a form of anti-Western nationalism, this thesis builds on Wang's work by highlighting how the discourse is not merely an old narrative of historical memory adapted to a new platform. Instead, this thesis argues that the discourse represents a fresh manifestation of enduring trends, shaped and intensified by contemporary geopolitical developments.

Xu Guanqiu (2001, 2012) details the timeline of how specific events triggered certain responses among the Chinese population, it is equally important to account for the nature of those responses and what such sentiments are indicative of. Naturally, contemporary Chinese nationalism exhibits a natural intertwining with anti-Western sentiments, particularly evident in its modern expressions. In fact, it has been noted by some that research on the trajectory of anti-Western nationalism in China has often overlooked the underlying psychological origins of deep-seated anti-Western, and anti-white, sentiments (Kim 2024:4). Historically, nationalist rhetoric in China has often been marked by a dual narrative of resistance against perceived Western hegemony and the assertion of Chinese cultural and civilisational superiority. In the post-reform period, anti-Western nationalism in China gained momentum as the nation transitioned from Maoist isolationism to a more open but cautious engagement with the global economy. This was evident in various movements and noteworthy publications such as *China Can Say No* (中国可以说不) (Song et al. 1996) which epitomised a rising sentiment of defiance toward the West, as well as Japan, during the 1990s and 2000s. While Beijing initially supported the book's overarching thesis, following strong criticism from the US and other Asian nations, it denounced the publication as an irresponsible and misleading work, subsequently banning its circulation. Events such as the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 in particular further intensified anti-Western sentiment, as many Chinese viewed it as a deliberate act of aggression. This incident

sparked widespread protests, with students and citizens taking to the streets in Beijing and other cities, denouncing the United States and NATO. Similarly, the 2008 Beijing Olympics, as well as the recent 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics (Lehman-Ludwig et al. 2023), though celebrated as a showcase of China's rising global status, also became a flashpoint for nationalist sentiment as Western media coverage was often perceived as biased or overly critical, particularly concerning issues like Tibet and human rights (Garrity 2019).

With the emergence and evolution of these new mediums of expression, Chinese nationalism has gained access to expanded channels for influence, dissemination, and reinforcement. These platforms enable a multitude of voices and perspectives to actively shape and contribute to the ongoing discourse on national identity and cultural pride. Anti-Western nationalism also emerged in response to perceived Western "meddling" in Chinese affairs, such as criticisms of the "One-China Policy" regarding Taiwan or the handling of protests in Hong Kong. These countless examples illustrate how anti-Western nationalism evolved in the post-reform era, shaped by both real and perceived grievances, and served as a rallying point for national pride and resistance to foreign criticism. As this thesis seeks to investigate, the anti-*baizuo* discourse is indeed part of a broader tradition of Chinese nationalism that incorporates both historical and contemporary dimensions of anti-Western sentiment.

Notably, such observations demonstrate how nationalism can be conceptualised as a social and iterative process that is 'inherently reactive' (Brittingham 2007:148). Reactive nationalism, as discussed in this context, is understood as a form of nationalism primarily driven by the need to 'defend its identity against' perceived external threats or pressures from 'the other' (Brittingham 2005:136). Reactive nationalism, as discussed in this context, is understood as a form of nationalism primarily driven by perceived external threats or pressures, often manifesting as a response to foreign dominance, interference, or criticism This conceptualisation builds upon existing literature on nationalism, including Anthony Smith's (1991) understanding of nationalism as a dynamic and adaptive process, and John Hutchinson's (2017) framing of cultural nationalism as a reaction to perceived threats to a nation's identity or sovereignty. Contemporary Chinese nationalism, in particular, has developed within a unique historical context, shaped significantly by the Century of Humiliation and the experience of foreign imperialism (Fewsmith 1991:37). These historical grievances have fostered a form of nationalism that remains sensitive to external influences, particularly from Western powers. Michael Brittingham's (2007) paper explores Chinese nationalism through a constructivist lens, emphasising that it is shaped largely by interactions between states rather than being purely a product of

domestic political forces. He argues that Chinese nationalism is often a reactive response to international events, rather than a top-down manipulation by the Chinese government, as maintained in much of the scholarship on Chinese nationalism. In doing so, Brittingham challenges traditional views that nationalism is mainly state-engineered and highlights how external pressures and international criticism can trigger nationalist sentiments. This is particularly enlightening for the purposes of this study which explores how moments of international friction or global crises, namely the COVID-19 pandemic, can fuel nationalistic reactions among Chinese citizens. By focusing on the reactive nature of Chinese nationalism, Brittingham's analysis complements studies on how China's national identity, troubled history, and sense of pride are often intensified in response to external criticism or perceived threats, further deepening our understanding of nationalism in global contexts. In other words, reactive nationalism fulfils a dual role, acting both as a defensive mechanism and as an ideological instrument. Reactive nationalism is defined by its oppositional stance, often framing foreign actors as others against which the nation must unify. It is within this framework that this thesis explores the mobilisation of *baizuo* as a manifestation of anti-Western nationalism in China.

Relatedly, and crucial to this framework, post-colonial nationalism in China is not only a reaction to the legacy of Humiliation but also a reassertion of sovereignty, cultural pride, and the desire to reclaim a central role on the global stage. This thesis adopts Chenchen Zhang's definition of postcolonial nationalism as the creation, circulation, and mobilisation of national identity narratives rooted in victimhood or subaltern status, shaped by a (post-)colonial relationship to hegemonic powers, i.e. the West (Zhang 2024:2). This research does so through its examination of how netizens' defensive posture reflects China's dual efforts to assert itself as a modern global power while preserving its unique historical and cultural heritage that transcends geographical borders and statehood. Within the framework of anti-Western discourse, nationalism emerges as a fusion of rejecting Western dominance and reaffirming traditional Chinese values and identity. Reactive and postcolonial nationalism offer valuable perspectives for analysing the interplay between Chinese nationalism and anti-*baizuo* discourse in the broader context of global tensions and the COVID-19 pandemic. As the subsequent chapters will demonstrate, netizens' use and understanding of the term *baizuo* exemplifies how reactive nationalism operates in the digital age, leveraging social media to amplify opposition to perceived Western hegemony. By analysing this discourse, the study aims to expand the understanding of how nationalism evolves and adapts in response to new mediums of communication and global dynamics. In doing

so, it highlights how reactive nationalism in China, while rooted in historical grievances, has developed distinct characteristics that reflect contemporary political and cultural realities.

Before addressing anti-Westernism in China, it is crucial to note that the concept of "the West" can be expressed in various ways, and therefore is not limited to the arguably most commonly known term, *xifang* (西方). Given the term's usage across different contexts and political discussions, it is important to recognise that "the West" can also be referred to as *xifang shijie* (西方世界), *oumei* (欧美), and *taixi* (泰西). In addition to these terms, "the West" is also referred to more specifically by certain countries and geographical regions, as it is detailed in Chapter 4. Due to its roots primarily in anti-imperialism, the widespread presence of anti-Westernism has been extensively researched and examined in various contexts, particularly in discussions on Orientalism and Occidentalism (Huntington 1993; Pieterse and Peters 2012). While many have looked at anti-Westernism in the specific context of current geopolitical tensions between the West and countries like China and Russia, some have examined the development of anti-Westernism across the Asian continent. In *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia* (2007), Cemil Aydin's exposes the epistemological constraints inherent in Orientalist knowledge categories, particularly of Eastern and Western civilisations, and how these constraints have influenced not only the contradictions and political entanglements within anti-Western discourses but also modern interpretations of anti-Western trends (see also Buzan and Acharya 2022). Although netizens contributing towards anti-*baizuo* discourse might reflect such anti-Western sentiment as mentioned above, it is important to understand how the anti-*baizuo* discourse aligns with both Chinese nationalism and broader anti-Westernism, both within China and on the global stage.

While they focus on both the top-down and bottom-up dynamics of anti-Westernism on Chinese social media, Anna Lehman-Ludwig et al. (2023) explores how such social media platforms frame the contest between a rising China and a failing West which reproduces a discourse that competes with the negative portrayals of China outside the country. Bearing this in mind, this research develops a better understanding of how netizens engage with international issues related to Western powers and how these interactions shape broader narratives of Chinese identity and global relations. Therefore, this research provides a more focused exploration of specific discourses and narratives within the Chinese online sphere, complementing such studies on anti-Western sentiments. Critical engagement with this literature on anti-Westernism in China alongside

scholarship on anti-Westernism offers a broader conceptual framework to effectively analyse the emergence, evolution, and intersections of anti-*baizuo* discourse with broader narratives of anti-Western sentiment.

Given the central focus of this thesis on the development of the anti-*baizuo* discourse in relation to COVID-19, the concept of "pandemic nationalism" emerges as the most pertinent framework for analysis. Pandemic nationalism, particularly in the Chinese context, encapsulates a distinctive 'sense of national superiority … based on China's success in fighting the epidemic' (Wang and Tao 2021:544; see also Chen et al. 2023). This notion not only aligns closely with the anti-*baizuo* discourse but also situates it within broader narratives of national pride and resilience during the pandemic. However, it is also crucial to note here that pandemic nationalism itself is understood as a form of reactive nationalism because of the ways in which it arises in response to external critiques of China's handling of COVID-19 and the broader perception of Western countries' failures to manage the pandemic effectively. It reflects a defensive posture where national identity and pride are reinforced in reaction to perceived threats to China's global reputation. The pandemic served as a unique moment for China to showcase its governance model and capacity for crisis management, contrasting it with the perceived disarray of Western democracies. As this thesis demonstrates, this reactive dynamic is evident in how netizens leverage the anti-*baizuo* discourse to assert the superiority of China's system while dismissing Western liberal values as inadequate or hypocritical in addressing global crises. While other terms such as "biopolitical nationalism" (de Kloet, Jian, and Yiu 2020), and "medical nationalism" (Wang and Tao 2021:526) offer valuable insights into pandemic-related nationalistic expressions, they focus on broader or more structural dimensions, such as prioritising domestic healthcare needs over international collaboration. Pandemic nationalism, however, directly connects to the public's perception of China's global standing and its triumph over Western nations in pandemic management, making it particularly relevant to understanding how anti-*baizuo* narratives resonate within and reinforce this sentiment. Consequently, the pandemic marked a boost in public attitudes and perceptions of China, and recent publications have demonstrably shed light on this by investigating how nationalism was exploited as a unifying force during the public health crisis (C. Zhang 2020a; Jaworsky and Qiaoan 2021; Gui 2021; Chen et al. 2023). For instance, Florian Schneider's (2021) article on representations of nationhood amid the pandemic delves into how various actors shaped, disseminated, and contested visual depictions of the Chinese nation. While investigating how official authorities infused visual portrayals of a nation in crisis with emotional appeal, Schneider explores how critics

repurposed these visual cues to serve their own agendas. In addition to exploring how nationhood is depicted in propagandist circles within China, Schneider's paper also poses valuable concepts and questions in relation to this research in that it also demonstrates citizens' perceptions and representations of nationhood and identity from the grassroots level.

In the specific context of the COVID-19 pandemic, China's role and identity on the international stage was further scrutinised due to heightened global attention on the origins of the virus and perceptions of China's response to the outbreak (Yuan 2020). In response, the Chinese government, despite the accusations of human rights abuses regarding its authoritarian public health policy, reasserted and defended itself through the tactical and 'discursive construction of positive "self" and negative "others,"' underpinning nationalistic narratives (Yang et al. 2021:1). As a consequence, tensions between China and the West at large have exacerbated differences in public perceptions, economic ties, and strategic trust. This recently developed body of scholarship enhances the comprehension of how global events, international relations, and ideological debates intersect, providing essential insights for analysing and contextualising anti-*baizuo* discourse within the contemporary discourse on China-West relations. This framework is particularly pertinent for understanding how anti-*baizuo* discourse intersects with broader narratives surrounding nationalism and global responses to public health challenges and what shapes perceptions of government competence. To set the stage for examining these expressions of collective and national identity during health crises, the following section of this literature review will delve into China's perspective on global affairs, its influence on Sino-American relations, and its reflection on its role as a major player in international affairs.

This section of the literature review has addressed the scholarship that has explored how the revival of nationalism in China during and post-COVID-19 is shaped by an intricate interplay of domestic and international factors, including perceptions of success, responses to external criticism, and tactical narratives fostered by the government (see Zhang 2022; Morris, Li, and Ruan 2023). Given the role of perceptions of the 'Self' and 'Other' in shaping Chinese nationalism (Suzuki 2007), it is crucial that this chapter situates the research project in the relevant literature that elucidates the ways in which Chinese nationalism is articulated in the context of international politics. Thus, the next section explores Chinese nationalism and anti-Westernism in greater depth to establish a framework for understanding how the anti-*baizuo* discourse reflects perceptions of political systems, global current events, and the broader world.

China and its identity on the international stage

To develop a better understanding of the Chinese gaze toward the West, this section of the chapter engages with the existing scholarship on Sino-West relations and China's 'great-power' identities (Boon 2018). Equally, it is imperative to speak to the concern that a significant proportion of literature on this theme is irrefutably partisan and reflected in predominantly North American hawkishness on one side (Layne 2020) and 'largely Sino-centric and anti-Western' Chinese scholarship on the other (Ho 2021:209). To situate this research within the broader context of Chinese identity and its role in global politics, this section delves into several key areas of scholarship. First, it examines the Chinese perspective in global affairs, exploring how China views its position and responsibilities in the international community. This involves understanding China's historical experiences, cultural values, and political ideologies, which all shape its approach to global interactions and governance. It then addresses the implications of China's perspective on Sino-American relations, which are a crucial component of global politics. It considers how China's views and policies impact its relationship with the United States, especially regarding issues such as trade, security, and diplomatic engagement. Finally, the section reflects on China's self-perception as a significant and equally worthy key player on the international stage, which includes how China sees its role in shaping global norms, contributing to international organisations, and engaging with other countries. Ultimately, this section serves to address and highlight the country's aspirations, ambitions, and strategies for maintaining and enhancing its influence in global affairs. Through this comprehensive exploration, the following situates this research study in the rich and evolving scholarship on Chinese identity and China's place in global politics, offering insights into the multifaceted ways in which China navigates its growing prominence on the world stage.

Regarding scholarly discussions on the Chinese perspective and its self-reflections, there is a wealth of literature on China's global identity, China's long search for its place on the international stage (Dittmer 1991), and contemporary developments of exceptionalism. Exceptionalism, in the context of states and nationalism, is the belief that a country or society is "exceptional" and distinctive from others in a way that also implies superiority (Fredrickson 1995:593). In *China's Global Identity*, Boon considers China's role and responsibilities, specifically in the context of the growing perspective that 'China is basically non-status quo

or revisionist in orientation and trajectory' (Boon 2018:xiv). Boon proposes that the construction of a great power identity requires 'two key sources of role ideas: self and other', both of which seemingly promises a better understanding of the state's identity and its self-perception (Boon 2018:xviii). Given the focus of this research on the Chinese perspective, particularly towards the West and Western liberalism, the notion of Self and Other are crucial to grasp the dynamics of nationalism and collective identity. In *China's Worldview and Chinese Exceptionalism* (Ho 2021), Benjamin Ho conducts interviews and discourse analysis to provide a comprehensive account of Chinese political worldviews. In particular, in his research on the Chinese political elite and scholarly circles, Ho asserts that 'a deep sense of exceptionalism is highly pervasive within the Chinese worldview' (Ho 2021:16; see also Callahan 2023). Reflecting on elites' perceptions of their country and people, Ho's analysis on the discourse of exceptionalism explains why and how it is reproduced by leaders to 'articulate a sense of difference ("we are unlike the West") while accentuating claims to superiority ("we are better than the West")' (Ho 2021:208). Xiaomei Chen's (1995) *Occidentalism* explores how post-Mao China (1978–1988) redefined its cultural relationship with the West, challenging traditional notions of Western imperialism. Chen argues that the appropriation of Western discourse, termed "Occidentalism," can be politically and ideologically liberating for non-Western cultures. In doing so, Chen situates Sinology within broader Western theoretical frameworks, namely postcolonialism and feminism, highlighting the symbiotic relationship between the Orient and Occident. Her work proposes a new model for comparative cultural studies that reimagines cross-cultural appropriation as a dynamic and reciprocal process. Much like Chen's work, this study does not aim to provide a comprehensive history of Occidentalism, or rather anti-Westernism, in modern China, marked by a complex relationship with the West. Instead, it offers a focused exploration of key moments when Chinese realities intersected with the Western Other.

As discussed in the previous section of this chapter, recent literature on nationalism has demonstrated how biopolitics has evolved into an arena of competition and rivalry, and is characterised by nationalistic, and even local power, dynamics, especially in China as well as in other East Asian countries (de Kloet et al. 2020; Woods et al. 2020). As outlined in the previous section, historical narratives play a crucial role in shaping national pride, collective identity, and a sense of continuity with the past, which influences how individuals perceive themselves and their nation's place in the world. For instance, by focusing on the narration and education of history in contemporary China, Zheng Wang's (2012) *Never Forget National Humiliation* sheds

light on the perspectives of the young patriots who will shape the trajectory of this emerging global power in the twenty-first century. Due to the current political climate, an overwhelming majority of recent literature has focused on the breakdown of Sino-American relations which is reflected in the literature covered here. Drawing on a collection of party documents and other primary sources, one of America's most renowned China hawk Rush Doshi's book *The Long Game* (2021) argues that China has, for many decades, been playing a tactically long game – observing the five waves of American decline – to replace the United States as the hegemon. Declinism, the belief in the 'inevitability' of societal decay, is a central concept to understanding how societies view themselves as well as how they are perceived by others (Dumbrell 2010:17). Despite arguing that the party-state itself has been calculating an ominous grand strategy, Doshi emphasises the need for scholars to develop the currently 'incomplete' scholarship on wider or popular discourses on the West and, specifically within that, the American decline (Doshi 2021:332). Taking a far more balanced approach to foreign relations, Richard Lebow and Feng Zhang's *Taming Sino-American Rivalry* (2020) is an insightful and, for lack of a better word, uplifting piece of work that addresses the shortcomings of both the US and China over the last decade. For the purpose of this research, the authors highlight the importance of acknowledging that 'the Sino-American competition is more a clash of egos than of interests' (Lebow and Zhang 2020:3). Lebow and Zhang provide a deep understanding of public opinion, rationale, and concerns for self-esteem, which are central factors that fuel the ongoing tensions between the two superpowers. This is especially important, as discussed earlier, because it underscores the nature of contemporary nationalism in a global environment where tensions between two superpowers—China and the US—have remained heightened for some time. Both nations are engaged in a strategic competition, where maintaining international prestige and "saving face" are paramount. In this context, nationalism becomes a tool for asserting dominance and unity, as well as for reinforcing domestic legitimacy. It reflects not only a defensive posture in response to external pressures but also an active effort to shape global narratives. The interplay between nationalism and these geopolitical dynamics reveals how national pride and identity are mobilised in a high-stakes environment, where both superpowers are keen to project strength and resilience in the face of perceived threats or challenges. This thesis explores how netizens' involvement in the anti-*baizuo* discourse provides a platform for articulating their perceptions and critiques of these ongoing developments.

Despite the historical nature of such themes and concepts, scholarship has primarily focused on certain narratives in the context of contemporary anxieties surrounding China-West relations. In Franck Billé and Sören Urbansky's (2018) *Yellow Perils: China Narratives in the Contemporary World*, they focus on the racialisation of hostile perceptions and narratives of the Chinese population which continues to preserve the relevance and timeliness of the moniker "yellow peril". By examining how China has historically been perceived in and by the West, the book addresses the development of how the Chinese see themselves and 'how they see China's place in the world' (Billé and Urbansky 2018:27). One of the most significant chapters in the book is by Urbansky, who concludes that changes in Sinophobic phrases and terms resulted in changes in 'new ways of self-perception, and others' changing perceptions' among the Chinese (Billé and Urbansky 2018:263). Urbansky ultimately argues that looking at 'Chinese responses to these motifs' reflects how 'anti-Asian and Sinophobic ideologies, such as the Yellow Peril and the China Threat Theory, were not monopolized by the West but adapted in diverse contexts in China and other parts of Asia as well' (Billé and Urbansky 2018:263). Similarly, this project examines how the anti-*baizuo* discourse is situated in the context of contemporary concepts and expressions of anti-Western attitudes. Xu Guangqiu's work (2001, 2012) importantly highlights that a noteworthy proportion of the Chinese population detest Eurocentric interpretations of China, a particularly significant issue in North American scholarship, whereby Western interpretations are often made in the vein of Cold War theory. Indeed, Xu argues, North American scholarship on China often reflects North American self-perceptions of ascendancy – particularly with regard to free markets, democracy, and morally superior attitudes toward international responsibilities and concerns – which are projected through judgements on and criticisms of China against these standards. Xu argues that these deeply entrenched biases perpetuate the segregation of 'the Western public from the reality of China' (Xu 2012:124). One text in particular that allows for a deeper understanding and contextualisation of contemporary popular Chinese perspectives is Jennifer Pan and Xu Yiqing's paper on 'China's Ideological Spectrum' which scrutinises the results of the China Political Coordinate System Test (中国政治坐标系测试), a survey that effectively measures the 'beliefs and preferences of the public' (Pan and Xu 2018:258). While the survey results are not wholly representative, and not without their selective biases, Pan and Xu argue that 'those who prefer authoritarian rule are more likely to support nationalism, state intervention in the economy, and traditional social values' (Pan and Xu 2018:254). By reflecting on such findings and what drives such sentiments among the Chinese population, this thesis expands upon the existing literature on 'the configuration

of preferences in nondemocratic contexts', especially in China (Pan and Xu 2018:272). Though much of the literature on this explores how Chinese citizens express their opinions on domestic concerns, by investigating perceptions of the West in the Chinese online public sphere, this thesis is concerned with examining what netizens think of the West, and the *baizuo* in particular, as well as what they think of themselves by extension, or inference.

With regard to anti-*baizuo* discourse, the overarching critique seems to be that the West – despite recent socio-political developments which appear indicative of decline – continues portraying itself as morally righteous and "correct" in its ways of managing domestic issues and global ones. As addressed in the above section on contemporary manifestations of Chinese nationalism, such assessments indicate that Western exceptionalism, defined as being destined to be the global leader, is both heavily and widely criticised in China. Ho's promotion of a non-monolithic conceptualisation of Chinese society and opinions highlights the need to address and analyse 'the interplay between global forces and individual appropriation of these ideas' which is relevant to this analysis of anti-Western discourses (Ho 2021:68). Ho's analysis on the state's promotion of ethnic community, in retaliation to the professed superiority of the West, is central to understanding processes of "naturalising history" which results in the 'patriotic/nationalist narrative' that accentuates the 'differences between "people like us" and "people who are different from us"' (Ho 2021:70). Considering the nature and meaning of the neologism *baizuo*, it is crucial to draw on Ho's work; by criticising American and Western socio-political developments and attitudes, netizens simultaneously reflect their own pride and sense of superiority, if not exceptionalism.

By exploring how netizens articulate their perceptions of the *baizuo* in this sense, this thesis explores what William Callahan calls "Chinese visions of self and Other" (Callahan 2023) in order to conceptualise how the discourse resonates with existing notions and sentiments of anti-Westernism and nationalism in China. These visions of self and Other are highly relevant to framing this thesis because it explores how identity and cultural relations are shaped by the dynamic interplay between social and international relations. Specifically, he very critically highlights the importance of 'identity, culture, and even civilization-states' and emphasises on how those take shape (Callahan 2023:2080). In the context of the anti-*baizuo*, this helps to analyse how the discourse manifests within Chinese online spaces. It also allows for a better understanding of how such self-

reflections articulate broader cultural and ideological responses to global power structures, particularly in how China navigates and critiques Western liberalism and constructs its identity through interactions with the Other.

The rise of Chinese nationalists has been marked by an increased assertiveness in expressing patriotic sentiments, which are predominantly aligned with government narratives. Simultaneously, nationalists have also leveraged the expansion of the internet, particularly social media platforms, to amplify nationalist rhetoric, engage in political discourse, and defend China's interests against perceived external criticism. By exploring such developments, we might be better equipped to understand how the Chinese population 'seeks to relate with the world' (Ho 2021:16). This research seeks to explore the anti-*baizuo* critiques in relation to these sentiments and ideas of superiority, or exceptionalism, and what such findings reveal about how netizens appropriate discourses to produce their own. By examining the language used in the discourse, this research will develop an understanding of what Chinese netizens argue, believe in, and argue for, based on their criticisms of Western liberalism and its followers. The thesis thus considers the anti-*baizuo* discourse as one manifestation of Chinese self-perception and netizens' perspectives on China in comparison to the West. Such a contribution is not only important for the purpose of understanding contemporary sentiments and trends in popular discourses but is furthermore crucial to understanding the links between China, Chinese identities, nationalism, and the global identity China is navigating. In order to explore how this manifested in the anti-*baizuo* discourse, the following section addresses the swelling body of scholarship on the online public sphere and the consequent development of Chinese netizen culture.

Political discourse and the (online) public sphere in China

To better understand how nationalism is expressed and reproduced in online spheres, this project engages with scholarship on the developments of netizen culture in the specific context of the Chinese internet. The first theme of literature that this section addresses is the nature of the Chinese internet and how it facilitates netizen culture to thrive in the ways that it has permitted. Secondly, this section considers the construction of identities through other studies on digital nationalism, cybernationalists, and anti-Western discourse in the Chinese context, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, to address how existing conceptualisations of anti-*baizuo* sentiments are "anti-Western" and, through Self-Other reflections, this section addresses the scholarship on Chinese civic engagement online and public attitudes towards international issues, particularly

those involving Western powers, thereby shedding light on how this thesis contributes an understanding of the Chinese perspective on Western affairs.

Social media and netizen culture in China

If Internet Studies is the interdisciplinary field that focuses on the social, political, and technical, among other dimensions of the Internet and associated information and communication technologies (Brügger 2012:102), Social Media Studies can be understood to be the sub-field under which scholars investigate the practices and types of cultures on specific platforms. Over one decade ago, Charles Ess and William Dutton (2013) co-authored the introductory essay for the fifteenth volume of *New Media & Society*, tracing the genealogy of Internet Studies, its rapid and constant evolution, and highlighted the ways in which internet-based research will develop under existing frameworks and methodologies. In the paper they highlighted that, as a subsection of Internet Studies, Social media research is an undoubtedly rich and diverse field of study as it encompasses many different types of methodologies and allows for understanding a wide range of human behaviour, interactions, and trends on online platforms. From "web historiography" and "digital history" (Brügger 2012), to globalisation and the impact of digital media (Jin 2021), there is significant range in terms of what internet research includes and covers. Crucially, Ess and Dutton highlighted the call to arms that was Elaine Yuan's (2013) paper in the issue, on the culturalist critique of "online community" and how online spaces and cultures within and across East Asian societies differ from the West. In the paper, Yuan highlights the limitations of purely economic and technological logics in explaining the diversity of 'lifeworlds constituting the global community' (Yuan 2013:676). She also advocates for a culturalist approach, arguing that the East Asian experience, alongside the integration of new media into daily life, shows that communities and social interactions must be understood within their cultural and historical contexts, where the virtual and physical realms converge. Eight years later, Yuan's *The Web of Meaning: The Internet in a Changing Chinese Society* (2021) was published. In *The Web of Meaning,* she critically examines the internet's role as symbolic spaces for the evolving cultural practices of privacy, nationalism, and the network market, among other aspects, in China. One of the book's key contributions, which is particularly relevant to this study, is its analysis of cybernationalism in China. It illustrates how social media has become a crucial platform for the expression and crystallisation of nationalist sentiment, particularly in moments of geopolitical conflict, such as the 2012

Diaoyu Islands dispute. In contrast to Western social media platforms, Yuan demonstrates how Chinese social media has increasingly become a venue where nationalist discourse is tied to broader concerns about China's cultural identity and political representation. In the book's conclusion, she notes how, 'In exuberant online discourses, nationalist imaginations that emerged portrayed China as a rising power in a clash with other major players' (Yuan 2021:145). Due to the unique characteristics and dynamics of Chinese social media, this literature review concentrates specifically on the Chinese internet and its platforms, rather than global social media more broadly. This focus allows for a more nuanced understanding of how these platforms shape and reflect the distinct socio-political landscape in China.

At the time of writing this thesis, China has a total population of over 1.4 billion people. Out of this vast population, it is estimated that almost 1.1 billion individuals are internet users, which represents well over three-quarters of the total population. Considering China's relatively high urban-rural divide (Zhong et al. 2022), the population's high level of technological connectivity has meant that the internet has profoundly transformed China. In ways that are widely deemed unmatched, internet-based technologies drive the country's ongoing economic development, connect its massive population, and support its development as a highly digitised economy (ChinaPower Project 2019). Many scholars have studied the various aspects of China's complex communications network. From e-commerce to social media, the online environment is one that is continuously evolving and shaping the future of the nation's digital landscape. However, quite notoriously, Beijing also uses the complex communications network to exert and maintain political control by suppressing opposition and limiting freedom of speech. Using the case study of WeChat, Plantin and de Seta's (2019) findings show that while the "infrastructuralisation" of its model has had unbeatable success as a social media platform, it is ultimately shaped by markedly techno-nationalist media regulations and an increasingly overt cyber-sovereignty agenda.

China's media landscape – encompassing both official outlets like CCTV and Xinhua, and social media platforms such as WeChat and Weibo, formerly known as *Sina Weibo*, plays a crucial role in the country's political dynamics. Official media disseminates news that are approved by, are thus in line with, the Party's policies and achievements, while social media usually allows for grassroots activism and public discourse on local issues, though this must also be in line with the Party's narratives. Naturally, both forms of media are subject to stringent government censorship. For instance, some have explored this by observing how

the government selectively filters content so as to inundate timelines with desired content, effectively manipulating the algorithm, and "distracting" social media users (King, Pan, and Roberts 2017) and "censorship by flooding" (Goron and Bolsover 2020). Primarily, discussions that criticise the Party, advocate for democratic reforms, or delve into sensitive subjects such as Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan, and the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident are strictly prohibited as they are considered highly politically sensitive and are therefore closely monitored by the government. Any attempt to address these issues, whether in media, social media, or public forums, is swiftly censored to maintain the Party's control and prevent the spread of dissenting viewpoints. As Bingchun Meng (2018) explores in *The Politics of Chinese Media: Consensus and Contestation*, the internet has emerged as a battleground for ideological disputes and influences the conduct of political negotiations. Such measures ensure that while there is space for bottom-up political engagement, it remains within the boundaries set by the Party. Equally, Weibo itself has been well-studied as the platform itself also, while playing into state policy and narratives, managed online contention through the tactical use of subtle strategies, in order to advance its own commercial interests (see Vuori and Paltemaa 2015; Li 2023).

To provide an understanding of online civil society as a construction of netizens' identities and expressed attitudes, it is important to address the body of scholarship that contextualises netizen culture as a site of censorship. Therefore, to contextualise this research within relevant discussions, the following section explores the literature on online patriotism, examining its spectrum from state-sponsored or mobilised activities to those who view it as a platform for resistance (see Tai 2015). There is great contention over whether a "public sphere" has ever truly existed in Chinese society due to its predominantly authoritarian nature, which by definition means that 'there has never been a time in which individuals could express their opinions "freely"' (Zhou 2006:9). However, it is imperative that this thesis also addresses the dynamics of netizen culture whereby influence – including but not limited to state intervention as described above – from fellow netizens and social media users also plays a significant part. Here, it is important to highlight the significance of echo chambers and the dynamics of online expression whereby media scholars have researched and observed the ways in which online expression, particularly those during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Persily, Tucker, and Barberá 2020; Jiang, Ren, and Ferrara 2021; Wang and Qian 2021), is also (self)-reinforced by the individual whose opinions and beliefs are validated by readership, words of affirmation, and likes, which ultimately is a form of self-influence (Cho et al. 2018).

Throughout this thesis, it will become evident that the anti-*baizuo* discourse distinguishes itself from other online grassroots movements like Weibo feminism (see Xue and Rose 2022; Gu and Heemsbergen 2023) and environmental activism (see Auer and Fu 2015), which usually see the digital sphere as a site of resistance. Unlike such movements, which often challenge established norms or advocate for progressive change, the anti-*baizuo* discourse aligns more closely with nationalistic expressions of Chinese identity and pride and critiques of external ideological influences, particularly those associated with Western liberalism. Rather than resisting authority or systemic structures, as in the case of feminist and environmentalist movements for instance, this example of political discourse reinforces existing nationalistic narratives and reasserts cultural boundaries in response to perceived external threats. In other words, the anti-*baizuo* discourse does not present any challenge or threat to the government because it focuses on criticising individuals whom the government itself also critiques. By comparing such movements, it becomes clear that anti-*baizuo* discourse is more reactive and confrontational; while Weibo feminism and environmentalism are proactive movements seeking social change and improvement, anti-Western discourse poses no political threat or critique to the state. As Chapter 6 will discuss in more detail, official state media seemingly avoids using charged terms like "*baizuo*," despite their relatively non-sensitive nature in terms of explicit political correctness. While it is unclear as to why this may be the case, there are several plausible explanations. Firstly, these terms originate from Chinese internet culture and serve to criticise Western ideologies, which may diverge from the narrative preferred by the state. Secondly, employing such terms could further burden diplomatic relations with Western nations by explicitly endorsing and promoting internal critique. Indeed, state media maintains control over public discourse and so media platforms, like Weibo, may avoid promoting certain topics and buzzwords that could highlight societal issues or criticisms not aligned with official narratives. Chenchen Zhang notably argues that despite somewhat diverging from the state's official ideology and policies, anti-*baizuo* commentary 'generally defends the legitimacy of authoritarian rule by positing that security and stability take priority over individual rights and liberty' and thus 'coincides with the official narratives that criticise universal values and advocate greater confidence over the Chinese regime (*zhidu zixin*)' (C. Zhang 2020b:108). Therefore, while "*baizuo*" itself may not be politically sensitive, its usage in official channels could conflict with broader strategic goals and messaging. Thus, the absence of censorship of "*baizuo*" could imply that, unlike other heavily censored topics, the government strategically permits anti-Western discourses like this to thrive without directly implicating

themselves. Nonetheless, the lack of censorship is certainly interesting to note here considering the broadly combative censorship of the digital public sphere.

By exploring the depths and limits of online politics and nationalism on the Chinese internet, Yongming Zhou (2006) rightly dismisses the relevance of Habermas' ideal notion of the public sphere in the Chinese context. Such analysis crucially highlights the limitations of social media research within the Chinese internet while also emphasising the need to research the field site with a keen and close eye to nuanced and complex dynamics, due to the possibilities of the 'misuse and abuse' of technology that Zhou suggests 'could impede the emergence of an embryonic public sphere' (Zhou 2006:239). While acknowledging that the CCP has a record of promoting certain cultures and discourses online, which in turn resulted in the stimulation of certain sentiments, Ying Jiang's (2012) *Cyber-Nationalism in China* strongly argues against the simple and binary prediction that the internet does or does not lead to democratisation but, much like Karsten Giese (2004), proposes that it allows internet users to express themselves through more creative means (see also Guo 2020). Equally, in her book chapter, Marina Svensson problematises "connectivity" and so-called civic engagement on Chinese social media through an exploration of Weibo and analyses the different forms such engagement can take, beyond the generalisations of mere "clicktivism" or "slacktivism," (Svensson 2016:49). Indeed, as revealed by the findings of this thesis, including Weibo users' engagement with trending news and hashtags, as well as interactions in comment sections (see Ng and Han 2018; Alafwan, Siallagan, and Putro 2023; Biri, Hekanaho, and Palander-Collin 2023), it is evident how the concept of *baizuo* itself is subject to significant contestation and thus an example of such creative and political expression.

It is widely acknowledged that most scholarly works on cybernationalism 'emphasize the distinctly non-state nature of online nationalism' (Fang and Repnikova 2018:2165). One of the most commonly asked questions regarding nationalism is the issue of where discourses are produced and stimulated, specifically whether they are conjured from the 'top-down' or from the 'bottom-up?' (Chen et al. 2019). In their quantitative method-based paper, Chen et al. adopt a network agenda-setting investigation into Chinese nationalism on Weibo to 'examine nationalist issue networks of different actors on social media' (2019:513). While their study is of a quantitative nature, the authors' conclusions are of great significance for this research as their findings indicate that the output of influencers, also known as bloggers, significantly differs from those posted by organisational accounts and are even more influential due to the audience outreach. Due to Weibo

being a microblogging platform, it is vital that this study scrutinises the role of bloggers and influencers, rather than those employed or affiliated with the state (see Han 2015; Fang and Repnikova 2018), in terms of contributing toward and shaping discourses, which effectively influences their followers' identities and beliefs (see Huang and Sun 2014). This is relevant for this research, given that the anti-*baizuo* discourse is one that is predominantly, if not entirely, coined and used by netizens as opposed to state-affiliated media accounts (Q. Huang 2021).

In Françoise Mengin's *Cyber China*, Karsten Giese explores how the technological revolution in China has created new public spaces for discourse and how the internet 'facilitates the widespread exchange of opinions and public discourse' (Giese 2004:23). By focusing on the growth of bulletin board systems – software that allows users to direct message, read, and contribute to news and bulletins – Giese studies how platforms and networks in China 'provide individuals with ample space for self-realization' which have resulted in new forms of identity construction (Giese 2004:23). As this project also seeks to address netizen agency, specifically how Chinese social media users express and direct their sentiments beyond the confines of domestic issues, Giese provides insightful analysis on how constructions of identity manifest in the cyberspace. As with *The Power of The Internet in China* (Yang 2009), Giese also demonstrates how the internet has become empowering for those seeking to express their opinions to, and with, an audience beyond their daily interactions. Similarly, Lei Ya-Wen argues that, despite China's seemingly all-prevailing authoritarianism, the internet enables a decentralised media system that '[contributes] to a more critical and politicized citizenry in China's cyberspace' (Lei 2011:291). Some have claimed that cross-border news consumption provides opportunities for netizens to 'collect information about alternative political systems', posing a potential threat to authoritarian states like China (Jiang 2012:7). Alternatively, Han Rongbin's *Contesting Cyberspace in China* explores the complexities behind 'the power of the Internet' and claims that the internet is 'far less threatening than many had anticipated' and has only resulted in the 'maintenance of the status quo' (Han 2018:xiii). Ultimately, this research cannot establish the motivations behind, nor the legitimacy of, netizens' engagements and expressions. However, this does not impact the importance of studying the internet as it offers scholars a 'first-rate window onto Internet politics' and thus reveals a variety of trends and phenomena (Han 2018:7).

Given such diversity, close ethnographic studies of internet users can provide more intimate and detailed insights on the role of social media and the internet in people's everyday life. The University College London Department of Anthropology's monograph series on social media usage – of which two are based in China (McDonald 2016; Wang 2016) – highlights how various groups and platforms have been researched in order to understand *Why We Post* (Miller et al. 2019). The books respectively explore *Social Media in Rural China* (McDonald 2016) and *Social Media in Industrial China* (Wang 2016) and, together, provide an understanding of how different social media platforms are used by certain demographics and audiences in China. Reflecting on her own research, Lei proposes that, regardless of not knowing precisely who posts and why, research must explore the 'mechanisms producing the consequences' (Lei 2011). Reflecting upon this scholarship that looks at political discourses in the online public sphere, it is clear that there is a need to account for how, and in what ways, these discussions manifest and develop. Reflecting on the importance of Weibo as a research site, Eileen Le Han asks the question, 'What do changing discourses about Weibo tell us about the changing landscape of Chinese social media and the public life of Chinese people in this transitional society?' (Han 2019:380; see also Yuan 2021).

While it is challenging to precisely know the details of specific Weibo users, it is widely accepted among researchers that Weibo is most commonly used and favoured by a young adult demographic and tend to be 'better educated than the population as a whole' (Dickson 2021:193; see also Koetse 2015). Describing the younger generations of Chinese society, Paul Nesbitt-Larking and Alfred Chan argue that Chinese youth, beyond 'mere rebellion or discontent', have 'increasingly become integrated into the international youth culture' (Nesbitt-Larking and Chan 1997:151). With increased cross-border news consumption online, the authors found that younger demographics have grown openly expressive in their criticisms toward certain countries like the United States and Japan (see also Harrington and Zhang 2022). Dickson's analysis of Chinese anti-Japanese sentiments during the 2000s offers an example of how, alongside the Party's top-down implementation and stirring of anti-Japanese messaging, popular nationalism put pressure on Beijing's hard-line stances on foreign policies (Dickson 2021:219). The complexity of understanding the roots of such influences, or 'what [is] happening behind the scenes', in the construction of discourse are important to highlight as this study explores how Chinese netizens reproduce nationalistic discourses and concepts to express anti-Western attitudes and opinions (Dickson 2021:222). Through the lens of anti-*baizuo* discourse,

this study illustrates how nationalism manifests in the Chinese online public sphere, between the 'conventional wisdom' of the Party and grassroots popular discourses (Dickson 2021:223). This thesis thus builds upon Dickson's comments as it investigates how Weibo users develop and reproduce discourses on recent socio-political developments in Western democracies separately from, or in relation to, state-led discourses.

Cybernationalism and anti-Western discourse

As a public sphere, the internet connects social networks across society and allows different voices to be heard and empowered (Yang 2003). In the Chinese cyberspace, anti-Western sentiments have amplified in recent years which has created a 'substantive sub-discourse community' (Jiang 2012:59). In the context of the current political climate, a significant portion of Western scholarship has focused on the limits of contentious politics in China, often concentrating on the issue of surveillance and censorship. While contributing to current understandings of netizens' critical attitudes toward the West, this thesis must also engage with how other scholars have approached similar questions regarding Chinese cybernationalism. Recent literature on Chinese netizens have focused on the increased presence and variety of pro-regime nationalists, such as the 50 Cent Army and Internet Water Army, known as *wangluo shuijun* (网络水军), and their unpaid counterparts, "Little Pinks", or *xiao fenhong* (小粉红) (Han 2015; Fang and Repnikova 2018; see also Wong 2021; Song 2023). While the Internet Water Army is hired by non-state groups or companies (Guo and Jiang 2023), the 50 Cent Army refers to a group of internet users who are 'rumored to be paid 50 cents' per comment or post that 'strongly [argues] with and [debates] against those who criticize the government, its leaders, and their policies' (King et al. 2017:484–85). On the other hand, Little Pinks is a term for younger, often more feminine, and fervent nationalist netizens who often engage in online activism and are motivated by a sense of patriotic duty (Fang and Repnikova 2018), but unlike the 50 Cent Army, they are typically voluntarily and thus unpaid. Both groups contribute to the spread of state-sanctioned narratives, with the Little Pinks also playing a key role in protecting China's image and countering what they perceive as anti-China sentiment. These groups are essential to understand because they reflect the broader strategies employed by the Chinese government to shape online discourse and maintain a unified national narrative. The internet serves as a valuable tool for gaining deeper insights into public opinion and the ways in which individuals engage with political and social

issues. By studying the internet, its users, and 'interactive dynamics of technology and civil society' (Yang 2003:421), scholars further contribute towards a better understanding of how state-sponsored and grassroots efforts converge in influencing public opinion and promoting nationalistic agendas online.

In April 2021, *The Global Times* published results from a survey that claimed, 'approximately 90 percent of the young Chinese participating [...] believe China should not "look up to the West" anymore' (Yang et al. 2021). While the results were not surprising per se, given its nature and timing, the survey was indicative of popular attitudes towards the West (see Kim 2024). Despite this, relatively little is known about the specifics of those opinions and the nature of those discourses that might be associated with them. While such discourses are predominantly 'associated with state propaganda', this is not necessarily the case in the cyberspace (Fang and Repnikova 2018:2164). In *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism* (2009), Yang argues that social changes in China cannot be fully understood without considering the radical nature of the internet and contested struggles online. Yang also highlights the importance of reconsidering netizens' nationalistic sentiments as beyond state control. Current anti-Western nationalism significantly differs from that of the 1990's due to technological advancements which have facilitated the growth of platforms and freedom of expression (Xu 2012:112). There is substantial scholarship on new forms of Chinese nationalistic expression which often focus on how sentiments have increasingly risen from the 'bottom up' and it is this new public sphere that has enabled new forms of civic engagement to develop (Hughes 2006:1).

Simon Shen and Shaun Breslin's (2010) edited volume, *Online Chinese Nationalism and China's Bilateral Relations*, approaches a multitude of questions that explicitly address the internet and Chinese nationalism. Though the book provides crucial context for the development of online Chinese nationalism as a broader political and even diplomatic phenomenon, this research delves deeper into how this online nationalism intersects with global political discourse, especially in reaction to Western liberal ideologies. Moreover, while the book questions whether online nationalism influences foreign policy or mainstream media, this project extends this line of inquiry by analysing how anti-*baizuo* sentiment specifically has shaped both public opinion and Chinese social media discourse during COVID-19, offering a case study of online nationalism's evolving role in China's domestic politics and international relations.

In *Cyber-Nationalism in China,* Jiang Ying examines the political consequences of this most recent technological revolution and asks how the rise of 'Chinese Generation Y's resentment to the West' ought to

be approached and understood (Jiang 2012:49). Exploring the rising hostility towards the West, Jiang investigates bloggers' hostile responses to Western critiques of Chinese censorship. While Jiang's book provides historical context for 'Generation Y's nationalism and support for the Chinese central government', it also elucidates the role of the government in 'forestalling political unrest through its subtle management of Chinese bloggers' national loyalty' (Jiang 2012:19–20). This differs from other studies on cybernationalism which focus on either official discourse or state-affiliated groups that pose as ordinary netizens. Such studies have examined the methods adopted by these groups, like the '50 Cent Army' (Han 2015), who portray themselves as ordinary netizens to defend the regime subtly and indirectly. Indeed, it is groups like these who blur the lines of bottom-up and top-down discourse production and thus highlight the need for closer examinations in seemingly grassroots movements and narratives.

While Chinese cybernationalism is an increasingly studied topic of research, there has also recently been a growth in studies on public opinion particularly regarding the growth and cultivation of anti-Western sentiments (see Kim 2024). Shifting the focus away from the studies on the domestic, this research seeks to contribute a study of civic engagement in relation to netizens' attitudes towards international, but mostly Western, issues and concerns, as an analysis of the Chinese gaze towards the Western powers. In their paper on Nationalism on Weibo, Zhang et al. (2018) scrutinise a large data set on pro-regime sentiments in relation to public discourses and attitudes towards the United States, Japan, and Taiwan. While the nature of their research study is not directly linked to this study, it highlights some important concerns. Most importantly, it reminds scholars in this field that, however difficult it may be to identify and distinguish individuals in the messy web of social media, research must not succumb to the trap whereby nationalists are understood and portrayed as 'monolithically xenophobic and illiberal' (Zhang et al. 2018:763). While asking whether nationalist and democratic views are truly at odds, Zhang, Liu, and Wen's paper confronts conventional Western scholarship that regards Chinese nationalism as being associated with 'xenophobia and illiberalism, i.e., nationalists are pro-regime and/or tend to turn a blind eye to domestic political conditions' (Zhang et al. 2018:763). Relatedly, Zhuo Chen et al. highlight that, within discourses of Chinese nationalism, 'national identification … is always the core element within the meaning structure, surrounded by other discursive elements' (Chen et al. 2019:514). This is further rationalised as historical narratives being used to 'induce collective memories' and, equally, 'in- and out-group division, arousing sentiments, such as out-group hostility

and in-group affection', which is also found in other Othering dynamics (2019:515). As previously mentioned, discourses surrounding humiliation have dominated contemporary hostilities towards the West, effectively causing 'a strong sense among Chinese that the West is evil, so that they should be hostile to the West' (2019:519). Such examples demonstrate that future research on these crucial matters ought to move beyond determining whether the internet allows for democratisation and "resistance" and should instead investigate the complex sets of identifications and effects that go beyond such binaries, that perhaps shift over time and swell at certain points.

Understanding "baizuo"

The term *baizuo*, which literally translates to 'white left', amalgamates both racial and ideological characteristics to criticise 'Westerners holding left —or more precisely politically correct— opinions' on a large range of domestic and global issues (Y. Cheng 2019a:288). The meaning of "white" in *baizuo* imitates Chinese racial thinking that adopts discourses addressing 'the political and ideological needs of the party-state, cultural and intellectual elites, and ordinary citizens', such as 'social Darwinism, Han Chauvinism, [...] populism, and the Chinese civilizational supremacism' (Y. Cheng 2019a:241). Given the entanglement of political ideology and 'China's ethno-racial identity', scholars must handle contemporary anti-Western discourses with great sensitivity (C. Zhang 2020a:108). In *Discourses of Race and Rising China*, Yinghong Cheng transitorily explores the term's racial origins and complex implications as it not only 'perceives a yellow Han/white European/American racial affinity', but also 'identifies a racial Other within by defining it as the traitor of the race' (Y. Cheng 2019a:281). Heavily likened to terms such as "libtard" and "woke" in the West (Hioe 2018), the term has increasingly been used domestically, 'against Chinese nationals sympathetic with liberal-egalitarian values', to denounce fellow netizens for expressing left-leaning attitudes (C. Zhang 2020a). This phenomenon is further reflected in what Cheng describes as contradictions in Sino-Western relations as 'many adherents of this nationalism are anti-Western but are 'racially [...] pro-Western' (Y. Cheng 2019a:290). Here, it is important to recognise how the anti-woke movement among the Western far-right intersects with the concept of "*baizuo*". This, crucially, illustrates how the Other can and has been perceived as an internal threat, a trend also reflected in the findings of this research. Cheng argues that 'racializing a political faction' is often reflective of a 'historically inherited racial consciousness' that is utilised by those in power to 'enhance

political discussions [...] without an awareness of its racial nature' (Y. Cheng 2019a:288). Due to Cheng's emphasis on the history of Chinese racial thinking, his analysis of the anti-*baizuo* is limited in that it does not account for how it is produced online. To answer to this, this timely study examines Weibo posts to explore how netizens mobilise, or are mobilised by, certain discourses about the West.

While there certainly are some general observations and inferences regarding the term's definition, there is yet to be an explicit outlining of its definition. The earliest article that can be retrieved on the Chinese internet using the term supposedly came from a Renren Network (人人网) user named "Li Shuo" in 2010 (Xu 2020). He used the term "*baizuo*" in his article "The Pseudo-Morality of Western "White Left" and Chinese "Patriotic Scientists"" to describe foreign left-wing youth who sympathised with the communist revolution before 1949 and came to China to help the Chinese revolution (Xu 2020). In his essay, "Li Shuo" wrote that the popular antagonist attitudes towards this type of people in the article, and the "white left" here is tainted with a derogatory and negative colour. It has been argued that since this term was allegedly coined, other platforms besides Renren began to see a large number of "*baizuo*" concepts close to the current meaning, in which the "left" began to shift to cultural progress and pluralism in the Western context, and gradually decoupled from the traditional concepts of "left" and "right".

Broadly speaking, the term is often used to refer to well-educated, left-leaning individuals in the West who, according to their critics, are perceived as ignorant and arrogant self-proclaimed saviours (Kohnhorst 2018). In order to satisfy their personal sense of moral superiority, these extreme leftists advocate peace and equality, but also supposedly lack an adequate understanding of the so-called real world. Hypocrisy, as described above, is a particularly central component that is tied to the *baizuo* in terms of why they are so highly criticised by Chinese citizens. Indeed, as this thesis will later delve into some specific examples, "*baizuo*" is frequently used alongside derogatory terms to amplify its negative connotations. The popular internet slang term *shengmubiao* (圣母婊) is a particularly fascinating characteristic of the more aggressively-toned anti-*baizuo* Weibo posts and was found in multiple posts in this research study. Roughly translating to 'Virgin Mary bitch', the derogatory term is a contemporary take on the idiom "a wolf in sheep's clothing" (F. Huang 2021). The term is therefore typically used to mock someone perceived as hypocritically virtuous or excessively moralistic, especially when their actions or beliefs are seen as naive or insincere. Together with "*baizuo*",

netizens' use of such pejorative language enables them to criticise individuals who are seen as overly progressive or self-righteous in their advocacy for social justice, often suggesting that such views are out of touch with reality or practical common sense. As this thesis will later address in Chapter 5, these kinds of combinations of terms serve to intensify the disdain and ridicule directed at those who hold what are perceived to be overly idealistic liberal views.

While it might be logical to break the term down into two parts or concepts –"whiteness" and "leftism" – it is important to distinguish these from other definitions. The term's usage seems to suggest that *bai* as whiteness in this context refers more to the "white West" rather than the broader racial classification of "white". The findings of this thesis, particularly those found in Chapter 4, show that although the term's reference to "whiteness" ostensibly targets "white people," it is actually more concerned with the sociocultural and political implications of whiteness in Western contexts. In fact, this thesis actually argues that the concept of "whiteness" in Chinese discourse is less about race in the pseudoscientific or biological sense and more so about critiquing Western sociopolitical dynamics and ideologies. The definition of "left", on the other hand, is slightly more difficult to pin down in this context. Indeed, there are various definitions and working concepts of "liberalism" which ought to be briefly discussed before delving into the nature of this project's prime research focus. In political theory, liberalism, as articulated by thinkers like John Stuart Mill, centres on the values of individual freedom and autonomy. This strand of liberalism prioritises personal liberty, free speech, and the pursuit of happiness, and advocates for minimal state interference in personal lives (see Mill 1859). The notion of the liberal international order, however, refers to the post-World War II global system that is now predominantly characterised by open markets, international institutions, cooperative security, democratic governance, and the rule of law (Lake, Martin, and Risse 2021). While Chinese netizens do critique various aspects of these different but interconnected forms of liberalism, their specific critiques of the "*zuo*", or "leftists", are more focused on left-wing multicultural progressives rather than on American liberalism or the international liberal order. These critiques often target what is perceived as excessive political correctness and a disconnection from reality. Though it cannot be asserted that Chinese netizens do not equally criticise these different but complementary components of Western liberalism – which Chenchen Zhang (2020b) explores in her paper on right-wing populism and Chinese characteristics – the findings in this thesis show that anti-*baizuo* netizens seem to focus more so on what is perceived as excessive political correctness. This nuanced focus highlights the complexity of political discourse within China, where Western liberalism and left-wing ideologies are

frequently subject to scrutiny and criticism. However, as this thesis also demonstrates, such criticism is not monolithic; instead, it is directed toward specific elements of liberal thought that are seen as contradictory to Chinese values or as threats to China's sociopolitical stability, particularly in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. By exploring these distinctions, this research provides a more detailed understanding of how political ideologies and cultural perceptions intersect in contemporary Chinese society.

Amidst the discrepancies between "left" and "right" ideologies, this thesis situates itself between the perpetual mutual misunderstandings of values between China and the West (Q. Zhang 2020). In terms of how *baizuo* is currently understood, it is noted that general nationalist discourses on Chinese social media 'combines the claims, vocabulary and style of right-wing populisms' in the West with 'forms of nationalism and racism in the Chinese cyberspace' (C. Zhang 2020b:88). More crucially, it is important to note the significance of racism during and after COVID-19. Racism and xenophobia related to the COVID-19 pandemic have disproportionately impacted migrants and minority groups worldwide, exacerbating pre-existing discrimination and inequities. In the book chapter, 'Racism and nationalism during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic' (Elias et al. 2021), the authors examine the nature and scope of racism triggered by COVID-19, including the historical connection between pandemics and racist attitudes, and explores ethnic and racial disparities in the context of the pandemic. In it, the authors analyse how populism, resurgent exclusionary ethno-nationalism, and declining internationalism have contributed to the rise in racism, particularly across the West, during this period. While anti-Western, and anti-whiteness discourse in China, primarily focuses on political and ideological critiques, it also crosses into racialised language– blurring the line between nationalism and racism. Recognising this tension allows for a more nuanced understanding of how racial and ideological dimensions intersect within Chinese nationalist discourse, as explored in this thesis.

While cross-cultural psychology and perceptions of the West have been studied by academics, such research has often taken the form of public opinion polls and surveys. In order to place this project within the relevant scholarly context, the following addresses the ways in which Chinese knowledge and popular opinion of the West has been explored. It is widely acknowledged that there is a greater volume of literature examining how the West perceives China, compared to the literature on how China perceives the West (Fang et al. 2022:1). The latter has so far predominantly consisted of investigations into how the American and Chinese public have

perceived each other and US-China relations (D. Wang et al. 2022). Comparatively fewer studies have investigated variations in Chinese attitudes towards different Western countries, though they offered more nuanced insights into the nature of these perceptions and the underlying reasons for both positive and negative views of certain countries (Liu, Li, and Fang 2023). Given these reflections, it is worth considering how the Chinese public might possess a nuanced understanding of the diversity within the West, leading to distinctions in their criticisms and the targets of those criticisms.

Until recently, there seemed to be an acceptance of China's inferiority to the West and, while anti-*baizuo* rhetoric represents a clear turn away from that, the sentiment itself is not entirely new. The survey by *The Global Times* on attitudes towards the West as cited above, suggests that significantly more Chinese now 'look down on the West' than in previous years (Yang et al. 2021). Partly due to its explosive economic success and improving social stability, China's newfound pride identifies with the 'superiority of the Chinese self' – not within the ancient glories of Chinese civilisation but – within the 'pragmatic, rational and non-moralising approach [...] taken by the current authoritarian regime' (C. Zhang 2020b:104). Highlighting major international developments during 2016, Cheng notes the 'upsurge of conservative politics' across Western democracies and how recent events effectively 'whipped up anti-*baizuo* people in China' (Y. Cheng 2019a:283). Hence, the term *baizuo* has also become entwined with political discourses of Western inferiority which, Zhang suggests, embodies the logics of 'anti-Western Eurocentrism and anti-hegemonic hegemonies' (C. Zhang 2020b:88). This development has been investigated in multiple papers in relation to discourses of populism in the West. Ying Miao's (2020) paper investigates the construction and contestation of core populist concepts—'the people', 'the elite', and 'the other'—in China. As found in Chenchen Zhang's (2020b) paper, Miao's paper explores how Chinese netizens contextualise the rise of right-wing populism in America and construct a narrative emphasising lessons China should learn from the American experience, incorporating identifiable populist elements. This research examines the rise of the anti-*baizuo* discourse to build on Zhang's analysis of the 'changing ways in which self–other relations are imagined in Chinese popular geopolitical discourse' (C. Zhang 2020b:88). By doing so, it situates these imagined relations within the broader context of Chinese perceptions of sociocultural values and differences, extending beyond the realm of geopolitics. In her most recent publication, Zhang explores reactionary anti-Western discourse in her most recent publication by adopting a co-constitutive approach to Occidentalism (and Orientalism) 'to illuminate the transnational co-production of gendered East/West binaries' and how they are 'invoked to legitimate reactionary discourse from

different geopolitical positionings' (Zhang 2024:4). As she crucially notes, while Western civilisation decline has been widely observed, 'less attention has been paid to how they are produced and employed elsewhere to bolster ethnonationalism and social conservatism in the "non-West"' (Zhang 2024:3).Through her examination of the anti-*baizuo* discourse, Zhang thus exposes the connections between culture war narratives and the framing of US-China relations in current international contexts. Taking note of Zhang's collective works, this research delves deeper into the unique sociocultural, historical, and political factors within China that shape anti-Western, specifically anti-*baizuo,* sentiment and discourse, providing insights into how this discourse manifests within Chinese online communities.

Describing Chinese hostility towards the *baizuo*, Yao Lin defines political beaconism as having grown from the comparison between Mao's totalitarianism and the 'politically near-perfect' West (Lin 2021:85). For these 'civilizational vindicativists', they view the Chinese and Western civilisations as antagonistic and argue that China will return to its glory – replacing the West at the top of 'civilizational hierarchy' – and prove, to the West, that the Chinese model is 'superior to whatever the West has' and 'failed to offer' (Lin 2021:98; see also Levine 2024). From Chenchen Zhang's analysis, the defining characteristic of anti-*baizuo* sentiments is the critique of the liberal West's 'alleged moralism' and self-righteousness, which they simultaneously find highly hypocritical at times (C. Zhang 2020b:106). From the perspective of the anti-*baizuo*, the West possesses an arrogant and ignorant 'sense of paternalistic superiority' and sense that 'white people' feel 'destined to have the right to determine world order' in order to gratify their own sense of moral superiority (Y. Cheng 2019a:106, 282). This thesis examines how morality and moral superiority are expressed in Chinese netizens' critiques of the West and the *baizuo*. By deconstructing such critique, it also investigates how Chinese netizens perceive and assert Chinese values and reveals how they are rationalised and understood.

Through discourse analysis of anti-*baizuo* discourse, this thesis primarily provides insight into Chinese understandings of moral articulations surrounding the perceived decline of morality in the West. While this has been widely studied over many years, general understandings of Chinese and broadly Eastern philosophies reflect how they emphasise concepts such as harmony, collectivism, and the importance of moral virtues, social roles, and the collective good. Confucianism, for instance, is widely known for its focus on ethical conduct, filial piety, and maintaining social harmony through proper relationships. Though these traditional belief systems and values have faced significant scrutiny in China, historically and in the present-day, there is still a

consensus that supports and encourages maintaining some of those values and principles today, particularly in the context of increased globalisation and exposure to the West (Kubin 1999). By examining narratives and perceptions of morality and social values, which are also shared across value systems in and beyond China (Alexander, Ku, and Park 2019), this study sheds light on how these articulations manifesting on Weibo intersect with broader socio-cultural dynamics and how China's role is not only perceived as an economic powerhouse but also as a moral leader. By focusing on the content, tone, and engagement patterns of the Weibo posts, the use of discourse analysis in this thesis provides a window into the everyday negotiation of national identity, cultural pride, and moral superiority within Chinese online spaces. Examining Weibo posts that highlight China's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in contrast to perceived Western failures, provides insight into how narratives of moral responsibility and governance competence are constructed by Chinese netizens. As it will be investigated in greater detail in Chapter 6, posts utilising hashtags such as '#China Leads The Way#' exemplify how netizens have positioned China as a global moral authority by emphasising Chinese values while criticising Western responses underscore systemic shortcomings, thereby reinforcing China's perceived moral superiority. By exploring these digital articulations, this study demonstrates how Chinese netizens invoke historical and cultural references to construct a moral narrative that strengthens China's positioning as both an economic power and a moral leader within global discourse.

Chinese public opinion during COVID-19

As this thesis examines how netizens reflected on the management of COVID-19, the following provides a brief overview of the emerging sub-field on how citizen responses to pandemic politics and public health crisis management. Given the nature of responses and approaches to managing COVID-19 in China, which raise significant questions about ethics and morality, it is crucial to place this research within the relevant literature. For instance, some have explored how self-interest bias affects adherence to COVID-19-related social norms across different cultures (Dong et al. 2021). Dong et al., for instance, investigated the tendency of individuals to justify their own self-serving actions, such as exploiting the availability of COVID-19 test kits or not following safety protocols, while condemning similar behaviours in others. Their findings suggested that morals and cultural differences, specifically independent versus interdependent self-construal, may influence the degree to which people justify their self-serving behaviours during a pandemic. Despite the considerable

body of literature on the development of domestic political discourse and public opinion on COVID-19 in the domestic context (see Han et al. 2020; Wang et al. 2020; Lu, Pan, and Xu 2021; Zhong 2021; Schneider 2022; Zhang 2022; Chen et al. 2023), there has been very little significant scholarship that has explored the transnational or cross-cultural perceptions of COVID-19 management and responses (see Genc and Dede 2020; C. Zhang 2020a).

In April 2021, during the peak of the pandemic, *The Global Times* released its survey results on whether China should continue to look up to the West. The survey saw 51.2% of respondents vote that 'Ineffective COVID-19 control' was the main reason for their 'deteriorating view of Western countries' and 58.8% vote that China's 'remarkable effort in fighting COVID-19' as shaping their perception of China as being equal to the West (Yang et al. 2021). Though questionable in terms of its reliability, given the likely issue of sample bias, the survey questions undoubtedly point towards some interesting assumptions about the kind of existing attitudes among Chinese citizens towards the West, especially given the nature of how Chinese media has historically covered Western affairs. Such results, in addition to online discussions, demonstrate how many in China had paid close attention to the various kinds of shortcomings of their Western counterparts. During the pandemic, while simultaneously applauding their government's ability to handle the outbreak, netizens were demonstrably fixated on Western countries' failure to contain the coronavirus. There are but a handful of articles that explore the anti-*baizuo* phenomenon and COVID-19, including Elizabeth Forster's (2020) article on the Chinese government's reaction to the spread of the coronavirus and a study by Peng et al. (2020) that examined netizens' reactions to Boris Johnson's contraction of the coronavirus. Such studies show how Chinese netizens, from the government to the online public sphere, resonate with China's successful handling of the virus. Expanding upon netizens' comparisons between the West and the Chinese government's handling of the pandemic, Peng et al. focus on netizens' support for the Party and 'their distrust of Western democracies'; netizens' apparent awareness of the state's authoritarian and interventionist governance were contrasted with their critiques of the Western prioritisation of 'freedom', 'self-regulation', and liberty (A. Peng et al. 2020:89).

The COVID-19 pandemic serves as a critical juncture for analysing anti-*baizuo* discourse, particularly in the context of the disparities in public health crisis management between China and the West. This particular timeframe provides a unique opportunity to explore the dynamics of cybernationalism, which has been fuelled

by a surge of patriotic pride in China's handling of the crisis. As Fang and Repnikova define and describe cybernationalism, it is widely understood 'as a radicalized expression of national identity that is rooted in antagonism toward other nations (deemed as enemies) and ethnic groups and has been treated with caution by the party-state' (Fang and Repnikova 2018:2165).

As the pandemic unfolded, many Chinese netizens displayed a pronounced sense of superiority over Western nations. This catalysed a wave of anti-Western sentiments, reflecting not only frustration with perceived failures but also a rallying around national identity and pride. Equally, it is crucial to recognise that the intense emotions and opinions surfacing during this period may not be fully representative of broader or more stable perceptions of the West among Chinese netizens. In other words, examining this timeframe, or "moment", is vital for understanding how crises can transform discourse, galvanise nationalistic sentiments, and redefine the parameters of self and Other in a digital landscape. In the existing scholarship that explores public responses to COVID-19, several have noted that 'research that studies the main concerns expressed by social media users during the pandemic is limited' (Wang et al. 2020) and so it is in this context that this thesis also contributes towards understandings of hostile attitudes towards the West. Ultimately, this thesis pushes beyond the question of what the anti-*baizuo* discourse truly reveals about politics beyond the narratives that are widely dubbed as being populist. Rather, this thesis expands such analysis to explore what can be said about cultural and social politics about what is "right" in the eyes of these Chinese netizens.

3. Research Design and Methodology

In order to provide a comprehensive account of the research methods employed in this doctoral thesis, this chapter thoroughly outlines the methods and approaches that were adopted to ensure the rigor and validity of research findings. Furthermore, when dissecting the process of shaping the research project, it also takes into consideration how decision-making requires a combination of sound reasoning and adaptability. This project began with the goal of examining how the term *baizuo* was utilised and discussed in online discussions across a variety of current affairs topics. The initial fascination with this term stemmed from its widespread popularity and its adaptability, being used in a multitude of contexts and discussions. Given the flexibility and broad reach of *baizuo*, this research project aimed to investigate its significance as a significant example of popular discourse. The thesis initially sought to expand upon earlier research undertaken at the postgraduate level. The original plan was to take a much broader approach, exploring multiple topics and subtopics within *baizuo* discourse. This wider inquiry would examine how the term was applied across different issues, engaging with the complexities and nuances that *baizuo* represents in online political and cultural debates. Nevertheless, this ambitious undertaking was promptly scaled back upon the realisation that there was far more to explore and delve into than originally anticipated.

In analysing such discourse in the context of heightened China-West tensions, it is crucial to understand the nuances of Chinese discourses that go beyond the often-simplified or exaggerated national image portrayed by foreign media 'expected and the often-exaggerated national image painted by the foreign press' (Wei 2019:48). Additionally, it became evident that the *anti-baizuo* discourse, particularly in light of COVID-19, could be explored from numerous angles, potentially expanding into multiple doctoral theses. The pandemic further complicated the discourse by intertwining health concerns, nationalism, and political ideologies. Moreover, it became increasingly evident that the anti-*baizuo* discourse could in fact be researched in a multitude of ways that would exceed several doctoral theses. Upon recognising the vastness of the subject interest, a more focused approach was necessary. In order to '[take] into account a range of relevant factors' (Hewson, Vogel, and Laurent 2016:13), the scope of this doctoral research project was significantly narrowed down after extensive discussions during supervision meetings and subsequent explorations into the recent publications post-2021.

The internet has become an integral part of modern society and communication, playing a crucial role in how individuals, communities, and nations interact. Social media in particular has transformed the dynamics of information exchange, allowing for immediate, widespread dissemination of content and ideas (Hanna, Rohm, and Crittenden 2011; Bouvier and Machin 2020). This digital shift has reshaped not only personal communication but also how businesses, governments, and social movements operate, leveraging platforms to engage audiences on a global scale. As much of the scholarship that champions the study of digital culture and behaviour contends, much can be understood by exploring human social dynamics through such means. In order to cultivate some answers for a handful of the preliminary questions that were initially raised, the next step of designing this research study required a deeper and pragmatic consideration of scope. While some scholars have extensively documented the rise of anti-Western discourses on Chinese social media during the pandemic era (see Chen and Xu 2021; Wang and Tao 2021; Yan 2020; Yang and Chen 2021), only a handful have actually written relevant pieces on the concept and use of *baizuo* in such a specific context (see G. Chen 2022; Lin 2021; C. Zhang 2020b). Thus, upon reflecting about how those respective projects could be useful to reference when designing this research project, some important decisions were made first before continuing with research. Thus, before delving into the research design and methodology of this project, this chapter first discusses the rationale behind selecting Weibo as the sole field site, highlighting both the strategic importance and the inherent limitations of such choices.

In China, there are at least ten major social media platforms that play a significant role in shaping public discourse, each offering unique ways for users to interact, share, and discuss content (see Kent et al. 2017; Zhao and John 2022). Deciding on which platform or platforms to observe for this project required careful consideration to ensure that the chosen source would provide consistent, reliable, and relevant data that would allow for data analysis to fulfil the project's central research question. Given the diversity of social media platforms in China, each with its own distinct user base and content-sharing mechanisms, it was crucial to select platforms that aligned with the research focus. The decision hinged on several factors, such as the platform's popularity, the type of discussions typically hosted, and its relevance to the target topics—in this case, the usage and discourse surrounding terms like "*baizuo*" and their broader socio-political implications.

Critically, such decisions also necessitated a broad consideration of crucial factors like censorship and data availability, given that Chinese platforms may restrict or heavily moderate certain political discussions, skewing the data set. Weibo, for example, is known for its public nature and trending political discussions, making it a prime candidate for research into politically charged online discourse (see Leibold 2011; Koetse 2015; Svensson 2016). Platforms like Weibo, allow for microblogging and short posts, are famously a hotspot for political commentary and trending topics on the internet generally. Specifically, Weibo's open format and high user engagement in political and social commentary has consequently led many to deem the platform as a rich and diverse source of real-time conversations. Among many of its functions, 'the most popular mobile application in China today' (Plantin and de Seta 2019:258), WeChat, or *Weixin* (微信) allows for more private individual and group-based communication due to features that allow users share articles, images, and opinions within closed networks. While hugely popular, these more private, closed-network communication platforms not only limits, but also skews, the potential scope of available data due to the effects of closed-network dynamics and the prevalence of echo chambers (see Persily et al. 2020; Jiang et al. 2021). Other platforms like *Bilibili* (哔哩哔哩) and *Douyin* (抖音) focus more on video content, but they still allow for extensive user discussions in comment sections or video descriptions, where people express their views. *Xiaohongshu* (小红书), which is also known more commonly as RedNote, is China's answer to Meta's Instagram, and therefore similarly allows users to share lifestyle, fashion, and travel content but has increasingly become a space for discussions on social issues (see Fan 2024; Morris and Cong 2024). *Zhihu* (知乎), China's version of Quora, encourages more in-depth discussions through question-and-answer formats, often attracting more thoughtful and long-form debates. Despite the wide variety in how users engage with content, each platform offers a distinct space for discussion, giving rise to multiple venues for public opinion to form, circulate, and be shared. However, the nature of each platform—from short microblog posts to video discussions—shapes the way that topics are addressed and the manner in which they spread across China's vast online ecosystem. Ultimately, the selection of a social media platform for the research purposes of this doctoral thesis project had to be strategically aligned with its primary objectives. Such considerations were crucial in ensuring that the data collected would be comprehensive, representative of public opinion, and robust enough to allow for thorough analysis. This also meant not only choosing the right platform but also considering how its design and user interaction patterns could shape the discourse being studied.

Before the official data collection process began, several preliminary searches were carried out across multiple Chinese social media platforms to identify where significant anti-*baizuo* discourse could be found. Such steps were taken in order to determine which platforms offered enough content to be valuable for data collection. Over the course of a week, Zhihu, Bilibili, and Weibo were skimmed through, and a combination of keywords—similar but shorter than those used in the final data collection—was employed. It quickly became clear that discussions surrounding the term "*baizuo*" were much more prominent on certain platforms, particularly when the term was paired with keywords related to COVID-19. However, it quickly became evident that other platforms posed various accessibility challenges for comprehensive and consistent data collection. For instance, in the case of Zhihu, while discussions within the "question" threads were intriguing, only one "question" thread contained both "*baizuo*" and a reference to any one of the ten keywords, whereas countless matches were found in the "answers" search results, which would have made the data collection process considerably more challenging. Additionally, supplementary source materials from Zhihu would not significantly enhance the quality of accumulated data, as preliminary assessments indicated that the very limited relevant content available had very closely resembled that which was found on Weibo. Although this project focuses on examining the specific details and motivations behind anti-*baizuo* rhetoric in the context of COVID-19, including other platforms like Zhihu in future studies could provide valuable additional data for a more comprehensive exploration into the interactive-nature of such discourse.

Weibo was ultimately chosen as the primary social media platform for this research due to the significant presence and volume of anti-*baizuo* discourse it hosted, especially in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Preliminary searches across a range of public Chinese social media platforms revealed that while discussions of the term "*baizuo*" appeared sporadically elsewhere, Weibo consistently provided a far greater volume of relevant posts and conversations. The platform's open nature, combined with its popularity for discussing current events and societal issues, as the data collection process would later prove, made it an ideal source for collecting substantial and relatively diverse yet relevant data. Additionally, the prevalence of discussions on Weibo about "*baizuo*" particularly regarding pandemic-related topics suggested a concentrated space of discourse that would enable a more focused and meaningful analysis. The decision that entailed making this project's sole focus on Weibo ensured that the research would be based on a rich dataset reflective of the broader public discourse surrounding "*baizuo*" in China. more so than the other popular platforms.

It is crucial to explain here first that while this project draws heavily from online sources and examines internet-based discourse, it is not fundamentally a doctoral thesis rooted in Internet Studies. Rather, and quite crucially, it is framed as an Area Studies thesis, focusing on how the internet, as a medium, facilitates the circulation and shaping of a particular form of social and political discourse. The distinction lies in the fact that Internet Studies typically centres on the technological, cultural, and communicative aspects of the internet as a space of interaction. It may focus on the infrastructure of digital platforms, the behaviour of online communities, or the broader implications of digital media in society. In contrast, this project takes a narrower approach by focusing on a specific example of discourse—the usage and contestation of the term *baizuo*—within the broader socio-political and cultural contexts of China and its relationship with the West. The digital space, in this case, serves as a lens through which to explore a key phenomenon tied to ideological and geopolitical tensions. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of how digital platforms like Weibo are not just spaces for communication but also arenas where cultural and ideological battles are fought. The emphasis is on the sociopolitical implications of internet use within a specific national context, rather than on the internet itself as an isolated subject of study. This distinction is important because the primary aim of this research project is to analyse the content of these online discussions in relation to historical, cultural, and political factors unique to China, rather than to investigate the technicalities of how the internet itself functions as a medium. The emphasis remains on the discursive production of meaning around *baizuo* within China-West relations, framed by the socio-political environment that has given rise to such terms. Therefore, the methods and frameworks employed in the thesis draw more heavily from Area Studies, with a focus on discourse analysis and cultural context, rather than from Internet Studies methodologies that might prioritise user behaviours, platform algorithms, or digital communication patterns. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, this research project examines anti-*baizuo* sentiment to illuminate the ways online discourse reflects and shapes Chinese nationalism, identity, and attitudes towards the West. Additionally, this thesis seeks to investigate how such discourses evolve and manifest on Weibo and reveal the changing dynamics of Chinese social media and the public life of citizens in this changing society.

For the project, it was vital that this methodological approach allow for data to be collected on how Chinese netizens interacted with the term and what is specifically said in such conversations. Moreover, in adopting

social media research methods, it was crucial to navigate the role and responsibilities as a researcher for this is not, if it is at all, conventionally participatory research and is even further away from being an example of digital ethnography for there are no stakes for the anonymous and unknown researcher in this specific field site. Unlike a number of existing studies on similar topics or areas of interest regarding Chinese social media, this project did not set out to quantify how often the term was used or when it was most popular and used by netizens, nor did it seek to measure how antagonistic users were in their posts by designing and imposing a ranking system. Rather, it has sought to demonstrate the *ways* in which the neologism is used and thus understood by fellow netizens and, in multiple instances, debated or rebutted.

Having adopted an inductive approach to this research project, the methodological considerations have allowed for a more exploratory and flexible inquiry into the subject matter. Inductive research starts with observations and data collection without a predetermined hypothesis, allowing patterns and themes to emerge organically from the data (Hayes, Heit, and Swendsen 2010). This approach is particularly valuable for examining complex and dynamic phenomena, such as online discourse and socio-political sentiments in contemporary China, as it avoids imposing preconceived notions or theories onto the study (see Zhou and Baptista Nunes 2013; Hsiung 2021; Ren 2022). As a result of the measures that underpin this methodological framework, this study is able to delve more deeply into the nuances of anti-*baizuo* sentiment – in ways that quantitative analyses may not fully capture – uncovering the various, complex ways Chinese netizens express their views in a heavily censored online environment and the underlying cultural, political, and social dynamics that shape these expressions. It facilitates a comprehensive understanding of how digital narratives around nationalism, anti-Westernism, and identity formation are constructed and negotiated in real-time, reflecting the fluidity and evolving nature of online spaces. This research design allows the study to be flexible and responsive to emerging patterns or significant themes within the data, resulting in a richer and more nuanced understanding of the interactions between digital culture and the ever-complicated socio-political dynamics in China's public sphere. These considerations equip the study to account for unexpected research outcomes, thereby enriching the depth and scope of the analysis.

The decision to use Weibo specifically as the principal field site for this research was primarily driven by the need to align with the ethical standards and principles of internet-based research. This approach ensures that data collection respects user privacy, consent, and the public or semi-public nature of the content being

analysed. The choice of platform, therefore, was not arbitrary but a careful consideration to maintain ethical integrity while gathering relevant data for the study. As discussed in the following sections, gathering and documenting an adequate amount of data from social media posed several notable challenges. These difficulties stemmed from various factors, including the sheer volume of content available, the dynamic and rapidly changing nature of online discourse, and the technical and ethical complexities associated with scraping or accessing data in a manner that is both effective and responsible. Additionally, ensuring the authenticity and reliability of the data while navigating platform policies and potential biases added further layers of complexity to the research process. The structured organisation of this chapter is intentionally designed to provide a clear and systematic account of the methodology and thought process behind the project's design. Rather than following a strictly chronological approach, the chapter is organised to logically present the considerations, decisions, and ethical frameworks that guided the research. This structure provides a thorough understanding of the research design, showing how each step was shaped by both theoretical and practical concerns.

As 'the most popular microblogging service in China' (Cui and Kertész 2023:2), Weibo provides a rich and diverse collection of user-generated content that captures a broad range of public opinion, social trends, and political discourse. Its prominence as a space for public discussion and the expression of socio-political sentiments made it an ideal site for investigating the themes central to this study, such as anti-*baizuo* sentiment and the dynamics of Chinese nationalism. However, such a decision is not without its challenges and limitations. The platform's regulatory framework, user demographics, and the potential for government influence or censorship pose considerable challenges that must be carefully managed to ensure accurate and unbiased data collection. Next, the chapter delves into how a commitment to research ethics and integrity shaped the methodological approach, highlighting the specific precautions and decisions made to uphold these principles. Adhering to ethical guidelines in internet-based research, especially on a platform like Weibo, involves navigating complex issues related to user consent, privacy, and data security. The research design incorporated these considerations by adopting strategies that protect the anonymity of users, ensure the confidentiality of sensitive information, and respect the semi-public nature of the content being analysed. These measures were not only crucial for maintaining ethical standards but also for enhancing the validity and reliability of the research findings, as they help mitigate biases and ensure the data reflects genuine public discourse. The subsequent sections of this thesis chapter are dedicated to providing a detailed account of the procedures involved in collecting and documenting Weibo posts as data, outlining the methodological steps

taken to gather a robust dataset that accurately represents the themes under study. This includes the criteria for selecting posts, the tools and techniques used for data collection, and the strategies employed to manage and organise the data effectively. Following data collection, the chapter then describes the analytical process, detailing how the data was systematically examined through coding and discourse analysis. Through this comprehensive exploration of methodology, the chapter underscores the rigorous and thoughtful approach taken to ensure the research outcomes are robust, reliable, and ethically sound.

Social media as the field site

For those seeking to grasp the dynamics of online political discourses, social media platforms provide researchers the opportunity to observe and analyse discussions and events as they unfold. Researchers face considerable limitations due to the sensitivities surrounding the Chinese internet when investigating social media platforms. However, employing careful and ethical methods enables the study of Chinese 'digital cultures' and can thus provide the gift of gaining valuable insights into socio-political trends in China (A. Y. Peng et al. 2020:77). China research specialists face significant challenges in the internet space due to increasing concerns about data privacy, censorship, and accessibility (Przybylski 2020; Zhang and Pan 2019). Of those challenges, the importance of selecting a field site cannot be underestimated as such decisions could have significant ramifications on the project as well as the actual research outcome. In the monograph series *Why We Post*, Tom McDonald (2016) and Wang Xinyuan (2016) illustrate how social media platforms in China cater to diverse demographics and serve distinct purposes. Thus, choosing a field site in this case was a process of careful consideration pertaining to the kind of data that would be able to answer the central guiding research question. In my commitment to maintaining ethical standards in research, I sought advice from colleagues and experts at both the University of Oxford China Centre and the Oxford Internet Institute. Their diverse areas of expertise proved invaluable, as they offered practical suggestions on how to approach sensitive topics and ensure the integrity of my research; they recommended taking multiple precautions, such as anonymising sensitive data, ensuring transparency in data collection, and considering potential cultural sensitivities. Crucially, such support was also useful in terms of pointing me toward relevant academic literature which has undoubtedly helped further justify and reinforce the ethical foundations of my methodological approach.

As discussed in the following, the matter of research ethics and integrity had an impact on the selection of a field site, as it necessitated the consideration of both public and private domains within the online environment. While researching the private domain may very well reveal some noteworthy and interesting discussions, for the sake of ease and efficiency, the decision was made to research a single and public social media platform. Like Twitter, the user-generated nature of the platform means that Weibo is able to provide more fruitful insights into the types of posts and interactions that arise. However, it is essential to place emphasis on the fact that the data gathered from Weibo users' posts only represent 'a non-random sample of the population' (Zhang and Pan 2019:6). Moreover, this thesis also seeks to contribute somewhat to the discussion on how social scientists should or should not study social media 'as a separate sphere from 'real life'', as it has becoming increasingly argued by scholars that online spaces ought to be 'viewed as integrated into and as an integral part of society at large' (Quan-Haase and Sloan 2016:3).

As it has been widely observed by social media researchers on China, the notable rise of '*gongzhi* – the "public/citizen intellectuals" – who are critical of the current political system and advocate the embracing of "universal values"', which like the *baizuo* became a derogatory label, has exposed the reality of increasingly complicated political dynamics on Chinese social media (Han 2019:384). Moreover, and quite crucially, Weibo provides an apt platform for rich sources of user-generated content, including text, images, videos, and even weblinks (Hu, Qiao, and Fu 2016:605). Arguing that citizens are more engaged with societal problems due to the 'circulation of information' on Weibo, Marina Svensson claims that users' "appropriation" of the platform allows them to engage however and with whomever they seek, 'clicking, liking, and sharing views and offering support' (Svensson 2016:50–51). Unlike other platforms, like the forum website Zhihu, Weibo users are able to engage in far more interactive discussions than a simple question-and-answer format; the nature of microblogging is much more aligned with the research aim of exploring how political and social commentary are constructed and disseminated. Additionally, Weibo allows for close and careful observation into user engagement – how individuals engage with content and express their opinions, different kinds of content, and interact with one another. Though this research is concerned with 'inter-account (follower–followed) relationships and comment (reply) [relationships]' (Hu et al. 2016:602), there are understandable limitations in terms of what information can be disclosed about such users. Eileen Le Han's chapter on the platform explores how Weibo, being event-oriented and topic-driven, has 'made a unique contribution to

shaping the Chinese social media landscape and the public life of Chinese people' (Han 2019:379). Han's account of her methodological rationale is highly relevant to this project as she had adopted an 'online ethnographic approach to data collection' by spending at least six hours on Weibo every day (Han 2019:381). Han argues that, because discourses on Weibo simultaneously develop and circulate, the platform provides countless opportunities for topics and news 'to be discussed with new meanings added' (Han 2019:381). After cross-referencing with numerous similar studies, it was decided that the study would be conducted on Weibo. Due to various methodological considerations and ethical concerns, this project cannot replicate traditional ethnographic research methods. Participant observation, interviews and surveys are considered critical aspects that make up the most basic foundations of digital ethnography (see Pink et al. 2015; Caliandro 2016; Przybylski 2020). By meticulously tracking the evolution of discourse through systematic data collection and searching processes, the methodological approach of this study remains observational and lacks participatory methods. Among social media researchers, there has been much debate surrounding the ethics of observation-based, rather than participation-based, research in online communities. Those who have been criticised for such methods have been accused of taking 'a lurker approach' by those who contend that 'meaningful insights require full involvement as participant observers' (Uberti 2022). Since this study lacks interaction with Weibo users and does not engage directly with the community itself, it may not be considered by fellow social media researchers as true digital ethnography. Given the ethical considerations of this project, and the undeniable lack of conventional ethnographic methods, this project might be more appropriately characterised under the broader umbrella term of "social media research".

As social media offers researchers studying China a limited, though relatively accessible, view of contemporary Chinese society, it is essential to take several precautions both before and during the research process. Rather unavoidably, the researcher's choice of social media platform has an impact on the sampling process and the research outcomes in any given study. As one of China's major communication platforms 'for breaking news and politically-sensitive commentary that are absent from the state-sanctioned news media', posting and sharing certain types of content is vastly 'subjected to official censorship' (Hu et al. 2016:604). Chinese netizens face numerous challenges stemming from the government's stringent surveillance and censorship policies, which heavily regulate online activity. However, beyond these restrictions, self-censorship also plays a significant role, particularly in China, where individuals consciously limit, and sometimes even

deliberately obscure, their online expressions to avoid repercussions and limit (see Zhao and Lin 2020; Henry 2022). This dual layer of censorship – government-imposed and self-imposed – profoundly influences the content that appears in search results, as users adapt their language and avoid sensitive topics, leading to filtered or diluted discourse on social media platforms in China.

It is important to acknowledge and consider that the aforementioned external factors may have impacted the availability of relevant data for this research study. For instance, during the White Paper protests, countless words, as well as combinations of, Chinese characters were censored (Human Rights Watch 2023). This became apparent when, during the second phases of cleaning and combing through data, I attempted to revisit a Weibo post that was posted in November 2022 which included the word "protest" (抗议). While it cannot be said with confidence whether or not the post had been censored, it is a likely possibility given that various others had noted similar instances of censorship during this period. Moreover, though it might be argued that it is possible that users simply did not post about COVID-19 and protests in 2022, thorough repeat searches conducted for each of the ten keyword combinations revealed only eight unique posts, excluding reposts, containing the term "protest". Crucially, none of *these* posts were posted after March 2022. Regardless of whether or not this particular post was censored and removed, such observations are important to reflect upon as social media researchers. The unpredictability of social media in general, beyond the Chinese context, is a shared frustration among many and ultimately underscores the need for caution and thorough analysis when interpreting social media data. These reflections therefore call into question whether the concept of "*baizuo*" and its relevance could have shifted, particularly given that such potential outcomes extend beyond the timeframe of this research.

In light of these complexities, and despite receiving ethical clearance, various adjustments were necessary in the original research design. Initially, the study aimed to incorporate direct interviews with Weibo users to gain a more nuanced understanding of their perspectives. However, attempts to secure these interviews proved unsuccessful, likely due to concerns surrounding personal safety, the risks associated with discussing politically sensitive topics, or a general reluctance to engage with external researchers. This led to a shift in focus, emphasising the analysis of publicly available data while ensuring that ethical guidelines were strictly upheld throughout the research process. In the case of this project, it was highly likely that Chinese netizens would be hesitant to participate in such a research project with an early career researcher from a foreign university, considering the current political climate. This hesitancy stems not only from strict government

surveillance but also from the deeply ingrained culture of self-censorship in China, where individuals are cautious about discussing politically charged issues online or with outsiders. This concern was unfortunately confirmed during the initial stages of data collection. Attempts were made to contact several Weibo users whose posts were included in the dataset, through direct message requests. However, the outreach yielded no responses, as users either did not reply or, as in one case actually declined participation, likely wary of the potential consequences of engaging in a politically sensitive research project. This outcome further underscores the broader challenges researchers face when conducting fieldwork involving Chinese netizens.

On a somewhat lesser related note, social media platforms are also associated with the formation of filter bubbles and echo chambers (Persily et al. 2020), where users are mostly exposed to information that aligns with their existing beliefs thus reproducing existing discourses and sentiments. This, depending on the nature of inquiry, can be of benefit to some researchers, particularly those who wish to study the impact of these phenomena on political polarisation and the formation of particular popular discourses. Thus, with such acknowledgements, the following further considers the practical and ethical precautions that ought to be, and have in this case, been taken in such cases of social media research, particularly in such potentially sensitive environments.

Research ethics and integrity

Given the sensitivity of the Chinese online environment, there are certainly significant constraints on the actions that a researcher can undertake on social media platforms. Prior to submitting the application for the University of Oxford's Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC), a number of clearly outlined principles were highlighted as being key components that would be universally sensitive points that would potentially sound alarms by academics of different disciplines and fields of study. It was therefore, from the earliest of stages in research design, the greatest challenge and concern, to ensure that this research study would be able to uphold the principles of social media research ethics and integrity. However, as it is widely acknowledged, 'no consistent approach to the ethics of using social media data has been provided to researchers in this sphere' (Townsend and Wallace 2017:189). Thus, rather than regarding ethical considerations as a single, one-off measure, it was crucial to integrate the assessment of ethical issues related to internet research throughout all phases of the research project. Thus, at every step of decision-making, the

commitment to research ethics was made a priority. The categorisation of various internet-derived data sources is far from clear-cut, and this has consequences both in terms of determining the degree of consent and the extent to which identities should be safeguarded. However, it is crucial to note and acknowledge that while diligent measures and precautions have been implemented, it is not possible to ensure absolute confidentiality, nor is it guaranteed that the researcher will not be influenced by biases or unconsciously produce misrepresentations. Since this project takes an approach of observation rather than a participant-based one, in order to commit to the expected standard of research ethics, a number of measures have been taken in order to ensure that this project adheres as closely as possible to the University of Oxford's CUREC "Best Practice Guidance on Internet-Mediated Research". In addition to this, as referenced in the Literature Review, such precautions have been taken as a result of consulting the existing scholarship on similar studies as well as referring extensively to the wide range of scholarly literature on social media research ethics and general research practice.

First and foremost, the inherently public nature of many social media platforms introduces complexity to the realm of research ethics and integrity. This complexity primarily manifests in conflicts between established ethics guidelines and the circumstances of the field site, the process of securing informed consent, and the challenge of distinguishing between public and private spaces. For instance, in the case of this project, one needs to have an account to browse Weibo with ease which further blurs the line of what is classed as public. However, most, if not all, social media platforms require an account to be able to make full use of the platform's functions. Thus, in such cases of research that do not engage with or directly quote from users, a number of other confidentiality measures serve to address and mitigate such concerns about users', rather than participants', data rights and protection. Risks to individuals or groups, as well as the researcher, must be thoroughly accounted for especially in cases where research participants may be deemed vulnerable or when the research may delve into sensitive subjects. It is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that they have appropriately assessed the degree to which the identities of participants are crucial to the research itself and, if so, how sensitive that information is (Tiidenberg 2018). Though user identity is difficult to verify on social media platforms like Weibo, all and any identifiable personal information that was collected under this project will never be used in any publication, including this thesis.

Another significant concern pertaining to internet-mediated research is that, even with full anonymity, it may be much easier to identify individuals from internet-mediated research than from other types of research. In order to mitigate these risks of revealing users' identities, particular care and attention has been paid to ensuring anonymity. Research data, including personal and identifiable data, was safely and securely stored through Nexus365 OneDrive for Business, henceforth referred to as OneDrive, on a password-protected laptop device. While the raw data remains stored on OneDrive, all identifiable information from this study cannot be found or accessed by anyone who should not have access to the specific folder of data of this project. In fact, the only information in this thesis that remotely alludes to information about the users is anonymised and does not draw on specific characteristics of the user accounts, with the occasional reference of the post users' verification symbol type.

Though a rare occurrence throughout this thesis, the decision to address the prevalence of certain verification symbols is due to the nature of the inquiry that seeks to understand whether the usage of the neologism transcends the standard user account. By exploring the prevalence of verification symbols – refer to Appendix C for a statistical analysis of the various categories of verified and unverified users – hence the types of user accounts engaged and responsible for propagating such discourses, this will shed light on the possibility that 'shared nationalist goals of both the state and popular players' might be coincided and mutually reinforced (Ma 2018:306). However, even with full anonymisation, a search on the internet may easily lead one to the post and user. For instance, conducting a Google search using a direct quote from a Twitter post will very likely yield the direct link to the original post and, with that, the account user. Therefore, to mitigate the possibility of this occurring, a multi-step process of translation and paraphrasing quotations was employed throughout the writing up process of this thesis; the multi-step process essentially considered the possibility of retracing the post and thus ensured that, after translating posts and quotes from Simplified Chinese to British English, quotes for publication were paraphrased in a way that retained its original meaning without using the same wording. While much of the necessary steps have been taken in order to ensure data privacy and anonymity, various colleagues at the Oxford Internet Institute had strongly advised taking one additional measure sometimes colloquially referred to as "scrambling". *The Ethics of Using Social Media Data in Research: A New Framework* (Townsend and Wallace 2017) posits a framework that borrows from a number of discussions from workshops, publications, and official ethical guidelines which serves as one of if not the first for social media researchers. In this proposed framework, the final stage highlights the ethics of data usage

and publication whereby the 'issues of sensitivity or risk of harm' are critical (Townsend and Wallace 2017:205). Although the topics discussed and users involved which are concerned in this research are not particularly sensitive or vulnerable, to guarantee an approach as ethical as possible, 'paraphrasing quotes' are an advised additional step (Townsend and Wallace 2017:201). In light of the sensitivity surrounding this research and the challenges posed by government surveillance and self-censorship in China, it became essential to adopt careful measures in presenting the data used in this thesis. To ensure the protection of privacy and anonymity of Chinese netizens whose posts were analysed, all quoted data has been deliberately altered to avoid traceability. For any direct quotations from Weibo or other Chinese social media platforms are limited to very concise excerpts—only one or two words—making them nearly impossible to trace back to the original source. For longer references or more substantial points, the content has been fully rephrased, ensuring that the original language and structure are obscured. Additionally, these rephrased posts were first translated from Chinese, adding another layer of abstraction. This approach ensures that the integrity of the discourse is preserved for analysis, while also mitigating the risk that any individual netizen could be identified or face consequences for their participation in politically sensitive discussions. By taking these precautions, this thesis adheres to ethical research practices while navigating the complexities of studying social media discourse in a highly controlled digital environment.

Reflexivity is crucial in a project like this, especially when dealing with emerging social media research methods. My personal background, which encompasses British nationality alongside Chinese ethnicity and Taiwanese citizenship, has provided me with a unique vantage point that informs my research approach. This dual heritage has fostered a heightened reflexivity throughout the research process, enabling me to critically engage with the material while remaining mindful of potential biases. My Chinese heritage has afforded me a deep understanding of Chinese culture, values, and societal norms, which has been instrumental in analysing and interpreting the anti-Western sentiments expressed within the Chinese context. Concurrently, my British identity has allowed me to approach these issues from a global perspective, situating the discourse within broader geopolitical frameworks and enhancing the analytical depth of this study. Ultimately, this confluence of personal and academic influences has allowed me to approach this research with a balanced and informed perspective, striving to uphold objectivity while acknowledging the complexities inherent in my positionality. This reflexive awareness has been central to the integrity of the research, ensuring that the insights generated

are both nuanced and contextually grounded, thereby contributing meaningfully to the broader academic discourse on China and its evolving global interactions.

Social media platforms are dynamic, and the novelty of such research requires scholars to critically examine their own role in the research process. Reflexivity involves a deep awareness of how a researcher's biases, choices, and interpretations may influence the study at every stage. In their paper, Pousti, Urquhart, and Linger (2021) propose a framework for social media research that emphasises this reflective nature. They introduce the concept of 'three levels of reflexivity: theory, design, and practice' (Pousti et al. 2021:356). It is crucial to account for such considerations as researchers are aware of the influences that can alter how sense-making occurs at the theoretical, design, and practical levels of a study, wherein researchers collect, interpret, and depict data. At the theoretical level, researchers need to consider how their conceptual frameworks, assumptions, and disciplinary perspectives shape the research questions and objectives. In the context of this project, for example, reflexivity might involve recognising how preconceptions about Chinese internet discourse could influence the interpretation of the "*baizuo*" phenomenon. At the design level, reflexivity includes recognising the impact of research tools and methods, such as how data is collected, coded, or analysed. Put simply, the researcher must account for how these choices might shape the data collected and how they interpret it. Finally, at the practical level, it involves reflecting on the day-to-day activities of data collection and analysis, including the interactions between the researcher and the platform, the ethical considerations, and the influence of evolving social media algorithms (see Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez 2021; Schneider 2022). For instance, when sending direct messages to Weibo users, this project had to contend with the likelihood of self-censorship or user hesitancy in responding. This interaction directly affected the data-gathering process and required the researcher to adapt the research design accordingly. Reflexivity at all three levels ensures that the researcher remains aware of how their own actions, decisions, and assumptions shape the knowledge production process. This awareness is essential in social media research, where the digital environment, political climate, and researcher's position are interwoven into the fabric of the study itself.

Through an examination of the evolution of anti-*baizuo* content during the 2020-2023 period of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study aims to offer insights into how Weibo users participate in and reproduce this discourse. This research not only enables the participants and those under scrutiny to be comprehensively observed and potentially understood, but also contributes to a deeper comprehension of the ongoing political tensions

between East and West. While there are no risks or threats imposed on those who are the focus in this research, the aforementioned ethical considerations are not only fundamental to the credibility of this research but are also crucial for maintaining the trust and respect of those who are studied. However small this study measures in the grand scheme of the international political arena, it nonetheless still speaks to a number of serious and legitimate concerns and so it is indeed a responsibility to do right by those who are being studied and represented in this research. By taking such precautions so seriously, it demonstrates the commitment to adhere to these ethical guidelines, ensuring that this work stands as a beacon of responsible and ethical research practice.

Data collection

Eileen Le Han's chapter examines how Weibo, as an event-oriented and topic-driven platform, has made a distinct contribution to shaping the Chinese social media landscape and the public life of Chinese people (Han 2019:379). Han's methodological approach is particularly relevant to this project, as she employed an 'online ethnographic approach to data collection' by spending six hours daily on Weibo (Han 2019:381). Han asserts that because discourses on Weibo develop and circulate simultaneously, the platform offers endless opportunities for topics and news 'to be discussed with new meanings added' (Han 2019:381). Reflecting on the methodologies employed in existing but similar studies, it was decided that an inductive reasoning approach would be used to gather meaningful data from Weibo and ensure flexibility and adaptability in being able to sufficiently examine the "*baizuo*" discourse. This approach was particularly suitable for this research project, as it enabled the researcher to draw patterns and insights directly from the collected data without the constraints of preconceived theories or hypotheses. The research began with several preliminary test searches, focusing on the Chinese characters for "*baizuo*". These initial keyword searches were intentionally broad and general, aiming to capture the wide range of contexts in which the term was being used. This preliminary phase served two key purposes: first, to gauge the relevance of the term's contemporary usage on Weibo, and second, to determine whether the patterns observed during earlier postgraduate research remained consistent in this more extensive doctoral investigation. The early exploratory searches helped to assess how the "*baizuo*" term was situated within various ongoing discussions on Chinese social media, particularly in relation to major societal and political issues. This allowed for greater ease when building upon prior work while maintaining

an open-ended approach that was receptive to new or unexpected findings. By examining a diverse range of Weibo posts, the research was structured in a way that would help build an understanding of how "*baizuo*" was deployed in both its literal and symbolic meanings, noting shifts in its usage across different contexts and time periods. This inductive process also helped to refine the scope of the research. Initially, the project aimed to investigate the term "*baizuo*" in conjunction with multiple key topics prevalent in contemporary Chinese social media discussions. As more data was collected and analysed, the research gradually homed in on specific trends and themes that emerged from the discourse. However, upon realising the overwhelmingly large scope of this endeavour, the crucial decision was made to narrow the focus. This led to revisiting the proposal of focusing on the sole topic of COVID-19, delving into additional terminology, and exploring other aspects of the conversations that had been previously noted. This iterative process of collecting, analysing, and refining data ensured that the study remained responsive to the nuances of online discourse and that its findings were grounded in observed realities rather than theoretical assumptions. The inductive approach, combined with preliminary test searches, thus allowed the research to adapt organically as new patterns and topics of interest surfaced. This flexibility was particularly important given the ever-evolving nature of online platforms like Weibo, where language usage, societal trends, and political discussions are constantly shifting. By starting with broad searches and allowing the data to guide the research direction, the project was able to gather substantial and significant data that would provide a deep understanding of the "*baizuo*" phenomenon within the context of Chinese social media.

One potentially identifiable limitation of this study is the quality and availability of relevant data, coupled with the potentially restricted scope of the research. Upon assessing the demands of the research enquiry, it became evident rather early on into the research design process that a purely quantitative methodology would have been insufficient for capturing the contextual nuances and subjectivities necessary to understand these sentiments. This rationale also informed the decision to focus on Weibo, given its vast user base and the variety of multimedia content, providing a rich dataset for analysis. The methodology in this research project has, since the outset, prioritised quality and relevance over the size of the dataset. Moreover, ethical, legal, and technological concerns also influenced the choice to gather, rather than scrape, data from Weibo. Expanding the dataset was deemed unnecessary, as it would not have significantly impacted the findings. Though it could

certainly be argued that future research aiming to track the rise and widespread use of terms like "*baizuo*" could benefit from statistical analysis to better understand how such discourse gains prominence online.

Given that this study focuses solely on the prominence of the term baizuo during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, its relatively narrow scope of enquiry may be seen by some as insufficient to comprehensively address the broader research question. While this thesis ultimately draws upon several hundred Weibo posts, it is important to note that, at an earlier stage of data collection, the dataset comprised over 800 posts. This number was later significantly reduced through the application of exclusion criteria. Due to the study's deliberately focused line of enquiry, the available data pool is naturally smaller than in many other social media-based projects, particularly those adopting a "big data" approach. As such, questions may arise regarding potential data limitations or representativeness. However, the decision to centre the project on this niche discursive intersection was only reached after revising the original research design, which initially aimed to explore anti-*baizuo* discourse across three global current affairs, including the COVID-19 pandemic. Upon reflection, it became clear that such breadth would have prevented a sufficiently rigorous or nuanced analysis of each topic and their respective discourse strands. Narrowing the focus allowed for a more coherent and robust interrogation of the research questions. Moreover, while the broader pool of 803 pandemic-focused Weibo posts remained relevant in scope and thematic orientation, the dataset was refined in order to enhance analytical precision. This reduction did not reflect the irrelevance of the excluded posts but was instead a necessary step to enable repeated close readings of the post and comment sections, detailed annotation, and the iterative cross-referencing of emerging themes. The final dataset allowed for deeper engagement with a discursively rich and diverse set of posts, while avoiding analytical dilution caused by redundancy or content oversaturation — particularly given that many excluded posts reproduced near-identical language, tropes, or media already captured in the final selection.

As mentioned above, while an overwhelming proportion of social media researchers opt for more quantitative approaches to studying the internet-based phenomena, it was important that – in order to answer the primary research question – that this project was structured and designed differently from those following such practices. Thus, the decision not to use scraping and web crawlers, is a conscious one. While researchers have endorsed and made use of certain tools, like 'Weibo APIs' (Hu et al. 2016:596), to gather and collect large amounts of user-generated data, this study adopted a manual approach of data collection to counter a number of concerns. Firstly, despite countless existing studies that have adopted scraping on Weibo, data

scraping poses a number of ethical challenges. Given that some of the data might contain personal data or information, such a research endeavour would face a number of ethical concerns and challenges. The mere accessibility of data online does not inherently confer ethical legitimacy for its utilisation in research endeavours. More critically, content posted online does not imply explicit consent for its incorporation into research, thus raising pertinent privacy concerns (Tiidenberg 2018:470). Crucially, it is important to note that, as of 2023, 'No current legislation directly addresses web scraping' (Krotov and Johnson 2023:486). Thus, there are significant legal risks with using scrapers or Application Programming Interfaces (API) on Weibo, as seen in the landmark lawsuit filed against Maimai in which Weibo Corp took legal action for illegally mining and using Weibo user's personal data (Chen and Yang 2017). Secondly, there have been a number of reports in online forums regarding technical issues with Weibo scrapers, such as the quality of the tool, the rate limit, and if the tool does not scrape complete search results (Littman et al. 2017). Such issues thus call into question the actual quality of such data collected. Thirdly, safely securing and storing a considerable amount of data, as is often the case with data scraping, poses several potential challenges. Finally, there is also an issue of reproducibility and ethical transparency; a lack of transparency with methods might pose challenges for others seeking to replicate or authenticate results, while being transparent may mean that, with the ability to replicate such methods, stakeholders of the platform could take actions that lead to further complications. Furthermore, the ethical discourse extends to the accuracy and reliability of scraped data (Krotov and Johnson 2023:485). Given the prevalence of inaccuracies and misinformation online, researchers must exercise diligence in validating and cross-referencing their sources to prevent the propagation of erroneous information or misrepresentative data. Researchers ought to recognise these challenges and implement suitable strategies to mitigate, if not overcome, them. As mentioned in the previous section on the precautions taken for this study, this may involve safeguarding data privacy and security, scrambling or paraphrasing quoted data, and maintaining transparency regarding methods and limitations in research publications. Ultimately, due to the primary focus in this project being on the nature of discourse itself and understanding the logic and rationale underpinning it, quantitative methods have not been particularly appealing for the purposes of this research. Moreover, it was important that the data collected was appropriate in that analysis would allow for structuring and classification which, unlike scraping for instance, allows the researcher to have more control over their data (Luscombe, Dick, and Walby 2022:1030).

In October 2022, when data collection first commenced, I reflected on the limits of my postgraduate research and devised key words and concepts that had come up either in my own research findings or online articles. During the initial collection, numerous posts were gathered that contained the key characters for "white" (白) and "left" (左), which together form the term *baizuo*. The preliminary analysis of the initial sample, which comprised 803 posts, provided a broader insight into the discourses circulating on Weibo. However, not all posts that included these characters individually pertained to the concept of *baizuo* in the political or cultural context being studied. The challenge is further compounded by the fact that characters in the Chinese language often have multiple meanings, which are only fully understood when viewed within a particular context or phrase. This made it difficult to ensure that search results were genuinely relevant to the research, requiring careful manual screening to distinguish between posts that were pertinent to the study and those that were not. For instance, multiple posts were found to include the terms "white" and "left" in a medical context, particularly discussing the appearance of white blurs on x-rays, which were indicative of COVID-19 impact on lungs. This singular example alone highlights the challenges of working with textual data that may contain the correct lexemes but diverges completely in meaning from the research topic. These instances underscored the complexity of data collection on platforms like Weibo, where search engines often return results based on the presence of specific characters or keywords, without considering their intended meaning or the order in which they appear. This means that search queries can yield irrelevant content simply because the words or characters are present, even if they are unrelated to the research topic. As a result of deliberating these concerns, the data collection process necessitated a far more nuanced approach to filtering and interpreting search results to avoid misrepresentation and to accurately capture the discourse under investigation.

This phase involved the application of an exclusion criteria which served to remove any posts that were deemed irrelevant, redundant, or not aligned with the scope of the research (see Appendix B). This approach helped prevent the dilution of research findings and facilitated a more accurate interpretation of the online discourse surrounding the term. The rationale behind this process was twofold: first, to refine the dataset by focusing on posts that directly contributed to the research objectives, and second, to ensure a high level of analytical depth by working with data that held significant value in understanding the online discourse. Therefore, refining the dataset was crucial to maintaining the integrity and focus of the research, ensuring that only posts with direct relevance to the concept of "*baizuo*" were included. This meticulous refinement of the

dataset allowed the research to focus on posts that presented unique insights or added layers of complexity to the discourse. The application of exclusion criteria reduced the dataset from 803 to 337 posts (see Appendix A). While seemingly modest in size relative to the vast scale of Chinese internet users, this curated sample provided a manageable scope for the qualitative approach of this study. Rather than focusing on the sheer number of posts, the analysis prioritises depth and intertextuality, examining how posts reference, respond to, and shape broader digital discourses. The emphasis on depth enabled an analysis attuned to nuanced themes such as nationalism, anti-Western sentiment, and identity within Chinese online spaces. Importantly, these 337 posts represent a purposeful selection aimed at uncovering meaningful patterns within the broader context of anti-*baizuo* discourse. The study acknowledges the scale of China's 1.09 billion internet users and the potential for *baizuo* discourse to manifest across other platforms. However, it situates the significance of this dataset within the dynamic nature of Weibo, a central space for public discussion and rapid trend dissemination. This selection is intended to provide a detailed case study that highlights how such discourse operates in practice. By narrowing the focus to a specific moment and platform, the study captures a fragment that reflects larger societal tensions and discursive shifts. While this thesis focuses on Weibo, it is important to acknowledge that discourses surrounding *baizuo* are not limited to this platform alone. However, within the specific scope of this research, such discourse was not found to be abundant on other platforms. As discussed previously in this chapter, multiple attempts at preliminary searches conducted on these platforms yielded minimal or uninformative data, highlighting the challenges of accessing reliable information outside of Weibo. Therefore, while this study offers a detailed analysis of 337 posts on Weibo relating to the term *baizuo*, it also points to the position that this term and its related discourses occupy within a broader "family" of discourses on Chinese superiority in relation to the liberal West. This methodological choice ensured that the final analysis would be both thorough and representative of the diverse range of voices participating in the online discussion, while avoiding the pitfalls of oversaturation or superficial engagement with the data. To dismiss anti-*baizuo* rhetoric as a minor or fringe phenomenon would risk underestimating its expanding influence on public discourse and its role in shaping contemporary ideological debates in China. This rhetoric, while seemingly niche, reflects broader societal tensions and the complex interplay between cultural identity, political ideology, and national pride. The analysis of these Weibo posts provides a critical foundation for examining how anti-*baizuo* narratives are constructed, disseminated, and engaged with online. These posts reveal how such rhetoric not only critiques perceived Western liberal values but also reinforces a sense of Chinese cultural and moral

superiority, aligning with the broader trends of grassroots nationalism. Consequently, these 337 posts offer a valuable starting point for understanding the position of anti-*baizuo* rhetoric within the larger framework of growing nationalist sentiments and its implications for China's online and offline sociopolitical dynamics.

Consequently, there were a cluster of recent and popular topics or hashtags that served as initial entry points for the first preliminary searches that were conducted on Weibo, and this allowed for a broader read of the popular discourses involving or surrounding the term. Then, as a result of brainstorming, a working list of forty English key words and phrases were narrowed down to be more efficient in terms of time and effort, considering that many of the words, or characters, were the same– given the nature of the Chinese language. Moreover, to find out the prevalence of those topics and phrases in the preliminary searches, each Advanced Search entry included the Chinese characters for *baizuo* as well as one of the forty phrases, separated by a semicolon. Every entry made was set with a "state date" of 1 January 2020 while the "end date" was the date that the data was logged into the spreadsheet database on OneDrive; in the case of this study, the end date was not of importance so long as it was a post that was published after 2019, when the coronavirus outbreak became a pandemic. After the preliminary results were completed, there was a process of elimination which saw the list of forty decrease by three-quarters so as to maximise research efforts; due to the many names of the coronavirus, and some being far more common and popular in usage than others, the list of phrases was reduced to seven. Though this would later be revised and expanded upon, the first seven key phrases were the following, in no particular order: "new crown virus" (新冠病毒); "new crown pneumonia" (新冠肺炎); "coronavirus" (冠状病毒); "pandemic" (大流行); "virus" (病毒); "coronavirus disease" (冠状病毒病); "epidemic" (流行性) (see Appendix A). It is worth noting that while search results display all content containing those characters, they do not necessarily mean that the characters appear together in the order specified in the search input.

The research process was carefully structured to ensure both methodical data collection and opportunities for reflection and refinement of the approach. Before the posts were even selected for consideration, a laborious preliminary stage was required: this entailed combing through thousands of social media posts using relevant search terms, hashtags, and keyword combinations related to *baizuo* and associated themes. This stage was particularly time-consuming and often tedious, as it involved sifting through a high volume of irrelevant,

tangential, or low-quality content in order to identify posts that even loosely aligned with the research focus. Research days typically lasted a minimum of four hours of scrolling through and logging data from social media platforms, with alternating research and off days to avoid fatigue and allow for continuous assessment of the data gathered. A minimum of 20 hours per week was dedicated over the entire research period of six months, totalling at least 520 hours of online browsing and systematic experimentation with keywords. This periodic schedule included week-long breaks, which were essential for reflecting on the current data, assessing limitations in the methodology, and developing strategies to address these challenges.

By the end of May 2023, data collection concluded with just over 800 Weibo posts (see Appendix A), though this would later be further reduced by more than half due to the development of an exclusion criteria. This phase of the research involved a systematic and multi-step filtering process, guided by a defined set of inclusion and exclusion criteria to refine the dataset. First, each of the 803 posts was subject to a close, manual reading in order to assess the content's thematic relevance to the research focus — specifically, its engagement with the term *baizuo* and the broader discourses surrounding it, i.e. the COVID-19 pandemic. Posts were only included if a significant proportion of the content explicitly addressed or invoked *baizuo*-related language, tropes, or political framings, rather than mentioning the term in passing or in unrelated contexts. Second, the word count of each post was considered; posts that were fewer than fifteen words, often lacked sufficient context or argumentative depth to yield meaningful analysis and were therefore excluded. Third, the vitality of the comment section was also evaluated, as user interactions and discussions were a crucial dimension of the analysis. Posts that failed to generate a sufficiently rich or active comment thread were deprioritised but not necessarily excluded, as they offered limited insight into the wider dynamics of online reception and debate. Fourth, to ensure diversity and analytical value within the dataset, posts were cross-compared for repetition. A number of posts were found to contain near-identical wording or reposted media, particularly in cases of viral or re-shared content. These redundant entries were excluded to preserve the analytical clarity of the study. This rigorous and iterative filtration process not only enhanced the validity of the dataset but also ensured that the final corpus was representative of how politically engaged netizens — as distinct from casual or passive users — articulated, circulated, and contested the concept of *baizuo* in the Chinese digital public sphere. The selected posts were thus not only thematically aligned with the study's aims, but also discursively rich, contextually grounded, and analytically generative.

The first phase of data collection, from early October 2022 until mid-January 2023, saw a focus on these seven key phrase searches; each Advanced Search entry thus included the same start date, the Chinese characters for *baizuo*, and one of the seven phrases. When scrolling through the search results, one by one, posts were first combed to see whether or not they fit the remaining inclusion criteria for being appropriate as data. There is astonishingly little guidance in existing social media scholarship on the specifics of "Advanced Search" functions in research and so it was a rationalised but not proven solution to adopt the widely adopted use of the semicolon when searching for multiple words. Thus, excluding posts such as this were a necessary measure that needed to be taken and would have likely been overlooked had a web crawler been used. Then, it became a question of how relevant the post's contents were in terms of criticisms and the elaboration or discussion that followed the use of the term itself. In other words, the post needed to be significant and have some, even if just a clause or short sentence, potential context for why the term was being used, i.e., referencing a political party, a controversial public figure. Other criteria included, albeit less important, was the length of posts; though it was rare in this research study to come across a post over 750 characters, it was necessary to limit the scope somewhat in case the term was not a central point of focus in the post. Moreover, it is worth noting that, while both key words appeared and were a significant or central component to the post content, some of the posts were not exclusively or purely about COVID-19. Rather many of them mentioned it or included it as an example, or point of reference, in their argument or explanation.

When logging the contents of the original post, it was also important that, to maximise efficiency, the English translations from the automated translation device were also logged. Indeed, as expected with automated translations, raw data cannot be treated as such given that there are a number of issues pertaining to data accuracy and reliability. Given such considerations, it is important to outline here first, before addressing it in more depth later, that this was a precautionary step that provided a generic idea of what the original post was about or contained. From the posts that were deemed appropriate for use, there were multiple components that were recorded as data, in addition to the contents of the post, the number of likes, comments of significant interest, the Uniform Resource Locator (URL), and the original poster's verification status. Though they were logged as data in the preceding research project, it became evident that the number of shares reveals no more than the number of likes and comments and so they were excluded in this study. The research design of this project incorporates a comprehensive analysis of comment sections and netizen interactions on platforms like

Weibo to capture the complexity and diversity of online discourse surrounding "*baizuo*." While the study focuses on common themes and topics of interest, such as anti-Western sentiment and critiques of liberal ideologies, it aims to demonstrate that the discourse is far from monolithic.

By keeping records of and analysing comment sections and user-generated interactions, the research highlights the presence of dialogue, debate, and varied perspectives among Chinese netizens. This approach is particularly important for illustrating that not all netizens align within the anti-*baizuo* discourse. By documenting and analysing these dialogues, this research underscores the significance of these divergent perspectives; such variations in public opinion reflect broader trends in contemporary Chinese society, where individuals navigate the intersections of global and local perspectives in different ways. The study thus sheds light on the dynamic nature of digital nationalism, emphasising that the discourse around *baizuo* is a contested space of interaction, rather than a uniform and one-dimensional expression of hostility toward the West. Thus, this methodological choice enriches the study by not only mapping the prevalence of certain themes but also revealing the active, dialogical processes through which these ideas are debated, reshaped, and sometimes resisted by netizens. This approach of analysing comment sections and netizen interactions will allow for deeper insights into the multiplicity of voices contributing to the dialogue, revealing both agreement and disagreement with the dominant themes, which enriched the understanding of the discourse's diversity.

As observed in Chapter 6, the record-keeping of verification symbols (see Appendix C) was also important as it allowed for conclusions to be made about the different types of users involved in building or shaping the discourse. For instance, it is widely known among users and researchers alike that users with "VIP" verification 'often have millions of followers and thus are considered to be opinion leaders' (Hu et al. 2016:594). Put simply, by observing and distinguishing the types of user verification, analysis can be made about the different types of users who utilise and discuss the term. As it will be discussed in more detail about their respective significance, the majority of original posters from the data collected showed that the majority of those accounts were either paid-for "VIP" symbols or completely non-verified. While taking notes of such trends, it also became apparent that a handful of usernames were particularly prevalent in the search results, many of whom were verified and well-established blogging influencers and other citizen journalists. Notably, Eileen Le Han argues that the boundaries between sources of authority have become 'blurred', making 'user-generated' content as credible and informative, if not more so, than 'official' sources (Han 2019:381). Such observations illustrate how Weibo's ideological arena results in or facilitates the development and attribution

of new meanings to labels such as '*gongzhi* (公知 "public intellectuals")' and '*wumao* (五毛 "fifty cents army")' (Han 2019:384). Borrowing from similar studies' approaches to tracking such individuals, it was important to 'identify opinion leader tweets' and user accounts (Zhang et al. 2018:765), though any data obtained from such observations would not be published in any forms. Thus, in making note of such observations, it was important to, alongside the analysis of the data collected, '[follow] those selected users … that are most relevant to the discussion' (Han 2019:381).

Between January and March 2023, data collection was temporarily paused to prioritise the transcription and paraphrasing of the posts already gathered. These were then systematically logged into NVivo, a critical qualitative data analysis tool, in preparation for deeper analysis. This period of reflection and transcription was crucial to ensure the research was not merely accumulating data but also making sense of it in a structured way. The cyclical nature of the data collection process—where batches of data were collected, compared with existing entries, thoroughly reviewed, and then logged—was key to ensuring the research was both comprehensive and adaptable. The iterative nature of the research design therefore allowed for continuous refinement, making the study adaptable to emerging patterns and unanticipated gaps.

The second phase of data collection therefore began in March 2023 and was completed two months later in May. During this period, the initial list of seven key phrases expanded to ten, as three new terms—"pneumonia" (肺炎), "face masks" (口罩), and "lockdown" (封城)—were added to the search rota. These additions were prompted by a careful review of the initial dataset, where frequently recurring characters and terms became evident in the raw data. Much like the first round, this second wave of data collection followed a meticulous process. Searches based on the newly identified phrases yielded a significant number of results, further enriching the dataset. The integration of these additional terms not only broadened the scope of the research but also revealed more traceable themes and subtopics across the discussions. These ten terms were not only used as but also labels for each page of the dataset, as sub-datasets in spreadsheets on Excel and NVivo display windows in order to make data visualisation easier. Through this cyclical approach—where data collection was followed by periods of reflection, analysis, and refinement—it became possible to stitch together overarching narratives and recurring ideas that might have otherwise gone unnoticed. This iterative

strategy ensured that the research could accommodate new insights as they emerged, making the overall analysis both comprehensive and dynamic.

At first glance, this number seems modest compared to other social media studies, which often involve large-scale datasets. However, the qualitative nature of this research required an in-depth analysis of the discourse, language, and culturally loaded jargon used in politically and historically charged discussions, particularly in the context of the Chinese internet. Translation was thus by far one of the most laborious challenges faced in this research project, due to a number of concerns. On one level, as a heritage speaker and continual student of the Chinese language, the task of translating, transcribing, and "scrambling" the Weibo content for data collection and analysis was particularly demanding and taxing as an experience. The additional complexity arose from my familiarity with Traditional Chinese, which meant that translating content from Simplified Chinese required marginally more time and effort, as I had to cross-reference and ensure accurate translations. Beyond this, throughout the research process, significant concerns emerged about the ability to fully understand and interpret the complexities of the Chinese language, particularly in the context of online communities where jargon and slang are prevalent. As someone not deeply immersed in the intricacies of Chinese language, particularly in the context of contemporary popular discourse in mainland China, there is an inherent challenge in grasping the subtle meanings and cultural connotations embedded in the evolving online vernacular. Even native speakers often struggle to fully comprehend these terms, as online jargon frequently shifts in meaning or usage within specific subcultures (see Seta 2014; Yi et al. 2019; Li and Wang 2024). Such concerns are heightened due to fears of misinterpretation or missing important nuances, ultimately impacting the accuracy and depth of any analysis. These concerns highlight the necessity for a deeper, more contextualised understanding of digital Chinese discourse to capture its full complexity. This realisation underscored the complexities of the upcoming data analysis phase, which demanded a more thorough and careful exploration of the content. The posts were first compiled in an Excel spreadsheet, and the dual-step transcription process resulted in English translations being recorded on NVivo for easier data handling. To streamline the analysis, all data—excluding any identifiable information about users or posts—was put into NVivo, which effectively ensured that the initial coding process would be smooth and efficient. The transfer of posts into NVivo allowed for the commencement of the first steps of data analysis, which required meticulously tagging and categorising each post according to key themes.

Despite the reduced number of posts, the depth of analysis required—focusing on subtle linguistic nuances and the intricacies of political discourse—indicated that this qualitative approach would yield far richer insights into online nationalism and anti-Western sentiment in China than a larger quantitative study might have provided. This iterative and focused process set the stage for a more thorough exploration of the data, ensuring that the resulting analysis would be nuanced and comprehensive. Then, a systematic approach was used to assign unique reference numbers to each post, ensuring both randomness and chronological context, without posing a risk to anonymity. This process involved generating a random three-digit number for each post, which was then combined with the corresponding month and year when the post was created or collected. For instance, a post uploaded to Weibo on 13 September 2021, would be assigned a random three-digit number and subsequently logged as "#1230921" for easy reference. Similarly, for comment sections as shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4, a random number generator—ranging from one to the total number of comments recorded at the time—was used to display different users' comments. By integrating the date into the reference number, this method allowed for an organised structure that not only ensured each post had a distinct identifier but also preserved information about the time period of the post. The use of a random number generator prevented predictable sequences and added an additional layer of randomness, while the month and year markers provided temporal context, facilitating easier referencing and analysis across the dataset. This approach allowed for efficient post tracking while maintaining both randomness and temporal clarity throughout the study.

Reflecting on the range and timing of the collected data, it is essential to acknowledge how various factors may have shaped the findings of this study. In particular, censorship on Chinese social media platforms plays a critical role in the availability of certain types of content, especially regarding politically sensitive topics. As reviewed in Chapter 2, there has been significant academic and editorial coverage of the substantial censorship of terms like "protest" on platforms like Weibo, which could have curtailed discussions and mentions related to the 2022 protests in China. For instance, posts containing words such as "protest" in 2022 were found to be significantly fewer in comparison to those dating to the 2020-2021 period of the pandemic. The 2022 COVID-19 protests, or White Paper Protests, in China, which saw a rare convergence of online and offline dissent, were subject to heavy censorship, particularly on social media (Henry 2022; Mozur, Xiao, and Liu 2022).

Therefore, references to "protest" during this time would have been filtered out or restricted, thus reducing their presence in the data. In fact, of the 337 posts in the dataset, fewer than ten posts were found to be posted in November 2022 or later, none exhibited any significant deviation from the predominant trends observed. On the topic of "protest" in China, of all the posts that contained the word "protest", only one was dated in 2022 or after. In March 2022, the post author wrote: 'Once again, protests against the lockdown policies have broken out in Europe. It's almost as if only death itself can make these "white leftists" recognise their stupidity' (#8970322). In addition to censorship, it should also be noted that, by March 2022, a significant proportion of Western countries had already abandoned such restrictions and policies, which could also account for the reduced commentary on COVID-19 protests as found in the data collected. More significantly of these concerns, is whether censorship during this period somewhat hinders the ability to confidently assert whether the protests in China indicated a shift in netizens' reactions and sentiments. The overlap in grievances between the Chinese protests and those in the West therefore complicates the assessment of any potential shifts in critical attitudes towards the *baizuo*. This uncertainty arises from the complex interplay of censorship, societal pressures, and varying individual perceptions. While fieldwork was conducted during and after the protests in China, search results still provided ample content for data collection. Nonetheless, it cannot be determined, based on the findings found in this study, whether such circumstances led Chinese netizens to think less critically of the *baizuo*, considering that the protests touched on similar sentiments expressed by Western protesters (see Henry 2022; Human Rights Watch 2023), whom Chinese netizens had previously criticised.

Although the reversal of the zero-COVID policy was a turning point in China's pandemic strategy and had the potential to alter the narratives on the pandemic and the *baizuo*, the data does not reveal any substantive shifts in discourse. The limited visibility of dissenting opinions on tightly controlled social media platforms makes it difficult to gauge a comprehensive shift in public sentiment, especially in the specific context and community of anti-*baizuo* Weibo users. Moreover, the inherent subjectivity and fluidity of the term "*baizuo*" add another layer of complexity, preventing any definitive conclusions about changes in critical thinking among Chinese citizens regarding this concept. Therefore, future studies could explore how key events, such as the White Paper Protests, and the subsequent government crackdown on the internet, may have tested and redefined the boundaries of patriotism and identity within China. These events could have challenged or reinforced the understanding of "*baizuo*" as a term, with new political and social dynamics coming into play. As the protests highlighted tensions between individual rights and state authority, the shifting discourse could

alter the goalposts for what is considered "*baizuo*," reflecting deeper ideological divides and potentially reshaping what it means to be patriotic in both domestic and global contexts. The ramifications of these shifts could have a lasting impact on Chinese netizens' usage of the term and its broader political implications in the post-2022 period.

Data analysis

As this research employs discourse analysis, it is crucial to recognise the significance of this method in uncovering the nuanced use of the term *baizuo* on social media. Discourse analysis is particularly valuable in examining how language and communication are used not only to convey ideas but also to shape and reinforce social and political ideologies. In the context of this study, analysing the discourse around *baizuo* allows for an exploration of how this term functions as a rhetorical tool to express frustration, criticism, and political opposition, often framed within broader cultural and ideological contexts. Discourse analysis enables the researcher to delve into the connotations, underlying assumptions, and the intent behind the use of *baizuo*, going beyond surface-level meanings to uncover the socio-political motivations that drive users to engage with this term. By examining the language used in posts, comments, and interactions surrounding *baizuo*, discourse analysis helps to identify recurring themes, patterns, and contradictions within the discourse. This approach also allows for the recognition of the fluid nature of online discussions, where the meaning of *baizuo* may shift depending on the context, user, or event being discussed. Moreover, it helps illuminate how different groups within Chinese society may appropriate or challenge this discourse, reflecting a variety of perspectives and underlying tensions. Ultimately, the adoption of discourse analysis in this research enhances the ability to capture the complexity of the *baizuo* phenomenon on social media. It offers a deeper understanding of how language functions as both a tool for ideological expression and a means for constructing identity, culture, and political affiliation within digital spaces. Through this method, the research highlights how the use of *baizuo* extends beyond simple name-calling to reflect broader societal concerns and tensions, both domestically and internationally.

Considering the ways in which previous similar studies have adopted discourse analysis, this research explores how netizens 'echo the broader nationalist discourse in China' through the development of the anti-*baizuo*

movement on Weibo (Guo 2019:328; see also Q. Huang 2021). Examining 'intertextuality' in the construction of online social movements, Guo asserts that online political discourses are crucial to revealing 'an important dimension of contentious politics' (Guo 2019:328). Considering how the anti-*baizuo* discourse fits into the production and construction of nationalist discourses in the cyberspace, this research explores nationalistic expression and how it relates to ethnonationalism. Ma Yiben's paper on the discourse analysis of Chinese media relating to the 2008 Beijing Olympic torch relay in Paris investigates how official and online popular media shape Chinese nationalist discourses 'through representations and discussions of the Paris leg of torch relay' (Ma 2018:97). Ma's research shows how discourse analysis can be conducted on a relevant topic or development that occurred over a certain period of time. The article further considers 'the changing power relations between state and popular players in the context of online political communication' and examines how the rise of online popular nationalism challenges the role of the Chinese state in the construction of nationalist discourse. In Jason Ng and Eileen Le Han's article on online anti-Japanese sentiments, they investigate Chinese netizens' use of slurs to 'express strong emotion or engage fellow commenters', while simultaneously referencing historical events and emphatically conveying their national identity (Ng and Han 2018). In *Linguistic Elements in Chinese discourse*, Xuehua Xiang's chapter on the Chinese personal pronoun system provides a good foundation in terms of understanding how pronouns are used. Maria Cheng's (2019) chapter on the use of modal verbs in Taiwan's political debates examines modal auxiliaries and highlights how discourse analysis can account for the construction of particular narratives. Though her research focuses on how modal verbs 'shape the political cognition and behaviours of the hearers,' Cheng provides insight into how the construction of speech and discourses can be broken apart, scrutinised, and understood within a specific context (Y. Cheng 2019a:185). Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, Xiaoyu Zhao (2021) conducts discourse analysis on quotidian expressions of nationalistic Chinese netizens and analyses their "liking" behaviours as a means to explore how nationalist expressions have increasingly developed a newly confident, confrontational, and even xenophobic position. Such studies are both relevant and valuable examples that demonstrate the utility and importance of this method and its applicability to this research on Chinese reflections on current socio-political developments in the West.

As this research project takes the approach of studying social media data as text, it adopts discourse analysis, or rather 'digital discourse analysis' (Caliandro 2016:670; see also Wilson 2022), to study the significance and

usage of *baizuo* in the Chinese cyberspace. This thesis examines how the term *baizuo* functions within Chinese cyberspace, analysing its usage through discourse analysis to reveal underlying political and racial ideologies. The study explores how, on Weibo, netizens' engagement with *baizuo* reflects and reinforces broader societal debates surrounding nationalism and Western political discourse. As this research is also concerned with the interactive nature of social media in this specific context, the data analysis also consists of examining how such connections and networks facilitate the development of discourses. In Yuanzheng Wu and Dezheng Feng's chapter on social media news in China during COVID-19, they highlight the eight different types of social semiotic activities, 'namely, expounding, reporting, recreating, sharing, enabling, recommending, exploring and doing' (Wu and Feng 2022:181). While the extent to which these apply varies greatly, especially in this context of Weibo-related research, they are useful to reference when exploring 'interdiscursivity in social media news' as they can explain which practices and behaviours are involved in certain professional practices (Wu and Feng 2022:181). Moreover, analysing the role of 'intertextuality' in shaping online social movements, Guo argues that online political discourses play a vital role in uncovering a significant aspect of contentious politics (Guo 2019:328). Intertextuality refers to the way texts – in this case, social media posts – draw upon, reference, and contextualise others, thereby creating a network of meaning that strengthens their rhetorical impact. Guo argues that online political discourses not only reflect public grievances but also serve to expose underlying dynamics of contentious politics, such as power struggles, ideological clashes, and the negotiation of collective identities. Building on this, this study investigates this as an example of the 'production and construction of nationalist discourse' in online spaces, particularly in relation to current affairs (Ma 2018:305). However, in order to do so, numerous steps of data analysis are needed before commencing the critical examination of the actual social media post content.

The process of data logging involved a straightforward task of copying and pasting content from the website to the Excel spreadsheet. However, the transition to data coding marked a far more complex phase of the research process. Coding demanded an acute attention to detail and the ability to interpret and analyse subtle meanings embedded in the text—requiring the researcher to read between the lines. In NVivo, a single-digit identification number was automatically assigned to each post in the dataset, simplifying the task of referencing and organising the data. The task of logging data in NVivo required extensive planning and forethought, ensuring a systematic approach when going through every post and coding them individually. This stage was

particularly crucial, as it set the foundation for the qualitative analysis that followed. Each post needed to be carefully evaluated, and themes were meticulously assigned to ensure no important nuances were overlooked. Inductive coding was utilised to minimise the risk of imposing any preconceived notions or biases on the data. This approach allowed for the emergence of themes directly from the data itself, rather than forcing the data to fit predetermined categories. However, it is important to note that the initial search queries, especially the selection of specific words and phrases, did have an inevitable influence on the data being observed. Despite this, every effort was made to remain neutral, with the focus of the coding process being on identifying recurring patterns and themes organically, without outside interference. Ultimately, the coding stage proved to be one of the most intellectually demanding aspects of the research, as it required balancing objectivity with deep engagement with the content. The goal was to ensure that the resulting analysis would reflect the authentic discourses emerging from the data, offering valuable insights into the use of language, context, and meaning in the discussions observed.

One of the greatest advantages of using NVivo is that, in being able to store all the data in one place, researchers are able to work effectively with the various types of data groups. In turn, the setup allows for manageable subgroup analyses; by being able to work on various tables and sets of data on a single window, on different tabs, it allows for data analysis to be conducted more efficiently than having to do so manually. NVivo has a number of impressive Auto Code tools that can be used to simplify the coding process for the individual researcher. The decision to manually code the data in this study was particularly important when considering a key issue inherent to this type of research. While automated coding features may be effective for certain tasks, they proved impractical for this study. The “Auto Code” functions were unable to detect some of the core elements essential to the analysis, making manual coding a necessary approach. Nuanced context, sarcasm, slang, and cultural references, or “expressions of sentiment” are common in social media data and can pose challenges for automated tools to interpret accurately. Auto-coding can significantly overlook these subtleties, potentially resulting in data misinterpretation and would have critical consequences on the data analysis especially in this study. An overwhelming proportion of the Weibo posts generated and transcribed in this study contain heavy sarcasm and unique cultural references only found in Chinese social media spaces and so this was a major concern that had to be addressed by taking the necessary steps of manual coding. Through the structure of level-based codes on NVivo, the top-level code allowed for different classifications to be made; in order to break down the types of information that were found to have some significance and

would make for a good foundation when conducting discourse analysis. For instance, in this study, top-level codes included examples like, “Rhetorical and literary devices” and “Groups, organisations, and individuals”. Such illustrations were deployed as they are able to showcase how researchers are able to observe the different levels of granularity in coding so that both inter-group and subgroup analyses were able to be made. While the Coding section on the sidebar of the application displays all lower-level codes under the top-level codes, henceforth referred to as “categories”, it was useful to manually keep a log of the codes on another Excel spreadsheet as well as a physical copy on paper to allow for more impromptu brainstorming which is less convenient to do so digitally. Therefore, to ensure coherence, these were cross-referenced with the already colour-coded highlights in order to piece together appropriately and efficiently themes, trends, and arguments in the steps leading up to the final stage of data processing– of discourse analysis.

Depending on the individual’s preferences for coding, one might find it easiest to begin by clicking specific pages of the data set and manually scrolling through or, alternatively, clicking on specific top-level and low-level codes in the sidebar to view the most referenced. Ultimately, one will find that they will adopt a combination of those options, in order to maximise their readings of the datasets. In the case of this study, I first set out by reading through the ten data sheets, in no particular order, and coding the posts one by one. While reviewing the posts, it became apparent that certain characteristics and features were more straightforward to identify and document. For instance, it is a relatively easy process to manually code content that ‘contains a link, mention, or hashtag’ (Murthy 2016:562), as it was in the case of the dataset for this research; Weibo features, such as the use of hashtags, weblinks, emojis, and screenshot images, were of notable interest as those were able to reveal more about the nature of the post’s contents and other relevant topics.

The first step of highlighting to code necessitated colour-coding whereby one colour, in this case yellow, was chosen for this specific top-level code which was conveniently labelled “Features”. Similarly, a large proportion of posts included names of public figures, groups, and political organisations or bodies, which given the mostly politically charged nature of these posts, were of significant interest for the purpose of this study. The top-level codes, “Orgs, politics, groups” and “Places”, were thus created and would be used to highlight everything mentioned in the posts that, for one reason or another, related to or were being defined as being *baizuo*. Equally, a handful of key events, dates, or trending news stories pertaining to the pandemic seemed to appear in posts which then saw the generation of “Trending news and events”. Then, as coding became more focused on the specific contents of the posts, it became clear that a number of characteristics,

namely frequently used phrases, “common phrases and comments”, became of significant interest for the purposes of understanding what exactly netizens feel and argue about the *baizuo*, as did the adjectives, or “Descriptions of *baizuo*”, that were used. In their study of online anti-Japanese sentiments, Jason Ng and Eileen Le Han examined how Chinese netizens employed slurs to express intense emotions and interact with fellow commenters (Ng and Han 2018). Finally, reflecting on the literature of discourse analysis, the focus of coding shifted towards more technical analysis, particularly regarding the types of language and rhetorical devices that were employed by netizens in their posts. Such attention was focused on identifying key linguistic elements such as exclamation marks, pronouns, and modal verbs. Studying these devices and vocabulary are crucial for critically analysing the tone, rhetoric, and intentions behind social media posts (Ma 2018:305). For instance, examining the use of modal verbs like “must” (必须) and “should” (应该) can provide insights into whether the user is adopting an assertive or suggestive tone and provides an insight into how individuals express their sentiments. Thus, the top-level code of “Rhetorical and literary devices” was generated. Given that coding under this criteria required a lot more closer reading and diligent coding, in order to ensure that analysis could be made about the relevant content within each post. During the later stages of coding, once the posts had been scanned through more than twice, it became clear that another subsection of lower-level codes were needed as a number of themes or trends had become of interest. The use of pronouns and modal verbs were raised in Xuehua Xiang’s (2022) and Maria Cheng’s (2019) respective chapters in *The Routledge Handbook of Chinese Discourse Analysis* which demonstrated how significant analysis of such vocabulary can be when examining how language reflects tone, narrative, and emotion in such discourses. In the latter, Cheng provides in-depth analysis of how English modal verbs can be understood as ‘pragmatic markers’, like ‘will, would (future prediction, intention, promise or likelihood) … and should, must (obligation, logical judgement, necessity)’ (M. Cheng 2019:176–77). The strategic use of such vocabulary, as well as punctuation and rhetorical devices, in speech as well as written text, are highly reflective of intention, discourse, as well as a number of contextual elements. All such instances were documented, coded, and annotated for comparison with similar cases in other posts. This process was essential for identifying trends and patterns in the use of these features during the analysis of the collected Weibo posts.

The coding process was long and meticulous as it required revisiting the same posts and scanning through to spot any other points or features of interest that could have been overlooked in previous readthroughs. Herein

lies the key ingredient to coding– consistency. Consistency is a crucial component to qualitative data analysis as it allows for safeguarding accuracy and, consequently, the ability to tie together strands or themes and formulate arguments across the dataset. Fortunately, as a qualitative researcher's tool, NVivo allows for flexibility which makes it easy to rearrange or reorganise codes across different categories and levels in case of mistakes or reshuffling the top-level nodes. There were, however, cases whereby codes did not conventionally fit under the top-levels but nonetheless needed to be included and were annotated as needed to distinguish such codes apart. This iterative process was one of if not the most challenging as it required many additional hours of careful reading and, where necessary, annotation. NVivo's "Annotations" function is a useful tool that can be used alongside highlighted codes as it allows for the researcher to take notes about the highlighted content. Like coding, however, annotating the posts was a continual process by which cross-referencing posts was also necessary in order to ensure that key points or themes could be tied together. In order to pull together strands and formulate arguments from the data collected throughout this research, it was crucial to map out a systematic approach to commencing discourse analysis. Though it might have been logical to replicate the same method of going through each data set and coding post-by-post, the decision was made to consider a number of possibilities. When viewing the datasets on NVivo, the right-hand side bar allows users to select one of seven different viewing options for Coding Stripes and, depending on what is sought from the data, one can utilise one the following preferences: "None", "All", "Selected Items…", "Coding Density Only", "Most Coding", "Least Coding", and "Recently". Though this might be useful for other studies, there is little value in sorting such arrangements for the purpose of this research project. Similarly, it is worth noting that very little can be said about the prevalence of certain categories than others across the data set. For example, if posts from the "pneumonia" dataset only referenced a political organisation or figure once or twice, there is not much that can be said about that in comparison to other searched words. Though it might be a pattern that can be observed, such observations and conclusions cannot be equated to substantial analysis. Equally, clicking through the entire data set and scrolling through all of the data is neither productive or an efficient use of time nor is it an organised and systematic approach by any means. Thus, it was found to be much more effective to click through each of the pages within the dataset and select the Coding Stripes viewing sidebar on the right-hand side of the application window to see both posts and the highlighted codes simultaneously side-by-side. Moreover, it is also useful to click through each of the codes when viewing the posts within one data set as it allows for observations to be made about the posts.

Considering the different approaches to qualitative data analysis that could be adopted, through a process of elimination, or rather suitability, the approach to data analysis was informed by a number of different studies and relevant literature. As it is widely observed, content analysis notes the frequency and prominence of certain characteristics in a slightly more quantitative manner; thus, it was apparent that it would not adequately answer the research questions outlined in this research. Through discourse analysis, the researcher is able to discern how concepts are influenced by key factors such as history, culture, or ongoing power dynamics, which ultimately shapes the ways in which they are expressed in language. However, given that the initial phase of coding via NVivo is deemed thematic analysis, the approach outlined in this study is one of methodological triangulation. In order to mitigate the limits and potential gaps in the analysis made using one method, triangulation allows for more thorough readings and establishes credibility and reliability. Initial phases of triangulation thus consisted of clicking through the individual sheets from the dataset and, on a separate document, making notes of common or repeated themes and sentiments that were of significance or, when they were more rare and harder to place under specific themes, treated with more attention and critical analysis. Over time, the two-pronged approach of analysing themes and the contents of the posts with broader discourses became an iterative process of cross-referencing, revisiting certain phrases or terms, and tying together strands where appropriate. Moreover, in this process of data analysis, there was also the crucial need to contextualise finding using the literature and the framework in which social media is used in China. As it will be demonstrated in the empirical chapters that follow, these final steps of data analysis are thus part of the very writing which makes up this thesis.

By approaching and studying social media 'as a cultural text', this research adopts 'digital discourse analysis' to study the significance and usage of *baizuo* in the Chinese cyberspace (Caliandro 2016:670). By studying the use of language, tones, and expressions, discourse analysis enables researchers to explore internet users' interactions, develop ideas and trends, and thus construct discourses. Considering how drastically different the Chinese language is to English in terms of linguistic and cultural dissimilarities, discourse analysis requires great contextualisation so as to be able to translate appropriately and sufficiently (Shei 2022:5).

While most of the existing literature on Chinese discourse analysis are case studies, *The Routledge Handbook of Chinese Discourse Analysis* (2019) demonstrates how China scholars approach discourse analysis in the Chinese context. On the topic of identity, certain chapters cover examples of identity

construction in contemporary discourse; Qing Cao's (2019) chapter on 'Discursive construction of national and political identities in China' engages with the construction of national and political identities in the PRC. Cao discusses how the circulation of identity discourse 'shapes the understanding of Chinese identities amid China's ascent as a major power' (Cao 2019:431). Considering broad classifications of China's cultural, state, and ethnic nationalisms, Cao argues that identity is 'being continually constructed and reproduced through discourse that mediates the relationships between social practice, institutions, and values' (Cao 2019:436). Cheng-Tuan Li argues that 'ingroup-affiliation and outgroup-detachment constitute a central point of identity construction' which highlights the significance of the anti-*baizuo* discourse as reflecting netizens' construction of themselves and an 'Other' (Li 2019:479). Similarly, Wei Weixiao's chapter investigates how crucial Chinese discourse analysis is, as a research method, at a time when China's growth into a superpower and its discourse is, due to its often 'enigmatic' language, increasingly 'an object of misunderstanding' (Wei 2019:36). In sum, this study offers a nuanced perspective on the digital construction of national identity, providing deeper insights into the dynamics of China-West relations as expressed through online discourse. In doing so, this thesis contributes to the broader scholarly effort by conceptualising China-West relations through an investigation of grassroots sentiments and the genuine concerns of the online public (Wei 2019:48).

4. Deconstructing "*baizuo*": investigating netizens' politicisation and racialisation of the liberal West

One of the central questions that underpins this project is the nature, definition, and connotations of the term *baizuo*. The term is a widely adoptable neologism that can be found in a wide range of conversation topics, *baizuo* is predominantly understood and operates as a 'strongly derogatory' term (Hendriks-Kim 2023:1). The term was reportedly coined in the early 2010s, though it is widely contended that it was only popularised in or around 2015, coinciding with significant events like the refugee crisis and discussions related to the US Presidential Elections that captured widespread attention in the Western world (Zhang 2017). This chapter closely examines how Chinese netizens on Weibo, utilise, interact with, and interpret it. In order to further our understandings of the complexities behind this politically and racially charged term, the following reveals and discusses in great detail how this intriguing neologism encapsulates a complex blend of ideologies and sentiments. Firstly, this chapter starts by examining the specific names, groups, or institutions mentioned in Weibo posts. Through initial data analysis using NVivo coding, the chapter explores identified clusters of individuals, groups, and organisations unmistakably linked with what is commonly referred to as "*baizuo*". Secondly, this chapter delves into specific examples of language that effectively reinforce the conceptual division between the "negative other" and the 'positive self' (Yang and Chen 2021) in such antagonistic and also racialised (see Gu and Ho 2023) and political discourse. Finally, in the last section of this chapter, the analysis delves into the racialisation of "whiteness" within the anti-*baizuo* discourse, specifically by investigating how the term is infused with racial connotations, stereotypical traits, and how those attributes intersect with perceptions of whiteness in China. By uncovering the nuances and complex interplay of cultural, racial, and ideological dimensions associated with this term, this chapter develops a stronger understanding of how the *baizuo*, the West, and even Chinese liberals, are perceived and understood by politically engaged netizens.

Defining and classifying the *baizuo*

Several China watchers have written about the *baizuo*, its critics, and what such criticisms reveal about this fraction of Chinese perspectives as it pertains to online discourses on current affairs. Given the political and racial undertones of the term, there are various interpretations one might adopt to deconstruct and critically examine its meaning. In its literal interpretation, the term "white left" refers to the left-wing, which is also conflated with "liberalism" or "liberals" in the Western context, specifically within the predominantly white, Euro-American Western societies. However, at a much closer look, one will find that even within that definition, there are some who have used the term to target a much more specific group in their commentary. By assessing the context and ways in which the term has been adopted by netizens, this section solely focuses on the names of individuals, and groups that are explicitly named and mentioned in the Weibo posts collected in the dataset. To this end, the following explores the critiques of specific groups and individuals which are unambiguously named in anti-*baizuo* commentary. By zeroing in on named individuals, groups, organisations, and countries explicitly mentioned in anti-*baizuo* commentary, the following analysis provides a crucial, yet a nuanced exploration of the critiques directed at identifiable entities within the context of online discussions.

As discussed in the existing scholarship on the *baizuo* and its definition, the general consensus reflects that netizens' criticisms are clearly directed towards the Western world. However, there are many variations of "the West" in Chinese which includes but is not limited to the widely known, *xifang* (西方). Given that the term is used in a wide range of contexts and political discussions, it is crucial to note that "the West" can also be referred to as the following: *xifang shijie* (西方世界); *xifang guojia* (西方国家); *oumei* (欧美); *oumei ren* (欧美人); *taixi* (泰西). Netizens frequently employed the term "the West" in their Weibo posts, particularly when making sweeping observations about the overarching distinctions between China, or "the East"/*dongfang* (东方). The characters for *oumei* and *xifang* were found in 40 posts, while *taixi*, due to its predominantly historical context and usage, was not mentioned in any posts. These include the instances whereby the characters for "people" (人) and "country" (国家), which can both be interchangeably applied in combination with both terms, were found. For instance, phrases like 'if the West fails, China will also suffer' (#4320621), 'in the white-left Western world' (#7300320), and 'the white-left politicians of the West' (#4840320) illustrate how this term was woven into their narratives. Nevertheless, these are all common everyday terms that are used by Chinese to refer to "the West" across the Sinophone world, not just in China's social media. It is worth

noting that such terminology is a contrast to the opposite, as Americans or the British do not commonly use terms such as “easterners”. However, though they are less common, some of the English equivalents have historically been deemed derogatory in nature, i.e., “Orientals”, which have colonial, racial, and significantly derogatory connotations.

While there are a number of differing ideas of what constitutes “the West”, the most prominent examples were found across the posts that mentioned the *baizuo*, demonstrating how netizens perceive specific countries. While putting forward their own study on ten Western countries, Liu, Li, and Fang (2023:120) note that there is surprisingly very little ‘systematic research’ on how Chinese citizens perceive the West despite its interest among scholars. Though the following countries differ substantially in their unique contexts, Chinese netizens tend to categorise and label these Western nations because of the democratic nature of their political systems. This democratic setup has naturally paved the way for the development and proliferation of liberal political ideologies and groupings, including, what is widely dubbed by those on the other side of the bench, “lefties”. The contemporary evolution of social progressivism has been a predominantly Western affair which has, evidently, caught the attention of those way beyond its circles. Indeed, it reflects a global awareness and engagement with the progressive ideas, movements, and social changes that for the most part originated in Western contexts. As these progressive ideals permeate various aspects of society, they have become focal points of discussion, analysis, and adaptation on a global scale. This widespread recognition underscores the global impact of Western social progressivism and its enduring influence on the broader discourse surrounding societal development and change.

The United States is by far one of the largest and loudest proponents of such movements, despite the prevalence of right-wing populism. This is reflected in the data set, where the United States emerged as the most frequently mentioned country which signifies the heightened attention and discourse surrounding the US in the context being discussed. The specific references to the US indicate a focal point for discussions, reflecting the nation's influential role in the topics under consideration. The recurrent mentions of the United States, in posts about the *baizuo*, highlight its significance in this narrative, suggesting a keen interest among Chinese netizens and emphasising its impact on the discussions surrounding the themes being explored. Although the details will be discussed in subsequent sections of this chapter, it is certainly worth noting that all targeted mentions *and* references to the US or Americans were present in 72 (23.8%) of the total collected posts in this research study.

Explicit mentions of “the US” (美国) or “Americans” (美国人) totalled 44 (61.1%) of those 72 posts. It is important to note that this does not account for repeated references but rather the proportion of posts that contain at least one reference or mention pertaining to the United States or American citizens or groups. Certainly, the concept of *oumei* (欧美), which effectively translated to Euro-America, could be considered synonymous with the specific individuals and groups identified as *baizuo*. Though its literal translation denotes countries in Europe and North America, it is understood and used as a term to broadly refer to the populations of the white English-speaking world which have a significant make-up of European heritage, thus also encompassing countries like Australia and New Zealand.

“Europe” (欧洲), similarly, is deemed by netizens to possess the same, if not highly similar, characteristics, as demonstrated by the frequently mentioned examples of Western, and technically Northern, European countries. “Europe” and “Europeans” (欧洲人), as well as examples of European countries, appeared in 60 (19.8%) of the posts collected. “Germany” (德国) and “Italy” (意大利) were the second most frequently mentioned country in the collected data – each making up 16.7% of “Europe” posts – trailed by “Sweden“ (瑞典) and “the United Kingdom” (英国), making up 6.7% and 5% of “Europe” posts, respectively. In the case of Italy, which was the first and biggest hotspot of coronavirus cases, Chinese netizens were quick to criticise the ‘Italian government’s performance of political correctness’ (#8340320), as well as Italian netizens for ‘uploading photos of hugging with Chinese Italians’, so as to counter allegations of Sinophobia (#2700320). Despite exhibiting many left-leaning characteristics, due to its political landscape, Germany is broadly seen as a socio-politically centrist country, due to ‘its history as an archetypal consensus democracy’ (Wood 2021:733). Though this widely applies in most circumstances, it is crucial to note that such Chinese netizens generalisations about these countries are influenced by media representation and online discourses (Liu et al. 2023). While it will be discussed in more detail later, netizens’ engagement with trending news stories or hashtags demonstrates how media coverage can feed into online discourses. This engagement often revolves around current events that resonate with broader ideological concerns or nationalistic sentiments. During the pandemic, Chinese netizens frequently scrutinised Western nations’ handling of the crisis, with particular attention to issues such as overwhelmed healthcare systems, vaccine rollouts, and governmental

mismanagement. Stories about personal protective equipment (PPE) shortages, the opposition to mask-wearing, the high death toll in Italy, and Western countries' struggle to implement effective lockdown measures all became focal points for criticism. These stories, enhanced by algorithms and active engagement from Weibo users, were often framed as evidence of Western incompetence or the failures of liberal democracies, contrasting sharply with narratives of China's effective pandemic responses. Specific trending news stories, such as were widely shared, often accompanied by commentary that highlighted the cultural and systemic flaws perceived to underlie these struggles. For example, discussions about the United States' politicisation of mask-wearing and vaccine uptake were used to emphasise cultural values of individualism and mistrust in authority as barriers to collective action. Similarly, new stories about protests against lockdowns in countries like Germany and the Netherlands were framed as emblematic of Western societies' inability to balance personal freedoms with public health responsibilities. As noted in one post, where one user includes one hashtag which had been particularly popular at the time, '#The French President Says He Will Not Close the France-Italy Border due to COVID-19# That Macron is such a typical white leftist' (#3120220). Such evidence of netizen engagement with news stories illustrates how media frames—such as the portrayal of foreign leaders' decisions during the pandemic—become tools for netizens to construct narratives around Western *baizuo* ideologies. However, netizens also engage with a range of other news stories, often giving more in-depth treatment to issues that align with domestic concerns or reinforce collective identity. Throughout this thesis, the findings will demonstrate how news stories receive more in-depth engagement when they resonate with existing cultural anxieties, such as critiques of liberal governance models or the perception of Western hypocrisy during crises. By analysing which topics attract sustained attention, and the ways in which netizens concern themselves with such topics and issues, this thesis sheds light on the specific mechanisms through which netizens select, amplify, and contextualise global events to align with nationalistic or ideological discourses.

For instance, Sweden has an international reputation for its progressive ideology which is further evidenced in their strong social welfare programmes, progressive taxation policies, and commitment to social equality, even by European standards (Andersson 2009). With its market-based mixed economy, the "Nordic Light" is often dubbed as a utopia that has consistently, like its Scandinavian counterparts, achieved high standards in equality, humanitarianism, environmentalism, healthcare, political stability, and social order, to name just a few (Andersson 2009). Given Sweden's global standing, it is frequently seen as the epitome of

liberal or leftist ideals, despite falling somewhat short of aligning with what might be deemed as traditional socialist principles (Nilsson et al. 2020). Consequently, Sweden's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and its liberal policies on immigration frequently became focal points of online discussion. Indeed, as one Weibo user noted, 'Although it is a relatively small country, Sweden is the most vicious white left. If anything, it's the origin of white leftism' (#6371220). The characterisation of Sweden as being "the most vicious white left" implies a strong condemnation of its political stance. The word "vicious" in particular carries connotations of severity, indicating a perception that the actions or policies of the Swedish political left are highly morally objectionable. In attributing the origin of *baizuo* to Sweden, suggests that the country serves as a foundational or influential figure within this political ideology and, moreover, asserts that Sweden's political landscape embodies the epitome of what the speaker views as problematic or misguided left-wing principles. Likewise, while discussing the significance of how the rise in coronavirus cases in Berlin coincided with a number of protests, one user noted that, 'Germany has long been a main target, the country that the white left group hopes to control' (#9341022). It is particularly noteworthy that both Sweden and Germany are singled out, besides the United States, by netizens who fixate on specific socio-political developments that might be deemed as being somewhat similarly aligned as liberal leaning on certain topics or political trends. Germany and Sweden's active participation, and often leadership, in international organisations reflect their commitment to multilateralism and their desire to address global challenges through cooperation and diplomacy. Though less prevalent in this specific dataset, it should also be noted that netizens mentioned other *oumei* countries, such as Australia (澳大利亚), Denmark (丹麦), and Belgium (比利时). Trending news stories such as these prompted users to critique what they perceived as the contradictions of Western liberalism, with some framing these issues as evidence of incompetence and, ultimately, ideological impracticality or decline. By engaging with these narratives, netizens simultaneously examine their own domestic values, such as collectivism, trust in authority, and social responsibility, and contrast them with perceived Western ideals of individualism and personal freedoms. This dynamic allows them to reinforce personally-held beliefs, align their viewpoints with nationalistic sentiments, and construct a sense of cultural or ideological superiority in the global context.

Chinese perceptions of these countries can be incredibly varied, but they are often largely amplified in social media discourses when geopolitical tensions are flared. It is certainly worth emphasising this as there is great variation in Chinese perceptions of different countries (Liu et al. 2023) and so it is important to distinguish the difference between specific attitudes and perceptions of such countries and those about the

West or the Western system in general. Indeed, as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, tensions between China and the West resulted in this becoming more evident than ever before. Pinning blame and failure on both sides became, and still are, broadly typical of social media discussions even beyond the topic of the pandemic. While such countries have been named and referenced in this study, due to the topic in question being fixated on the pandemic, the data does not show notable patterns regarding criticisms of specific countries in this context. Moreover, it is crucial to note that when netizens have posted about the *baizuo*, many posts do not explicitly name countries or individuals but rather allude to such groups by using broader labels like "the West", as discussed above. Though it is evident from the data that those European countries that netizens discuss, and mention, are predominantly Western and sometimes Northern European, subregions are not usually mentioned by netizens, with the exception of two mentions of "Northern Europe", or *beiou* (北欧) (#5730420; #8320420).

While it has already been noted that the US is widely distinguished as being one of the greatest targets of the anti-*baizuo* netizens, in terms of country, it is important to explore the various ways in which it is referenced by netizens. Specifically, a large proportion of posts included explicit or implicit references to and regarding the US which demonstrate who and what is the target of such scrutiny. Based on the data gathered in this study, it is evident that American Democrats are among the prime targets in the anti-*baizuo* discourse, if not the primary ones. From reposting prominent New York-based actor Michael Rappaport's renowned Twitter tirades to critiquing the large-scale Black Lives Matter protests of major US cities, Chinese netizens have targeted and largely critiqued the actions of those who are characteristically deemed as being Democrats, *minzhudang* (民主党), or even "lefties". Equally, there is also great flexibility in terms of who "Democrats" are understood to be. Commonly, netizens directly criticise the Democratic Party for their policies and actions or beliefs of prominent politicians. As Yinghong Cheng maintained in his examination of China's response to major political developments in 2016, 'prime targets in anti-*baizuo* rhetoric' included 'Barack Obama, Angela Merkel, Justin Trudeau, Hillary Clinton, and, later on even George W. Bush' (Y. Cheng 2019b:283). In this dataset, like those netizens who made mentions of former President Donald Trump's administration, "the White House" was also often used interchangeably with "Biden administration" when referring to the American government. While President Joe Biden was directly targeted in five posts, the most frequently mentioned individuals or important or influential figures were members of the Democratic Party, namely

former Speaker Nancy Pelosi, former Governor of New York Andrew Cuomo, and Governor of California Gavin Newsom. These particular individuals were often criticised for their policies and actions during the first year of the pandemic, as indicated by the dates on the relevant posts. For example, during the outbreak of the virus in New York, the nickname "Governor *Baizuo*" appeared in several posts that particularly focused on the policy and crisis management in the US at the time. In fact, in response to a number of viral videos of interviews between Governor Cuomo and his brother, then CNN anchor, Chris Cuomo, a trending hashtag was born– '#CNN Anchor diagnosed with COVID-19#'. It is crucial to note the broad criticisms of the Cuomo brothers given how viral the hashtag topic became at the time. While some were most critical about the bias of Chris Cuomo's coverage, others were concerned with their light-hearted delivery and focus on entertaining their audience which clashed with the reality of the pandemic and the public's need for crucial information. As cited in several posts within this dataset, netizens' criticisms highlighted how, despite taking pride in their work and leadership, the incompetence, selfishness, and 'disgusting tricks' (#9380420) of such influential political figures cast significant doubt over Western hegemony. Indeed, the Cuomo brothers are just one of many cases where the concept of "*baizuo*" has been applied to someone in a significant position of authority and influence who has been perceived as failing to deliver on their duties despite claiming to be better than their other political counterparts. Such sentiments will be explored in subsequent chapters in order to provide more context into the historically and culturally coded critiques that have been made on this issue among others.

Another way in which the Democrats are referenced on Weibo is through the naming of "blue" states and cities, with California being one of the 'white left strongholds' (#0970820). Such references to "the blue wall" or "blue states", such as California or New York, serve to underscore the consistent political leanings of these areas and are used to critique or highlight Democratic Party or liberal-leaning demographics and populations. A particularly pertinent example of this as found on Weibo in this study is visible in one post where the user listed multiple cities to emphasise their argument about the connection of outbreaks with Democratic strongholds 'New York, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Silicon Valley and San Francisco' (#7450320). Similarly, several users in the Weibo comment section referred to these Democratic strongholds as "the East and West coasts". While a large proportion of posts broadly criticised the general Democratic-supporting public, such examples demonstrate Chinese netizens' understanding of American political geography. In one user's critical analysis of the United States' government for its significant mishandling of the pandemic, they made legitimate arguments citing references to American bipartisanship and demonstrated

a knowledge of the political system which they credited to the collective incompetence or failure: 'This white-left stronghold state's so-called COVID policy is equal to that of the red-necked Texas. Perhaps culture has a greater impact than politics' (#5500820). The claim that cultural factors outweighed political affiliations in shaping responses to the pandemic is particularly noteworthy, as it highlights the influence of shared cultural norms across the US political spectrum. By contrasting two ideologically distinct groups—the "white left" stronghold, representing liberal or progressive areas, and "red-necked Texas," symbolising conservative or Republican-dominated regions—the user suggests that pandemic responses by the general public were more significantly shaped by common cultural norms. Specifically, netizens identified such values such as "individual freedom" and "resisting authority" are perceived to be deeply ingrained in American culture and may have shaped pandemic responses more significantly than political ideologies. It suggests that underlying sociocultural factors—such as those regarding collectivism, individualism, trust in authority, or adherence to public health measures—drove the outcomes observed in different areas, surpassing the role typically assigned to political alignments. Rather than politics, it is insinuated by this author, among others (see pages 166-167), that cultural values—such as the emphasis on personal freedom and scepticism toward centralised authority in some regions—stood in stark contrast to communities that prioritised collective well-being and compliance with government mandates. These deeply ingrained cultural traits, which for some transcend political divides, are understood to have influenced pandemic behaviors – such as resistance to public health mandates or scepticism toward centralised directives – more profoundly than ideological commitments. This interpretation suggests that, regardless of whether individuals identified as liberal or conservative, their actions during the pandemic reflected a broader cultural ethos that prioritises autonomy and a wariness of institutional control, revealing the cohesive yet paradoxical nature of American societal values in times of crisis. Indeed, some have noted that 'when the crisis began, Democrats and Republicans differed little in their viewpoints and actions relative to COVID-19' (Mehlhaff et al. 2024:351). However, as subsequent studies have shown, there has been increasing evidence to show that the public response to the COVID-19 pandemic was, and continues to be, politicised in the US. The claim that American cultural values as factors for the bipartisan failure in handling the pandemic – meaning that public health policy during the pandemic was ineffective regardless of political doctrine – is a damning reflection. As the next chapter explores, delving deeper into the interplay of cultural dynamics and political influences in shaping responses to the pandemic, it becomes evident that such perspectives and analysis potentially sheds more light on the intricate relationship between these factors.

Other targets among the accused include the usual suspects of conspiracy theories, often reminiscent of right-wing soundbites. In numerous posts, netizens parroted the demonising allegations of the *baizuo* – who like the liberal elites of The Establishment (Shrimsley 2023), "really controls everything" – which are frequently made by right-wing politicians and populist commentators. Examples include the likes of Big Pharma conspiracy theories about the allegedly *baizuo*-run company Moderna inventing the coronavirus to 'profit immensely from the selling vaccine' (#4710722), 'selling to Americans and abroad in other countries' (#2790521), as well as the 'white-left Jewish media' (#3050620) who controls the 'news, Hollywood, and other mainstream media' (#4921121). Notably, this sentiment was seen in the public outrage of Governor Andrew Cuomo and his news anchor brother Chris Cuomo, as mentioned above. Similarly, many of the Weibo posts expressed frustration with Western media organisations and online platforms, with a particular emphasis on the Cable News Network (CNN) which, like many others, spotlighted China's role in the pandemic in its reporting. Some criticisms were more focused on the selective aspects of media coverage, where the United States' policy and mismanagement of the pandemic were overlooked and even 'downplayed' in the news (#4580320), doing little to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus while 'controlling public opinion' (#0520522). In one post, tying multiple threads of 'right-wing populism with Chinese characteristics' (C. Zhang 2020b), one user's commentary of the situation in June 2020 drew on antisemitic and conventional points of contention in anti-*baizuo* discourse. In response to a news article that covered the scale of the 2020 Chicago Pride Parade, one user wrote:

> 'Chicago hosted a large-scale gay parade on June 28th, but Western mainstream media did not even report about it properly. People won't worry about the rise of coronavirus cases in the US because the white left Jewish media doesn't think it will infect the gays and Black Lives Matter protesters.' (#3050620)

While the statement hints at a feeling of frustration or discontent with mainstream media in the West, it also suggests that the biased reporting of the media led to a downplayed portrayal or characterisation of the public health threat. For the user, this omission is viewed as indicative of a broader issue with media representation and priorities. Moreover, the description of "white left Jewish media" carries connotations of bias or agenda-

setting, thus reproducing the antisemitic cliché that "Jews control the media" (Gillis 2017). During the pandemic, most netizen theories revolved around pharmaceutical companies allegedly engineering the virus with the sinister intention of profiting from the resulting deaths. Given that these narratives bear striking resemblance to those echoed by the right-wing that gained prominence under the Trump administration, this effectively mirrors the broader trend where misinformation and conspiracy theories about the origins and motives behind the pandemic were circulating widely on social media platforms. Crucially, these assertions bear striking parallels to the Trumpian rhetoric adopted by a large proportion of the Republican Party and its membership and was, and continues to be, used to accuse the left-wing of the political spectrum in North America and Western Europe (C. Zhang 2020b). In one post, the post author wrote:

> 'It is well-known that the coronavirus vaccine belongs to a white left company that specialises in vaccine research and development. According to reports, Moderna was worth very little prior to the pandemic but after the coronavirus outbreak, the company was somehow able to very suddenly mass produce a large number of vaccines. The speed of vaccine development and manufacturing was remarkable. Today, this white left company has obtained immense wealth as a result of the coronavirus.*'* (#4710722)

Instances where specific groups are referenced through common talking points provide insight into who netizens perceive as embodying the characteristics of being *baizuo.* The repeated and consistent mention of certain individuals, places, and groups in conjunction with *"baizuo"* suggests a broader understanding of this label among Chinese netizens and how they see it applied to various socio-political contexts in Euro-America. In analysing the data collected, it becomes apparent that the use of categorical naming—such as associating *"baizuo"* with particular political factions, prominent figures, or specific geographic locations—reveals who netizens broadly perceive as having or embodying *baizuo* views. These references are not random but are evidently deeply embedded in the socio-political landscape of the Western world, reflecting a layered, though not necessarily fully accurate, understanding by Chinese netizens of the political and cultural makeup of Euro-American societies in the West. For example, when discussing where the *baizuo* are most concentrated in North America, netizens often refer to specific regions or states, like California and New York. These areas are frequently cited as epicentres of liberal thought and progressive politics, characterised by their coastal,

urban environments, which are stereotypically seen as hubs for individuals who espouse *baizuo* ideologies. The association of these regions with the *"baizuo"* demographic is not just about geography but also about the perceived values and beliefs that dominate these areas, such as a focus on social justice, environmentalism, and multiculturalism. Moreover, the commentary by netizens often reflects a degree of awareness and understanding of the broader socio-political dynamics in Euro-America. It is crucial to note however that some entities or individuals are labelled as *baizuo*, even though they would not necessarily be considered so progressively left within Western political contexts. For instance, while Democratic politicians and news outlets like CNN fit into the broadly left-side of the political spectrum, they do not always align with the conventional characteristics of the *baizuo*. Similarly, Moderna and Big Pharma, which are not inherently political entities, have been targeted, primarily due to conspiracy theories propagated by right-wing circles in the US. Such misrepresentations or inconsistencies demonstrate that the label *baizuo* does not neatly correspond to the political left as understood in the West (see Nathan and Shi 1996). Evidently, the term is often deployed in a way that transcends conventional political categories, complicating the simplistic binary of left versus right.

The findings underscore the fluidity and context-dependent application of the term *baizuo*, revealing how it complicates the perceived ideological boundaries in both Western and Chinese contexts. By associating *baizuo* with prominent political figures and entities, Chinese netizens display an awareness of the broader political discourse and cultural debates shaping Western societies, illustrating that *baizuo* is not a static label but one adapted to suit specific critiques and narratives. These findings suggest that their use of the term *"baizuo"* is informed by a combination of factors, such as media consumption, political as well as cultural narratives, and even personal experiences or interactions with Westerners or travelling abroad. Overall, the frequent invocation of specific groups and places in relation to *"baizuo"* indicates not just a superficial labelling but a deeper, more critical engagement with the socio-political realities of the Western world as understood from a Chinese perspective. Naturally, these perspectives inherently reflect distinctly Chinese concepts of self-Other identity construction, nationalism, and a sense of moral superiority. This discourse reveals how Chinese netizens construct and negotiate their own cultural and political identities in relation to global narratives, often positioning themselves in opposition to what they perceive as the overly idealistic, rather than pragmatic (Z.-D. Wang et al. 2022:8038), or hypocritical nature of Western liberalism and philosophies.

In both Western and Chinese contexts, terms like *baizuo* and "woke" have become central to populist rhetoric, reflecting a disdain for perceived liberal elitism and progressive values (see C. Zhang 2020b). The increased creation of new terms by those "cancelling" or highly critical of such "lefties", is widely credited to the Trump era which saw the coining and popularity of many deprecatory and politically-charged neologisms, like 'wokerati', 'liberal crybabies', and 'snowflakes' (McIntosh 2020:74). In fact, *baizuo* has been widely perceived as being comparable to that of the use of terms like 'social justice warriors' (C. Zhang 2020b:96) and 'libtard' (Hioe 2018; see also K. Kuo 2018b). While terms like "woke" are often used in Western contexts to criticise progressive stances on issues such as race, gender, and social justice, *baizuo* differs in that it carries a uniquely Chinese critique, focusing more on the perceived moral superiority and hypocrisy of Western liberalism.

Though not expletive or aggressive in nature, the weaponisation of the term in some posts evidently carries more derogatory implications than the milder descriptions, i.e. "naïve" and "unhelpful". Zhang aptly highlights the parallels between anti-*baizuo* discourse and Trumpian rhetoric, noting how netizens' weaponisation of the term 'combines the claims, vocabulary and style of right-wing populisms in Europe and North America' with 'forms of nationalism and racism' (C. Zhang 2020b:88). However, despite parroting a majority of the 'xenophobic and anti-liberal narratives' (C. Zhang 2020b:94) of the right-wing populists in the West, the anti-*baizuo* discourse differs from conventional populist narratives that adopts an "us" and "them" binary without 'claiming that legitimate authority flows from the people (Us)' and forwarding an anti-'establishment elite (Them)' agenda (Norris and Inglehart 2019:67). In this context, The Establishment is reframed as "the liberal West," representing a collective adversary that embodies values and ideologies perceived as foreign and elitist. This framing fosters a sense of solidarity among "we Chinese" netizens, who rally together against "them," reinforcing their shared identity and cultural values in opposition to what they view as Western moral superiority. This dichotomy not only strengthens nationalistic sentiments but also serves to galvanise a community response that critiques perceived injustices and contradictions within Western liberalism, thereby solidifying a distinct online narrative that emphasises unity and resistance.

Notably, critiques of the *baizuo* have been similar in that they target individuals or groups seen as out of touch with "ordinary people," advocating for social justice causes in ways that their critics view as impractical, morally questionable, or even hypocritical. This act of criticising the *"baizuo"* is not merely about

rejecting what they see as misguided or excessive Western liberalism. Rather, it is also about constructing an identity in opposition to these ideals and so, by positioning themselves against what they perceive as the excesses of *baizuo* ideology, netizens implicitly highlight their alignment with alternative viewpoints that are often more conservative, pragmatic, or nationalistic in nature. In this way, the criticism serves a dual purpose: it negates the perceived flaws of the "Other" while simultaneously reinforcing the attributes of the "Self." This process of Othering—the act of defining oneself in opposition to an external group—plays a crucial role in shaping identity within a community. For many, the *baizuo* represents not just a political opponent, but a symbol of values and attitudes that they feel are at odds with their own cultural norms and socio-political realities. Moreover, this critique is not conducted in a vacuum. It takes place within the broader context of global discourse, where ideas, ideologies, and cultural practices are constantly exchanged, debated, and contested. By participating in this discourse, netizens are not only responding to external influences but are actively shaping the narrative around what it means to hold a particular set of beliefs.

Through their critique of the *"baizuo,"* netizens assert a kind of ideological sovereignty, resisting what they see as the imposition of foreign values, and instead promoting a worldview that they believe is more grounded in their own cultural and social contexts. Essentially, critiquing the *baizuo* functions as a diagnostic tool for netizens, allowing them to identify and articulate what they view as shortcomings in Western liberalism while also suggesting solutions or alternatives that resonate with their nationalist sentiments. Such critique serves as a powerful illustration of the dynamics of Self-Other relations and underscores the intricate process of meaning-making within these digital environments. By engaging in this practice, netizens undergo a process of self-definition and differentiation that reinforces their ideological positions. This creates a distinct space for them within the broader global discourse, allowing them to articulate their beliefs and values while asserting their identity in a world that is increasingly interconnected yet ideologically diverse. Thus, while critiques of the *baizuo* share similarities with Western populist critiques in their rejection of perceived elitism and liberal values, they significantly differ in their emphasis on national identity and cultural context, which shapes their arguments and strengthens a collective sense of Chinese identity.

Forming the 'negative Other': the use of pronouns in anti-baizuo discourse

Within the *baizuo* discourse, the usage of terms like "the Chinese" or "us Chinese" introduces intricate complexities, especially concerning the inclusivity of this collective identity. The inherent anonymity of social media platforms shrouds the specific individuals encompassed by these terms, making it challenging to ascertain the exact demographics involved (Giese 2004). Consequently, the exact composition of the "we" in online discussions about the *baizuo* remains somewhat ambiguous. This ambiguity exists not only among fellow netizens but also for researchers who are analysing these interactions. The "we" can be seen as a flexible and shifting category that reflects a sense of collective identity among those participating in the discourse. However, this collective identity is not clearly defined or universally understood, making it difficult to pinpoint exactly who is included in this "we." In the context of discussions about the *baizuo*, the term "we" is often used to distinguish those who oppose or criticise the perceived excesses of Western liberalism from those who are perceived to embody or support such ideals.

The use of "we" suggests a collective self-identification that contrasts sharply with the "Other" represented by the *baizuo*. This dichotomy creates a clear us-versus-them dynamic, but the boundaries of who belongs to the "we" are not always clearly articulated. This ambiguity is partly due to the diverse backgrounds, experiences, and motivations of the netizens involved in these discussions. From the discourse, it can be inferred that netizens who engage in these critiques do not see themselves as aligning with the values or behaviours associated with the *baizuo*. As such, the "we" could potentially include Chinese netizens who are more conservative or nationalistic, those who feel alienated by Western liberal ideologies, or even those who are critical of what they see as cultural imperialism by the West. Thus, netizens effectively use the term in a way to position themselves in opposition to these values, often expressing pride in a more nationalistic, pragmatically oriented, or conservative worldview. This self-positioning highlights a rejection of the perceived cultural and political attitudes that the *baizuo* represent, such as excessive political correctness and social justice activism. For researchers, this ambiguity presents both a challenge and an opportunity; it highlights the fluid and dynamic nature of online identities and the ways in which collective identity can be constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed in the digital space. It also points to the complexity of understanding cultural and political identities in an era of globalisation, where local and global narratives intersect and influence each other in unpredictable ways. In order to understand the nature of this critical and generally antagonistic discourse towards Westerners and the West at large, the following explores how netizens' use of language solidifies the conceptual polarisation of the 'negative Other' and 'positive self' (Lams 2019:447).

Wallace Chafe postulated that the primary function of language is to convert 'unique experience into something familiar and manageable' (1994:41). One prime example of this is personal pronouns, which can be used to 'presume a certain degree of hearer/reader familiarity with the referent' (Xiang 2022:155). Specifically, the use of first-person plural pronouns in the anti-*baizuo* discourse are central to portraying a collective voice, representing the sentiments or opinions of others in the community[1]. "Us" and "we", in particular, are first-person plural pronouns that 'position the referent as "shared/known" to the reader/addressee' (Xiang 2022:155). The utilisation of these pronouns within the posts illustrates the manner in which netizens articulate and convey their thoughts, adopting the role of spokespersons for the larger Chinese community. The choice of pronouns implies a collective identity and further indicates an intention to represent the sentiments, opinions, or experiences of the Chinese community as a whole, emphasising a collective voice in the online discourse. For instance, while criticising how the West had allowed the coronavirus to spread out of control, Weibo users often directed optimistic and encouraging phrases, like *jia you* (加油) or 'come on, let's work together!' (#1810121), to their fellow netizens. In addition to the use of first-person plural pronouns, netizens' dialogue also contained 'markers of identity construction' (Li 2019:472). For example, commonly used 'discourse markers' like the modal particle "*ma* (嘛)" (Li 2019:472) –which can be likened to "right" or "obviously"–are often placed at the end of a statement to both emphasise what the speaker sees as obvious and engage the audience in agreement (Lepadat 2017:243).

Social media content is rife with such examples, particularly on platforms like Weibo, and reflect how netizens recognise the insulating nature of their online space and can for the most part confidently assume their reader will share, at least in some capacity, their identity and values. In the context of COVID-19, this was particularly evident when netizens wrote about pandemic politics in the West. For instance, the phrase 'like, *we* did not use face masks for political show' (#4611020) made reference to how mask-wearing became a form of politicisation across different political factions and parties in the West (Neumann et al. 2024; Young et al. 2022). Moreover, netizens also made juxtapositions of Westerners' reluctance towards public health measures with the almost-instinctual ease at which China swiftly and effectively imposed public health crisis policy. In

[1] In some cases, first-person plural pronouns were used to write as if from the perspective of Westerners, thus mocking them. For instance, one post read: 'give me freedom or give me death' (#6480620).

discussion surrounding face masking policies, Chinese netizens were shocked at the politicisation of masks when they had not only pioneered them but, like their East Asian counterparts, wore them routinely pre-pandemic, with another boom in face mask-wearing during and after SARS (Huang 2020): 'we invented and originally advocated wearing facemasks long before these laws now' (#6490520). Such contrasts were made to emphasise the fundamental shortcomings of Western countries' in mitigating the spread of the coronavirus.

While such examples draw attention to an assumed collective unity of the Chinese people, the second person is adopted for alternative purposes. First, it is important to note that while "you" is used when the identity of the audience is known or familiar, "they" is used when they are not: 'speakers usually do not start a new topic with tā without having established a context where the identity of tā is known or accessible to the addressee' (Xiang 2022:155). Context is key, particularly in online discourse where tone and sincerity can be blurred and difficult to read. On one hand, familiarity and common understanding can be inferred from certain formulaic phrases, such as *ni kankan* (你看看), "you see" or "look" and *ni zhidao* (你知道), meaning "you know", and *ni shuo* (你说), meaning 'you say' (Xiang 2022:156; see also Li 2019). Notably, second-person pronouns like , like *ni* (你) and *nimen* (你们), are used to directly address and draw on the readers' attention, 'bonding with them and inviting them' to engage (Xiang 2022:156). These forms of address serve to draw on the audience's attention, reinforce a point, or invite agreement, effectively constructing an 'expected identity' (Li 2019:472), and creating a more interactive and engaged conversation (see Cruz, Leonhardt, and Pezzuti 2017; Lepadat 2022; Shan 2023).

The use of third-person pronouns, by contrast, inherently creates a sense of Othering. In March 2020, one post author criticised how poorly the elderly had been treated in the West due to medical negligence and, rather than using "they", wrote: 'Your old people have been left without treatment. Why won't you help them?' (#8080320). As it is widely assumed that the overwhelming vast majority of Weibo users are Chinese and not the *baizuo* who are addressed in this post, it is interesting that the post author used the second person when writing to an audience that – at that time – could not necessarily relate. Though it cannot be inferred why the user wrote in this way, such an example highlights the highly emotive use of personal pronouns in social media posts. In a somewhat similar vein, the use of second person pronouns have also been studied in relation to the use of 'personalised negative vocatives, assertions and references expressed in the second person (e.g., you

idiot, you are X), … and negative expressives (e.g., go to hell, fuck you)' (Biri et al. 2023:110; see also Culpeper 2011). Such examples are often coupled with rhetorical questions that reflect a deep sense of frustration and inability to understand the Other: 'Why can't you just understand these simple facts?' (#4670520); 'Why don't you just continue with the mask mandate? Stupid white left…' (#5020322).

In addition to the use of the first and second person, Weibo users also write using the passive voice, rather than speaking from one's perspective. The conscious choice of lexis – in this case, the use of the third person – not only asserts a passive voice but also allows the author to present themselves as an objective, well-informed individual that essentially strategises the 'ideological square' (Van Dijk 1998). In doing so, the author is able to allocate both active and passive roles to groups as well as 'negative/positive connotational semantics' which is 'instrumental in solidifying a conceptual polarisation of 'us/them' groups' (Lams 2019:408). For instance, during the initial outbreak of the coronavirus in Italy, one user posted that, 'There is no infection in the Italian Chinese community, which shows that the Chinese pay more attention to viruses and know how to protect themselves!' (#5090420). This form of commentary in the third person reflects a number of significant points of interest. First, while social media is predominantly seen to be a user-generated platform for individual expression, the active voice and the first person is often, with the exception of news and the likes of information-sharing organisations, assumed for user-generated content. Second, the tone of objectivity is particularly interesting to note given that social media is generally seen as a platform where users express themselves individually.

In addition to the use of the grammatical person in this narrative of Othering, of "our success and their failure", netizens also draw on other devices to further forge a sense of unity against Westerners. Some even expressed a sense of humour by highlighting a historical perspective. For instance, there were many references to how, throughout history, the Chinese have frequently been credited with inventing or pioneering many aspects of current medical knowledge and contributions to public health. One example of such 'medical nationalism' (Wang and Tao 2021) was observed in several posts where the authors had highlighted the influential role of the widely renowned Malayan physician, Dr Wu Lien-teh's (伍连德) significant contributions to contemporary medical knowledge and public health as the inventor of the forerunner of today's N95 mask. For these netizens who referenced Wu, the significance of Wu Lien-teh being of Chinese descent lies in the way Chinese netizens claim him as a symbol of cultural pride, highlighting the enduring influence of Chinese

heritage across borders. His ground-breaking contributions to public health, coupled with his achievement as the first Chinese medical student at Cambridge, possibly further solidifies his status as a figure representing Chinese excellence. Netizens emphasise his legacy to reinforce the narrative of Chinese ingenuity and its historical impact on global advancements, especially in the realm of medicine.

One user highlighted how Wu, as a Chinese medical expert, 'already discovered that the spread of infectious respiratory diseases could be mitigated by wearing protective gear like masks. And that was, like, 100 years ago.' (#3500821). The use of commentary or satire in this context serves several purposes. First, it allows for a critique of the common perception that modern medical and public health advancements are primarily the domain of Western countries, or at least are self-proclaimed by them. By emphasising these contributions, the commentary or satire serves to remind audiences that the history of medicine and public health is not solely a Western narrative but is also shaped by significant developments from other parts of the world, including China. This narrative challenges the bias that equates modernity and progress with Western practices while neglecting the rich contributions from non-Western civilisations. By emphasising China and Chinese people's role in the history of medicine, the commentary can be seen as a response to Western dominance in scientific and medical discourse. It serves as a reminder that China has a rich cultural heritage and a tradition of scientific inquiry that has contributed to global knowledge.

In a global context where power dynamics and cultural influence are often contested, such assertions are a way of reclaiming credit and recognising the value of non-Western contributions to global progress. The commentary in this context may also aim to challenge contemporary narratives around public health and medicine, particularly in the wake of global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. By framing China as a historical leader in medical advancements, the observation could be interpreted as a critique of how current events have been discussed or portrayed, suggesting that contemporary Western narratives might oversimplify or misrepresent China's role in global health. Observations like these further enhance the perception that the Chinese have always been one step ahead of the West: 'this experiment shows that washing hands frequently and wearing a mask is an incredibly effective daily anti-epidemic measure that we originally advocated! It's a pity that, even today, those brainless white leftists in Europe and America are still struggling with this!' (#6550520). In addition to the "competition" analogy, netizens often likened the pandemic to "an experiment" whereby the impressive results of China's success are compared to the West's extreme shortcomings. One user even asserted that 'epidemic prevention has been widely regarded as a competition for national strength' and

that, during COVID-19, 'the West thought that China would fail' (#4320621). Therefore, the analysis implies that discussions related to COVID competition are not merely about the pandemic but rather are intricately connected to the larger narrative of Othering and expressing superiority, where the "*baizuo*" serves as a convenient label for those deemed ideologically different or opposing. This connection underscores the multifaceted nature of online discourse, where political, cultural, and pandemic-related discussions converge, often shaped by perceptions of ideological and cultural superiority.

While utilising language to assert their positionality, Chinese netizens construct and present to fellow Weibo users a 'negative other' – the *baizuo*, as the outgroup – that is 'associated with negative properties' (Lams 2019:447; see also Yang and Chen 2021). Meanwhile, the use of the literal words "us" and "them" are markers for fellow netizens, as 'the ingroup', who are 'embellished with positive attributes and positioned in positive agentive roles' (Lams 2019:447) in the context of pandemic prevention response. This polarisation is evident in the disagreements over what constitutes "*baizuo*" in multiple comment sections and the differing interpretations of *baizuo*-like behaviour across the collected posts. Although this chapter began by exploring who is labelled *baizuo*, this final section has explored the subtle nuances in how netizens fashion a discourse of Othering. As discussed, it is crucial to note that there is notable disagreement among netizens in posts and, more noticeably, in comment sections about who and what can be classed as "*baizuo*". Ultimately, this chapter has traced the ways in which netizens' lexis, specifically the use of the grammatical person, 'can create/enhance stereotypes and may be instrumental in solidifying a conceptual polarization of "us/them" groups' (Lams 2019:447). While this chapter ends by alluding to the collective identity and Chinese pride that is displayed by Chinese netizens, the following section deconstructs anti-*baizuo* sentiments in order to better conceptualise netizens' criticisms of the West in tandem with the historical, socio-cultural factors that underpin such rationale.

Deconstructing "*baizuo*" through the lens of race

While these netizens openly criticise the above-mentioned groups and individuals, all of whom are from, or reside in, the West, "*baizuo*" does not bear exact resemblance to the anti-woke discourse that is observed in the white Western world of North America and Western Europe. As mentioned previously in this chapter,

though terms like "woke" are commonly used in Western contexts to criticise progressive ideologies and views, netizens' weaponisation of *"baizuo"* reflects a distinctly Chinese perspective on race and politics. This section explores the diverse range of language and critiques used in such critique in order to deconstruct the traits that are associated with being *bai*, as a literal reference of being white. As discussed in Chapter 2, whiteness is particularly complicated given the various definitions and concepts of race, ethnicity, and identity– particularly in the Chinese context. By dissecting the ways in which language shapes these conversations, we can gain a deeper understanding of the social dynamics at play and the motivations driving various participants in the online landscape.

In the Sinophone context, discussions involving the concept of "whiteness" have recently become more prevalent, both online and offline. However, these often centre on the conceptualisation and examination of the social and racial implications associated with whiteness, reflecting the broader discourse on race within Sinophone communities. As it has already been outlined in the literature review, the examination of Chinese narratives on the subject of race has been a focal point of extensive study within the academic community, particularly among scholars specialising in China-related research**.** Whiteness, in the Chinese context, has also historically been explored as being a result of the geographical expansions of China, whereby the need to distinguish between peoples deepened and resulted in whiteness becoming the demarcation between Han Chinese and darker Others (Wyatt 2012:311). Consequently, the concept of yellowness, as well as whiteness, developed in 'the late eighteenth century of the Common Era' (Wyatt 2012:310; see also Keevak 2011) and were influenced and furthered by key influential figures, like Liang Qichao and Sun Yat-sen, 'in the formation of national consciousness' (C. Zhang 2020b:103).

While there is no universally agreed-upon definition of racism, generally it is accepted that a core element is the belief in the superiority of one's own race or ethnicity over others. Of the limited scholarship on (anti-)whiteness in the Chinese context, most acknowledge that such weaponised racialisation stems from historical encounters (Y. Cheng 2019b; Wyatt 2012) and, more recently, heightened geopolitical tensions and COVID-19 (Fang and Liu 2021; Leonard 2022). While scholars define racism as a system that upholds the interests of the dominant culture while discriminating against minorities (Feagin 2013; Banaji, Fiske, and Massey 2021), understanding anti-white racism, particularly within this framework, necessitates careful consideration of context. In fact, it is crucial to recognise that the nature of anti-white sentiment in the Chinese

context is fundamentally different from racial discourses in the contemporary West, and such developments should not be understood using the same frameworks that apply to Western race relations. As Daegyeong Kim highlights in his article on hawkish public opinion in China, scholarship on the history of anti-Western nationalism in China has paid relatively little attention to the psychological roots of 'deep-seated, anti-White racial sentiment' (Kim 2024:4). Amidst a notable decrease in biologically grounded theories in discussions on racism and racist ideologies (Hirschman 2004), China scholars have observed that while 'racial theories are less visible in China than before the Second World War', notions of Chinese superiority have been increasingly weaponised by the state as 'a unifying concept against the threat of "Western culture"' (Dikötter 2012:366). Transcending the Century of Humiliation, China's narrative of national humiliation at the hands of the West continues to be central to consolidating the 'sense of the victimhood' of nationalist rhetoric (Kim 2024:2; see also Callahan 2004; Wang 2012). While this thesis explores the nuances of grassroots-level Chinese nationalism, nationalist rhetoric is generally and predominantly orchestrated from the top-down and serves to intensify those sentiments of victimisation and resentment towards the West and continue to shape national identity and popular nationalism. In the current political climate, sentiments of victimisation and resentment are being reinforced by narratives that exacerbate these feelings. These narratives often amplify perceptions of unfair treatment and grievance, which are particularly heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing geopolitical tensions. The pandemic has intensified stress, economic hardship, and health concerns, while contemporary international conflicts further contribute to a sense of insecurity and dissatisfaction. As a result, these factors collectively sustain and magnify feelings of victimisation and resentment in Chinese society (see Jaworsky and Qiaoan 2021; Gairola and Jayawickrama 2021).

As previously discussed, while whiteness has historically been deemed to be a desirable trait, the popular use of the derogatory term "white-skinned pigs" (白皮猪) is reflective of common anti-foreigner sentiments in contemporary China. Albeit a secondary point of interest in this study, it is worth noting that, in this study, the term appeared five times in total across three separate posts. While this is a common term that is thrown around across the Chinese social media platforms in certain topics of discussion pertaining to foreigners both in China and outside China (Ang and Martin 2023:12), there have been countless instances where the term has been deployed by Chinese in real-life encounters (see Connor and Farmer 2018; Teon 2021). This was especially the case amid the COVID-19 pandemic when the Chinese government's loosening up of visa regulations for

foreigners in China met a wave of heated backlash from its citizens in which the "pig theme" was utilised to depict white Westerners 'as violent, animalistic barbarians' (Ang and Martin 2023:12). While some are less aggressive, others take a much more malicious tone whereby netizens are more inclined to be more combative and accusatory:

> 'From the very beginning, white-skinned pigs have been causing chaos, while the Chinese believed from the start of the outbreak that COVID is a common crisis for mankind – one that would require the cooperation of all countries. Otherwise, without global cooperation, none of us will have a happy ending. That's what the Chinese think... but what about the white-skinned pigs? …' (#4320621)

Such depictions of "white-skinned pigs" marks a revival in the demonisation of the white Westerner, which has historically been fuelled by perceptions of colonialism and imperialism at the hands of such non-Chinese Others (Chen 2010:260). Sylvia Ang and Fran Martin argue that this resurgence of explicitly racialised discourse, on the 'animalistic nature of White Westerners' bodies and behaviours, as well as characteristics which make them apparently more likely to be carrying the virus' (Ang and Martin 2023:13), is particularly significant in the context of pandemic politics and China's increasing global power. It is therefore crucial to analyse these nuances to grasp the complexities of racial attitudes and biases within different cultural and historical contexts. Indeed, social media as platforms for netizens facilitates the development of 'new forms of racialization to articulate their dissatisfactions with historically entrenched White hegemony in both global and Chinese pandemic contexts' (Ang and Martin 2023:13). Though it is predominantly produced from the top-down, scholars posit that nationalism as a social and iterative process makes it 'inherently reactive' (Brittingham 2007:148).

Amidst the 'politics of blaming' during COVID-19, the utilisation of "white-skinned pigs" conveys a strong impulse to respond in defence of China against allegations attributing the virus' origin in Wuhan to bats and wet markets (Jaworsky and Qiaoan 2021). This animalisation of the Other reflects "reactive" nationalist netizens' to certain trends in foreign relations, particularly in times of conflict (Brittingham 2007:162). The portrayal of Westerners in such a manner indicates that in periods of heightened tension or conflict, nationalist emotions tend to become more pronounced. This intensification of nationalist sentiments can result in the dehumanisation or even animalisation of those perceived as outsiders or adversaries. In other words, when

conflicts arise or disagreements become more acute, there is a tendency for individuals or groups to depict the Other—those who are different or opposed—as less than human or as something subhuman. This process of dehumanisation serves to justify or rationalise hostile attitudes and behaviours towards these groups, reinforcing divisions and perpetuating animosity. With the exception of the abovementioned example of vulgarity, this study has found that the anti-*baizuo* discourse reveals little about biologically grounded racism among Chinese netizens. Equally, there is no substantive literature on such interpretations of whiteness, particularly as it pertains to the modern Chinese context. However, it has been noted by some, such as Zeus Leonardo, that it is crucial to note the key distinction between whiteness and people who are white: ''Whiteness' is a racial discourse, whereas the category 'white people' represents a socially constructed identity, usually based on skin colour' (Leonardo 2002:31).

To delve deeper into the deconstruction of "being white," it is important to note that white individuals are not the sole perpetrators of whiteness, even though they exhibit it. In essence, the focus is on scrutinising "being white" as encompassing behaviours, actions, and thoughts associated with whiteness, rather than merely superficial aspects of race and appearance. Indeed, this should not be strictly limited to understanding "whiteness"; it should be applicable to understanding other racial and ethnic identities, including "Chineseness". For instance, in one post, one netizen alleged that, while Italy and the majority of Italians struggled to contain the virus during the initial phase of the pandemic, there was 'no infection in the Italian Chinese community' (#5090420). Besides the hyperbolic claim that there were no cases of coronavirus, the post author maintains that there is a logical explanation for why the Chinese community in Italy were not suffering deaths as much as their non-Chinese counterparts (Roberts 2020). Moreover, the user's argument that 'the Chinese pay more attention to viruses and know how to protect themselves!' (#5090420) posits a positive narrative about the Chinese community's response to the coronavirus despite its spread in Italy. This assertion, suggesting that the Chinese community in Italy effectively contained and limited the spread of coronavirus, is linked to the particular practices or preventive measures that contributed to a lower mortality rate amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

As evidenced in preceding sections of this chapter, claims of Chinese superiority in responding to COVID-19 ascribe such success to the distinctive social and cultural traits perceived as intrinsic to the Chinese people and their culture. Similarly, these findings have uncovered the interchangeability of "*baizuo*" with terms

like "*bairen*" (百人). Such evidence of substituting "white left" with "white people" thus indicates a general conflation between whiteness and Westernness. This has been highlighted by others previously as it is widely acknowledged that, 'whiteness is predominantly seen as a distinguishable marker of Westernness and/or foreignness in China in consequence of Chinese people's collective memory' (Liu 2022:2). This – in combination with earlier discussions of mentioned *baizuo* countries, groups, and individuals – have evidently pertained more to cultural, political, and country-specific criticisms rather than mere discriminatory musings on the biologically "white race".

Framing the West and "Us" in COVID-19 discourse

As demonstrated by these findings and preceding studies, Chinese superiority is widely upheld by nationalist netizens through criticising and highlighting the shortcomings of the West and its overarching socio-political system and hegemony. Indeed, this has been observed widely in various contexts. In the aftermath of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, Wen Jiabao, the former Chinese premier, wrote "Distress rejuvenates a nation (多难兴邦)" on a blackboard at a school near the epicentre; this sentiment resonates among a widely-held belief that 'a nation can be successful only after experiencing some hardships and difficulties, as a disaster can also open new opportunities and bring new changes' (Jaworsky and Qiaoan 2021:313). While Jaworsky and Qiaoan ponder the significance of this maxim internationally, the findings of this doctoral research project shed light on the prominence of such sentiments within the COVID-19 context, given that it manifests in the form of pandemic nationalism.

Naturally, in anti-Western nationalist discourse, there is an inherent tendency to showcase and celebrate what is widely understood among Chinese as "Chinese characteristics" and values. In this specific context, the term "Chinese characteristics" encapsulates a set of cultural attributes often associated with Chinese values. For instance, the characteristic of hard-headedness, in this context, refers to a resolute and determined attitude that resists giving in under pressure or opposition. Such values and traits that are ascribed to the Chinese, in the words of these netizens particularly, are often associated with being 'realistic' and 'pragmatic' (C. Zhang 2020b:101) which enables a practical and grounded approach to problem-solving and decision-making. This trait, along with others, is considered a key component of Chinese cultural identity and is frequently highlighted in discussions about Chinese culture and society. In these conversations, such traits

are often celebrated as emblematic of strength and perseverance. Chinese netizens, or internet users, commonly associate these qualities with being Chinese, regardless of how the identity of "Chinese" is defined or understood. They believe that possessing these traits contributes to a higher level of awareness, knowledge, and readiness to handle crises effectively. This perception was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, where netizens felt that these characteristics were crucial in managing and overcoming challenges. Moreover, such associations are not strictly limited to individuals within mainland China but extends to Chinese diasporic communities all over the world. For instance, the post about Chinese communities in Italy illustrates how the achievements and resilience of Chinese people are recognised and valued beyond the borders of China, reflecting a broader view that encompasses the successes and contributions of Chinese communities globally. This broader sense of community and identity reflects a recognition and celebration of the achievements and contributions of Chinese individuals around the world, highlighting their positive impact across diverse geographical and cultural settings. Essentially, these assertions suggest that individuals who identify with Chinese culture or heritage are seen as having inherent traits that help them endure and excel during challenging times. Such claims often point to cultural practices, educational backgrounds, and community values rooted in the shared sociocultural traditions among Chinese people or those of Chinese descent. While these assertions do not always directly criticise Western cultures or individuals, they implicitly convey a belief in the distinct strengths and capabilities of the Chinese community. By emphasising the resilience and competence of peoples who identify with Chinese heritage, these comparisons subtly contrast these attributes with those of non-Chinese groups.

Arguably, such notions of Othering are extended to encompass the broader Asian continent as part of an "Us" versus "Them" dynamic, while also framing East and Southeast Asian populations as a unified community rather than focusing solely on "Chinese" populations. This collective identity formation positions the entire region in contrast to Western countries, emphasising a sense of shared cultural, political, and historical ties across diverse Asian nations. By constructing this broader "Us" identity, the discourse forges a form of pan-Asian solidarity that seemingly seeks to reinforce a sense of collective strength and commonality against perceived Western opposition or critique. While often acknowledging the obvious differences and ongoing issues between such countries, fundamental social or cultural similarities between East and Southeast Asian societies and cultures are, broadly-speaking, credited to sharing similar histories and value systems due to the complexities of the region's long and complicated history. Indeed, there is a body of scholarship that

concerns and questions the definitions and concepts of "ethnic group" and "racial group" in the East and Southeast Asian region (Kowner and Demel 2012a:9; see also Barabantseva 2012; Suryadinata 2013).

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, countless scholarly works across health and social science disciplines investigated how East Asian nations demonstrated notable success in managing the pandemic compared to other regions worldwide (see An and Tang 2020). Thus, contrary to the notion of Chinese exceptionalism in its reportedly unique success during the first two years of the pandemic, multiple other East and Southeast Asian countries demonstrated notable successes. Many of the netizens observed in this study, as discussed in later in this thesis (see pages 166-167), attributed China's achievements to what they perceive as uniquely Chinese sociocultural values—such as collectivism, social cohesion, and a strong sense of collective responsibility—rather than merely to its authoritarian political system. As Eugénie Mérieau (2020) points out, despite notable political and historical differences, East Asian states share a 'common reference matrix' that fosters a collective identity, viewing themselves as "fellows." This sense of collective identity reflects deeply ingrained values such as Confucian principles of collectivism, respect for hierarchy, and prioritisation of communal well-being over individual interests. These cultural traits have historically underpinned public adherence to social norms and government directives in East Asia. While governance played a role in the pandemic response, some argue that success was due to a broader "Asian culture" marked by shared sociocultural values (Prescott 2015). This, crucially in such context, includes a willingness to sacrifice personal freedom for collective safety, higher levels of trust in scientific expertise, and cultural norms emphasising cleanliness and personal responsibility. Scholars like An and Tang (2020:791) have expanded upon these observations by investigating how these values effectively promoted public cooperation and voluntary compliance during COVID-19 management and public responses. These socio-cultural dimensions provide a compelling lens through which to understand China's pandemic performance and highlight the intersection of culture and governance in shaping outcomes. By emphasising notions of shared traits that are common among East and, to some extent, Southeast Asian societies and cultures, netizens argue that these characteristics, often linked to Chinese cultural norms, have strengthened these nations' ability to adapt and endure during the crisis. The idea that countries share the experience of 'being together in this' (C. Zhang 2020a) reflects a broader sense of solidarity and mutual understanding, particularly in moments of global crisis. These shared perceptions of other relatively similarly-minded nations grappling with the same challenges help to create emotional and psychological bonds, reinforcing a sense of collective belonging. This sense of belonging

resonates with Benedict Anderson's (2006) notion of the imagined community. During events like the COVID-19 pandemic, these collective experiences may transcend national boundaries, cultivating an imagined community grounded in shared cultural, social, and historical reference points.

In some instances of comparing China with the rest of the world, Weibo users rallied around the sentiment that can be conveniently summarised in one post, 'people all over the world have to fight the virus, we're all fighting the same fight. It's just that some countries fight well, others fight badly.' (#9901122). Those that are perceived to "fight well" against the pandemic include not only China but also, as widely reported in global news outlets, East and Southeast Asian countries such as South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Singapore. These countries were often praised for their swift, organised, and effective responses to the COVID-19 crisis, characterised by widespread testing, contact tracing, and strict lockdown measures. Their public health approaches stood in contrast to the more chaotic responses seen in many Western countries, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic. This underscores the importance of recognising the interconnectedness of cultural norms and societal responses, ultimately shaping regional dynamics and interactions. Thus, when considering the prevalent notions of solidarity and proximity among these populations, it becomes evident that a collective mindset – a larger sense of "Us" – shaped by common values and attitudes toward societal advancement, plays a significant role. Indeed, this deepens existing discussions regarding the perceptions of Chineseness, encompassing considerations of race, ethnicity, nationality, and beyond. The "fighting well" narrative not only underscores the success of these particular countries' pandemic strategies but also contributes to broader debates surrounding governance, cultural values, and social responsibility (An and Tang 2020; Baldwin 2021; de Kloet et al. 2020). The achievements of these East and Southeast Asian nations reinforce the view that they generally emphasise the collective well-being above the individual, societal discipline, and resilient governmental authority—factors that some argue were more critical in managing the crisis than political ideologies or partisanship, especially when contrasted with Western responses. Such comparison highlights how global discussions about the pandemic intersect with deeper cultural and political discourses, including the anti-*baizuo* narrative, where Western liberal values are often juxtaposed against the perceived efficiency and pragmatism of such Asian governance models. In the eyes of anti-*baizuo* netizens, this contrast highlights the inefficiency of Western liberalism, particularly its emphasis on individual rights and personal freedoms, which are seen as obstacles in managing large-scale collective challenges like the pandemic.

Considering the significance of such means of Othering, it is interesting to note that, despite being originally employed by netizens to critique Westerners and "white people" alike, "*baizuo*" has developed beyond its initial usage. The development of the term, Yinghong Cheng argues, 'shows that China has joined the global discussion on race under its own initiative in response to an unfolding global situation.' (Y. Cheng 2019b:281). While the term has historically and is predominantly used to discuss and criticise "White Westerners", it is also worth noting that it has also been used to describe those who are neither white nor Western. For instance, in one post, while criticising the then-Mayor of Seoul, Jung-hyup Seo, for not imposing stricter policies in February 2020, the author complained that 'the people of Korea have embraced "freedom" and "democracy" and have forgotten their founding father and their roots … It seems that the white left giant babies are the same all over the world' (#8720220). The user's commentary on South Koreans "forgetting their roots" implies that contemporary Korean society has deviated from the values and principles that played a crucial role in propelling the country's rapid development during the period following its politically unstable years. Furthermore, the insinuation of such a shift not only reflects a concern about the current societal trajectory in South Korea but arguably extends beyond Korea and inwards. To draw on the concept of Othering, netizens' critique of societal decline in Korea arguably reflects Chinese concerns regarding the presence of *baizuo* beyond the West. Despite political tensions between China and countries like South Korea, this broader concern may also reflect Chinese perceptions of cultural proximity and a sense of solidarity among East Asian populations, who share certain social values and attitudes (Chen and Chung 1994; Huang and Chang 2017). As reflected in anti-*baizuo* posts that celebrated pandemic management in East Asian countries, one might argue that long-standing anti-Japanese and anti-Korean sentiments, traditionally central to Chinese nationalist discourse, appeared to be temporarily set aside to foster a broader "Us versus Them" dynamic, with the West becoming the primary target of critique.

Thus, the extension of the term *baizuo* beyond the Euro-American world indicates that it is not exclusive to Westerners or the West but is widespread globally and, more concerningly for anti-*baizuo* netizens, much closer to home; netizens' perception of the *baizuo*'s expansion into East Asia reflects deeper concerns regarding it permeating through, and even beyond, Chinese society. It is particularly worth noting that this is a common thread within the discourse that likens the prevalence and spread of *baizuo* thinking, or rather the *baizuo* in more general terms, with a virus. Writing before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Yinghong Cheng noted that netizens seemed concerned about the prevalence of the *baizuo* as being 'part of a global

ideological epidemic with a destructive impact on developed civilizations including China' (Y. Cheng 2019b:281). However, as far as available sources indicate, this study is the first that observes how netizens liken the spread and subsequent prevalence of *baizuo* to viruses or diseases. Though there are many examples and varying iterations of the 'white left virus' (#4141220) in posts and comment sections, some have gone further to argue that the severity of the *baizuo*'s control across the liberal West is so detrimental that it is 'even more cancerous than cancer itself' (#5450620).

Given the significance of context during this period, netizens' likening of the *baizuo* to the coronavirus itself are particularly common: 'Like the coronavirus itself, the *baizuo* phenomenon has taken the world by storm, resulting in contagion and erosion wherever it spreads. No country or region can be spared, it is only a matter of time. No one is safe' (#0920722). Following the height of the pandemic, Chinese netizens grew increasingly concerned about the spread of coronavirus within China. In September 2022, one user posted about the development and prevalence of so-called *baizuo* behaviour, which seemingly correlated with the rising infection rate at the time. The subsequent discussion shifts to the debate on vaccination, with the user describing a group of individuals expressing reluctance or opposition to getting vaccinated. The portrayal of these individuals as 'selfish monsters' suggests a strong condemnation of their stance. The concerns mentioned, such as pregnancy, fears of vaccine safety, and 'severe allergies', are common reasons cited by some individuals in discussions about vaccination (#3141122). The use of the term 'white left disease' represents a negative view or criticism of left-wing ideologies, associated with Western liberalism. This characterisation of the *baizuo* phenomenon 'growing in China, like the coronavirus' (#3141122) implies a perceived threat or negative influence, likening its spread and influence on the contagious nature of the coronavirus.

While the initial use of the term was to criticise the usual suspects as outlined in this chapter, such critique has made its way to the domestic realm, 'being used against Chinese nationals sympathetic with liberal-egalitarian values' (C. Zhang 2020b:95) and to 'discredit social activism within China' (C. Zhang 2020b:100). While both Chenchen Zhang (2020b:105) and Taiwanese journalist Brian Hioe (2018) are of the few, if not the only, to have noted this trend, neither have gone into much detail about how this manifests. Though it was not the most common use of the term in the posts gathered for this research study, there were some instances which may serve as motivation for future research. Moreover, it might also be worth exploring whether there are offline ramifications as a result of this trend. In numerous comment sections, individuals opposing the original post

were branded as "*baizuo*" by users aligning with the anti-*baizuo* sentiments expressed in the posts. This evolution of the term highlights its transformation into a weapon, deployed not only against Westerners but also against dissenting voices within the Chinese online community in particular. The fear of ideological contagion illustrated in this chapter highlights the potential porosity of sociocultural values otherwise identified with the West spreading closer to home. The use of metaphoric language around contagion to describe the spread of *baizuo* ideology in East Asia takes on a particularly pronounced emotional affect, which will be demonstrated in Chapter 6, as it chimes with fear of contagion from COVID-19. Conversely, the metaphor of contagion at this moment of pandemic crisis, serves to forcefully promote the importance of avoiding ideological contagion by the *baizuo* and of maintaining a clear separation between Self and Other.

Among the posts found and used in this study, it was noted on numerous occasions that the term was used against a fellow netizen in their comment section to discredit and argue against them. Oftentimes, one user would leave a comment, under a post containing the term, questioning the original poster's argument, to which the author responded that the commenter is incorrect, too lenient, or stupid. For instance, in one post in April 2020 (#1110420), the author asserted that, unlike the Chinese, the rest of the world was reluctant and even refused to embrace science, which netizens rationalised as the coronavirus 'rightfully wiping out' those populations. While the original post received well over one hundred likes and thirty comments, one Weibo user left a highly critical comment of the original post author: 'Wow, you have serious Nazi tendencies'. In response, another user came to the defence of the original post author, arguing that, 'you're *baizuo* for thinking that'. Though this was one of two incidents whereby the term was weaponised against a fellow Weibo user in this research, it is common for Chinese netizens to engage in discussions under posts about what and, more crucially, who is seen as being *baizuo* (Hioe 2018). Moreover, in cases where netizens were not using the term against each other, there were many instances in the comment sections under posts where they debated and argued whether or not someone or something was actually *baizuo* and, naturally, why they thought so. Common disagreements like these therefore imply a lack of consensus among Chinese netizens regarding who precisely falls under the category of "*baizuo*" and what characteristics or behaviours define this label. While netizen culture and interactions such as these will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 6, it is crucial to note here how such observations suggest a shift in the usage and implications of the term, potentially indicating broader societal implications. Thus, the identification of the term's evolution and flexibility serves as

motivation for research to delve deeper into the offline ramifications and social dynamics associated with the evolving usage of "*baizuo*" within Chinese discourse.

Conclusion

Through this comprehensive analysis, this chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of how *baizuo*, the West, and even Chinese liberals are perceived and understood by politically engaged netizens. This chapter has introduced the complexities behind this inherently politically and racially charged term by critically examining how Weibo users utilise, interact with, and interpret "*baizuo*". Through the careful scrutinisation of specific mentions and language usage in Weibo posts, the chapter has particularly focused on identified clusters of individuals and groups associated with *baizuo*, shedding light on its nuanced definition and interpretation among Chinese netizens. It has revealed that, by closely examining their criticisms on specific countries, groups, and well-known individuals, netizens demonstrate strong engagement with Western political geography, history, and current affairs. By extensively exploring these details, this chapter ultimately argues that the term itself is defined by virtue of who is discussed as being part of it. Indeed, the later part of the chapter has shown that the racialisation of "whiteness" within the anti-*baizuo* discourse goes beyond simply branding white Westerners, but potentially other East Asians too. Examples of language that, through critique, weaponise the term and reinforce the conceptual division between the "negative Other" and the "positive self" in the anti-*baizuo* discourse highlight the fear of the Other spreading ever closer to the Self. Beyond the reminiscence of right-wing populism in the West (C. Zhang 2020b), this chapter has found that unity in Chinese superiority, rather than Han (cultural) superiority (Y. Cheng 2019b:271), is more prominent in these politically charged discussions pertaining to the West and the critical commentary that those entail. At the same time, the importance of shared sociocultural values has elucidated netizens' expansion of "Us" in showing their recognition of the interconnectedness of cultural norms and societal responses across East Asia. This research therefore illustrates the complexity of ongoing discussions surrounding perceptions of Chineseness, as well as common Chinese perspectives on Chinese and East Asian identity. The fluid boundaries between Chineseness and what might be described as "East Asianness" are often reflected in netizens' expressions and self-identifications, as they identify, navigate, and critique overlapping cultural values and historical influences in the broader East Asian region. This conflation further reinforces the notion of a broader East Asian cultural

sphere, where distinctions between national identities are blurred in favour of shared values and regional solidarity rooted in a perceived common civilisational history. While this chapter has illuminated the intricate dynamics of Self-Other relations in this discourse, the following chapter takes this further by critically examining the process of meaning-making within online spaces by focusing on the particulars of anti-*baizuo* discourse during COVID-19.

5. The significance of *"baizuo"* amid the COVID-19 pandemic: analysing netizen critique of public health crisis management in the West

Building on the previous chapter, this chapter critically examines the role that the term *baizuo* plays within a range of netizen critique of Western approaches to mitigating the spread and severity of the pandemic. By analysing the various historical and socio-cultural factors that underpin such criticisms, this chapter contextualises how anti-*baizuo* sentiments map on the broader anti-Western discourses that precede such contemporary trends in rising sentiments of Chinese superiority and anti-Western nationalism. It seeks to analyse how these critiques shape a sense of Chinese superiority and nationalism, thereby contributing to academic discourse on nationalism, public opinion, and international relations. To do so, the following sets out to address two points of interest: first, it addresses the criticisms towards the *baizuo* in terms of how the West coped, or failed to cope, with the pandemic; second, it draws on such criticisms collectively to discuss how these perceptions of the West map onto broader and deeper historical contexts and what such critique reveals about netizens' self-reflections. In order to do justice to such a line of inquiry, this chapter is structured into three main parts. While the first section focuses on the criticisms that are directed at political institutions and their leaders, the second explores the criticisms of *baizuo* ideology and behaviour, contextualising it within the framework of Euro-American society. The final section weaves together the various sociocultural factors that underpin such manifestations of contemporary Chinese anti-Western sentiments.

Critical assessments of the West's governance and policy failures amidst the pandemic

In the wake of the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the lens through which the West is evaluated has undergone profound scrutiny, particularly by Chinese netizens. As the pandemic unfolded, the digital landscape provided a platform for individuals to express their opinions and scrutinise the approaches taken by Western nations in managing the crisis. In order to explore how netizens rationalised their criticisms of the *baizuo*-run governments in the West, this section delves into the critical assessments of the governance and policy failures, as articulated by Chinese netizens. As key players in the digital realm, Chinese netizens offer unique insights and critiques that reflect a nuanced understanding of governance, crisis management, and societal resilience. Through analysing this online discourse, this section unravels how the digital realm has

served as a conduit for cross-cultural evaluations and critiques of the institutional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic by the Chinese netizen community.

Frequently, as explored in the preceding chapter, netizens directed their critiques toward the institutional shortcomings of Western governments in handling the onset of the coronavirus outbreak effectively. Broad observations regarding Western strategies categorised governments as adopting defeatist and laissez-faire approaches, especially in the widely shared perception that the transmission of the coronavirus was deemed uncontrollable and seemingly unstoppable. For instance, in one post, the author commented on how they found it amusing that Western news commentators were shocked that China had approved and begun preparing for the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics: 'German media said it is impossible for China to contain the virus and host the Winter Olympics. But then China was able to miraculously prevent the virus from spreading through harsh restrictions. These naive white lefties!' (#2680722). According to netizens, a defeatist approach entails surrendering to the challenges posed by the coronavirus rather than actively combating it, as China is asserted to have done. In this context, adopting a defeatist stance implies accepting a future of 'coexistence with the coronavirus' (#7461022) rather than fighting against it. It is worth noting, however, such perspectives were not limited to endorsement solely at the highest levels; instead, it was a sentiment embraced and shared across the entire spectrum of society, extending from the general population to the upper echelons of the political elite. According to netizens, Western governments were widely seen as embracing this defeatist mindset, where they were criticised for not taking proactive measures to protect their citizens. Such an approach – or lack thereof – essentially allowed nature to take its course and, ultimately, accepting the increased likelihood of infection and potentially death. The prioritisation of 'freedom' over death (#3160422), was a common talking point among anti-*baizuo* netizens who struggled to make sense of how the government could simply abdicate responsibility towards the well-being of its people. The sheer lack of proactive intervention and protection was interpreted by netizens as a form of negligence or irresponsibility on the part of Western governance. While some believed that the West were not taking enough of a proactive approach, for others, there is also heavy scrutiny of the significant shortcomings and deficiencies on an institutional and policymaking level.

Western governments are widely criticised by Chinese netizens for various reasons, but in the sensitive context of the pandemic, criticisms on the incompetence of Western leadership and action reflect deeper frustrations

with how responsibilities failed to be taken seriously. One example of this was seen in a number of posts which mentioned how institutional incompetence and poor crisis management was reflected in the inaccuracy of case number reporting and medical provisions. In describing the state of coronavirus management in April 2020, one user argued that the explosion of coronavirus cases across the Western world was directly linked to the incompetence of their respective governments and healthcare systems alike: 'You have to remember the official numbers are nowhere close to or representative of actual cases in foreign countries. Also, hospitals can only admit confirmed patients, never mind the undiagnosed cases who are able to go out and continue infecting others. Meanwhile, we all know that staying at home and self-isolating is the only way to limit the spread' (#1110420). The post author further supported these assertions by connecting those trends to a history of inadequate medical resources, a privatised healthcare system, and the prevalence of costly medical treatments. Additionally, the author linked these issues to a more ingrained problem, namely that 'white leftists do not respect science and aren't scared of viruses' (#1110420), which will be further examined and discussed in the subsequent section of this chapter. The linkage suggests that there is a more profound and persistent concern that extends beyond the immediate problems of insufficient medical resources, privatised healthcare, and expensive medical treatments. The author of this specific post implies that understanding the fundamental features and traits, including behaviours, of a specific group, the *baizuo*, is crucial for a comprehensive analysis of the broader issues at hand. Moreover, and somewhat relatedly, competence and even intellectual capacity were often cited by Weibo users in their posts when scrutinising the rationale and poor decision-making during the pandemic. In contrast to assertions suggesting governmental passivity and absence in addressing the pandemic, the contention that efforts were indeed being made potentially reveals a somewhat uncomfortable reality – the West appeared to lack the capability for effective crisis management when compared to the East, notably, China.

Despite being highly influential superpowers and being recognised as world leaders, netizens expressed significant criticism, highlighting that this esteemed position often translates into minimal effectiveness in crisis management. In making such arguments, some highlighted the failures of the *baizuo*-run government in the US by comparing COVID-19 with other historic events, 'like Hurricane Katrina' (#5360320). Though they did not delve into great detail with such comparisons, netizens' readings of crisis management reflected similar concerns and points of criticism. More specifically, by highlighting such critical differences between the West and, by virtue of self-reflective comparison, China, netizens demonstrated what

might be best summarised as scepticism of the Western hegemony and leadership. In the context of COVID-19 management, scepticism toward Western governance is often portrayed as mere 'smoke and mirrors' (#5360320), highlighting the perceived gap between rhetoric and reality in Western responses to the pandemic. Netizens argue that the Western response to the pandemic is not a model of effective leadership as portrayed, but rather a facade that conceals its systemic and fundamental flaws. In such commentary, netizens highlight instances of perceived inconsistencies, pointing to what they view as an orchestrated attempt to downplay failures and present a more favourable image of Western-led governance. This scepticism reflects broader sentiments challenging the perceived superiority of Western governance and raises questions about the information disseminated by Western leaders during the global health crisis.

By associating opposition to masks with *baizuo* policy and behaviour, Chinese netizens mobilise discourses that position Chinese people and their government as being superior, emphasising a collective responsibility for public health and contrasting it with what they see as individualistic Western values. Of the many manifestations of anti-*baizuo* sentiment, one of the most common lines of criticism is the *baizuo*'s prioritisation of individual freedom over the health risks posed by the virus. An example of how this is exemplified can be seen in Chinese netizens' disapproval of governments, politicians, and groups politicising and opposing mask-wearing, which they label as "*baizuo*" behaviour. While many Weibo posters maintained that the escalating spread of the coronavirus in the US has been significantly exacerbated by what netizens deem as the *baizuo*'s typically characteristic "anti-intellectual behaviour", though due to the inconsistency and lack of clarity in defining the term, there is no consensus on precisely what constitutes such behaviour. Yet, what can be deduced from the dataset from this study is that such criticisms embody a Chinese stigmatisation of Western problems that either have no relevance in China or are not deemed 'real problems in the real world' (Zhang 2017). Netizens' perceive such problems as being overly concerned with intangible and abstract issues which are often likened to activism and related endeavours. While this generic definition might be applicable to anti-*baizuo* discourse across topics and themes, this study found that Weibo users often lumped together, and sometimes directly cited, activist efforts and heightened concerns around 'political correctness … LGBTQ+, and freedom,' were reasons for the failures of the West in handling the pandemic which, for some, ultimately made 'Americans and Europeans look very stupid' (#3160422). Chinese netizens thus criticised what they deemed as the *baizuo*'s misplaced concerns and highly questionable priorities amid the ongoing public health crisis.

Netizens found it particularly incomprehensible how mask-wearing became highly politicised in the West across the political spectrum. In response to the spreading of conspiracies and various anti-mask and anti-vaccination demonstrations and protests in the US, some netizens highlighted the role of politics and media manipulation in the failures of preventing the spread of the coronavirus: 'The politicisation of mask-wearing is a stupid sham that has once again been orchestrated by the white left in Europe! This is why the epidemic got so bad. We all know that wearing a mask is good for other people – but such simple logic has been manipulated by politics. These types of countries will have no future!' (#4940220). Crucially, this suggests that netizens' criticisms extended beyond, though still including, the *baizuo*; such commentary on the politicisation of masks across the spectrum points to how the issue of mask-wearing is not confined to a specific political group or ideology. Relatedly, netizens also highlighted how, in facing such a humanitarian crisis, the political elite for the most part seemed more concerned with the political performance of mask-wearing, and appeasing domestic political tensions, rather than the priority of protecting the lives of civilians. In the specific context of the US, one particular user emphasised the impact of a dual influence characterised by both extreme right-wing political manipulation and the discourse of left-wing political correctness. The user proposed that this combination played a role in worsening the spread of COVID-19 in the country. On the one hand, the reference to 'extreme right-wing political manipulation' (#6801020) implies a criticism of far-right political strategies, alluding to how Republicans had seriously downplayed the seriousness of the virus throughout the pandemic, from the initial denial and downplaying of the severity of the coronavirus to the rejection of public health measures.

Though many of the anti-*baizuo* netizens acknowledged significant and fundamental differences between the parties and factions, some Weibo users pointed to Western failure as bipartisan: 'It doesn't matter who you vote for or which side you choose … Western liberalism of the right wing and of the white left are evidently both destroyed' (#0980720). Similarly, another user praised Trump for shaking up the political structure and showing the world how unstable the United States is at its root: 'See, both parties in the United States are anti-China. The only difference is that with some businessmen, for instance Trump, they only want money' (#6960320). Naturally, when discussing the influence of right-wing populism in the US, many users emphasised the longstanding dominance within the Republican Party of Make America Great Again (MAGA), the political support base of former President Donald Trump. On the other hand, mentions of the 'influential figures of white-left political correctness' (#6801020) indicate criticism towards certain ideological stances

associated with the political elite of the left, possibly implying a reluctance to acknowledge or address the gravity of the situation due to concerns about political correctness and appeasing criticism, likely from across the political spectrum and potential voters. Moreover, the user contended that only when the situation reached a critical state, marked by a surge in infection rates, did a noticeable shift occur in public opinion in the US. At this juncture, the user observed that there was a change in behaviour – from merely performative mask-wearing to a genuine acceptance and following of the science.

The use of the term 'performative wearing of masks' (#6801020) suggests that, initially, there had been a superficial acceptance of preventive measures without a deep belief or understanding in the scientific basis for such measures. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, so-called performative mask-wearing among Western liberals took on a distinctive role, often seen as an outward expression of civic responsibility and a commitment to collective well-being. While many liberals embraced masks not only as a practical tool for virus prevention, they were also seen and used as a symbol of conforming with public health measures and trust in scientific expertise in stark contrast to their more conservative counterparts (Kaplan et al. 2023). This performative aspect was reinforced through social media, where mask selfies and endorsements of responsible behaviour became prevalent. For instance, President Biden's "100-day mask challenge" was cited by several Weibo users in reference to Western liberals acting in the faith of political correctness rather than viewing it as a pragmatic public health measure. Similarly, influential high-profile politicians from the Democratic Party, such as Governors Gavin Newsom and Andrew Cuomo, were seen as particularly important figures in terms of representing what critics dubbed as being performative, overly politically correct, and by definition, *baizuo*. Moreover, many well-known Democrats, including celebrities who are vocally Democrat or pro-Democrat, were seen participating in such trends, sharing images of themselves wearing masks and emphasising the symbolic aspect of responsible behaviour (Gelfand et al. 2022). This performative dimension, amplified through social media, underscored the intersection of political symbolism and public health initiatives in the Western response to the pandemic.

Alternatively, general opposition to mask-wearing often found footing in various Western and often, though not exclusively, conservative circles, where scepticism towards government mandates, concerns over personal freedoms, or scepticism about the effectiveness of masks were prevalent. This divergence in attitudes towards mask-wearing not only reflected contrasting perspectives on the role of the individual in a public health crisis but also contributed to the broader socio-political polarisation evident during the pandemic. Thus,

many netizens demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the socio-political climate in the West, particularly in the US, and often accredited the combination of extreme right-wing influence and certain aspects of left-wing ideology as collectively hindering the chances of effective and science-driven responses to the pandemic. The observation underscores the idea that public opinion and behaviour in the US were influenced by political dynamics, with a significant shift occurring only when the severity of the pandemic became undeniable.

Due to substantial state control, particularly since 2012, and the perception of the crisis as a success for China's centralised political regime, civil society responses have arguably furthered the strength of political control over the political apparatus and consequently, the public at large (Hu and Sidel 2020:1178). In stark contrast with the loose and unstable political dynamics of liberal democratic countries in the West, the structure and strength of the Chinese state over its population is perceived by the anti-*baizuo* as being fundamental to the success in handling the spread of the virus within China. As one user summarised, comparing Chinese and Western perspectives on the imposition of, and public responses to, harsh policies and lockdowns: 'One reason why people hate the pandemic is that it is very much like living in a war and that the means to effectively suppress it are highly authoritarian' (#3160320). The critique from Chinese netizens directed at Western governments and politicians for their perceived mishandling of the pandemic underscores a robust manifestation of pandemic nationalism (Chen et al. 2023), highlighting their confidence in their own government's management of the crisis. Unlike previous studies which often highlight aggressive or more combative forms of Chinese cybernationalism (see Harrington and Zhang 2022; Jiang 2012), the nationalist sentiments observed in these discussions articulate a sense of patriotic pride in the government's efficiency and resilience, reflecting a form of 'pandemic nationalism' that centres on national unity and competence (Chen et al. 2023; see also Jaworsky and Qiaoan 2021). While this section has introduced netizens' strategic positioning of Chinese superiority against the failures of Western leadership and governance, the next focuses on the perceived prevalence of the *baizuo* values and behaviours among the general population rather than institutional weaknesses and failures from the top-down.

On the collective failures of the Other: assessments of public responses to COVID-19 and prevention policies

While this chapter has focused on the institutional and political shortcomings of Western governments in implementing preventive measures, the following examines broader criticisms from netizens regarding the failures of liberal Western society in responding to COVID-19. As the global community grappled with the unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic, public reactions and responses became a subject of intense scrutiny. This section examines the ways in which Chinese netizens perceived and assessed the actions and inactions of Western society in adhering to COVID-19 prevention measures. Specifically, this section examines how Chinese netizens critiqued Western public responses to COVID-19 by exploring the expressions of "helplessness" or inefficacy, often denoted through terms like "incompetence", "negligence", and "laissez-faire". The analysis highlights criticisms of Western governments' and societies' failure to adopt what netizens consider common-sense health practices, such as basic hygiene and adherence to public health guidelines.

Among the perceived shortcomings in the Western public response to COVID-19, a recurring theme in netizens' criticisms was the belief that while Western efforts to combat the virus were acknowledged, there was a perception that they lacked the necessary traits of rigour and discipline, and an overall capability to effectively curb its spread. The subsequent analysis examines how Chinese netizens scrutinised expressions of helplessness or ineffectiveness, denoted in various forms such as incompetence, negligence, and being laissez-faire. As it was discussed in the previous section, a perceived lack of common sense, and even intellect, was often employed as a descriptive way to rationalise the shortcomings of *baizuo*-leaning Western governments' response to COVID-19. For instance, explaining the poor management and responses from both the US government and its citizens, one user posted, in August 2020, that: 'while I don't know the average IQ of Americans, these white leftists are very odd. The average IQ of American politicians is indisputably low, and their questions [about Wuhan] are incorrect!' (#1580820). The discourse on online platforms included the recurrent use of terms like 'outright stupidity' (#8970322) and 'anti-intellectual' (#4670520; #3160422; #4141220), indicating a perception that certain individuals were resistant to intellectual or knowledge-based approaches. Other expressions were far more explicit and highly derogatory terms 'retarded white left' (#5020322), were commonly used in posts that displayed a heightened level of emotional charge and antagonism, as indicated by the frequent use of exclamatory punctuation in those posts. In one instance, one user expressed that Western society and culture have 'demonstrated a decline in the intelligence of younger generations' and that Western culture has 'completely ruined the West' which, at the time of the coronavirus

outbreak, 'Westerners lost their common sense. […] The white left continues to erode – Europe and America continue to decay' (#1530920). Similarly, in another post, the author wrote that, 'It is odd that they don't seem to understand how general hygiene works. Like washing your hands and wearing a mask, those are pretty effective measures— measures which we Chinese actually advocated first! It's a shame that those brainless white leftists in Europe and America have struggled with these basic facts!' (#6550520).

This sentiment suggests a perception of Western populations as struggling with fundamental hygiene practices, leading to a sense of disappointment among certain users who believe that these measures were initially promoted by the Chinese and should be easily comprehensible. Notably, comparisons on hygiene and public health between China and the West, seen as a gauge of China's success and superiority, underscore netizens' viewpoints that stand in contrast to Western narratives about the unsanitary origins of the coronavirus (Boylan et al. 2021; Jaworsky and Qiaoan 2021). Criticisms of this nature thus additionally argue that a more scientific approach – like that of the self-professing netizens' – to epidemic prevention is essential, and the failure to adopt such an approach is attributed to the observed shortcomings of the *baizuo*. The notion that Westerners' disregard for the severity of the coronavirus is frequently cited by netizens critical of the *baizuo*, who argue that such negligence, together with fearlessness, overwhelmingly contributed to the surge in global COVID-19 cases. In a similar vein, arguments that the *baizuo* showed great naivety in their handling of the coronavirus was linked to their perceived lack of seriousness toward the virus and failure to act in the best interests of public health.

While posts frequently explicitly named and criticised governments and the political elite, as outlined in the previous section, general commentary on negligence extends beyond in order to encompass society as a whole. For instance, the assertion that Western governments were neglectful was reflected in remarks such as 'epidemic prevention must be scientific' which were further enforced by the argument that 'one simply cannot be as thoughtless as the white left' (#8020220). Though the user's first commentary was on the perceived negligence of institutions and governments, the general reference to the thoughtless *baizuo* was broadly more inclusive in that societal attitudes and public responses were similarly, if not equally, reckless. By characterising the *baizuo* as "thoughtless" in this regard, the user suggests that individuals associated with this group are considered lacking in rational and well-informed decision-making when it comes to epidemic prevention measures. Netizens further expressed frustration regarding protests and other forms of pushback on

Western media as Westerners assertions of difficulty and challenges in adhering to more stringent policies outlined in public health guidelines. This broader critique suggests a scepticism towards the efficacy of measures taken by individuals associated with the *baizuo* group, reflecting a belief in the importance of scientific rigour in navigating and mitigating public health crises.

Some conveyed a sense or feeling of astonishment, and incomprehension, concerning the perceived challenges faced by the West in enforcing policies and penalties for those who did not comply with public health guidelines. The notion that the West struggled with understanding and following public health policy and protocol was further discussed in relation to public response to President Biden's "100 Days Masking Challenge" (Fox 2021). One user drew a comparison between China's initial 'success in combating the epidemic' (#0511220) and the noteworthy reluctance, and at times resistance, displayed by Americans in response to social distancing measures and lockdowns. Through such comparison, the user highlighted how it was difficult for the 'anarchic' and 'polluted' minds of the liberal Americans and Europeans to make sense of and embrace 'physical isolation and preventative measures'. Similarly, while criticising Biden's administration for ineffective policy implementation, the post author noted that 'while they know that stricter policies should be adopted, the government knows that the American people cannot follow them'. To revisit a previously mentioned Weibo post, one post author scrutinised Westerners' ability to comprehend and practise basic hygiene and public health: 'It is odd that they don't seem to understand how general hygiene works. Like, washing your hands and wearing a mask, those are pretty effective measures— measures which we Chinese actually advocated first! It's a shame that these brainless white leftists in Europe and America have struggled with such basic facts!' (#6550520). This example of a Weibo post combines elements of national pride, frustration, and criticism in the context of public health practices, with a focus on the perceived failure of Westerners to embrace what the user considers fundamental hygiene measures. The post begins with a comparison between China and the West, particularly Europe and America, regarding general hygiene practices. The post also asserts that these basic hygiene measures were pioneered and advocated by the Chinese first. Moreover, "we Chinese" implies a sense of pride or superiority in terms of public health practices, positioning China as a frontrunner in promoting effective measures against the spread of diseases. This is connected to the theme of hygiene and public health as a measure of China's and Chinese superiority, in spite of the controversial Western discussions regarding wet markets as the alleged source of the coronavirus. While this will be critically analysed in the following section, these common claims carry undertones of nationalism and

a superiority complex and contend, by implication, that China is far more knowledgeable or advanced in medical and public health practices compared to the West.

Through an exploration of how Chinese netizens evaluate instances of helplessness or ineffectiveness linked to perceived *baizuo* intellect deficiency, these findings can be enriched by analysing various expressions, like incompetence, neglect, and laissez-faire attitudes. Among the various points of criticism, there is a prevailing sentiment of condemning "outright stupidity," signalling a widely acknowledged perception of deficient decision-making in the implementation of epidemic prevention measures. Another strand of netizen discourse on the *baizuo*'s lack of efficacy and capability in handling the public health crisis delves into the scrutiny of laissez-faire attitudes, both within Western societies and among the *baizuo* in particular, shedding light on a perceived lax approach to crucial public health measures. The criticisms of the 'absurd bunch of fools' (#5290920), who uphold and prioritise an ideological commitment to prioritising personal freedoms over collective well-being, encapsulate the multifaceted nature of netizens' discontent with Western and *baizuo* responses to the global health crisis.

Another prevalent and overarching theme in the critiques by netizens aimed at the *baizuo* suggests that contrary to criticisms centred on Western society's incompetence or the incapacity of Westerners in general, there were contentions emphasising that the virus spread was a consequence of disobedience and unwillingness rather than sheer incompetence. Beyond concerns about intellectual capabilities, netizens' criticisms also show real concern about the perceived chaos and non-compliance with rules and regulations in Western societies. In particular, disparaging descriptions were employed in criticisms directed at those who opposed, and in some instances protested against, the implementation of mandatory mask-wearing policies in various countries during the period of 2020-21. Without conflating public trust in science with compliance with public health policy, it is generally and widely acknowledged that 'liberals generally place higher trust in science and express more positive attitudes toward various science issues than conservatives' (Peng 2022:4), and this was evidently visible in the data collected from the Weibo posts in this study. Although resistance to measures like mask-wearing and social isolation is less prevalent among the purported *baizuo* and more commonly associated with the right-wing, there has also been considerable attention on anti-vaccination movements within liberal circles in the West (Monbiot 2021). As one user proclaimed, 'do not challenge these people's freedom to go maskless and go wherever they want! As we know, white leftists love not listening to their government' (#8950620). By

using the term "*baizuo*", netizens imply that such individuals in Western countries tend to disregard, or at least challenge, government advice or instructions as in the case of pandemic prevention. The descriptions of 'anarchy' (#0511220) reflects how netizens perceive the West at large being in a general state of disorder or lack of control, while 'not listening to their government' (#8950620) highlights a perceived reluctance or refusal to adhere to established norms or guidelines. Such criticism extends beyond cognitive abilities and delves into perceptions of societal behaviour, reflecting a perspective – on behalf of the Chinese population – that perceives Western populations as lacking in order and discipline.

While both Western and Chinese cultures assert that their philosophical underpinnings aim 'to achieve the harmonious coexistence among human beings' (Z.-D. Wang et al. 2022:8034), the two differ significantly in terms of how they understand and perceive harmonious coexistence. While the West prioritises accommodating freedoms, desires, and individual preferences, Chinese culture and philosophy place a greater emphasis on accommodating the collective good. Consequently, netizens' criticisms indicate an antagonism toward a mindset where individual freedom and desires are prioritised above those of others. In such critical analysis, the widely noted observation that the *baizuo* were 'not afraid of death' (#1790322) becomes a focal point, shedding light on perceived cultural disparities in attitudes towards collective well-being. The critical analysis of Chinese netizens regarding the management of the coronavirus by the *baizuo* reveals a perception of inadequacy, incompetence, and significant naivety. Netizens also expressed dissatisfaction and frustration with what they perceive as a lack of effectiveness and capability in handling the virus. Additionally, it is worth noting that some criticisms extend beyond the notion of incompetence to underscore a sense of naivety, indicating that, according to netizens, the *baizuo* may not be taking the virus seriously or understanding the gravity of the situation. This dual critique highlights a fundamental dissatisfaction among Chinese netizens with the perceived shortcomings and perceived lack of seriousness in the management of the pandemic by the *baizuo*. As it will be further elaborated later, these sentiments mirror the overall critical attitudes towards the West and Westerners, especially among the younger generations, whose perspectives have undergone significant shifts post-2008 and again since the outbreak of the pandemic in early 2020.

In terms of the selection of strong and explicit language, instances of netizens' antagonistic vocabulary indicate a particularly elevated level of frustration or dissatisfaction with those who resisted scientifically recommended preventive measures. While the vast majority of posts contained either implicit and sarcastic or

overt critiques of *baizuo* activity during the pandemic, it is critical to note here that expletives were also adopted in more antagonistic and heated outbursts. The derogatory term "bitch" was frequently used by netizens when criticising the ways in which Western populations failed to efficiently mitigate the spread of the virus. As one user posted, in response to the initial reaction to the delayed and inefficient response from the Danes, 'there are way too many white left bitches in Denmark, these people are simply not scared of death' (#7230320). The antagonistic and frustrated voices of such netizens is reflected in the frequent use of profanities and sometimes, though more rarely, racial slurs. For example, the vulgar term *shengmubiao* is frequently used by netizens to criticise what they see as the sanctimonious behaviour of the 'Virgin Mary bitch white leftist forces' (#5360320). "White-skinned pigs" though less common than *shengmubiao*, appeared in several Weibo posts to critique the perceived failures of the Western public's response to pandemic prevention measures.

While the use of derogatory terms further adds an emotional and negative tone to the discourse, it also reflects a strong disapproval of the perceived failure to adopt what netizens consider common-sense health practices. In this context, netizens often expressed observations and opinions regarding what they perceived as the *baizuo*'s deficiencies in taking responsibility. Netizens labelled the *baizuo* as 'selfish' (#0970820), suggesting a perception that this group prioritised their own interests over the well-being and concerns of others. While "stupidity" was commonly used as a surface-level insult, descriptors such as "selfish" and 'crooked' (#9421220) convey a more profound level of concern. This particular thread of critique, on the perceived lack of concern and consideration exhibited by the *baizuo* during a challenging period of crisis and widespread fear, questions and even scrutinises Western morality and social values. Such critical assessments of the *baizuo*'s behaviour, is indicative of netizens' discontent over what they perceive as a lack of accountability and empathy, particularly when facing a crisis that demands collective responsibility and consideration for others.

Examining the interplay between anti-*baizuo* critique and nationalist narratives during COVID-19

As people all around the world continue to grapple with the impacts of the pandemic, understanding the dynamics of online discourse and its reflection in nationalist sentiments provides valuable insights into contemporary socio-political landscapes, especially in the Chinese context. Much like during the aftermath of

Deng Xiaoping's reforms in the 1980s, China's initial triumph in preventing the spread and impacts of the virus subsequently saw a revival of Chinese nationalism, or nationalisms, underpinned by a tapestry of passionate sentiment, varying in nature and tone. Through close readings of netizens' comparisons between China and *baizuo* countries' COVID-19 management, the following analysis teases out those critiques while also weaving in the patriotic and chauvinistic strands of Chinese nationalism. While it is established that the perceptions of the 'Self' and 'Other' are utilised in shaping Chinese nationalism (Suzuki 2007), this section ultimately explores nationalist critique of *baizuo*-led failures, using public health as one critical example, in order to outline what anti-*baizuo* critique reveals about Chinese perceptions about political systems, current affairs, and world view more generally.

Significantly, netizens linked the inadequate and inefficient public reaction to the coronavirus spread with the striking contrasts between Western and Chinese sociocultural values. In order to explore the ways in which netizens express such critiques of those values, this section addresses how netizens express their rationale by focusing on the contents from a singular Weibo post, after the reversal of China's Zero Covid policy, that contains the most prevalent and significant themes of anti-*baizuo* discourse. By deconstructing sentence-by-sentence the different strands and motifs utilised by Weibo users, the following scrutinises how Chinese netizens assert comparisons and critiques of Western dominance while simultaneously countering criticisms of China in the process:

> 'While the virus was stopped from spreading in China, it was already spread around the world by the white left–wasting China's early efforts. After three years of lockdown policies, China observed that the virus was no longer as dangerous, so restrictions have been steadily lifted while continuing to prioritise saving lives. Regardless, China is slandered by white leftists in wider political discourse. They just want to stoke the flames of China's poor image so they can cover up their own wrongdoings. Do not be fooled by them. They're afraid that we will become world leaders. After our successful battle with the coronavirus, we are obviously much more qualified.' (#0581222)

First, netizens often took issue with the ways in which China had taken appropriate and effective measures in order to mitigate the spread of the virus. Pride is expressed when referring to "China's early efforts", as the

country had successfully tackled the monumental challenge of combating a virus in order to safeguard a population of nearly one and a half billion. As demonstrated by the prevalence of first-person plural pronouns in this post, netizens speak, with a certain egotism, on behalf of their fellow citizens when criticising the West for, unlike themselves, not doing so. This is further exposed by the phrasing "wasting China's early efforts" as it reflects a sense of disappointment or frustration with the perceived consequences of the global spread beyond China. The use of the word "wasting" implies a belief that China's initial efforts were not fully appreciated or had a diminished impact due to how the pandemic developed soon thereafter. This implicit assertion that the global spread of the virus was predominantly caused by the *baizuo*-led West suggests a level of blame or responsibility assigned to them, framing their actions as detrimental to China's initial efforts, and sacrifices, to limit the spread of the virus. It is important to note that there was at least initially, during the first months of 2020, a significant delay in communication from Wuhan and, arguably more crucially, Beijing in terms of broadcasting the news of the outbreak. Perhaps unsurprisingly, netizens' criticisms do not acknowledge this crucial detail in their analysis of early responses to the spread of the virus in those countries. Consequently, this commentary effectively conflates such effective management rigorous policy implementation within China with the dissemination of information beyond its borders. This tactic serves to divert attention from, or possibly conceal, previous shortcomings. While observations like these raise substantial questions about the post authors' credibility, the post demonstrates a politics of assigning blame, particularly regarding who is held responsible and for what reasons.

By accusing them of "slander", the post author accuses the *baizuo* of defaming China in wider political discourse. The user also contends that it is the aim of the *baizuo* to tarnish China's image in order to divert attention from their own wrongdoings and shortcomings in terms of policy implementation during COVID-19. Moreover, in calling to readers to not be "fooled" by the *baizuo* discourse, the user seeks to caution readers against accepting what they believe is, and perceives as, misleading information. Similarly, one user's criticism of Western media – which reported that 'our people want freedom' and that 'China should apologise for the virus' (#2890320) – positioned China as taking effective and prompt measures to control the virus, while simultaneously criticising the West, particularly its media, for what they perceived as biased reporting, laced with hypocrisies, as well as delayed and inadequate crisis responses. Consequently, such commentary suggests a distinct perspective on the global response to the pandemic, shaped by nationalistic sentiments and a perceived need to defend China's actions. This broader narrative of victimhood is particularly noteworthy

especially given how netizens often follow through with rebuttals and counterarguments to doubt and question the Western perspective. The statement that China had proved itself as being 'obviously much more qualified ' (#0581222) in leading the world by example in public health crisis and management conveys a suggestion of competition. While the user suggests that competition should not be a priority at the time, a significant proportion of the posters seemed to suggest that China was in fact doing much better than the West in handling the pandemic. Weibo posts such as this prominently exhibit a robust theme surrounding international relations and Chinese supremacy through the utilisation of "*baizuo*" as a strategic means to counter criticisms directed at China. As one demonstrated with great frustration, 'There should not be any kind of competition during this pandemic, but Westerners are so set on China failing. Is it really so important to prove that your system is right, or better than ours? And don't you think you think you should be focusing more on world security? Is that not more important? Are you really such pigs?' (#4320621). The post author questions the Western focus on competition rather than addressing the imminent threat of the virus and thus accuses the West of misplaced priorities, implicitly suggesting that the West is more concerned with proving its system's superiority than ensuring global security and health. The author expresses dismay at the apparent Western inclination to wish for China's failure rather than prioritising collaboration and addressing shared challenges, particularly those related to global security. Moreover, the use of the term "pigs" adds a strong emotional undertone, indicating a strong objection to Western society as not only being selfish but also morally objectionable, and thus likening Westerners to being less than human.

In a research paper that addresses the problematic nature of vaccine nationalism in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, Muhammad Zaheer Abbas contends that certain acts are reflective of 'self-centred political behaviour of leaving others behind' (Abbas 2020) in combatting the coronavirus. Indeed, while Abbas highlights how the championing of vaccine politics by the US facilitated the further outbreaks of cases both domestically and internationally, it is important to note that China had done very little to promote the flow of information pertaining to the origins and development of the coronavirus. Thus, in ascribing vaccine nationalism as being a predominantly Western-centric phenomenon, Abbas fails to adequately address whether China used its position to expand its influence and achieve geopolitical objectives in a time of great crisis. In other instances of comparisons between China and the rest of the world, Weibo users rallied around the sentiment that can be easily summarised by one Weibo user who wrote that, 'people all over the world have to fight the virus, we're all fighting the same fight. It's just that some countries fight well, others fight badly.'

(#9901122). Similar to the observations regarding Westerners' perceived shortcoming in handling the pandemic, the concluding statements in the user's extensive post elaborate on the idea that, irrespective of cultural distinctions, other countries could have replicated China's actions, rather than success, so long as their government and citizens acknowledged the gravity of the threat and collaborated in a unified effort. The Chinese government had, from the early stages of the outbreak, actively promoted a narrative of national unity and solidarity in the face of a common threat. "We Chinese" was a common sentiment that not only appeals to patriotism but the collective efforts necessary to combat the spread of the virus, which echoed with the population. Unity can be accredited to a number of typically Chinese attributes; the perceived success in controlling the virus contributed to a positive narrative about the Chinese government's capability and effectiveness, while the Chinese population's resilience and perseverance in accommodating the government's brutal measures also helped build a sense of shared identity and pride in the nation's ability to overcome adversity. Naturally, this was made obvious especially when references to historical narratives of resilience and overcoming challenges, such as the 2003 SARS outbreak, were invoked by some to validate their claims about the distinctly Chinese ability to 'pay more attention to viruses and know how to protect themselves' (#5090420), persevering through hardship, and triumph over such crises. By detailing the instances of China's successful management of the virus during the first two years of the pandemic, Weibo users rationalise their claims of Chinese superiority while asserting that China, or the Chinese, "are doing better" than the West (de Kloet et al. 2020).

Beyond the existing scholarship and ongoing discussions surrounding Chinese nationalism, the coronavirus marked a shift in public attitudes and perceptions of China and its position on the international stage. Though both 'biopolitical nationalism' (de Kloet et al. 2020) and 'medical nationalism' (Wang and Tao 2021:526) are valuable for analysing structural and policy-driven aspects of nationalism, the former refers to the ways in which state power intersects with public health measures and population management, shaping national identities through the regulation of bodies and health practices. The latter, on the other hand, highlights the competition among nations for access to critical medical resources, such as vaccines and treatments. Though both are certainly relevant to this thesis, 'pandemic nationalism' (Chen et al. 2023) more precisely captures the prevailing 'sense of national superiority … based on China's success in fighting the epidemic' (Wang and Tao 2021:544).

As demonstrated through this analysis of anti-*baizuo* discourse, Chinese social media users' extensive commendations of both the Chinese government and the public's responses to the pandemic underscore the connection between contemporary events, national pride, and a historical narrative of China's perceived exceptional achievements. In one post, the author outlined the success of China's initial pandemic policies and concluded with a powerful, and rather celebratory, exclamation: 'recognise the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation!' (#1810121). Implicitly targeting the West, this particular expression and emphasis on "rejuvenation" echoes enduring frustrations stemming from historical suppression and disdain toward the Chinese, reminiscent of the Century of Humiliation. China's relative success at containing the coronavirus and its spread, albeit temporary and by brutal means. The "great rejuvenation" echoes much of what is read and seen about contemporary Chinese politics, especially from state-affiliated news sources and government officials; China has persisted through many twists and turns in its contemporary history, but 'rejuvenation' echoes the rhetoric of Deng Xiaoping's reform era whence China saw gargantuan economic development and, for the first time in its history, visibly made its mark on the world stage. Thus, the findings of this study further support the argument that, while both military and economic power has been the predominant cause for national pride, in the context of the pandemic, 'the latest trigger has become efficiency in the exercise of biopower, especially vis-á-vis the 'inefficient West'.' (de Kloet et al. 2020:638). Conversely, critiques of *baizuo* in the context of the pandemic as they are explored in this thesis, underscore a widely-held belief in the success and superiority of China, coinciding with the West's decline. Most importantly, this key element of the discourse presents the success in handling the pandemic as a qualification for assuming a leadership role on the world stage.

Framing "Chinese characteristics" within anti-Western narratives during COVID-19

The anti-*baizuo* discourse, as explored during the period of the coronavirus pandemic, is demonstrably intertwined with anti-Western sentiments. While this chapter has thus far surveyed Chinese netizens' critical dialogue on the developments of COVID-19, particularly beyond China, this section delves into the synthesis of various sociocultural factors that elucidate the basis and formations of such anti-Western sentiments as discussed above. As it has been widely explored in this thesis, netizens' criticism of the West's pandemic response highlights how cultural differences shaped each society's and government's approach to public health measures. Across the posts collected, Chinese society was presented as prioritising the collective well-being

of the population and followed guidelines strictly as opposed to Western societies which, for the most part, were more concerned with the threats against their individual freedoms. In order to situate Chinese netizens' observations, the forthcoming paragraphs critically examine the perceived differences in societal priorities and "characteristics" (C. Zhang 2020b) between Chinese and Western societies during the COVID-19 pandemic and how such criticisms articulate Chinese public opinion and Self-Other perceptions.

By exploring the criticisms being made about the *baizuo*, one can also take note of and analyse what the Chinese netizens believe about themselves and their fellow countrymen. In just one example of candid self-reflection, the post author noted how their fellow Chinese netizens 'are basically Social Darwinists, indifferent to traditional society because those fundamental and "basic" issues are no longer relevant to their modern lives and believe in the survival of the fittest: It's believed that you are only miserable because you are not strong enough' (#6860520). 'Being strong enough' is indeed a common theme of critique in terms of how Chinese netizens deemed Westerners' inability to endure the significant hardships of pandemic prevention policies. In the context of such critiques of the West, netizens' criticisms of how Westerns were, unlike the Chinese and many across the Eastern cultures and societies, unable to *chi ku* (吃苦) implies the ability to withstand and persevere through challenges, or 'to bear hardships' (Lepesant 2022:64), regardless of one's inherent advantages and abilities (Wang and Byram 2011:411; see also Griffiths and Zeuthen 2015; Chen 2021). By asserting that the Chinese possess the ability to adapt and enhance their situations by enduring and overcoming adversity, netizens subtly suggest that the *baizuo* and the broader liberal West lack the fortitude to face such challenges. This reflects a critique from netizens regarding the perceived resilience and toughness of the West in the face of adversity. Conversely, when scrutinising Western public health policies during the outbreak, Chinese netizens vehemently criticised the concept of achieving 'herd immunity as soon as possible' (#6970821), deeming it highly unrealistic. This critique implies that Westerners are more inclined to take risks with herd immunity rather than adopting the ostensibly safer and responsible alternative of enforcing stringent lockdown measures, akin to China's approach. In essence, the netizens perceive the West's failure in handling the coronavirus pandemic as symptomatic of the West's unwillingness to sacrifice individual freedoms in the pursuit of public health.

Examining this facet of anti-*baizuo* discourse in particular sheds light on users' accusations of Western arrogance and highlights how it is widely seen as a significant factor contributing to the overall decline of the

West's reputation and standing as the dominant hegemony. The notion that the virus had unsurprisingly spiralled out of control beyond China's borders is embedded in a number of sociocultural critiques of the West. One user wrote that the rapid acceleration of the coronavirus' spread has 'a lot to do with the arrogance of the West' (#2750320). This suggests that the handling of the pandemic by Western countries – characterised by a sense of superiority or presumptuousness – played a significant role in the virus' swift transmission in such perceived *baizuo*-run countries. Like countless other posts in the aforementioned sections and chapter, this anti-*baizuo* perspective also implicitly encompasses criticisms of Western governments' response strategies, healthcare systems, and overall preparedness for such a global health crisis. Moreover, it implies a belief that the perceived arrogance of the West may have hindered effective containment measures or contributed to the initial underestimation of the virus's severity, thereby exacerbating its spread on a global scale. In the specific context of COVID-19, the juxtaposition of 'the arrogance of the West' (#2750320) to China and Chinese society was made far more specific as another post mentioned 'the arrogance of European and American whites' (#6371220), which touches on racial and cultural dimensions within the broader concept of arrogance.

Commenting on contrasts between the Chinese and Western approaches, one user characterises such attitudes and responses as being 'far too arrogant' (#0411220). The term "arrogant" in this context seems to convey a sense of perceived superiority or unwillingness to adopt measures that involve sacrifices for the collective good. Such a critique, a sentiment shared by many post authors, is highly critical of what they perceive as a lack of humility or adaptability in the Western approach compared to what they believe is a more compliant and sacrificial attitude in China. The statement also rejects the *baizuo* concepts of freedom and political correctness, implicating them in the alleged failure of foreign countries to manage the coronavirus effectively, ultimately suggesting a belief that these ideologies hindered an appropriate response and allowed the virus to proliferate. The user even criticises how Westerners choose to 'continue living as they did before World War II', implying that their approach signifies a reluctance to adapt to modern challenges. The post also posits China's success in managing the pandemic as a contrast to the perceived failures of other countries. It suggests that the epidemic has exposed the false prosperity of other nations, positioning China as a superior force that stands 'tall and proud above the rest of the world'. The success in managing the pandemic is presented as evidence of China's superiority and as a moment that highlights the alleged shortcomings of other nations.

State-controlled media most likely played a role in shaping the narrative surrounding COVID-19– focusing news coverage on China's successes and the West's failures, and downplaying any shortcomings, thereby mediating public opinion while simultaneously amplifying nationalist sentiment. Though it cannot be fully substantiated by the data in this research, it has been well-noted in research that the government also harnessed nationalism as a unifying force during the pandemic (Chen et al. 2023; Jaworsky and Qiaoan 2021; C. Zhang 2020a). As reflected through the close analysis of Weibo posts in this chapter, the resurgence of nationalism in China during, and potentially after, COVID-19 reflects a complex interplay of domestic and international factors, including perceptions of success, responses to external criticism, and strategic narratives promoted by the government (Chen et al. 2023; Morris et al. 2023).

National pride was thus celebrated when compared to how some Western countries failed in the face of those challenges that were posed as a result of the virus' rapid spread. Against the backdrop of current political tensions, China was subjected to heavy international scrutiny in regard to transparency, the handling of critical public health information, and 'unwavering strategy' (Mallapaty 2022:15) by which "zero covid" was accomplished. In response to such criticisms, a sentiment of defensiveness emerged, with citizens rallying around the idea of protecting the country and its reputation from attacks. Indeed, one way in which citizens and the government alike defended China's ability to persevere with the virus-curbing measures while also hosting the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. For instance, China's ability to 'host the 2022 Winter Olympics' (#2680722) demonstrated how, despite the heavy restrictions imposed, the Chinese were so confident in being able to host such a large international sporting event during a global pandemic with relative ease, despite case numbers going up among athletes' accommodation. Comments on Westerners' naivety about whether such a colossal challenge was even feasible were often mockingly dismissive, claiming that the West's trepidations were only reflective of their own insecurities which China, the netizens claimed, did not share. Moreover, criticisms of 'naïve white lefties' (#2680722) was seemingly a significant factor in the various shortcomings of Western government's approach to managing the pandemic. Netizens particularly focused on the perceived naivety in policymaking concerning the coronavirus. Some associated the elevated case numbers in the West with comparatively inadequate crisis management skills, emphasising the link between understanding and addressing the virus.

The pervasive criticism directed at the actions and behaviours of *baizuo* throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, encapsulates a comprehensive and sweeping indictment of Western society and civilisation at large. As it has already been discussed, cultural differences in risk perception, individualism, and public compliance might contribute to frustration. Chinese society, with a history of collective action and strong government interventions, might find it challenging to comprehend or accept Western approaches that emphasise individual freedoms and decentralised decision-making. Some of the commentary even went so far as to conflate such fundamental sociocultural differences with the notion that, in times of crises, individuals in the West are more likely than the Chinese to resort to selfish and immoral acts. Describing people of Western Europe and United States as having 'behaved like monsters in 2020' (#4131122), some fixated on how the pandemic revealed how Western societies were less inclined, if at all, to act cautiously with the public good in mind. In reference to the consumer chaos brought about by the masses stockpiling essential items and causing significant shortages, one user commented on how, for Chinese citizens, such shocking developments reflected the impact of sociocultural influences on social behaviours in different cultures and societies, particularly in times of crisis.

As this chapter has demonstrated, Weibo users often cite certain traits or sociocultural values, such as democracy, individualism, and political correctness, as being to blame for the demise of Western culture and its hegemonic presence and influence: 'The white leftists in Europe may really have been fooled by so many generations of democracy.' (#5090420). Similarly, criticisms often fixated on the *baizuo*'s lack of responsibility and 'selfishness' (#0970820) in their actions and how they failed to consider the feelings and needs of others, especially during such a crisis and public fear. Moreover, they especially criticised how Westerners 'ignore or bury their heads in the sand' when it came to making difficult decisions, as they perceived was the case in Western government's response to the outbreak (#4131122). For instance, claiming that 'poor management' and 'short-sighted' political interests has caused the liberal West to fall as 'slaves of extreme liberalism' (#3160422) and will subsequently become 'extremely detrimental to the long-term interests of mankind' (#2790521). In one medium-length Weibo post, the author details how, during the pandemic, the Western system of order revealed how it possessed a lack of global solidarity and cooperation in the face of a common threat. While maintaining that China won the so-called competition of pandemic control and mitigation, the author distinguishes pandemic *and* reactive nationalism from the Western approach of blaming, criticising, and condemning China for its alleged role in creating the pandemic:

> ‘Pandemic prevention has always been regarded as a competition for national strength, and this competition of the two systems is ongoing. But the West is focused on fighting against China, rather than the virus itself. Don’t they realise that there is no competition against each other? We all need to win. And yet, the Westerners are full of hope that China will fail’ (#4320621).

Then, in noting how the Chinese have ‘always believed that the coronavirus was a common crisis for all mankind [that] required the cooperation of all countries’, the post author contended that the ‘white-skinned pigs’, who ‘hope that China will fail so as to prove that their system is right or better’, do not share the same hopes of a ‘shared future for mankind’. These comments reveal deep frustrations with the current state of the Western-led global order and the ongoing ridicule and humiliation of the Chinese system. While others’ commentary on the anti-*baizuo* discourse have argued that this disillusionment is populist in nature (C. Zhang 2020b), the findings here suggest that these frustrations are also grounded in philosophical difference, a reflection of contrasting the collectively-oriented self with the allegedly self-centred and competitive West. Though these are the opinions of Chinese social media users and are not wholly reflective of all popular attitudes, such sentiments are reflected across the posts gathered in this study and previous research. Such commentary and depictions of the West during COVID-19 reflect how Chinese netizens perceive and rationalise why the liberal West acted how it did during such a calamitous public health crisis. As one user reasoned, people across North America and Western Europe ‘have been eroded by “extreme human rights” and “extreme liberalism”’ while their governments’ so-called ‘white-left behaviour has directly caused the current tragic situation [of the pandemic]’ (#8770320). Describing the US as a ‘mouldy country’ (#6970821), deteriorating at its core due to what appears to be inherent flaws, one user pointed out the significance of essential sociocultural values and norms. They highlighted how these elements played a crucial role in facilitating China’s relative successes, ranging from stringent prevention policies to cooperative and receptive public responses.

While the decline of the Western liberal order has been a longstanding topic of scholarly debate, its significance has surged in recent online discussions, particularly in light of contemporary developments. This trend is particularly pronounced among Chinese nationalists, who have rallied around President Xi’s invocation of Mao’s aphorism heralding, *dongsheng xijiang* (东升西降), meaning ‘the rise of the East and the decline of the

West' (Rudd 2022), as a symbolic representation of China's ascendance over the United States. This phrase has been embraced by the Chinese Communist Party as a mantra 'to be studied and believed by every Party member across the nation' (Yu 2021). The nationalist fervour encapsulated by this sentiment reverberates throughout various online discussions, including the anti-*baizuo* discourse examined in this chapter (see also T. C. Chen 2022). Kaiser Kuo (2018a) argues that the point of inflection for the rise of China and the fall of the West is after 2008, 'when one of the great symbolic moments of China's rise, the Beijing Summer Olympics, came right before one of the great symbolic moments in the West's (possible) "decline," the collapse of Lehman Brothers, which made plain the fact of the Global Financial Crisis'. Among the many instances where users cited examples of Western-led atrocities and failures, one post focused on how the US Democratic Party, despite presenting itself as the morally upright of the two major parties, was accused of 'ruining Afghanistan' (#3950821). Certainly, such commentary did not liken or directly compare the violations of those events to the pandemic. However, it is worth noting that netizens made references to those historical upheavals to provide context and rationale for why they believed the West, and the image of Western hegemony, should undergo scrutiny and examination.

While Chinese netizens also cited a number of other events and global conflicts, many of which were incited by or involved the United States, the emergence of the coronavirus marked a notable change in antagonistic attitudes. Given the geopolitical tensions between the two nations in particular as well as the fact that the pandemic posed a great threat to the global population, the progression of the pandemic significantly fuelled the momentum of anti-Western sentiments. As one user wrote, 'the coronavirus has pierced many of the West's lies with a single blow, especially the delusions of white left politicians' (#4840320). The notion that the coronavirus was simply a catalyst – the last straw on the camel's back – for the decline of the West, specifically the West's leadership on the international stage, is reflected in the metaphoric 'blow' to the reputation of the West. Statements such as 'the West's lies' and 'delusions of white left politicians' indicate the escalation of Western global leadership's failures, which, after prolonged scrutiny, have become undeniably apparent. For Chinese netizens, these failures are attributed to the leadership influenced by *baizuo* ideology which is deemed as being prevalent across much of the Western world. Thus, while amplifying China's achievements, it was also notable that much of this pride also came with some defensiveness, given that the Chinese government was widely being criticised for its poor communication and transparency with the rest of the world.

Such comparisons of governance models between China and the West suggest that within certain circles, there is a widely held belief that the democratic principles embraced by Western nations are intrinsically flawed or ineffective in addressing such challenges, particularly in comparison to China's approach in managing the outbreak. The emphasis on political disparities underscores the contrasting philosophies and systems of governance between China – which is often characterised as having a centralised and authoritative approach – and the Western world, where democratic principles of preference and choice are deemed imperative. The statement, 'Westerners live in their own world. The West will die as a result of anti-intellectualism, narrow-mindedness, prejudice, populism, and white leftism' (#4670520), encapsulates the sentiment that Western societies are at risk of decline due to a combination of factors which netizens perceive as *baizuo*. In essence, such sentiments underscore a broader narrative within the discourse, wherein sociocultural values and political structures in the West are not only critiqued but also, while marking a significant divergence from the perceived success of China's approach, attributed with the downfall of Western society. The disparagement of democracy, as articulated in such critiques, shapes Chinese perceptions of political ideologies, and plays a role in discussions about the comparative success or failure of different governance models in navigating crises especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. This perspective is recurrent in countless posts and is, consequently, a central theme within this discourse.

Netizens' precise targeting of Democratic-leaning and -affiliated groups and individuals in these Weibo posts bear incredible significance with Zhang's (2020b) observations about the increased presence of "right-wing populism with Chinese characteristics". Zhang presents "Chinese characteristics" through 'the Chinese self-image' of being 'pragmatic, realistic' and being 'rightly focused on economic growth and social stability' (C. Zhang 2020b:101). References to "Chinese characteristics" were often employed to raise questions like 'why can't European and American countries keep control [of the pandemic]?' (#3141122). While some expressed frustration and a lack of understanding, others confidently asserted why they believed China succeeded in mitigating the spread of the virus:

> 'Seeing the widespread response to compulsory vaccination and wearing masks in public spaces, the white left and the white right in the United States have actually joined forces for once. Together, you

> can see from this that such inclinations are actually excuses and that the real problems are two-fold: not accepting science and not assuming responsibilities to society.' (#2730821)

While numerous posts shared similar sentiments, this succinctly captures the essence of netizens' criticisms of the West's inadequate responses to the public health crisis. The widely held contention – by those in the East and West alike – that Western countries' struggle to control the spread of the virus was exacerbated by Westerners' ignorance and reluctance to preventative measures. Through their criticism of Westerners' obsession with concepts like freedom, Chinese netizens demonstrate how they fundamentally disagree with such social norms and individualist ways of thinking. As it has been widely observed, Chinese culture – like many of its other East and Southeast Asian counterparts – generally 'emphasizes collectivism' and 'voluntary compliance', which enables societal cooperation with 'stringent policy instruments' (An and Tang 2020:791). As it appeared in eighteen different posts, netizens' particular focus on "freedom" and "individual freedom", aligns with how many scholars have attributed the relative success of the Chinese, and some of their likeminded neighbouring countries, was due to the ways in which such 'culture governs social behavior' (An and Tang 2020:791). While making similar comparisons, one noteworthy post goes as far as predicting the imminent collapse of the United States, asserting, 'this white left country is about to end' (#6150220). Here, the use of the term "*baizuo*" reflects a profound conviction among some netizens that Western nations, particularly the United States, are on the brink of collapse due to what they perceive as inherent flaws associated with certain socio-political ideologies:

> 'This pandemic has confirmed what we've known all this time – China has taught the whole world a lesson about freedom and discipline, individualism, and collectivism. We have, for a long time, felt that the Western white leftists pay far too much attention to individual feelings and in doing so are incapable of forming cohesion and efficiency. But one's freedom will always come at the cost of another's.' (#1320320)

This statement reflects a critical perspective on the different responses to the pandemic, particularly contrasting the approaches of China and the West. By claiming that the pandemic has highlighted China's ability to impart lessons in moral and social codes, there is an implication that China's approach, characterised by discipline

and collectivism, has been more effective compared to what is perceived as individualistic and fragmented responses in the West. The commentary critiques what the Weibo post presents as an excessive focus on the individual's feelings, among the *baizuo* in particular, suggesting that this preoccupation undermines cohesion and efficiency. This criticism aligns with a broader narrative in some quarters that individualism, particularly in Western contexts, can hinder collective action and effectiveness in crisis management. In another post, the author critically analyses Western responses to the pandemic, highlighting inconsistencies and difficulties in understanding 'American logic' (#4921121). The post argues that democracy and principles of freedom have led to divergent behaviours, including protests and disruptions in industries. Despite some praise for government assistance, the post criticises ambiguous US public health policies during the pandemic peak, particularly the prioritisation of economic growth over epidemic prevention and saving lives. Additionally, the rhetorical question 'prevention or protest?' (#4921121) serves as a critique of the perceived inconsistency in Western liberal approaches to the pandemic. The assertion that 'one's freedom will always come at the cost of another's'' (#1320320) also implies a tension between individual freedoms and the collective good, suggesting that individualistic approaches may lead to societal harm, as individual freedoms may infringe upon the rights and well-being of others. Ultimately, by challenging the idea of absolute individual freedom, this contradiction underscores a perceived hypocrisy within Western societies, wherein the pursuit of individual freedoms may ultimately compromise the well-being of the collective.

Such perceptions of inconsistency and general inadequacies of Western governance are reflective of how netizens deem it a characteristic feature, as it suggests that ideological and political inclinations have greatly impeded their capacity to take prompt and effective action in managing the pandemic and related challenges. Conceivably, in the eyes of some netizens, it might be argued that the Western propensity for boasting significantly lacks substantiation, considering that Western society has not displayed significant merit in recent years. The notion of Western hypocrisy is thus particularly prominent in the anti-*baizuo* discourse, given that netizens express a distinct irritation with the perceived self-righteousness of Western governments, politicians, and individuals who assert superiority and presume to dictate the actions of others.

Such commentary suggests a desire to counter Western hegemony – one that is shared with other leading powers, like India – challenging the narrative that positions it as an unblemished champion of freedom and leadership (Duggan et al. 2022). Scholarly discussions on anti-Western sentiments have broadly addressed

these concerns from various perspectives and, like these Chinese netizens, underscore a call for a more nuanced and objective perspective on the West's actions and their global repercussions. Indeed, as previous sections in this chapter have detailed, the theme of hygiene and public health emerges as a significant measure of China's perceived superiority. In this narrative, China is portrayed as exemplifying a higher standard of hygiene and disease prevention measures compared to the West, despite the allegations surrounding the virus' origins. This perception underscores a broader narrative wherein China is depicted as more proactive and effective in managing public health crises, thereby bolstering its image as a responsible global actor– something that the West has allegedly chosen not to acknowledge and praise due to the political climate. Additionally, by invoking past instances of perceived Western failures, netizens aimed to establish a broader narrative that underscored the importance of scrutinising the West in the context of the ongoing global challenges, such as the pandemic. For these netizens, their criticisms bear frustration over how the West, despite being implicated in countless global issues and conflicts, continue to be celebrated as the exemplar of freedom and leadership. This frustration emanates from a sense that the West's failures and shortcomings are overlooked or downplayed, while its status as the global leader is upheld (Jaworsky and Qiaoan 2021). Though reflecting on COVID-19, netizens also commented more broadly on how American interventionism, particularly in international affairs, appeared hypocritical and ironic given their perceived inadequacies in handling countless domestic and international crises.

Conclusion

While Chapter 4 examined who Chinese netizens explicitly name and identify or consider as being *baizuo*, this chapter has focused on how the term is used in critiques of the West's COVID-19 response. The first two sections explore netizens' criticism of general and institutional failures, with the first focusing on government-level shortcomings of the *baizuo*-led West, and the second on the collective failures of the broader "left-leaning" populace. Through the break-down and examination of netizens' critiques of the Western response to the pandemic, this chapter has explored how criticisms of COVID-19 policy and response in the *baizuo*-dominant West has been interpreted by Chinese netizens not only as failure but decline. Through a close examination of the historical and socio-cultural foundations of netizens' criticisms of the liberal West, the latter two sections of this chapter critically examined netizens' comparative critiques of *baizuo* ideology and behaviour and its

roots within the context of Euro-American society. While these findings reveal a complex interplay between political ideologies and public discourse surrounding pandemic management, they also offer valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of online discussions and nationalist narratives. Specifically, by delving into how netizens reflect upon and invoke historical narratives, this chapter has argued how the anti-*baizuo* criticisms bolster assertions of Chinese superiority in managing the COVID-19 pandemic. Such utilisation of historical events to justify contemporary actions not only fosters a heightened sense of national pride and unity among Chinese internet users but also signifies a broader transformation in public perceptions of China's global standing.

Ultimately, this chapter contends that the anti-*baizuo* discourse also embodies a narrative of national or even civilisation rejuvenation, cultural pride, and superiority. Such assertions arguably, as demonstrated in this chapter, extends beyond concerns of mere superpower status, and are rather focused on portraying China as a highly respectable and accomplished civilisation. These observations underscore the intricate interplay between historical memory, current events, and nationalist fervour, shaping Chinese perspectives on global affairs with significant implications for public sentiment rather than strictly top-down nationalistic narratives. Through this endeavour, this chapter not only depicted netizens' nuanced position against Western inadequacies but also offered a deeper and more intricate understanding of contemporary Chinese nationalism and public sentiment. Crucially, this research contribution deepens the understanding of the complexities surrounding the perception of Chinese superiority as it has illuminated the ways in which netizens reflect on their own successes through the lens of another's perceived failure. By exploring netizens' sense of national pride and confidence in their government, culture, and history, this chapter contributes to a broader understanding of complex and evolving dynamics of nationalism in contemporary China. Considering the implications of such attitudes on international current affairs regarding the West, the following chapter highlights the dynamic nature of Chinese society in the online public sphere, where the bottom-up discourse of netizens plays a crucial role and allows for more nuanced understandings of popular attitudes towards the West.

6. On Viral Critique: Netizen Interactions and Emotional Resonance Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

This chapter zooms in on how netizen engagement, emotional responses, and broader cultural implications intertwine to shape the political landscape online, in terms of content and impassioned expression. By analysing netizen behaviour, specifically Weibo user interactions, the first section of this chapter explores the specific mechanisms and devices that are utilised, as well as by whom, and what this reveals about anti-*baizuo* discourse and netizen culture. The second section builds upon this by examining the emotive spectrum of this netizen-led discourse and, like the former section, alludes to how public sentiment is amplified through such online dynamics. Finally, the third section ties together the poignant nature of Chinese netizen expressions to highlight the emotive complexities of cross-cultural and ideological and political conflicts in online spaces. Through exploring netizens' tactical use of digital tools to orchestrate ideological and political narratives, this chapter emphasises the complex relationship between netizen culture and politics in contemporary Chinese society particularly in relation to how such methods and devices are able to strike emotive resonance with fellow Weibo users. In other words, rather than the anti-*baizuo* discourse itself, this chapter carefully examines the types of devices and tools that are utilised to construct and spread ideological narratives to strike emotional resonance and political engagement with fellow Weibo users.

Netizen engagement, behaviour, and the dynamics of anti-*baizuo* discourse

In contemporary Chinese society, social media platforms have become critical arenas for public discourse, where netizens engage, debate, and construct narratives around contemporary issues and trending news stories. By delving into netizen interactions and comment discussions on Weibo, the examination of emoji usage, and the inclusion of screenshots in posts, it can be better understood how these digital behaviours articulate and reflect broader netizen culture. These elements, namely emojis, functions, and other features on Weibo, play a crucial role in creating and propagating anti-*baizuo* discourse. Emojis, for example, often convey nuanced emotions and sarcasm, while screenshots can capture and share specific instances of perceived *baizuo* behaviour, further fuelling discussions and reinforcing collective sentiment among users. Despite Weibo's

popularity, significance, and the global attention it has garnered among China watchers, there is relatively little scholarship that delves into the finer details of how the social media platform is structured, particularly in the context of netizen culture and user-led discourse, and the specifics of such engagement, i.e., liking, commenting, and emoji usage. By analysing netizen engagement on Weibo, particularly focusing on visual and media engagement, this chapter develops a deeper understanding of how exposure and interactions alike develop and spread anti-*baizuo* discourse on Chinese social media.

Despite emojis having a long-standing presence in social media discourse – with emoticons being the predecessor many years before the creation of emojis – their use has received sporadic attention in scholarly research. In fact, it is widely accepted that emojis are not a "new" language per se but rather, like logographic systems, 'an evolution of older visual language systems that make use of digital technology to create greater layers and nuance in asynchronous communications' (Alshenqeeti 2016:56). However, of those, many have observed how emojis play a significant role in 'demonstrating tone, intent and feelings that would normally be conveyed by non-verbal cues in personal communications but which cannot be achieved in digital messages' (Alshenqeeti 2016:56; see also Kazmi et al. 2019).

For the purposes of this thesis, it is important to distinguish between two categories of emojis: those that can be used to literally substitute words and require minimal deciphering, and those that implicitly reflect certain tones or emotions, necessitating more in-context understanding. Literal usage of emojis, such as the People's Republic of China flag, were not frequently used when voicing nationalistic sentiments. For instance, in one that was published in March 2020, the user concluded with 'I am very proud and happy to be in China right now [PRC flag]' (#8770320), having first criticised how 'the *baizuo*-behaving government' had been significantly responsible for its poor management of the spread of the coronavirus. Similarly, in the same month, another user posted 'In this wave of epidemic, China [PRC flag] has already taught the whole world a lesson about freedom and discipline, individual and collective' (#1320320). Such examples demonstrate how emojis can act as a potent medium for, or supplement in, conveying national pride and bolstering political sentiments within social media discourse. While noteworthy, the use of the flag in Weibo posts does not offer particularly deep insights into the anti-*baizuo* discourse, bar the comparative and sometimes nationalistic nature of such sentiments.

It has been noted by scholars that the usage of emojis, as a form of coded information, can either 'clarify or confuse the reader, because they indicate presence of emotion but absence of the individual' which is needed to provide the necessary context of the message' (Alshenqeeti 2016:59). In one study, the authors analysed the use of emojis among almost 4 million active smartphone users from 212 countries over a month and demonstrated that the categories and frequencies of emojis used by these users reveal significant cultural differences aligned with Hofstede's cultural dimensions model (Lu et al. 2016). Despite some cultural differences in emoji usage, it is widely believed that 'their increasing ubiquity around the world suggests that they may be a way to avoid, or at least reduce, cross-culture misunderstanding' (Alshenqeeti 2016:64). Within the data set collected, the use of facial emojis, or "smileys"– primarily to represent certain emotions or facial expressions – are certainly among the most prevalent as they are utilised to convey tone or emotion. The example of the so-called 'laughing so hard I am crying' – or 'face with tears' – emoji (Danesi 2016:14), is widely deemed as one of the most universally understood emojis. While the use of the "face with tears" emoji is widely used to convey the user's genuine laughter about something that they find humorous, it is also common that it is used when emphasising something that they found absurd or questionable. For example, in one post liked by 26 users, the author stated that:

> 'The elderly and middle-aged Republicans are the biggest anti-vaxxers, and the United States refuses to impose compulsory measures. So, the people who need vaccinations the most are the very ones who reject it most– they would rather die than be vaccinated [face with tears]' (#2450422).

Indeed, the notion of *si ye bu da* (死也不打), meaning that 'they would rather die than be vaccinated', is indicative of how these netizens have made sense of the conspiracy theory-led discourse on anti-vaccination culture, particularly among America's extreme right wing. However, the use of the "face with tears" emoji further adds a layer of irony and disbelief, and highlights netizens' astonishment and mockery towards the perceived irrationality of the anti-vaccination stance held by this demographic. Equally, the use of the standard "smiley face" emoji in the post was employed sarcastically, highlighting the antagonistic nature of the commentary. Similarly, the post "What a bunch of disgusting [smiley] bastards" (#6400323) includes the smiley face to add a layer of sarcasm, underscoring the user's contempt and reinforcing their critical stance toward the subject of their comment. By incorporating a seemingly positive emoji into a derogatory context,

the user effectively accentuated their disdain and mockery. This strategy employs irony to underscore the user's critical stance, using the emoji not to convey genuine positivity but rather to heighten the sarcasm or ridicule aimed at the subject of their comment. This juxtaposition of a positive symbol within a negative or mocking statement serves to intensify the message's impact, adding a layer of subtlety and complexity to their expression of discontent or criticism.

Similarly, the "sigh" emoji, depicting exhalation, was used to portray a sense of exhaustion or defeat. By incorporating this emoji, users succinctly convey more complex sentiments that might otherwise require a more elaborate explanation, thus enhancing the expressiveness and relatability of their messages, in an effort to appeal to followers and readers. For instance, in one post, the author commented on the accelerating spread of the coronavirus by using a metaphor: 'This is a real holy land for raising poisonous animals. Rabbits will have to be wary of it in the next few years [sigh]' (#6970821). Other emojis, like the "thinking face," are often used to represent contemplation or puzzlement. Generally, the 'conventionalized posture' is used to indicate that someone is contemplating or questioning something, expressing doubt, or simply thinking '*Hmm*' in a casual way (Morras and Barcelona 2023:291). More critically, it conveys a sense of curiosity or scepticism and also invites others to engage in deeper reflection or discussion as it allows users to indicate that they are in the midst of deliberation or trying to make sense of a situation, thus enriching the dialogue by adding a layer of introspective or critical thinking. For instance, one user posted, 'Bootlicking *wanwan* media keeps talking about the C-17 and how powerful American technology is [thinking face]' (#3950821). Here, the "thinking face" emoji is used here to convey scepticism and slight sarcasm, questioning both Taiwanese media's portrayal of the US senators' visit to Taiwan and the glorification of American military technology. Coupled with the use of "*wanwan*" (湾湾) – an internet term of endearment for Taiwan – the emoji usage underscores a critical perspective, hinting at a deeper cynicism about such media narratives and inviting others to reflect, and agree or support their take, on the political complexities and power dynamics in US-Taiwan relations.

The use of the "raised fist" emoji is widely understood as conveying a sense of camaraderie surrounding empowerment, protest, or resistance. Though only used in two different posts, its use was in the context of rallying support for fellow Chinese, but specifically of the diaspora. In one post focusing on the Chinese community's resilience in Italy amid the initial outbreak, the author preached in a rather gung-ho tone: 'This country has allowed the virus to spread like this. It's not fair, because even the most responsible people have suffered [fist]' (#8340320). The use of the emoji in this context conveys a sense of defiance and solidarity,

in order to emphasise the Italian Chinese community's determination to endure despite the adverse circumstances. The author's assertive tone and choice of words highlight a strong sense of injustice and frustration towards the handling of the outbreak, while the "fist" emoji further builds upon this call for unity and collective strength in the face of perceived governmental failures.

Overall, the evidence suggests that emojis serve as integral tools in digital communication, enhancing the expressive range of text-based messages by conveying nuances of tone, emotion, and intent. As their usage continues to proliferate globally, emojis remain a dynamic component of digital communication, continually evolving to reflect and shape social norms, cultural expressions, and interpersonal interactions in the digital age (see Peuravaara 2021). These findings have demonstrated how certain emojis, particularly "smileys", serve as potent tools for expressing national pride and political views, as well as strong emotions of frustration or witty sarcasm, augmenting post content with nuanced emotional cues that transcend the barriers of the Chinese language.

As this section seeks to further build upon Tim Highfield and Tama Leaver's (2016) rallying call for more research into visual social media content and practice, another element that is worth considering is the use of screenshots in Weibo posts. Indeed, analysing the prevalence and context of such visual social media content (see Highfield and Leaver 2016) can potentially offer deeper insights into how Weibo users consume, interpret, and propagate news and information across cultural and geopolitical boundaries, which is a crucial component of understanding Chinese netizen culture. For the most part, posts that contained media primarily consisted of screenshots of Chinese news stories, often from verified "Blue V" accounts (see *Figure 1*), as well as those from Western news outlets, like CNN or BBC. Such practice reflects a broader trend in digital communication where users share visual evidence or references not only to support their viewpoints, but to also highlight specific news events and, in some cases, critique such media coverage. While some authors might cite or quote from news sources, the deliberate use of screenshots and images in particular could serve multiple purposes: it provides authenticity and reliability to the information being shared, facilitates the dissemination of diverse perspectives, and engages audiences visually, making the content both informative and accessible.

Hyperlinks to posts, like screenshots and direct quotations from news articles, were also included by post authors to direct followers and readers to additional evidence validating and supporting their claims. Some posts include screenshots of graphics, tables, and statistics of COVID-19 case numbers in China and the US,

among other countries. In one post that was uploaded in April 2022 (#2450422), the author included screenshots from a Google Search, which would have been accessed via VPN due to being blocked by China's Great Firewall, depicting the most up-to-date statistics of global case numbers and of those countries with the highest, which notably did not include China on the list– widespread scepticism about the accuracy of China's reported statistics. The inclusion of these screenshots highlights the author's intent to provide validation of their claims, in the face of international scrutiny regarding China's lockdown policies and its brutal clamping down on people's freedoms. Similarly, in an effort to counter Western-led conspiracies about the origins of the coronavirus in Wuhan, one post (#4710722) presents a collage of screenshots from various Chinese and Western media outlets. The post supports and advances the theory that the new coronavirus originated from a US laboratory, claiming that Moderna, an American "*baizuo*-led" company, had prior knowledge of the virus and profited enormously from the pandemic. This defensive strategy, arguably a display of "whataboutism", exemplifies a key aspect of "reactive" pandemic nationalism (see Tan and Sayankina 2023), wherein Chinese netizens deflect international criticism by redirecting the blame onto Western entities. This deflective strategy, among others demonstrated throughout this thesis, not only neutralises negative narratives targeting China but also bolsters a collective sense of moral and cultural superiority within the national discourse. By framing the West as failing to meet its own purported standards – whether in public health, governance, or human rights – this form of reactive nationalism reinforces a defensive posture while simultaneously projecting China as a more competent and ethically superior global actor. By effectively reinforcing solidarity and pride among netizens by emphasising the inadequacies of its critics, this dynamic highlights how reactive nationalism functions not only as a protective mechanism but also as a means to assert China's evolving role as a modern power that challenges Western hegemony and positions China as ethically superior.

Though little can be said with regards to the popularity and prevalence of hashtag usage, it is worth highlighting that just under one-fifth, or 67, of all posts contained at least one hashtag. Hashtags are somewhat indicative of social media users' responses or contributions to current discourses in trending news, stories, and discussions. They also facilitate user engagement, enabling individuals to join conversations, share their views, and amplify specific narratives (see Cui and Kertész 2021). In this study, analysing hashtags provides valuable insights into the dynamics of anti-*baizuo* discourse, revealing how it is shaped, spread, and sustained in the digital realm. The strategic use of hashtags can be interpreted as seeking to contribute to and amplifying certain

narratives on the platform, making it easier for fellow users to find, follow, and engage with specific topics. Tactical hashtag usage demonstrates how Weibo users are conscious of the power of hashtags to shape and steer online conversations, leveraging them to enhance the impact of their messages and ensure they reach a broader audience. It is also worth noting the slight differences in what can be categorised as the two types of hashtag usage. On one hand, there are those that typically appear at the very beginning of a post which usually signifies a response to a news story or trending topic, as in the case of "reposts". These types of hashtags, unlike those that are inserted throughout or at the end of the post as a sign-off, typically appear at the very beginning of a post and usually indicate a reaction to a news story or trending topic, as in the case of "reposts" which are indicated by the use of an at sign ("@").

More commonly, however, some hashtags are placed towards or at the very end of the Weibo post, often adding references from popular culture that can influence the visibility and reach of the discussion. One example of the latter can be found in the use of the hashtag '#Support Shanghai#' (#1790322), which could be interpreted as serving as a rallying cry to foster a sense of community among Shanghai residents and Chinese citizens more broadly, aiming to inspire hope and solidarity during such challenging times. The strategic use of hashtags in this way may enhance the visibility of the post and align individual efforts with a collective goal or shared opinion. Other notable examples include '#Weibo News Blogger#' (#9330422) which was used after signing off a post to signify the type of poster the author was. Other examples of hashtags that were not included at the very beginning of the post, such as '#Most Confusing Behaviour Award#' (#6480620), were used for adding either humour, sarcasm, or additional commentary. These strategically placed hashtags can shift the tone of the post, draw attention to specific points, and engage readers in a more dynamic and multifaceted way. By doing so, they acquire the ability to influence the visibility and reach of the discussion, demonstrating how hashtags can be employed to amplify and diversify narratives within the platform.

Hashtags thus play a central role in understanding and analysing online discourse, particularly in the context of anti-*baizuo* sentiment during the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining hashtags, researchers can identify the key areas of engagement and the central themes that resonate within this discourse. Hashtags serve as a means to categorise and connect discussions, making it easier to track the spread and evolution of anti-*baizuo* sentiments across different social media platforms. Given the range of hashtag topics and types and the fact that they are included or referenced in posts to engage users and hashtag followers, it is worth addressing what those different and most significant areas for engagement are in this specific context of observing the

West during COVID-19. After analysing each hashtag and delving into the trending posts on individual hashtag pages, it was found that three distinct categories of hashtag were of interest and are classified, for the sake of clarity, as follows:

1. COVID-19 policies and measures
2. Impacts of measures and public responses to COVID-19 in the West
3. Current affairs and other major non-domestic news

The first category includes hashtags that primarily focus on government responses to COVID-19, both regarding specific countries in the West as well as the global state of affairs at the time, reflecting a mix of critical and supportive discourse. Within this, some hashtags highlight the flaws of leadership decisions and public appeals related to pandemic measures, often scrutinising, or emphasising the gravity of the situation. For example, '#The French President Says He Will Not Close The France-Italy Border Due To COVID-19#' (#3120220) focuses on President Emmanuel Macron's decision which, once the Weibo user clicks into the hashtag, reveals countless posts debating over the potential consequences of Macron's policies. While the hashtag itself does not explicitly indicate an opinion, like other similar examples, it signals the Chinese public's interest in and discourse surrounding the effectiveness and implications of his decision not to close the border amidst the pandemic.

Others, such as '#All White House Employees Required To Wear Full Protective Gear#' (#4611020) and '#Scientific Fighting Against The Pandemic#' (#5500820) underscore the strict safety protocols and scientific approaches to combating the virus. Additionally, hashtags like '#Melbourne To Implement Curfew#' (#1310820) and '#Berlin Protest Against Preventative Measures#' (#0160820), point to specific examples of localised enforcement and general public reactions to lockdowns and curfews in Western countries, as seen in the cases of Australia and Germany. Unlike some of the more critically toned hashtags, the hashtag '#Merkel Tearfully Pleads With Germans To Follow Quarantine Rules#' (#0831220) emphasises the emotional and urgent nature of the former Chancellor Angela Merkel's appeal, reflecting the serious tone leaders have taken to stress the importance of adherence to health guidelines. Hashtags of this nature draw attention to the critical actions and emotional appeals made by Western leaders during the pandemic, fostering discussions that

scrutinise their decisions and underscore the weight of the ongoing crisis. However, by focusing on Merkel's emotional plea, the hashtag also underscores the distress and difficulty she faced in managing the crisis and addressing the German population. Similarly, the hashtag '#Biden Begs American Citizens To Wear Masks#' (#0511220), highlighted the complexities and challenges faced by the Biden administration in managing and enforcing mask mandates. Rather than solely attributing blame, many of the discussions under this hashtag showcased the administration's difficulties in persuading the American public to comply with health guidelines. One poster, for instance, illustrated this struggle, demonstrating the nuanced conversation within this particular hashtag:

> 'It is worth noting that Biden does actually believe in and respect science. But California has been really messed up by the white left, and I really hope that he doesn't continue with his current policies or lack thereof. Biden is a rather traditional Democrat, so he doesn't really agree with the white lefties … but he does have to compromise with them.' (#7601120)

Some hashtags that appeared in anti-*baizuo* Weibo posts were about domestic concerns and policies rather than those in the West, though these were often due to the individual posts' far more comparative nature. For instance, the hashtag '#Entire Shanghai Pudong Region Closed Off#' (#9330422), is what might be deemed as a widely popular hashtag among Weibo users who, at the time, used the platform to spread information, as well as misinformation, about the state of the pandemic and the updates from the news (Wang and Tao 2021; Yan 2020). Indeed, during this period, hashtags of such a nature served as a way for users to share and access real-time information about the lockdown measures, specifically in Shanghai's Pudong region, reflecting the collective effort to keep the public informed. Relatedly, one post included the hashtag '#China Will Achieve Zero COVID This Month#' (#0411220), which is indicative of public Chinese confidence in achieving zero COVID-19 cases. The use of this hashtag in particular not only underscores the ambitious goal set by Chinese authorities but also showcases a mix of regional perspectives on the pandemic. By using this hashtag, the user highlights what at the time was an incredibly optimistic outlook and determination prevalent in China, while the content of the post that followed contrasted that Chinese pride with the scepticism and varied responses observed in other regions.

The second category of hashtags found in the dataset might be best described as focusing on the impacts and incidents of COVID-19 in the West encompasses both general statements and specific news headlines. With regards to the former, highly popular '#America's Epidemic#' (#8950620) serves as a broad critique of the situation in the United States, and its widespread use can be seen as discussing the widespread impact of the pandemic across the country. Some hashtags were far more specific than other generic topics of interest and were far more fixated on particular breaking news stories in the West. These hashtags highlight instances of COVID-19-related behaviours or events that garnered attention on Weibo, among other social media platforms. The popularity of these hashtags, evident from their statistics, indicates that Chinese netizens are notably interested in specific trending news stories in the West:

Figure 1

Post ID number	Hashtag	Number of readers (million)	Number of discussion threads	Hashtag owner	Number of users posting hashtag
#8950620	#British People Ignore Quarantine And Flock To Beaches#	30.6	2228	World Wide Web *(Blue V)*	356
#2830821	'#American Primary School Teacher Took Off Mask And Spread The Virus#	170	3128	China News Network *(Blue V)*	553
#8080320	#Europe's COVID-19 deaths exceed Twenty Thousand#	1.5	253	Sina News *(Blue V)*	30
#6560320	#Belgium COVID Cases Reach Ten Thousand#	83.9	3479	People's Daily *(Blue V)*	959

Figure 1 presents a small selection of the most popular trending hashtags found in the anti-*baizuo* posts collected for this study, reflecting the discourse surrounding COVID-19 on Weibo. The table also provides details about the "hashtag owner," which refers to the account name and its verification type—all categorised as "Blue V". These hashtags are easily verifiable due to their popularity and the fact that they were created by high-profile accounts, so they do not require anonymisation. These hashtags, as indicated by the volume of posts and the number of readers engaging with them, show that users predominantly engaged in anti-*baizuo* commentary are focused on, or at the very least highly concerned about, the swift and alarming spread of the virus in Western countries.

Naturally, Chinese netizens who are anti-*baizuo*, or those who have displayed critical perceptions of Western liberal values, likely find such scenarios and current affairs frustrating and thus create or interact with these hashtags so as to reinforce stereotypes or negative perceptions they hold about Western countries. At first glance of these hashtags, instances of British people ignoring quarantine measures and holidaying on the beaches of Brighton, an American high school teacher allegedly spreading the virus, and the rapid spread of the virus in still-open restaurants were seen by netizens as evidence of Western governments and Westerners' irresponsibility or lack of discipline in handling the pandemic. This frustration may be further compounded by the rising case numbers across many Western countries, like Belgium, which could be interpreted as examples of Western society's failure to effectively contain the virus. For these Chinese netizens, as explored in greater detail in Chapter 5, these instances arguably could be seen as validating their beliefs about the perceived superiority of Chinese governance and societal discipline in managing crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. Among other examples, this in particular is concisely encapsulated in one post:

> '#Around 60% of Americans have been infected with the new coronavirus# This trending hashtag nicely showcases our superiority. But, first, let me talk about the situation here in China as well as the rest of the West. …' (#2450422)

The statement demonstrates a discourse that underscores a perceived superiority, particularly in the framing of the global health crisis. This indicates a rhetorical strategy of positioning the speaker within a global discourse, while subtly highlighting the dominant role of the United States in the pandemic narrative. Through this, the speaker speaks on both national pride and broader international concerns, reflecting a complex interplay of identity, power, and global interconnectedness. By focusing on the rhetorical strategies of these posts, it becomes evident how national pride and moral superiority are asserted, not just in response to the pandemic but also within the broader context of geopolitical competition. Such examples demonstrate how Chinese netizens use social media to express collective identity and reshape perceptions of China's global role. Subsequently, and as will be later discussed, heightened engagement and reposting of such content serves to reinforce and propagate these beliefs within their online communities, creating a feedback loop that strengthens their critical stance towards Western countries and further solidifies their nationalistic narrative and

perspectives. In doing so, these findings demonstrate how Chinese netizens utilise social media to reshape perceptions of China's global role and, as explored in Chapter 5, positioning the country as a moral global leader. The heightened engagement and reposting of such content reinforced these narratives within online spaces, creating a feedback loop that solidified critical stances towards Western countries and strengthened nationalistic perspectives.

The third and less directly relevant category of hashtags employed by Weibo users in this anti-*baizuo* discourse can be loosely defined as focusing on global current affairs and other major news. Often, through the usage of hashtags, or citing news stories, Chinese netizens engage with the arguments that the poor decision-making and shortcomings of Western societies reflect deeper issues of inconsistency, hypocrisy, and failure to protect individual freedoms. Examples of this include the war in Ukraine (#7471120; #9341022), as well as mentions of contemporary political developments in the US which were used to further leverage arguments about the *baizuo*. For instance, one post included '#American Supreme Court Strikes Down Rights For Abortion#' (#2900622), which highlighted the controversial decision of overturning Roe v. Wade in June 2022. Since the use of the hashtag can also be understood as a response, while the author's frustrated response was indeed directed at this controversial topic, it is also important to note that the user used it as an entry point to criticise what they deemed as fundamental flaws in Western societies. By focusing on the American Supreme Court's decision to strike down abortion rights, the user was not merely commenting on a single issue but leveraging it to highlight broader systemic problems which they go on to critically examine in greater detail, with regards to COVID-19 management, policy, and response. Such criticism extends beyond the specific event to a general critique of Western governance, societal priorities, and the perceived ineffectiveness in handling various social issues compared to their own country. Such decisions and interactions allow the user to present and contribute towards the existing narrative that Western societies are fundamentally flawed and inferior to their own, reinforcing their frustrations and criticisms towards what they often perceive as the inconsistency and hypocrisy of Western liberal values, rather than those beliefs. Indeed, as discussed in detail in the previous chapter, these sentiments can indeed be seen more explicitly in the anti-*baizuo* discourse.

The analysis of hashtags in this section demonstrates their role in engaging and reinforcing the anti-*baizuo* narrative, underpinned by value judgments and evidence-based commentary, supported by visual media like screenshots and even hyperlinks, thus integrating individuals into the community and fostering informed participation in ongoing discussions. Like the use of emojis, hashtags – which are often "owned by" high-level

verified media accounts – serve as another illustration of how such political discourse arises and evolves from the grassroots, despite the prevailing issues of censorship and surveillance in China. Moreover, netizens' engagement with Blue V accounts on Weibo also reveal how netizens react to news stories about the West– using these sources of information to articulate their own critiques via the anti-*baizuo* discourse. Such interactions with news and other trending topics allow netizens to articulate their opinions and, through such engagement, further amplify their views through hashtags and hyperlinks, further embedding these sentiments within online discussions (see R. Kuo 2018; Cui and Kertész 2023).

In order to better understand Weibo user-generated content and engagement and its relevance to online civic engagement, it is also critical to consider the nature of user-to-user interactions in this research. Central to this exploration are the various verification symbols employed by Weibo, which are primarily contingent on the quantity of followers, as well as an optional "VIP membership" that requires payment (KAWO 2018). While verification is not obligatory for Weibo users, the "Yellow V" represents verified regular users with an insignificant following. While "Orange V" and "Gold V" are both considered as highly interactive, they are primarily distinguished by the number of followers the account possesses, as seen in Figure 2. The Blue V symbol – akin to the blue checkmark on X, formerly Twitter – signifies official, verified accounts of public figures, celebrities, or institutions, which are perceived by users as credible and reliable sources of information.

Figure 2: Weibo user verification types

	Individual accounts			Organisational accounts
Icon status	Yellow V	Orange V	Gold V	Organisation Certification (Blue V)
User type	Verified authors	'High-quality creators'	'Highly influential creators'	'Enterprise certification'; 'Content/IP agency certification'; 'Government certification'; 'Media accreditation'; 'Campus accreditation'; 'Public welfare certification'

(Weibo n.d.)

Appendix C provides a detailed overview of the prevalence of both verified and unverified Weibo user accounts within the dataset collected for this study. The results of the data collection found that of the 221 individual

post authors, 92 (41.6%) were not verified. The majority of Weibo post authors were therefore verified accounts and, in the dataset, were differentiated by how influential the verified users were, in terms of following and general popularity. As outlined in Appendix C, a significant portion of the Weibo post authors included in the dataset were verified users, amounting to 129 individuals, or 58.4% of the total. These verified users are further categorised based on their verification levels: 72 are "Yellow V" users, often associated with general verified status; 23 are "Orange V" users, signifying high-quality content creation; and 34 are "Gold V" users, who are widely considered to be highly influential creators with a significantly high following. Due to the constantly changing nature of Weibo, as well as conflicting sources of information to verify, there is no clear consensus on the significance or distinguishing factors related to the follower count or interaction-based criteria for different types of verified personal accounts. The breakdown of different verified Weibo post authors in this dataset, as seen in Appendix C, reflects a range of verified individuals as content creators and ultimately showcases the prominence and influence of certain authors within the collected dataset.

The notable absence of posts, and even comments, from Blue V accounts in this research study warrants consideration. While interactions from different types of verified accounts are apparent, it is worth noting that this project found no data to show that verified media outlets, businesses, or institutions interacted with the term "*baizuo*" in relation to the discourse on the coronavirus. The findings of this study show that not a single one of the posts containing the term "*baizuo*" found in this study was posted from a Blue V Weibo account. Unlike narratives often promoted or influenced by official or verified accounts, as observed in other studies conducted on Weibo (see Yi, Gina Qu, and Zhang 2022), the prevalence of discussions around the *baizuo* initiated by non-verified and verified individual accounts suggests a bottom-up emergence fuelled by individual users' sentiments and interactions. Though it is possible that high-profile, verified microbloggers or influencers – who typically hold one of the three "V" symbols – who employed the term could have been endorsed by or collaborative with state-affiliated entities, it is significant that the term does not appear in Blue V accounts. This evidence strongly implies that the term's usage and propagation are primarily grassroots-driven, reflecting the sentiments of ordinary netizens rather than being directly and explicitly influenced or directed by governmental or authoritative entities. This grassroots nature implies that discussions on *baizuo* are shaped more organically through public discourse and individual perspectives rather than being orchestrated or directed by authoritative figures or institutional agendas. Thus, the absence of Blue V accounts in *baizuo* discourse underscores its decentralised and community-driven nature within Chinese social media.

In terms of improving future research on this particular front, this might require incorporating data from Blue V accounts – as well as the user-to-user interactions in the comment sections of posts – to provide a more comprehensive analysis of Weibo's role in facilitating online civic engagement and information sharing.

Due to the precarious nature of the Chinese internet and, naturally, the government's role in censorship and surveillance, it cannot be asserted that the state has had no role or influence in shaping the discourse surrounding the term in relation to discussions on the coronavirus, as explored in this thesis. Likewise, as addressed above, users integrated hyperlinks to news articles from Chinese news media outlets, such as the "Blue V" CTTV Official News account. While this does not directly indicate state interference and influence as countless other studies have revealed (see Han 2015; Fang and Repnikova 2018), it reveals how netizens react to specific content and justify their views regarding the West and its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Collectively, many studies on the Chinese government's perception of and commentary on China's response to the global health crisis reveal that the state have been incredibly influential, not only in terms of controlling the narrative of China's success, but also in regards to how China had managed comparatively and significantly well to their Western counterparts (see King et al. 2017; Cai and Zhou 2019; Chen et al. 2023). Acknowledging this is essential for contextualising the findings and interpreting the implications of the research accurately. Moreover, such general observations underscore the need for future research to incorporate data from "Blue V" accounts – as well as the user-to-user interactions in the comment sections of posts – to provide a more comprehensive analysis of Weibo's role in facilitating online civic engagement and information sharing. Indeed, while the absence of explicit evidence from official sources is noted, it does not discount the possibility of influential individuals within the online sphere shaping the discourse surrounding terms like "*baizuo*" in relation to various socio-political contexts, including discussions on the coronavirus. Nonetheless, efforts by Weibo authors to engage with popular hashtags and news sources demonstrate how netizens' heightened engagement with trending topics and even enhance the credibility of their arguments. As it will be discussed later in this chapter, this has significant implications for the question of whether the anti-*baizuo* discourse is primarily a bottom-up phenomenon.

Like hashtags, some users contribute to existing and ongoing conversations by tagging another user using the "@" symbol, followed by the targeted user's username. Due to measures put in place to preserve anonymity, exact examples cannot be provided here. However, it can be noted that in these mentions, users often start their

commentary by directly responding to a specific post by the tagged user. For instance, in one post, a user tagged another and began their response with, 'Indeed, the intellectual capacity of the ordinary white left is directly proportional to Governor Cuomo's ability to govern New York' (#4580320). Such an example of netizen-to-netizen engagement in the public online space demonstrates how such platforms allow users to engage directly with others, adding a personal and interactive dimension to the discourse while, more critically, amplifying their views on the topics being discussed. Indeed, this is not unique to Weibo, as Feicheng Ma (2015) demonstrates in his book *Information Communication*, in which he outlines microblogging as one of five case studies. In addition to disseminating and gathering information, Ma illustrates how microblogs like Weibo extend interpersonal networks beyond private platforms, fostering follow-and-followed relationships. This dynamic is best exemplified by the phenomenon of 'the microblogger' (Ma 2015:95).

In addition to tagging other users, by effectively duplicating the same post—either by reposting or simply copy and pasting— Weibo users contribute to the amplification and dissemination of specific narratives or opinions. Reposting reinforces the original message, ensuring it reaches a broader audience and solidifying its presence in the online discourse. Furthermore, it allows users to align themselves with certain opinions or sentiments, effectively forming a collective voice that can influence public perception and opinion. This is further reflected in the vibrant comment sections under some posts. Given that there are countless comments, amounting to many more than the posts themselves, in the data collected, the following addresses multiple examples of how these follower-followed interactions on Weibo unfold. This analysis will explore the themes, arguments, and sentiments expressed in the comments, providing insight into the broader social dynamics at play. By examining specific instances of comment engagement, we can better understand the collective discourse, the influence of particular posts, and the ways in which users interact with and respond to each other on the platform.

In response to one user who lamented the West had, by October 2022, adopted a philosophy and policy of co-existence with the coronavirus, another user commented: 'This reminds me of a Weibo post I recently came across, which begged the question– "Is it the virus that will not let people go or is it that people that will not let the virus go?" I was stumped upon reading this. [shrug]' (#7461022). It is worth noting that this particular post not only received over 260 likes but also garnered around 35 comments. Furthermore, this level of engagement is less surprising given that the user holds a "Gold V" status, which indicates that they are an influential microblogger. By referencing another post, despite not explicitly pointing to the *baizuo*, this user's

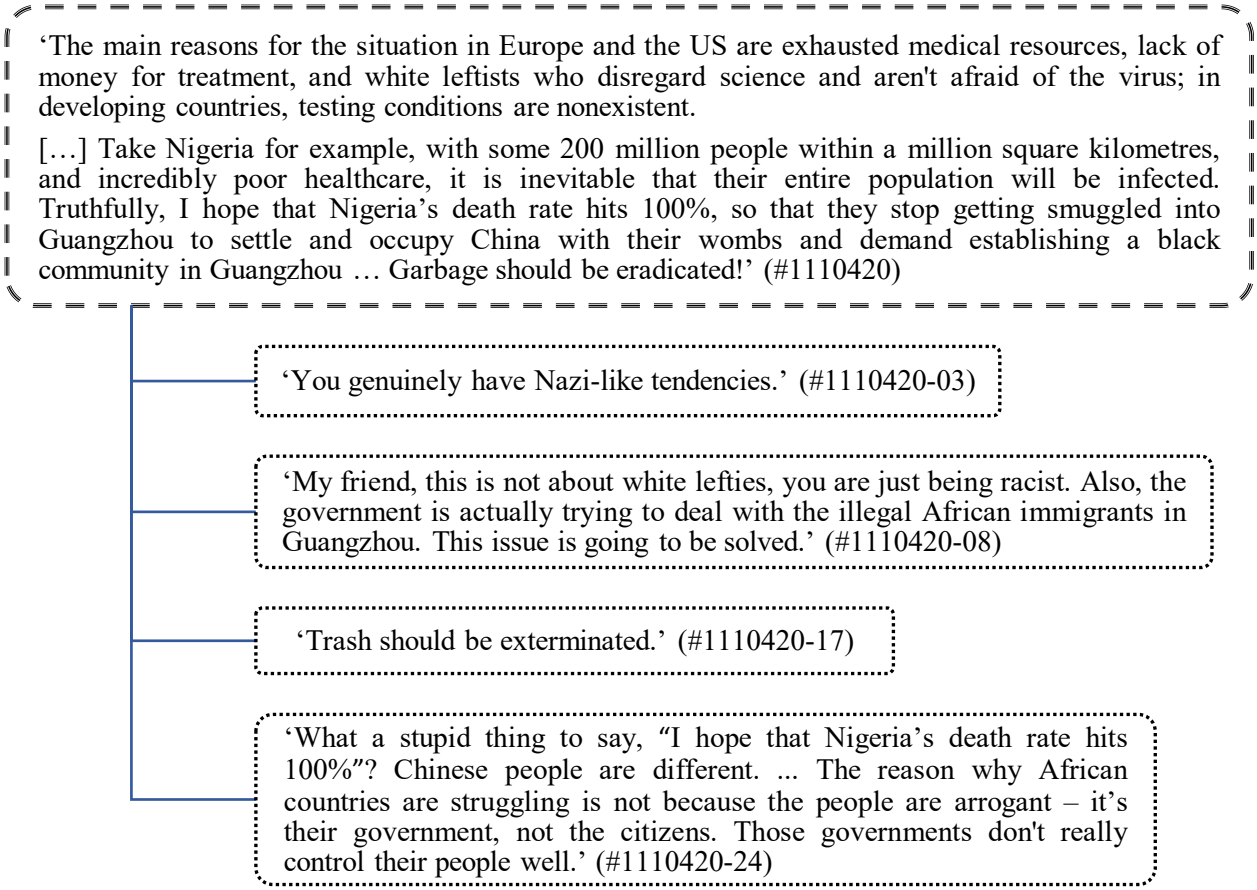
comment reflects that they have been influenced by the ongoing discourse about the Western handling of the pandemic. The comment itself also indicates a feeling of shared sentiment and a common narrative among Chinese netizens, highlighting scepticism and criticism towards Western strategies and the broader implications on societal behaviour. Further, the use of the "shrug" emoji underscores a sense of bewilderment and arguably conveys a feeling of helplessness or indifference, suggesting that the user sees the situation as both perplexing and somewhat unsurprising, given the existing narratives on the subject matter. It implies that the user finds the persistent struggle against the virus to be futile or mismanaged, reinforcing their criticism of how the West has handled the pandemic. The "shrug" emoji also adds a layer of casual dismissal to the comment, indicating that the user is not only sceptical but also somewhat resigned to the perceived ineptitude. This subtle, yet revealing, use of an emoji again demonstrates how they can effectively communicate complex emotions and attitudes, enriching the commentary with a nuanced expression of disapproval and detachment. Comments of a similar nature that agreed with the original post author often echoed these sentiments, using a mix of sarcasm, scepticism, and resigned humour to criticise the perceived failures of the West. These comments frequently employed rhetorical questions, ironic statements, and emotive language to underscore the posters' points of arguments (see Shei 2022). Collectively, these interactions not only amplify the original message but also build a communal narrative of critique and shared perspective among the users. This pattern of engagement highlights how individual posts can catalyse broader discussions and reinforce collective viewpoints within the online community.

From the dataset, comments of notable interest were classified either as explicitly mentioning and containing the word "*baizuo*" or as implicitly criticising the *baizuo* through their own rationalisations of Western society and its failures. Distinguishing these classifications is useful in understanding the frequency and context in which such criticisms of Western values and liberalism appear in online discourse. Comments of the former nature reveal how Chinese netizens interact with and contribute to anti-*baizuo* discourse by expressing strong criticism and disdain toward Western liberal values and individuals who embody them. It is very common that these include derogatory language and hyperbolic comparisons, which are indeed reflective of some of the antagonistic and demonising commentary that was explored in the previous chapter. For instance, in response to a post about actor and influential Twitter poster, Michael Rappaport – who lashed out in a video in response to Western media outlets and politicians who argued against the fact that fully vaccinated people could still

carry and transmit the virus – one user suggested, 'It's probably ideal to just kill all of the white lefties' (#2830821). Under a different post (#3050620), one user commented, 'white lefties have faulty brains', which encapsulates their disdain for the intellectual capabilities of the *baizuo*, implying that their political beliefs and actions are irrational or, at least, misguided. As explored in Chapter 5, these types of statements are part of a broader pattern of derogatory remarks that aim to undermine and discredit Western liberal values by attacking the intelligence and reasoning of those targeted. More crucially, this type of rhetoric not only reflects deep-seated prejudices but also contributes to the polarisation and intensification of anti-*baizuo* sentiment within these channels of Weibo. Under one post (#8970322), comments of a less hostile nature, however, criticised behaviour, such as 'White lefties protesting in Berlin despite rising case numbers in Berlin,' attributing this to the 'long-term brainwashing of the so-called concept of freedom in Western society'. In response to the original poster's commentary on the 'white left-isation of Hollywood' (#1881121) one user commented that 'the white left is the new coronavirus' a statement that has been reiterated many times and has appeared in multiple posts in this dataset. These comments highlight a pervasive narrative that positions Western liberal ideologies as fundamentally flawed and harmful, reflecting a broader scepticism and rejection of Western societal norms within this online public sphere.

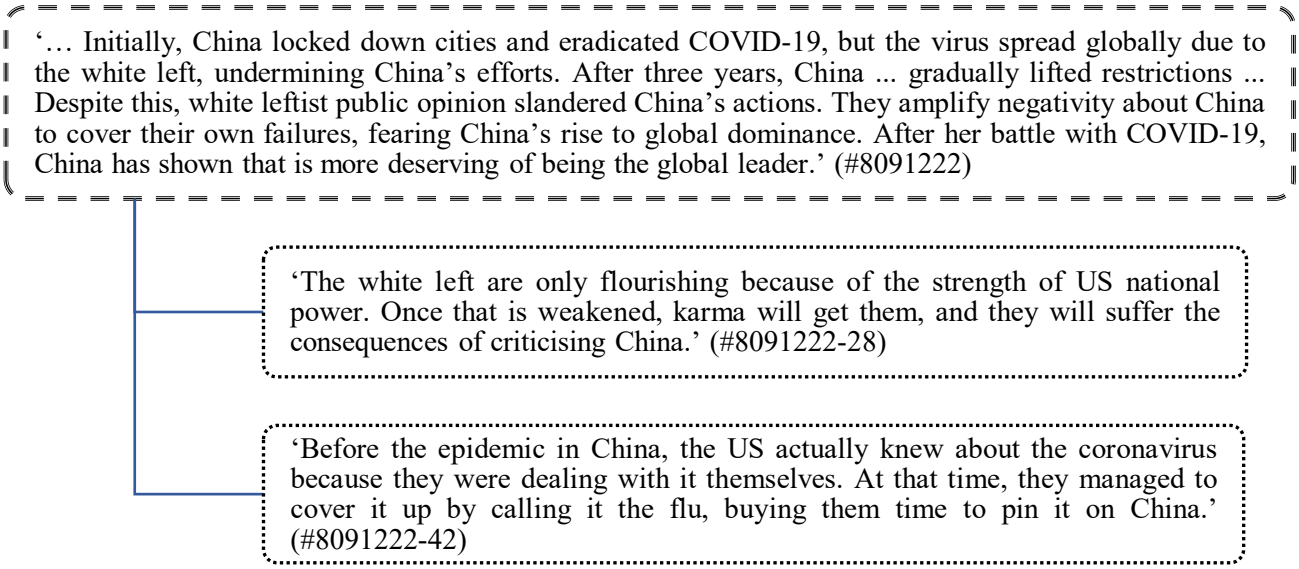
For the purposes of this research, debates and disagreements were of particular interest with regards to exploring netizen culture and the anti-*baizuo* discourse as being reflective of generally anti-Western sentiments on Chinese social media. However, after examining the comment sections of all the posts chosen for discourse analysis in this thesis, only several instances stood out with significant levels of interaction and disagreement. A notable example of significant interaction between the original poster and other Weibo users occurred in the comment section of post #1110420. In this post, the post author compared rising case numbers across countries, with a particular focus on the situation in Nigeria at the time, doing so in a highly racist and derogatory manner. Despite the post receiving over 115 likes, the comment section reflected a heated discussion among Weibo users who argued against the post author and each other. As shown in *Figure 3*, the thread highlights the heated and emotional tone these ideological clashes can reach. By scouring through the comment section, which contained 30 comments at the time of data collection, it is striking to see how Weibo users—likely followers of the original post author—engaged in arguments against each other. The thread exemplifies the heated and emotional nature of these discussions, showcasing the intensity of such ideological clashes:

Figure 3



In a different post, the author compared the West's failure and China's success in the pandemic's first two years (#8091222), asserting that the West, particularly the *baizuo*, criticised China out of fear that China would become the leading political power, especially post-COVID-19. While the post received around 760 likes and 50 comments, two comments in particular stood out for their focus on global power dynamics, the role of the *baizuo*, and accusations or rebuttals regarding conspiratory allegations:

Figure 4



While the vast majority of comments under this particular post were supportive and more light-hearted, often consisting of emojis to show additional support, these two comments stood out for their lengthy responses and agreement with the post's sentiment, as well as the fact that they built upon the original post author's argument. Numerous examples could be examined in detail here, demonstrating how netizen interactions within Weibo post comment sections are highly reflective of the ways in which the anti-*baizuo* discourse is reproduced, challenged, and disseminated into the broader Chinese online public sphere. Many comments naturally reflect and even echo critical views, especially regarding the West's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. In around a dozen comments from different Weibo posts, themes consistent with the posts collected emerge. As illustrated in the previous example, themes of defence, geopolitical rivalry, and Western decline are common in comments that explicitly mention "*baizuo*" or broadly critique Western society, government, policies, and culture. Similar to the posts, these comments often frame China and its approaches as more effective and morally superior, expressing a strong sense of moral superiority and optimism about China's rise and its potential as a global leader, in contrast to what these netizens see as the flawed Western hegemony.

The evidence supplied suggests that comment threads serve as dynamic spaces for user interaction, articulating a wide range of perspectives and often intensifying the debate. More importantly, such spaces are also rife with contestation between Weibo users, which also reveals the ways in which the anti-*baizuo* discourse is simultaneously amplified, lauded, and heavily disputed. This is further complicated by examining user account

verification statuses, as these different influential microbloggers possess a heightened platform on which they can influence how users interact with and understand the *baizuo* and contemporary Western society more broadly. Verified accounts, depending on their level of influence, contribute to shaping the discourse and guiding public opinion. Together, these elements underscore the significant role of citizen-driven dialogue in shaping public opinion and cultural narratives without direct influence from officialdom. Ultimately, this section has shed light on the complex and vibrant nature of the anti-*baizuo* discourse on Weibo and has underscored how digital tools and features are leveraged to construct and disseminate ideological narratives.

Confusion, frustration, and villainisation: the emotive spectrum of anti-*baizuo* sentiment

While it was identified in the first two chapters, to further understand the anti-*baizuo* discourse as a product of netizen culture and behaviour, this section adopts critical discourse analysis in order to rationalise the discursive strategies used by netizens to construct the dichotomy between the righteous and broadly "positive Chinese" (Gu and Ho 2023) and the "negative Westerners", represented specifically in this research as the *baizuo.* While Chapter 5 in particular focused on the specifies of such critique, the following seeks to examine the emotive and sentimental nature of the anti-*baizuo* discourse in order to situate such narratives in the context of Chinese anti-Western sentiments, exploring how emotions like confusion, frustration, and villainisation shape and are shaped by broader and historical socio-political dynamics. Indeed, much of their detailed analysis of specific events and occurrences in the West can be interpreted as attempts to rationalise what they either perceive as "Western logic" on one end of the spectrum or, more broadly, as "utter nonsense", at the other end. In unravelling the intricacies of contemporary manifestations of Chinese Westernophobia, the following utilises discourse analysis to explore the 'inherently reactive' (Brittingham 2007:148) – and particularly emotive – nature of anti-*baizuo* sentiments in relation to what this reveals in terms of understanding the contours of China's evolving relationship with the West.

While it has been briefly addressed in previous chapters, the first and arguably least antagonistic category of sentiment of netizens towards the *baizuo* can be defined as "confusion". Understanding the role of confusion, if not curiosity, allows for a deeper insight into how Chinese netizens engaged with and critiqued Western actions and policies during the pandemic. More specifically, it reveals the mechanisms through which

information is consumed, shared, and interpreted, thereby shaping sentiment and subsequently, public perception. Thus, the following aims to elucidate how initial interest can evolve into more complex emotional and ideological stances within the digital sphere (Yarchi, Baden, and Kligler-Vilenchik 2021).

Drivers of interest in social media-based phenomena have been well explored by scholars in the fields of psychology and internet research (see Thomas and Vinuales 2017; Sofyan, Shang, and Pan 2024). Given the nature of this research and inability to validate claims and arguments – primarily due to the lack of interviews – it can be somewhat deduced what the primary drivers of such interest among Chinese netizens might be. However, what can be inferred from this research, particularly in comparison to studies of a similar nature, is that there is a fundamental desire to understand and compare different cultural and political responses to global events, like the COVID-19 pandemic, and a pursuit for information that either supports or challenges their existing beliefs. Netizen culture in the Chinese context inherently includes an attraction to foreign media reports, fascination with Western societal behaviours, and the contrast between Chinese and Western governmental policies, all of which can fuel this inquisitiveness. This consideration of confusion, as a benign sentiment, helps contextualise how Chinese netizens navigate and interpret the vast array of information available on social media, ultimately shaping their attitudes and responses to the anti-*baizuo* discourse. Naturally, online content provides Chinese netizens with a window into Western societies and their underlying values. Such exposure and increased engagement with media and educational exposures often present Western liberal values in a way that is both intriguing and sometimes perplexing to Chinese audiences. In numerous Weibo posts examined in this study, netizens expressed their difficulty in comprehending the logic and decision-making of those they observed and criticised. In one post, the author's first sentence reads, 'American logic is so difficult to understand' (#4921121), then proceeds to express their confusion about US policies and political decision-making over the course of two short paragraphs. This sentiment reflects a broader pattern among Chinese netizens who use social media platforms to articulate their bewilderment and critique of Western approaches, as explored in Chapter 5, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many discursive strategies emerge from these posts. One prominent strategy is the use of direct comparison, where netizens juxtapose Chinese policies with those of Western countries to underscore such differences and rationalise what they deem and perceive as Chinese superiority. As explored in great detail in Chapter 5, discussions often emphasise China's swift and stringent measures to control the virus, contrasting them with

what is viewed as the West's inconsistent and often politicised response, in order to reinforce a narrative of Chinese competence and Western failure. Another commonly employed strategy involves the use of rhetorical questions. By posing questions like, "Why would they do that?" or "How does this make any sense?", netizens invite readers to respond to and share in their confusion and scepticism of such events. Some, however, were more specific in their questioning of such developments in Western countries. For example, in one post, after detailing the successes of relatively early policies during China's handling of the spread of coronavirus – citing extensive lockdowns, mass testing, and robust contact tracing – the author concluded with the earnest question, 'So, why can't European and American countries control it?' (#3141122). This rhetorical question serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it reinforces the perceived effectiveness and superiority of China's response by contrasting it with the perceived inadequacies of Western countries. Secondly, it expresses genuine bewilderment and frustration, questioning why similar results cannot be achieved elsewhere despite having access to comparable resources and information. Finally, it implicitly criticises the Western approach, suggesting that the failure to control the virus is due to flawed policies or a lack of political will. Such examples demonstrate how the author can invite readers to reflect on the differences between the responses and to share in the scepticism and critique of Western methods in crisis management and political leadership. This strategy not only strengthens the narrative of Chinese competence but also fosters a collective sense of pride and validation among Chinese netizens while further alienating and vilifying Western approaches. Similarly, as discussed earlier in this chapter, the use of hyperlinks to news stories and screenshots of news articles may also indicate how netizens, particularly the original post authors, respond to these news and media sources. Such interactions essentially demonstrate how Weibo users use these references to build discourse on the topic or issue with fellow users and followers.

Given that the portrayal of democratic processes, individual freedoms, and human rights issues can be starkly different from the narratives prevalent in Chinese media, this research has provided insight into how social media platforms in China still provide a platform for the facilitation and stimulation of netizen interest and engagement, despite state surveillance and censorship. It is worth noting that the state would not have any reason to censor anti-*baizuo* content as they are typically pro-China, if not pro-government. These findings are indicative that these Weibo posts and interactions on Weibo not only facilitate rich discussions and a vibrant netizen culture. Additionally, access to a wide range of viewpoints and the opportunity to engage with diverse ideological content enable netizens to develop more nuanced understandings and critiques.

Beyond the desire to make sense of or rationalise the *baizuo*, frustration, as the intensification of such attitudes, plays a significant role in shaping the intensity and direction of online discourse, reflecting deeper discontent and disillusionment with Western actions and policies during the pandemic. By unpacking frustration, we can gain insight into the underlying causes of disapproval and the ways in which this sentiment amplifies criticism and negative perceptions. Understanding frustration as a sentiment within anti-Western Chinese nationalism allows for a more nuanced conceptualisation of how emotional responses to perceived inefficacies or injustices contribute to the broader narrative of anti-*baizuo* sentiment, offering a comprehensive view of the socio-political dynamics at play within digital interactions. This highlights the role of emotional underpinnings in shaping ideological stances, like nationalism (see Eiranen 2022), and underscores how digital platforms amplify these emotions, particularly considering the provocative dynamics of user-to-user interactions and echo chambers. As seen in Chapter 5, netizens exhibit a general annoyance with Western ineffectiveness, whether that is to do with government, the public, or Western society as a whole. There is particularly notable frustration with the perceived ineffectiveness of *baizuo* policies, especially in handling issues like the COVID-19 pandemic, where they are seen as prioritising ideological purity and 'performance' over practical and scientific solutions (#4940220).

Netizens' frustration towards the *baizuo* stems from a number of long-term and short-term sensitivities. As established throughout this thesis, there is a strong sense of resentment towards the perceived moral superiority that the *baizuo* are seen to attribute to themselves. As found in this study, the *baizuo* have been criticised by Chinese netizens for their approach to public health measures and their attitudes towards those who do not conform to their standards – this is manifested in debates over mask mandates, lockdowns, and vaccination campaigns. Accusations of hypocrisy and 'double standards of white leftist Westerners' (#8790621) further fuel these antipathies. When prominent public figures, such as celebrities or politicians, advocate for strict public health measures while seemingly ignoring or flouting those same measures themselves, it reinforces the perception of a double standard. For these Weibo users, such hypocrisy majorly undermined the credibility of the *baizuo* and reinforced underlying distrust among Chinese towards those Westerners who perform and proselytise moral righteousness but in reality are highly hypocritical and generally fail to practice the values they claim to advocate, suggesting a disconnection between their rhetoric and their actions (see Jaworsky and

Qiaoan 2021). Relatedly, such sentiments are also fuelled by perceptions of growing Western influence, due to perceptions of the hegemon and its imperial tendencies. Such perceptions are often tied to concerns over the dominance of Western narratives in global discourse, which many feel undermine or grossly misrepresent Chinese culture, society, and political autonomy. As a result, there is a growing pushback against the West, and arguably by extension Western influence, seen as a form of cultural hegemony that threatens national identity. As seen in multiple posts in this thesis, these ideas are increasingly reinforced by the prevailing sentiment that, as demonstrated repeatedly in global events such as the pandemic, the West should no longer be "looked up to" (Yang et al. 2021), or seen as a moral or cultural standard to emulate. These frustrations reflect broader anxieties about globalisation and the power dynamics between East and West, where many Chinese netizens view the promotion of Western ideals as an attempt to overshadow or diminish non-Western cultures. It is widely deemed irksome by Chinese citizens, online and offline, that the West generally seeks to impose its liberal Euro-American values globally, thus disregarding local sociocultural autonomy and replacing those values with those endorsed by a hegemonic, 'bullying' power 'full of double standards' (Jaworsky and Qiaoan 2021:312; see also Harrington and Zhang 2022).

Crucially, and as reflected in the Weibo posts within the anti-*baizuo* discourse, these sentiments reflect broader tensions between Western and Chinese cultural spheres, highlighting genuine emotional concerns about such hegemony and the preservation of cultural identity in an increasingly interconnected world. Lastly, and relatedly, *baizuo* ideology is perceived as exacerbating political polarisation and creating deeper societal divisions. Collectively, these factors intensify the frustration and critique directed towards *baizuo*, highlighting the complexity of the sentiment among users. Though not always the case, frustration and antagonism are thus typical of anti-*baizuo* posts, being indicative of emotional, or emotionally charged, engagement among netizens. Reactivity, in the same sense as "reactive nationalism", is thus a critical component of how people respond defensively to perceived threats or criticisms against their cultural or national identity (Brittingham 2007; Jaworsky and Qiaoan 2021). Frustrations can therefore be argued to arise as a result of the West positioning itself as one of the primary arbiters of moral values, often overlooking or undermining the distinct cultural identities and autonomies of other nations. Thus, frustration with understanding such developments and behaviour reflect something of a shift, if not an escalation of criticism, from intrigue to heightened vexation. This is perhaps unsurprising when one considers the possibility that the perception of such Western impositions likely fosters a defensive posture among Chinese netizens, who view such behaviour and actions as an

encroachment on their cultural sovereignty and national pride. Emotive and often exclamatory commentary is thus indicative of social media users' emotional engagement with political content, particularly regarding international relations in light of current US-China tensions. Moreover, it could be argued that such vexation is connected with, if not feeding, stronger nationalistic sentiments on Chinese social media. As seen in Chapter 5, netizens exhibit a general annoyance with Western ineffectiveness, encompassing various aspects such as government policies, public behaviour, and societal norms. This frustration is often articulated through critical discourse that highlights perceived inefficiencies and failures in Western responses to significant challenges, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, netizens frequently criticise the perceived disorganised and politicised approach of Western governments in managing the crisis, contrasting it with China's swift and coordinated efforts. Moreover, the behaviour of Western publics, often depicted as reckless or irresponsible in the face of public health guidelines, further fuels this annoyance. Additionally, broader societal issues, such as economic inequality, social unrest, and cultural conflicts within Western countries, are cited as evidence of systemic ineffectiveness. Indeed, these criticisms are not merely expressions of discontent but are deeply embedded in a narrative that underscores a sense of superiority in Chinese methods and approaches, reinforcing a dichotomy between an effective, disciplined China and a flawed, disorganised West.

In Ronald Suny's (2004) paper on the role of emotions in ethnic violence, he argues that emotions are crucial to understanding political actions. He begins by discussing how national identities, although fluid, are often treated as fixed in politics and how emotions, which are essential for rational decision-making, are examined in the context of political theory and are more typically contrasted with rationality. Suny goes on to then analyse ethnic conflict as a form of collective action that is driven by emotions such as fear, hatred, rage, and resentment. Crucially, two key works – Stuart Kaufman's *Modern Hatreds* (2015) and Roger D. Petersen's *Understanding Ethnic Violence* (2002) – are reviewed in this paper to illustrate this and are indeed rather relevant to the study of anti-Western sentiments in this research study given the similar emphasis on rationality, emotion, and racial or ethnic discrimination. Netizens' expressions of frustration can be examined by exploring various discursive strategies they employ online. Unlike confusion, which stems from a lack of understanding, displays of frustration and irritation reflect how netizens critically rationalise and grapple with unclear or incomprehensible behaviours and actions. These expressions show their efforts to make sense of and respond to such events and developments, regardless of who or what they are precisely criticising, as explored in

Chapter 5. Specifically, these strategies often include the use of satire and sarcasm to mock perceived Western hypocrisy, the invocation of historical events to highlight double standards, and the deployment of nationalist rhetoric to assert cultural pride and sovereignty.

Strikingly, the use of emphatic language and exclamation marks in posts conveys a more upset and confrontational tone. Such rhetorical choices serve to amplify the intensity of the netizens' emotions, indicating a heightened level of frustration and urgency. Emphatic language, including the use of strong adjectives and forceful verbs, underscores the seriousness of their grievances and their desire to be heard. Additionally, exclamation marks punctuate their statements with a sense of immediacy and heated passion, often transforming a simple critique into a vehement declaration and call to arms or rally. These elements together not only convey the depth of their displeasure but also engage and rally others who share similar sentiments, fostering a collective sense of resistance and solidarity against the perceived injustices or impositions they are reacting to. In one post which sought to provoke, the post author declared, 'Where are the righteous white leftists who protest for the refugees? Your elderly have been given up on by the healthcare system and government! Go on, why don't you come out and try shouting for them like that will help!' (#8080320). This use of rhetorical questioning and direct confrontation is reflective of moral outrage towards the white left, in the eyes of the author, for not caring so much about their own elderly as they could or should. By juxtaposing the plight of refugees with the neglect of the elderly, the author underscores a perceived double standard, questioning and challenging the moral authority of the *baizuo* and emphasising the inconsistency and misjudgements in their advocacy. This example reveals a deep-seated frustration among Chinese netizens with what they perceive as selective and superficial morality exhibited by Western activists. The aggressive, rather than inquisitive, tone and provocative questions indicate a sense of resentment towards those who, in their view, champion distant causes while neglecting urgent issues within their own societies. This sentiment reflects a broader scepticism and distrust towards Western intentions and interventions, perceiving them as disingenuous or self-serving. Furthermore, it showcases an underlying assertion of cultural and national pride, pushing back against what they see as a condescending and imperialistic attitude from the West. The netizens' frustration is not just with specific policies or actions but with the overall moral posturing that they feel unfairly targets or disregards their own societal values and challenges. More specifically, it reveals how frustration as a heightened sentiment of confusion shapes the tone and direction of discussions on Weibo, especially as reflected in the debates and discussions under posts in the comment sections. This frustration often manifests

in a confrontational and provocative manner, where users employ rhetorical devices and emphatic language to express their discontent. In fact, it can be observed within comment sections, as outlined in the above section, that Weibo user-to-user dynamics can cause sentiments to become inflated and thus more malevolent. Netizens' frustrations are often expressed in a confrontational and provocative manner, where users employ rhetorical devices and emphatic language to express their discontent. In fact, it can be observed within comment sections, as outlined in the above section (see *Figures 3* and *4*), that Weibo user-to-user dynamics can cause sentiments to become inflated and thus more malevolent. This escalation often leads to a cycle of antagonism, where users continuously provoke each other, exacerbating the overall hostility. As a result, discussions can quickly devolve into personal attacks and derogatory remarks, further entrenching divisions within the community.

The interactive nature of these discussions often leads to an escalation of emotions; users may feel emboldened to express their frustrations more vehemently, using sarcasm, mockery, and aggressive questioning to challenge and provoke one another. Critically, this can create an echo chamber effect, where sentiments of anger and confusion are amplified, leading to a more hostile and polarised online environment. Indeed, there are a number of factors to which social media researchers credit such phenomena. For instance, it is generally acknowledged by researchers that platform users are more inclined to participate in topical or controversial debates and issues (see Berger 2011). Moreover, given that social media users are afforded a relatively high level of anonymity, others have observed how – in particularly political discussions– uncivil, discriminatory, hateful, and other remarks are far more likely to surface (Rowe 2015). Thus, hashtags are an invitation to such interactions and discussions which brings about the cumulative effect of intensifying individual frustrations and also further contributes to a broader sense of collective discontent and antagonism. This is evident in the predominantly negative and critical discourse surrounding the term "*baizuo*". The sources of such sentiment can thus be identified when reading through posts which often include some rationalisation that simultaneously emphasises a positive view of China and a confirmed or pre-existing negative perception of the West. These posts often contain explicit comparisons highlighting China's perceived successes and strengths, such as effective handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic resilience, and social cohesion. In contrast, they point out the perceived failures and weaknesses of Western countries, including chaotic political landscapes, ineffective pandemic responses, and cultural decadence. Close examinations of these posts reveal likely underlying reasons for the sentiment, revealing a narrative that seeks to justify and reinforce national pride while critiquing and dismissing Western approaches. Ultimately, as seen

already in the previous chapters, this dual narrative not only bolsters a sense of collective identity and superiority among Chinese netizens but also rationalises their frustrations and criticisms towards the West.

Expressions of villainisation can be examined by exploring various discursive strategies that these Weibo users employ in their posts and comments. Unlike confusion or mere criticism, villainisation in the context of anti-*baizuo* sentiments involves perceiving and speaking of such individuals or groups as being inherently malevolent or harmful. This sentiment goes beyond identifying flaws or misguided actions; it sees the *baizuo* as deliberate antagonists to cultural and societal well-being. Such sentiments not only intensify negative perceptions but also mobilise collective resentment and opposition. As seen in the previous two chapters, by representing the *baizuo* as villains, netizens adopt certain rhetorical devices to reinforce a clear dichotomy between "Us and Them", thus solidifying group identity and justifying harsh rhetoric and actions against those perceived as threats.

Beyond mere frustration and befuddlement, Chinese netizens' criticisms can be notably antagonistic. This is especially reflected in the inflammatory use of language, punctuation, and tone. Their posts often feature strong, emotive words and excessive exclamation marks to convey anger and disdain. The use of defamatory statements and insults in online discourse provides a vivid window into the deeper emotional and ideological currents that drive anti-*baizuo* sentiment among Chinese netizens. Such statements are not just expressions of frustration; they are strategic rhetorical devices that serve to delegitimise and dehumanise the targets of criticism, thus reinforcing in-group solidarity and out-group hostility. The phrase 'a group of selfish monsters' (#3141122) employs strong, emotive language that characterises the *baizuo* as inherently malevolent and self-serving. The term "monsters" suggests an almost sub-human or demonic nature, effectively stripping the *baizuo* of any moral or ethical standing. This kind of language is indicative of a process of dehumanisation, where the *baizuo* are portrayed as the antithesis of moral and social values cherished by the in-group. Such dehumanisation can escalate tensions and justify more extreme forms of verbal and possibly physical aggression. Similarly, comparing the United States to faeces and suggesting that it 'will only attract flies from now on' (#4611120), uses metaphorical language to convey a profound level of contempt. Here, the United States is likened to waste, a symbol of decay and worthlessness. This analogy not only insults but also implies a fall from grace or a loss of influence, suggesting that the country is – as is much of the West –no longer attractive or influential. These defamatory statements and metaphors serve several critical functions in the

discourse. Firstly, they act as powerful tools of social and political critique, encapsulating complex sentiments in vivid, easily communicable terms. On an emotional level, they build on resonance, using 'meaningful references, narratives, symbols and codes that will "resonate" with their "audiences"' (Jaworsky and Qiaoan 2021:311). Secondly, they foster a collective identity among those who share these views, as agreeing on such harsh portrayals of the Other creates a sense of unity and mutual understanding against a common adversary. Moreover, these examples reflect a broader strategy of antagonistic denouncement, where criticism moves beyond debate and enters the realm of emotive vilification. This shift from reasoned critique to emotional invective can polarise discourse, making it difficult to achieve any form of constructive dialogue. In other words, through emotive language, solidarity among an imagined collective of anti-*baizuo* is built and, by extension, nationalist pride is expressed. It also highlights how online platforms can amplify extreme sentiments, given the rapid spread and reinforcement of such ideas within echo chambers.

By analysing these rhetorical strategies, we gain insight into the underlying emotional dynamics and the broader sociopolitical implications of such discourse, emphasising the need for a more nuanced and critical understanding of online interactions and their real-world consequences. Unlike the questioning and confusion previously discussed, these notably more confrontational commentaries underscore a deep-seated resentment, seemingly aimed at provoking and challenging the perceived hypocrisy of the *baizuo*. Crucially, this antagonism is not simply about disagreeing with the *baizuo* philosophy and behaviour but also about expressing a profound sense of opposition and hostility towards their perceived cultural imperialism and responding with their own moral posturing. For instance, in response to what is widely perceived by Chinese and non-Chinese sceptics alike as the continued dominance of American influence and global leadership (Duggan et al. 2022), anti-*baizuo* netizen critiques have also embodied nationalist sentiments of competition and the desire to eliminate the *baizuo*.

Beyond mere frustration and befuddlement, Chinese netizens' criticisms can notably be heavily antagonistic. This is especially reflected in the inflammatory use of language, punctuation, and tone. Effectively, exclamatory remarks that are used in such a context can thus suggest a combination of enthusiasm, excitement, urgency, or other strong emotion. Indeed, exclamation marks in heavily critical commentary are common forms of criticism, however, multiple question marks – i.e., 'What is this?? How disgusting!' (#9421220)– are also more confrontational. They emphasise incredulity and bellicosity, adding to the overall aggressive tone. Specific examples of mechanisms of such villainisation can be seen in the use of expletives,

hyperbole, and derogatory language. For example, the insult "Virgin Mary bitch" was found multiple times in combination with "*baizuo*" (#2830821; #4080222; #7960220), while other posts mentioned both epithets separately (#8080320; #4530720). As previously noted, it is significant that highly negative vocabulary was particularly recurrent in more critical and inflammatory commentaries, regardless of whom they specifically target. For instance, commonly used terms like "disgusting", "crooked", "selfish", "tricksters", "evil", and even "scary", collectively reveal a pattern of heightened and intense disdain and hostility. These descriptors are not merely negative; they carry strong moral and emotional weight, suggesting a deep-seated aversion to the *baizuo* and what they represent. While 'white leftist tricks are so disgusting' (#9380420) implies a visceral reaction, one that goes beyond mere disagreement to a profound sense of repulsion, adjectives like "crooked" and "selfish" are emotively indicative of deceitfulness and self-interest, respectively, painting the *baizuo* as morally corrupt and driven by personal gain rather than genuine altruism. Similarly, "tricksters" further implies manipulation and dishonesty, reinforcing the idea that *baizuo* are not to be trusted and, by association, neither is the West more broadly. Some expanded upon this commentary, arguing that through hypocritical liberal and humanitarian ideology and behaviour, 'in competition, Westerners are always competing and hoping for others' failure' (#4320621). This sentiment suggests that Westerners, under the guise of liberal and humanitarian values, are fundamentally self-serving and competitive, seeking to undermine others for their own gain.

Going one step further, netizens have also used the term "evil" which elevates the critique to a cosmic scale and frames the *baizuo* as embodying inherent malevolence. This term taps into deep moral binaries of good versus evil, casting the *baizuo* as the ultimate adversaries. Similarly, "scary" evokes fear, portraying such movements and groups as a significant threat to international, as well as personal or national, well-being. Collectively, these terms create a discourse that is not just critical but deeply antagonistic. The language used serves to dehumanise and vilify the *baizuo* and this rhetorical strategy helps foster a sense of unity among those who oppose the *baizuo*, as they rally against a common, clearly defined enemy, rather than a mere "Other". The repetition of such emotive and powerful language intensifies the sentiment of hostility, contributing to a more polarised and confrontational online environment. Such examples of a linguistic pattern highlight how word choices can amplify sentiments of anger and resentment, transforming individual critiques into a broader, more cohesive narrative of opposition and, in this case, villainisation. Moreover, it reflects a strategic effort to consolidate negative perceptions and mobilise resistance against the perceived threat of *baizuo* influence, both internationally and domestically. The *baizuo* are viewed by netizens as both an

international concern and a legitimate domestic threat; this dual perception underscores the extent to which these sentiments are intertwined with nationalistic fervour and a rejection of Western dominance. For instance, in response to what is widely perceived by Chinese and non-Chinese sceptics alike as the continued dominance of American influence and global leadership , anti-*baizuo* netizen critique has also embodied nationalist sentiments of competition and eliminating the *baizuo*– which is increasingly deemed a legitimate domestic threat. For instance, one user argued how the coronavirus helped to show the world the weaknesses of the so-called 'American imperialist wolf' (#6590720). This statement encapsulates a sense of triumphalism and vindication, suggesting that the pandemic has revealed fundamental flaws in American leadership and ideology. Such rhetoric serves to bolster national pride and reinforce the narrative that Western values and systems are inherently flawed, thereby justifying a more assertive and confrontational stance. This kind of discourse not only strengthens internal solidarity but also positions China as a rising power ready to challenge and supplant Western hegemony.

More sinister allegations, however, include demonising representations of the *baizuo*, such as likening the *baizuo* to the coronavirus itself. One user vividly expressed this by stating, 'white-leftist thought is basically like the coronavirus, coming and going in waves all around the world, spreading, and eroding away one region after another' (#0920722). This comparison not only paints the *baizuo* in an extremely negative light but also frames their influence as a pervasive and harmful force akin to a deadly virus. By equating *baizuo* ideology to a global pandemic, the commentary suggests that their ideas are contagious and destructive, undermining societal stability and integrity wherever they spread, including in China, as others have reiterated. Such demonising language is indicative of deep-seated hostility and fear, reflecting how some netizens perceive the *baizuo* as a malignant force that poses a severe risk to their values. The use of a pandemic metaphor underscores the urgency and intensity with which these sentiments are expressed, highlighting the significant role that such extreme comparisons play in inflaming tensions and polarising opinions online. Critically, this kind of rhetoric elevates the discourse to a level where *baizuo* are seen not just as ideological opponents but as existential threats that must be actively resisted. Such analysis highlights how these sentiments of villainisation can escalate conflicts and deepen societal divides, revealing the powerful role of online discourse in shaping public opinion and social dynamics. Indeed, this contributes to a more hostile and divided online environment, where the lines between ideological differences are starkly drawn and vehemently defended by gung-ho netizens. Thus, the most critical component here that distinguishes netizen sentiments from merely "not understanding"

to villainisation is targeted defamation, followed by antagonistic denouncement. The targeted defamation and antagonistic denouncement employed by netizens contribute to a more hostile and divided online environment. In this space, ideological differences are starkly drawn and vehemently defended, often by aggressive and fervent netizens who stoke the flames of such antagonistic narratives.

By analysing the shift from mere confusion or criticism to full-blown villainisation, it becomes clear that the critical component distinguishing these sentiments is the deliberate campaign to malign and attack the character of the *baizuo*. Unlike feelings of confusion and frustration, this strand of sentiment is not just about misunderstanding or disagreement; it is about framing the *baizuo* as malicious actors deserving of condemnation, opposition, and, as seen in some cases, much worse. The characterisation of Western behaviour as inherently competitive and deceitful further intensifies the antagonistic tone of the discourse. Moreover, it portrays the West as not merely flawed or misguided but as actively malevolent, constantly seeking to exploit and dominate others. This deepens the divide between the in-group, the netizens speaking on behalf of Chinese citizens, and the out-group, the *baizuo* and, by extension, Westerners – fostering a more polarised and confrontational online environment. This kind of rhetoric intensifies negative perceptions, mobilises collective resentment, and fosters an environment where hostility is normalised and even encouraged. Ultimately, this underscores how the process of villainisation in online discourse can exacerbate tensions and polarise communities, illustrating the significant impact that digital interactions can have on broader social and cultural dynamics in domestic grassroots discourse in China.

The exploration of uncertainty, frustration, and villainisation in anti-*baizuo* sentiments reveals the complex and multifaceted nature of anti-*baizuo* sentiment among Chinese netizens. These emotions are not isolated from one another but rather interwoven and multi-layered, sometimes appearing simultaneously in posts, and through interactions influence the discourse and shape public opinion. Netizens' intrigue with such relevant topics and stories initiates the engagement with *baizuo* and related phenomena, sometimes driven by a desire to understand but more so with the intent of comparison and critique. This phase, however, often transitions to frustration as netizens encounter what they perceive as inconsistencies and hypocrisies in Western liberal values. The discourse here becomes notably critical and confrontational, reflecting a deeper struggle to reconcile these foreign ideologies with their own cultural and societal norms. The culmination of these emotions is seen in "villainisation", where *baizuo* are depicted not merely as misguided but as inherently

harmful and malicious. This extreme sentiment galvanises collective disdain and opposition, fostering a hostile online environment where ideological lines are starkly drawn and vehemently defended. In conclusion, the variety of emotive expression – from intrigue to villainisation – underscores the powerful role of online discourse in not only reflecting but also amplifying public sentiment. This spectrum reveals how initial attempts at understanding can devolve into antagonism and deep societal divides, highlighting the complexities of cross-cultural ideological conflicts in the digital age.

Implications of anti-*baizuo* netizen culture on grassroots nationalism and political discourse

While certainly applicable to other social media platforms, this inquiry highlights Weibo's role as a dynamic site for observing societal shifts and the interplay between online and offline public spheres in China. Based on this research, it is evident that the platform is highly useful for scholars analysing the intricate developments within Chinese social and political discourse. In order to outline the significance of anti-*baizuo* discourse with regards to netizen culture in China, this final chapter section addresses how netizen expression, in all its manifestations, provides a more insightful understanding of the emotive complexities in cross-cultural and ideological debates (Duggan et al. 2022; see C. Zhang 2020b).

As explored in the first section of this chapter, a vast majority of posts were indicative of Weibo users' high levels of engagement with trending news, topics, and hashtags. The findings of this research observe a high level of netizen engagement with news media and sources, both Chinese and international, which shows that netizens observe and choose to engage with trending news stories and viral topics, some of which are not accessible to the average user without a VPN. The active participation in discussions around news content indicates a robust public discourse and reflects the dynamic nature of information consumption in China's digital age, despite prevailing surveillance and censorship. Chen et al. (2023) investigates the impact of government social media on conspiracy beliefs during global crises and highlights the relationship between government-produced social media content and conspiracy theories.

In response to what is widely perceived by Chinese and non-Chinese sceptics alike as the continued dominance of American influence and global leadership (Duggan et al. 2022), anti-*baizuo* netizen critique has also embodied nationalist sentiments of competition and eliminating the *baizuo*. Notably, the latter is viewed

by netizens as an international concern, as well as a legitimate domestic threat. As discussed previously throughout this thesis, this was reflected in a number of different ways. On one hand, general concerns about the global spread of the *baizuo* movement were reflected in explicit statements such as: 'the white left phenomenon has taken the world by storm, resulting in contagion and erosion wherever it spreads. No country or region can be spared …No one is safe' (#0920722). Equally, the likening and metaphorisation of the *baizuo* to the coronavirus frames the ideology as a harmful and pervasive threat which arguably indicates an attempt to rally collective action and solidarity against a common "enemy." By calling for 'people all over the world to unite' (#6590720) against the West, some hold the belief in uniting against a hegemonic power and implicitly acknowledge the complexities inherent in fostering such global solidarity. Despite this perceived challenge, a subset of individuals expressed optimism, asserting that the 2020 United States presidential election could serve as a catalyst for bolstering the 'confidence of the Chinese people in defeating American imperialism' or the 'American imperialist wolf' (#6590720). Such examples of stigmatisation reflect perceived cultural threats from and deeper anxieties about the West. By analysing such language, it can be seen how netizens' use of rhetorical and literary devices can shape public perception and discourse, aligning ideological opposition with urgent and defensive responses akin to those in a health crisis. This perspective implies a nuanced understanding of global power dynamics, indicating that political events, such as a presidential election, can influence perceptions and attitudes, potentially shaping the geopolitical landscape and the confidence of nations or groups in their ability to contend with dominant powers. The belief in the transformative impact of a political event on the confidence of a specific populace reflects the interconnectedness of global politics and the role of key events in shaping perceptions and attitudes on the international stage. As discussed in previous sections, the recognition of globalisation and the dissemination of political attitudes is highly evident in the anti-*baizuo* discourse, where the growing apprehension about the proliferation of Western liberalism within China has become a valid concern.

As it has been widely observed, calls to action on social media amplify public sentiment, most notably by playing on emotions and, subsequently, creating unity behind certain narratives or even echo chambers (see Parsons 2022). This heightened emotional engagement can strongly influence public opinion, as like-minded individuals share and reinforce each other's views. There are countless studies on the implications of algorithmic recommendation–based technology – and the selective exposure and group pressure among users

– and how it contributes to the formation of online echo chambers. Increasingly, there is substantial research on the West and China that indicates that COVID-19 discourse is inherently highly politicised, with political preferences influencing beliefs about the virus, leading to echo chambers that reinforces confirmation bias (see Jiang et al. 2021). However, there is also significant evidence that – while there is reinforcement of beliefs and views – social and political dynamics also come into play whereby extreme speech, as seen in this research, is met with astonishment and disagreement. In some extremely polarised interactions, it was seen that arguments would play out in comment sections whereby people disagreed with each other about whether the post was "correct" or bigoted and inflammatory for the purposes of "clickbait". Indeed, as demonstrated in *Figure 1* and *Figure 2*, while it is principally true that Weibo users' anti-*baizuo* sentiments generally converge, there are significant disagreements among netizens in terms of what *baizuo* truly entails.

Tangentially, it is also worth highlighting that in these discussions and often rant-like frustrations as outlined above, the variety in tone of voice shows how netizens also reckon with their own rationalisation through the means of "talking aloud", despite perhaps hoping for support and alliance behind their line of thinking. Consequently, the different uses of "*baizuo*" reflect broader ideological battles and cultural exchanges within Chinese social media discourse. More crucially, and as seen in this research study, psychological biases in communication processes widely accounted for the partisan reinforcement which are caused by political conversation and it is precisely this inclination for 'homophilic communication' which creates and strengthens 'ideological segregation in society' (Cho et al. 2018:85). Indeed, as indicated by extensive research on social media interactions, individuals tend to feel more comfortable engaging in discussions with those who share similar political views, leading to a preference for political conversations with like-minded individuals. However, it is also clear that, despite surveillance and censorship, the observable online public sphere in China contains polarity, which can in turn influence broader societal perceptions and even potentially drive significant cultural or political shifts.

Conclusion

In seeking to examine the multifaceted dynamics of anti-*baizuo* discourse on Weibo, this chapter has demonstrated the various ways in which netizen engagement shapes the online landscape. More specifically, by examining the identified key elements that signify netizen behaviour, the findings reveal that Weibo posts

and their respective comment sections serve as highly dynamic spaces for user interaction and thus facilitates a wide range of perspectives. While the platform is indeed victim to censorship and surveillance, the research findings also revealed that though they often operate within the broad contours of state ideology, their discourse reveals a dynamic and participatory political culture where grassroots sentiment can significantly influence and reflect nationalistic and anti-Western fervour. Effectively, this chapter has detailed the vibrant and compound nature of the anti-*baizuo* discourse by examining the tactical use of digital tools to construct and spread ideological narratives that strike emotive resonance, and engagement, with fellow Chinese. Indeed, it can be argued that, in this context, the use of emotionally charged language helps to forge solidarity among a perceived collective of anti-*baizuo* netizens, thereby expressing nationalist pride. The chapter has also contributed an understanding of the complex relationship between media forms, netizen culture, and political engagement in contemporary Chinese society. By exploring how Chinese netizens contribute to and reproduce anti-*baizuo* commentary in the context of COVID-19, this chapter places another jigsaw piece of understanding grassroots manifestations of anti-Western and nationalistic sentiments in China. Consequently, this chapter contends that conceptualising expressions of nationalism online requires moving beyond simplistic depictions of mere brainwashed patriots or cybernationalists, like the Little Pinks and 50 Cent Army. As demonstrated in this thesis, expressions of nationalism reflect more grassroots, moral-driven arguments that assert China's moral superiority, thereby reinforcing notions of Chinese superiority. This examination has also revealed underlying themes of identity, power, and resistance in the digital age, providing a deeper understanding of the sociopolitical dynamics at play.

7. Conclusion

Through this close examination of the anti-*baizuo* discourse, this thesis has endeavoured to further illuminate the complex and often contentious relationship between Chinese netizens and the West. By exploring how Chinese netizens contribute to and reproduce anti-*baizuo* commentary, the research findings have allowed for a nuanced understanding of grassroots manifestations of anti-Western, nationalistic sentiments in China's online public sphere during a period of geopolitical tension, especially amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The rise of the anti-*baizuo* discourse, with its sharp focus on critiquing Western liberalism and "leftist" ideologies, provides a deeper understanding of the evolving landscape of Chinese public opinion towards the West. Beyond its relevance in populist circles, this study has found that the anti-*baizuo* discourse reflects deeper sentiments of discontent and scepticism towards Western values and society. The prominence of such critiques suggests a shift in how many of these netizens view global political dynamics, with increasing pride in Chinese governance and culture, as well as a rejection of what they perceive as the failings of Western political and social systems. Such critiques, as found in this thesis, often emphasise a perceived disconnect between Western (liberal) values and the realities of contemporary global challenges, like those posed by COVID-19.

In this context, anti-*baizuo* sentiments serve not only as a reflection of China's internal ideological struggles – namely the fear of Western influences in China – but also as a commentary on the perceived failures of Western political and social systems. The findings of this research indicate that, while Chinese netizens may engage in broad critiques of the *baizuo* as representatives and proponents of Western liberalism, their frustration and scorn is directed towards "whiteness" as "white culture" rather than biological race. Such critique is not necessarily aimed at American liberalism in its entirety, nor the international liberal order, but rather at what is perceived as an excessive political correctness that is perceived to undermine societal cohesion and practical governance while also imposing such standards on others, including China, in a patronising way that asserts a misplaced perception of Western superiority. This distinction is crucial, as it underscores the complex and multifaceted nature of political discourse within China, where Western liberalism is subject to intense scrutiny, yet not uniformly rejected, as found in Chapter 6.

Chapter 4 provides a deeper insight into how politically active netizens perceive and interpret the term *"baizuo,"* by examining the explicit references to individuals, groups, and countries. By analysing how Weibo users use

and understand *"baizuo"* as a label as well as a term, the chapter uncovers the intricate political and racial connotations associated with the term. It also focuses on examining netizens' specific mentions and tactical use of language and rhetorical devices in Weibo posts to highlight the nuanced meanings and interpretations of *"baizuo"* among Chinese netizens. The chapter also shows how these netizens demonstrate substantial knowledge of Western political geography, history, and current events through their specific and targeted critiques of particular countries, groups, and influential figures. Although the concept of *"baizuo"* is explored throughout the thesis, this chapter particularly highlights the absence of a clear consensus on its exact meaning. The findings reveal that the understanding of the term varies widely based on the context of the post, the perspective of the author, and the interpretation of the reader. Reflecting on these findings, this chapter in particular argues that the definition of *"baizuo"* is influenced by the individuals and groups associated with it and that *baizuo*-ness is defined by virtue of who is mentioned as part of it. This variability underscores the term's fluidity and context-dependent nature, showing that the conceptualisation of *"baizuo"* is largely shaped by individual perceptions and self-reflections. In other words, the term *"baizuo"* remains vague and highly subjective, allowing for a wide range of interpretations and applications. In fact, as discussed in the chapter, the term defies simple categorisation as populism, as its application is fluid and context-specific. Labelling certain entities or individuals as *baizuo*—even those who would not traditionally be considered part of the progressive left in Western politics—illustrates that the term is far from a simple illustration of Chinese populist ideology. The application of *baizuo* extends beyond ideological distinctions and enters into a broader critique of Western socio-political dynamics, often targeting figures and institutions that do not fit neatly into a left-wing framework. This complicates any simplistic interpretation of *baizuo* as a populist term, revealing instead a flexible and context-specific tool for expressing dissatisfaction, not only with liberal ideals but also with broader Western cultural and political practices. Therefore, "*baizuo*" also functions – beyond a mere marker of populism – as a kind of sociocultural critique of Western liberalism and the global socio-political order as understood through a distinctly Chinese lens.

This ambiguity affects how netizens engage with and respond to anti-*"baizuo"* discourse, making the term a versatile tool for various political and social commentaries. In fact, this thesis argues that *"baizuo"* is used as a tool to reinforce divisions between the "negative other" and the "positive self." Rather than simply mirroring Western right-wing populism, as previous studies have argued, this chapter finds that the discourse around *"baizuo"* emphasises Chinese unity and a sense of national superiority. Moreover, expanding on

Chenchen Zhang's observation that such critique has made its way to the domestic realm whereby the term has been 'used against Chinese nationals sympathetic with liberal-egalitarian values' (C. Zhang 2020b:95), this thesis contends that the weaponisation of the label serves to police ideological boundaries within China, marginalising those who align with liberal-egalitarian principles and reinforcing a nationalist narrative that favours a more authoritarian, state-centred view of national identity. The chapter also emphasises how sociocultural values influenced responses to the pandemic, broadening the concept of "us", as netizens describe what they consider "Chinese" and go even further by extending it to include like-minded countries in the region, fostering a broader recognition of shared cultural norms. In other words, netizens' constructions of "us" within the anti-*baizuo* discourse demonstrate how collective experiences that transcend national borders foster a sense of belonging, or imagined community (Anderson 2006), among East and Southeast Asian populations, which are grounded in shared cultural, social, and historical foundations. Such observations deepen the understanding of how perceptions of Chineseness and East Asian identity are shaped, illustrating how cultural and national identities are constructed and reinforced through online discourse, particularly during COVID-19. The chapter therefore provides valuable insights into how digital interactions, as found in Weibo discussions relating to the *baizuo* during the COVID-19 pandemic period, shape perceptions of identity and geopolitical attitudes, particularly in relation to the West, while also contributing to a more nuanced understanding of Chinese digital nationalisms.

Chapter 5 shifts the focus to explore how the term is specifically used in critiques of Western responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. It begins by analysing netizens' criticisms of both institutional and general shortcomings in handling the pandemic. The first section addresses failures at the institutional and governmental levels in the supposedly "*baizuo*-led" West, while the second section critiques the broader "left-leaning" populace. Chapter 5 demonstrates that Chinese netizens perceive criticisms of Western responses to the pandemic as more than just failures; they interpret them as indicators of the West's decline. This rhetoric is not just about criticising the West; it is also about highlighting China's successes in contrast, thereby reinforcing a narrative of national pride and competence. Through this use of historical context, netizens justify contemporary actions by drawing parallels between China's past resilience and its present achievements. This approach not only boosts national pride but also shifts global perceptions of China's position in the world, suggesting that China is now a leading example of effective governance and crisis management. While some interpretations suggest

that this discourse aims to showcase China's dominance over other nations, the chapter argues that the anti-*"baizuo"* rhetoric also reflects a deeper narrative of national rejuvenation and cultural pride. It is therefore argued that the discourse is about reclaiming a sense of superiority and reinforcing the idea that China is capable of not only matching but surpassing Western standards, particularly in times of crisis. This narrative positions China as a rising power that is reclaiming its rightful place on the global stage, emphasising themes of renewal, cultural confidence, and a belief in the inherent superiority of Chinese governance and social cohesion. The findings thus extend beyond mere superpower ambitions to depict China as a distinguished civilisation; the chapter explores how critique of the *baizuo*, as a form of Othering, reflects underlying attitudes towards global issues and self-perception as a civilisation. It finds that netizens' critical analysis and observations of the *baizuo* allows them to contrast with and thus position themselves against the highly negatively perceived out-group, condemning them by branding them "*baizuo*," establishing divisions between the "negative other" and the "positive self" (Yang and Chen 2021). These crucial insights reveal the complex interplay of historical memory, current events, and nationalism, shaping Chinese perspectives on global affairs. This analysis offers a nuanced understanding of contemporary Chinese nationalism and public sentiment, highlighting how netizens reflect on their own successes through perceived Western failures. The chapter contributes to a broader comprehension of evolving narratives and sets the stage for examining the role of online discourse in shaping attitudes toward the West.

In Chapter 6, the key findings offer a comprehensive analysis of how anti-*baizuo* discourse on Weibo reflects the intricate and evolving interactions between netizen engagement, digital tools, and the broader cultural and political landscape in China. The chapter illustrates that Weibo serves as a dynamic and interactive platform where a wide range of perspectives can be expressed. This environment facilitates the creation and spread of narratives that contribute to the diverse and layered nature of anti-*baizuo* discourse. One key observation of the chapter highlights how Weibo users effectively utilise digital tools and features to craft and disseminate these narratives. This underscores Weibo's significant role in fostering a vibrant and participatory political culture in China. Even within the constraints of censorship and state surveillance, the discourse on Weibo reflects a sentiment driven by ordinary users. This sentiment mirrors nationalistic and anti-Western fervour, creating a complex blend of state-driven and citizen-driven narratives that blur the lines between government influence and grassroots expression. Additionally, the use of discourse analysis in this chapter allows for

delving into the emotional aspects of the anti-*baizuo* discourse, showing how these narratives resonate deeply with Chinese netizens. This emotional resonance amplifies public sentiment and engagement, revealing the power of online discourse in shaping public opinion. The analysis thus demonstrates that the anti-*baizuo* narratives on Weibo are not just about political statements; they evoke strong and often explosive emotions that resonate with fellow netizens, which in turn enhance the spread and impact of these narratives among the public. The findings of Chapter 6 underscore the significant role of online platforms like Weibo in contemporary political communication in China and highlight the increasingly complex interplay between state influence and citizen agency, where both state narratives and grassroots sentiments contribute to the discourse. The chapter concludes by providing a deeper understanding of the relationship between media forms, netizen culture, and political engagement in modern Chinese society. It illustrates how Chinese netizens actively engage in and perpetuate anti-*baizuo* commentary, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This engagement offers valuable insights into the grassroots expressions of anti-Western and nationalistic sentiments within China's online public sphere, showcasing how digital platforms serve as crucial venues for the articulation and amplification of these sentiments.

Constraints and research limitations

Due to the nature of social media research in particular, the structure and scope of this study has been revised appropriately and as advised throughout the process of pitching, researching, and writing up this doctoral thesis. However, due to the nature of this endeavour, it is essential to acknowledge the constraints and challenges encountered throughout the entirety of the research process. By identifying and discussing these limitations, this chapter aims to enhance the transparency and rigor of the research findings while providing valuable insights for future studies in this area. To be precise, the limitations discussed here encompass the different aspects of the research methodology, data collection, analysis techniques, and various contextual factors that may have influenced the outcomes of the study. By openly addressing these limitations, the following provides a balanced assessment of the research findings and their implications, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the discourses on "*baizuo*".

This study focuses on how one specific instance of anti-Western discourse on Chinese social media is influenced by, and reciprocally reinforces, certain beliefs and ideologies within the context of the COVID-19

pandemic. As an illustrative case study of prevalent opinions and anti-Western sentiments in China, it is crucial to avoid conflating the findings and discussions of this study with broader narratives or applying them to the larger Chinese population, China itself, and the online public sphere in general. While the implications of the anti-*baizuo* discourse cannot be claimed to have significant ramifications for shaping the course of public opinion, this thesis does argue that the use and popularity of the term – which has been studied beyond the specific context of COVID-19 – shed light on evolving societal attitudes and dynamics within contemporary China. Thus, rather than asserting the generalisation that the "*baizuo*" discourse is part of a legitimate and thriving anti-Western netizen political culture, this thesis contends that the term and the use of it allows for a more nuanced understanding of how Chinese social media users interact in the online public sphere and interact with such an example of public discourse. More importantly, in order to conceptualise how anti-Western sentiments and nationalism are expressed beyond the official narratives of the Chinese state, this study set out to explore how politically engaged netizens respond to and rationalise international current affairs.

Speculatively, the intensity and militancy of the anti-*baizuo* rhetoric may not only be tied to the West's perceived role in the pandemic but also to a broader sense of internal threat within China. While the pandemic provided a convenient backdrop for blaming the West, the more profound concern seems to be about safeguarding national identity and cultural values in the face of both external pressures and internal shifts. The aggressive stance taken by some of these netizens seemingly reflect anxieties about foreign influence and a perceived erosion of Chinese values, leading to a more proactive and even militant defence of what they see as cultural or ideological purity (see Zhang 2024). The discourse surrounding anti-*baizuo* rhetoric on platforms like Weibo is likely shaped by a relatively small but highly motivated group of users. These individuals, either because of their strong ideological convictions or their proactive engagement with political and cultural debates, tend to be the ones most likely to participate in and amplify this rhetoric. As a result, the visibility and intensity of anti-*baizuo* sentiments online may give the impression of widespread support, but in reality, it may be driven by a vocal group of Weibo users who are particularly invested in defending their views. The dynamic suggests that the often-militant tone of the discourse is not necessarily representative of the broader population, but rather the product of individuals who are deeply involved in ideological battles and feel compelled to influence public opinion. These users often engage with topics that resonate with their concerns about cultural integrity, national identity, or perceived external threats, and in doing so, they help shape the dominant narrative within certain online spaces. Consequently, their active participation can create a disproportionate influence on the

overall tone and direction of digital conversations, reinforcing the perception that these anti-Western, anti-*baizuo* sentiments are more widespread than they may actually be.

This study primarily adopts discourse analysis, as initial attempts to reach out to Weibo users who used the term *baizuo* did not result in any responses. In future research, a more structured and strategic approach to securing interviews could be employed, such as utilising targeted recruitment methods, creating more personalised requests, or diversifying the platforms used to research the anti-*baizuo* to engage a broader range of participants. Interviews with such Chinese social media users could have provided a richer understanding of their motivations, beliefs, and the social or political contexts that shape their engagement with the *baizuo* discourse. Future studies could address these gaps by integrating both supporters and critics of the *baizuo* concept into a more balanced and nuanced analysis. Incorporating interviews would offer a more comprehensive, first-hand exploration of Chinese netizens' perceptions of Western political ideologies, leading to more grounded and multi-layered conclusions. By including counter-arguments and dialogues from both sides of the debate, future research could significantly enhance the understanding of how critiques of *baizuo* intersect with issues of nationalism, identity, and global politics within contemporary China.

Another promising avenue for further research would be a longitudinal study that tracks the evolution of *baizuo* critiques since the onset of COVID-19. This type of study could examine how the discourse has shifted in response to major events, such as the White Paper Protests in 2022, which reflected growing dissent over strict lockdown measures in China, or broader shifts in China's foreign policy, particularly its relations with the West. By comparing how the term is used before and after such events, researchers could identify trends in how Chinese netizens adapt the label to reflect changing socio-political climates, both domestically and globally. For instance, *has the term become more critical as Western democracies face internal challenges, or has its usage expanded to critique broader, more abstract ideas associated with the West?* This project might explore how the term is used across various online communities or discussion groups in reaction to global or political events, including the 2024 US Presidential elections, international trade disputes, or even wars and conflicts. By analysing trends across multiple datasets, researchers could uncover patterns in how the label is applied in diverse contexts and whether its meaning evolves in tandem with specific political or social developments. A project of such grandeur could also look at how *baizuo* critiques reflect broader ideological currents in China, including official Party discourse, particularly in relation to nationalism, anti-Western sentiment, and the perception of Western liberalism. Overall, these expanded approaches could offer a richer,

more nuanced understanding of how – beyond COVID-19 – "*baizuo"* is not merely a static insult but a dynamic tool that is used to frame complex geopolitical and cultural debates.

It is imperative to address the inherent challenges related to the qualitative nature of the research, particularly concerning my role as the researcher and the potential implications of subjectivity and positionality. As a scholar situated within the British academic context, my positionality is inherently shaped by both my academic journey and personal background. Having spent six years immersed in higher education within the United Kingdom, my scholarly development has been predominantly influenced by British academic paradigms. This context, while enriching, may also present certain limitations, particularly with regard to exposure to diverse scholarly discourses beyond the British framework. As a Western-trained specialist in Chinese Studies investigating contemporary manifestations of anti-Western attitudes, I am acutely aware of the political sensitivities that accompany such research, especially within the current global climate. The increasing geopolitical tensions between the West and China inevitably extend into the realm of academia, raising concerns about the influence of these dynamics on scholarly inquiry. In light of these considerations, it is crucial to acknowledge the ethical responsibilities that accompany the research of this nature, particularly in navigating the fine line between academic rigor and political implications.

Research contributions

In terms of the specific fields of scholarship that this thesis arguably makes the most contributions to, I believe that there are multiple areas of research that would either directly or indirectly benefit from the project and its findings. Firstly, it is important to note that this thesis is being submitted for a Doctor of Philosophy in Area Studies, with a focus on China. In a time when conducting research on and within China is increasingly challenging due to political sensitivities and restricted access, this study holds particular significance. Notably, it provides rare and valuable insights into the region, offering a nuanced understanding of some facets of China's sociopolitical landscape as they are manifested online. Moreover, by examining contemporary political trends within the Sinophone world, especially during periods of heightened geopolitical tensions and the unprecedented global challenges posed by the pandemic, this research contributes to a deeper comprehension of how these factors influence Chinese public discourse and identity. Considering the increased

difficulties facing China scholars due to the restrictions posed by government surveillance and censorship as well as the obvious challenges to in-person research and interviews, studies of online interactions are increasingly important. This, in turn, enriches our broader understanding of China's role and perception on the global stage, making this thesis a crucial addition to the field of China Studies, as well as Area Studies more broadly.

Additionally, this research project aims to conceptualise the increasingly significant role that social media plays in shaping both domestic and international politics concerning China. In particular, it seeks to illuminate how Chinese netizens perceive the West, liberalism, and democratic ideals through their online interactions and discourse. By delving into the anti-*baizuo* rhetoric, the study endeavours to uncover underlying attitudes and critiques that these digital communities hold toward Western ideologies. The intention is that readers more grounded on political science will gain a more nuanced understanding of these online groups and their perspectives, recognising that nationalist discourses not only reflect general opposition to the West but also offers incredibly deep and nuanced insights into how Chinese netizens, as just *one* window into the general public, construct and negotiate their own identity, culture, and societal values. Crucially, while this study does not explicitly aim to make a significant contribution to International Relations scholarship, it nonetheless offers valuable nuances to existing interpretations of China's global perspectives and the nature of contemporary Chinese nationalism, particularly from a Western standpoint. By dissecting the subtleties of Chinese online discourse and the sentiments expressed by netizens, this research enriches our understanding of how China views its position in the global order and how nationalism is articulated in response to external influences. Through an exploration of the Self-Other dichotomy, the project has aspired to reveal the complex layers of national self-perception that are embedded within these digital exchanges. These insights add depth to current academic discussions, offering a more granular view of the ways in which China perceives and interacts with the world, thereby indirectly contributing to the broader field of IR by providing a cultural and societal lens through which to analyse China's global strategies and ideologies.

Having also examined netizen interactions, particularly in Chapter 6, this study makes a significant contribution to the ongoing debate about whether discourses in China are primarily imposed from the 'top-down' by state mechanisms or emerge organically from the 'bottom-up' through grassroots movements. By analysing the rise of sentiments that appear to originate from the grassroots level, this research seeks to offer a nuanced understanding of how this 'new' public sphere in China functions. It highlights how digital platforms

have become spaces where new forms of civic engagement and public discourse are developing, challenging traditional state narratives, and allowing for more diverse expressions of public opinion. In doing so, this project aims to deepen our comprehension of the evolving dynamics of political and social communication in the Chinese context, where the interplay between state control and public agency continues to shape the landscape of national discourse.

Final reflections

As stated in the introductory chapter of this thesis, the primary research question begged the relatively long and three-part question, *what does the anti-baizuo discourse on Weibo during the COVID-19 pandemic reveal about Chinese netizens' perceptions of themselves, how their country is run, and of Western liberalism?* This research project has revealed some fascinating and significant insights into Chinese netizens' self-perceptions, their views on governance, and their stance on Western liberalism. The findings show a strong sense of national pride and confidence in how China manages global health crises compared to the perceived failures of Western countries, particularly those seen as embodying *baizuo* ideologies. Specifically, such discourse highlights a strong and proud belief in the superiority of China's political system and governance, particularly in its ability to effectively handle public health emergencies, but also a superiority of culture and morality or philosophy. In doing so, these findings crucially reveal that such rhetoric underscores a collective identity among Chinese netizens – and broadly categorised "Chinese people" within China and beyond – that is built in opposition to Western society and Western ideologies.

The anti-*baizuo* discourse thus fosters a sense of cultural unity and nationalistic pride and does so usually while simultaneously contrasting China, or Chinese, success with the perceived rapid decline of the West, or rather Western hegemony. This discourse also reflects a broader narrative of China's rise and the decline of Western influence, reinforcing the idea that Chinese governance is not only different but superior to that of Western liberal democracies, such as the United States, France, and Belgium. 'Pandemic nationalism' (Chen et al. 2023) and 'reactive nationalism' (Brittingham 2007) converge within this discourse, strengthening the perception that China's governance model is superior, especially during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. The pride stemming from China's collective efforts to manage the virus, particularly when compared to the perceived failures of Western nations, has evidently heightened nationalistic sentiments. By

focusing on the reactive dimensions of Chinese nationalism, Brittingham's (2007) analysis resonates with similar studies exploring how China's national identity, intricate historical context, and sense of pride are often amplified in response to external criticisms or perceived threats. As international criticism of China's initial handling of the pandemic escalated, a defensive nationalism emerged, further amplifying the anti-*baizuo* rhetoric and framing the West as both ideologically misguided and in decline. The findings of this study therefore illustrate this interplay – of reactive nationalism, the idea of China as a civilisation-state, and pandemic nationalism – thereby enhancing our understanding of how Chinese nationalism is articulated. Ultimately, the discourse articulates a broader critique of Western liberalism, particularly the values associated with the left-leaning, liberal West, which are viewed as ineffective or misguided in the face of global challenges like a global health crisis. In this context, the findings reveal that "*baizuo*" is used by netizens to mock the idealism and self-righteousness often associated with Western liberalism, suggesting that its prioritisation of personal freedoms over collective well-being leads to chaotic, disorganised governance.

This thesis therefore contends that Chinese netizens display a sense of pride when criticising the *baizuo* as they often frame their stance as a reflection of the values they associate with Chinese identity. Many netizens emphasise traits such as being 'realistic' and 'pragmatic' (C. Zhang 2020b:101), which they believe drastically set them apart and contribute to a practical, grounded approach to problem-solving and decision-making. The conclusion of this doctoral thesis ultimately finds that the term *baizuo* serves as a channel for netizens' criticisms of the naïveté and impracticality of Western values. These traits, seen as integral to Chinese cultural identity, are frequently celebrated in online discussions as symbols of resilience and strength. In the context of anti-*baizuo* rhetoric during COVID-19, netizens credit qualities as evidence of their higher awareness and ability to navigate global challenges, particularly in contrast to Western liberal ideals. This sense of pride is not only limited to individuals in mainland China but also resonates with Chinese communities around the world, further reinforcing the perception of a unified and pragmatic Chinese identity in opposition to *baizuo* values. The pandemic response thus became a symbol of the broader ideological clash, where the failures of the West are framed as evidence of the superiority of Chinese governance and cultural values. These netizens therefore use the term "*baizuo*" to criticise what they perceive as the moral posturing and ineffectiveness of Western countries, reinforcing their own sense of cultural and political superiority. Ultimately, it can be inferred from these findings that the anti-*baizuo* discourse not only serves as a critique of Western liberalism but also functions as a tool for reinforcing the legitimacy of China's political and social model. This discourse

has evidently enabled Chinese netizens to articulate a sense of moral and cultural superiority, positioning themselves as not just different from, but ethically and even intellectually superior to, their Western counterparts.

This research thus finds that Chinese netizens' use of *baizuo* highlights a rejection of Western ideologies, a reaffirmation of Chinese cultural values, and a desire for national sovereignty free from foreign influence. In the specific context of COVID-19, the use of "*baizuo*" rhetoric during the pandemic highlights how global crises can act as catalysts for amplifying nationalist sentiments and solidifying a collective identity that is fundamentally oppositional to Western values. In this way, the discourse becomes a mechanism, or a 'vehicle' (A. Peng et al. 2020:76), for both internal cohesion and external differentiation, reinforcing a narrative of Chinese ascendancy in a rapidly changing global order whereby the West is increasingly perceived as being in a state of decline (see Bickers 2017; Levine 2024).

For researchers, social media provides a rich, dynamic space for these discursive formations to emerge and evolve. In this case, Weibo has offered great insight into the ways in which *baizuo* has become a symbol of broader grievances, not just against Western liberalism but also in reflections of China's own socio-political landscape. The usage of this term, as found in this study of discussions taking place on Weibo, illustrates some of the ways in which Chinese social media users are responsive to and deeply engaged with global ideological and political debates. By critically examining the ways in which the term is used by Weibo authors, this thesis has sought to provide a more detailed and nuanced understanding of their criticisms and their rationale. Thus, not only does anti-*baizuo* discourse serve as a cultural commentary, but it also reflects a growing engagement with and critique of Western liberalism and values among Chinese netizens. The phenomenon also sheds light on echo chambers and polarisation within the Chinese digital landscape. As with all digital spaces, Chinese social media platforms are designed and used by its users in ways that facilitate highly interactive forms of communication, with algorithms also amplifying readership and view counts (see Williams, Burnap, and Sloan 2017). Such trends and developments are particularly evident in the current political climate, making it all the more necessary to identify and assess the nature of these narratives.

The pandemic has led to increased scrutiny and criticism of China's handling of the virus, its transparency, and its international cooperation, resulting in a more critical view of China's global position. This heightened

scrutiny has influenced Chinese netizens' construction and reinforcement of an "Us versus Them" narrative, particularly amid elevated political tensions. Concurrently, there has been a notable surge in domestic nationalism in China, driven in part by perceptions of unfair international criticism associated with various political issues and evolving foreign relations. This rise in nationalism, which has intensified under President Xi's administration (Johnston 2017), is evident in more assertive foreign policies, public diplomacy, and the emergence of cybernationalist groups, such as the 50 Cent Army. The insights gleaned from China's digital sphere during the pandemic, particularly as seen through the anti-*baizuo* discourse, have broader implications that extend to various contexts. Naturally, the rise of digital nationalism is evident globally, as online communities assert national pride and critique foreign ideologies in response to international events and crises. While this phenomenon is not unique to China, it does provide some insight into some of the rationale that may be deemed reminiscent of, and reflect in part, a wider trend that can be observed across different nations. This naturally calls for further attention in future research efforts.

This thesis provides a more nuanced understanding of how Chinese netizens, rather than just cybernationalists, use the term "*baizuo*" within the context of a global public health crisis, where nations collectively faced the challenge on their own terms. Additionally, China has increasingly utilised digital platforms for diplomatic and propaganda purposes (Bolsover 2021; T. C. Chen 2022), with the pandemic accelerating this trend. During the pandemic, governments globally employed digital tools for public health communication and misinformation control, China's approach revealed how netizens engage in political discourse without facing suppression, provided the content is not overtly anti-government. In addition to pandemic-related news, Chinese nationalistic netizens also engaged with stories tied to geopolitical tensions during this period. These posts included engagement with news stories regarding Western criticism of China's initial handling of the outbreak in Wuhan, accusations of vaccine politics, and the global debate over the origin of the virus. Such stories provided fertile ground for netizens to refute criticisms of China and promote narratives of Chinese superiority. Beyond COVID-19, ongoing geopolitical issues, such as the 2020 United States presidential election or diplomatic disputes involving Hong Kong, Taiwan, or Xinjiang, further captured attention and sparked discussions deeply intertwined with nationalistic and ideological themes. This focus on particular news stories or topics illustrates how netizens not only consume but also engage with and contextualise news to align with their cultural and ideological frameworks. By amplifying narratives that reinforce national pride and

dismiss Western systems as ineffective, these online discussions reveal a layered engagement with global current events shaped by both state media influence and grassroots sentiment.

The Chinese government has leveraged social media to promote its pandemic response narrative while tightening control over digital content, censoring information perceived as detrimental to its narrative and promoting state-approved messages. Although this thesis does not considerably address censorship, it does maintain that the netizen-led discourse surrounding "*baizuo*" – which is considered negative, racist, or politically incorrect – is not suppressed by the state due to its evident prevalence online. It is undoubtedly notable that, in contrast to the typically stringent censorship of digital spaces in China, this term remains uncensored, although it is unclear whether the government is fully aware of the scope of anti-*baizuo* discourse or, if they are, whether they perceive it as necessary or beneficial to censor it. Additionally, it is important to highlight that, as observed in Chapter 6, none of the Weibo posts or comments analysed in this study were authored by a Blue V verified account. Ultimately, the term "*baizuo*," which critiques Western liberal ideologies, serves as a convenient tool for reinforcing nationalist sentiment and shaping public opinion in ways that benefit the state. By allowing anti-*baizuo* discourse to thrive, the government can amplify narratives that highlight perceived flaws in Western political systems, such as inefficiency, hypocrisy, and moral decay, thus bolstering the legitimacy of China's governance model by contrast. Considering the significance of these observations, this thesis argues that the notable absence of censorship surrounding "*baizuo*" suggests that, unlike other heavily restricted topics or social movements, the government may intentionally allow anti-Western narratives like this to flourish without directly involving themselves.

It is certainly noteworthy that the anti-*baizuo* discourse, and its proponents or participants, significantly differ from their nationalist counterparts. For instance, as discussed in Chapter 2 (see page 58), the Little Pinks differ significantly from the 50 Cent Party because their online activities are driven by voluntary patriotism and emotional fervour rather than financial incentives or professional obligations. While the 50 Cent Party and Internet Water Army are composed of individuals who are directly hired by the state and private companies, respectively, to influence online discourse through coordinated and strategic posting (see Han 2015; Wang and Rice 2024), the Little Pinks are generally perceived as more organic participants in China's digital nationalist movements. Although those who are engaged with the anti-*baizuo* discourse are certainly more comparable to the Little Pinks, they differ in their focus and tone. The anti-*baizuo* discourse often centres around criticising Western ideologies and values, particularly liberalism, which these netizens

perceive as hypocritical or morally flawed. In fact, it is challenging to discern whether a clear divide exists between those participating in anti-*baizuo* discourse and the Little Pinks, as *baizuo* is a term that could easily be adopted and popularised within Little Pink circles. Regardless of such overlap, such distinctions between cybernationalist discourse and movements highlight the diverse ways in which Chinese netizens engage with digital nationalism, with each group contributing unique voices and strategies to the broader online discourse.

Given the government's avoidance or general lack of direct involvement in such racialised discourse, it would be valuable to explore how official anti-Western narratives differ from grassroots anti-*baizuo* discussions. This distinction could highlight the government's strategic disengagement from racially charged rhetoric while still permitting narratives that align with broader national interests. By examining these differences, future research could reveal how the government selectively promotes nationalist narratives that align with state interests while avoiding controversial topics that could harm its international image. Additionally, the findings may expose the balance between state-driven and grassroots nationalism, showing how citizen-led discourse contributes to the broader national agenda. A project focused on comparing official anti-Western discourses with grassroots *baizuo* discourses would provide valuable insights into the dynamics of online political communication in China. Moreover, by examining how these narratives differ, researchers could better understand the ways in which the government navigates controversial topics while allowing nationalist sentiments to flourish. Additionally, another potentially fruitful research endeavour might compare anti-*baizuo* discourse with other online movements, such as Weibo feminism and environmentalism, could illuminate the unique characteristics of the anti-*baizuo* phenomenon, revealing its role not as a site of resistance as it is in other cases, but as a tool for reinforcing state-sanctioned nationalism. This comparative analysis would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how digital spaces function as arenas for both state and grassroots expressions of identity and ideology.

In conclusion, this thesis offers valuable contributions across multiple fields of scholarship, with a particular emphasis on Area Studies, Politics, and the understanding of contemporary Chinese nationalism. By providing rare insights into China's sociopolitical landscape during a time of increasing research restrictions, the study enhances our knowledge of the complex dynamics at play in the region. By delving into the intricate dynamics of online nationalism, global perceptions, and the role of social media, this research not only offers a window into the perceptions and sentiments of Chinese netizens but also challenges prevailing assumptions about the

monolithic nature of Chinese society and its relationship with the world. The focus on social media as a critical tool in shaping both domestic and international perceptions of China further add to the discourse, shedding light on how Chinese netizens navigate and negotiate their identities in relation to Western ideologies. This research could inspire other Area Studies specialists to explore how social media shapes nationalism and global perceptions in other countries, such as India and Brazil. By examining the intersection of online discourse and national identity in different sociopolitical contexts, researchers can enrich their understanding of how such dynamics can influence national identities in an increasingly interconnected world.

This research also bridges gaps between traditional academic fields, offering nuanced perspectives that enrich International Relations by framing China's global outlook through a cultural and societal lens. Through the exploration of grassroots movements and the emerging public sphere, the thesis underscores the significance of digital platforms in fostering new forms of civic engagement in China, thereby challenging existing narratives and broadening our understanding of the interplay between state control and public agency. Ultimately, this work not only contributes to ongoing academic debates but also sets the stage for future research in the dynamic and ever-evolving field of China Studies.

While the findings of this research reveal a significant thread of anti-*baizuo* rhetoric in Chinese online discourse, it is critical to avoid reducing this to a monolithic view or overgeneralising the sentiment. Indeed, although this rhetoric is undoubtedly prevalent, it is not representative of the views of all Chinese social media users, as many hold diverging opinions. As demonstrated in Chapter 6, some users express disagreement with mainstream critiques, offering counterarguments or alternative views on *baizuo*-ness, Western ideologies, or philosophies. These dissenting voices have and continue to provide valuable insight into the nuanced nature of online discourse, showing that the stereotypical gung-ho Chinese nationalist does not dominate every conversation. The presence of disagreement signals that anti-Western sentiments and Chinese nationalism is not a homogenous movement but one shaped by internal tensions, contestations, and diverse viewpoints that extends beyond top-down narratives as widely believed (Lei 2011). This thesis stands as a testament to the critical importance of understanding contemporary China through the lens of its digital and sociopolitical transformations.

Looking beyond the immediate trigger of the COVID-19 pandemic, which undoubtedly contributed to anti-Western and anti-*baizuo* sentiments in China, the findings from this thesis suggests that this rhetoric

may stem from deeper anxieties. While the pandemic served as a convenient scapegoat, the intensity of anti-*baizuo* discourse also points to underlying concerns about national identity, cultural shifts, and perceived external threats. The militant tone of the rhetoric could be seen as a reaction not only to foreign influences but also to internal tensions related to ideological or cultural changes. In this context, anti-*baizuo* sentiment becomes a means of asserting control or reasserting traditional values in a rapidly changing global environment. Thus, the prominence of this rhetoric signals deeper cultural and ideological struggles within China, warranting a closer, more critical examination of its roots and implications. The findings of this doctoral thesis have broader implications for our understanding of China's role in global affairs and how this influences the perceptions and responses of Chinese netizens. China's increasing involvement in global governance, economic development, and geopolitical strategies inevitably shapes how its citizens perceive the world and their place within it.

Ultimately, this study has shown that Chinese netizens' critiques of the West are often framed within the context of China's rising global influence and the challenges it faces in asserting its identity on the world stage. These critiques are not just about rejecting Western values but are also about negotiating a new sense of Chinese identity that is distinct from, yet in dialogue with, global norms. A central contribution of this research lies in identifying anti-*baizuo* discourse as a manifestation of reactive nationalism. This type of nationalism emerges in response to perceived external challenges or threats, reflecting a grassroots effort to defend and assert China's position in the global order. While the Chinese state media and government undeniably shape public opinion, this study reveals that not only do anti-Western sentiments often originate from the bottom-up, but that they are fuelled by digital platforms that amplify existing sentiments. This thesis highlights the dynamic interplay between state influence and public agency, illustrating how digital platforms have enabled a burgeoning space for grassroots expression of nationalist and anti-Western discourse. Weibo, in particular, serves as an arena where Chinese netizens critique the West, articulate their frustrations, and reassert their national identity in the face of global challenges, like the pandemic. This dynamic reflects a significant shift in how public opinion is formed and expressed in contemporary China and underscores the evolving nature of its political and social landscape. Moreover, this research study has demonstrated that while the Chinese state media, and thus the government itself, undoubtedly plays a role in shaping public opinion, there is also evidence that there is a burgeoning space for grassroots expression of nationalist and anti-Western sentiments.

This dynamic interplay between state control and public agency is a key feature of China's evolving political and social landscape, and it certainly warrants further scholarly attention. By positioning anti-*baizuo* discourse within these frameworks of nationalism, this research contributes a new dimension to understanding Chinese online nationalism and its implications. It also underscores the importance of conducting rigorous and thoughtful research in an era when access to the region is increasingly restricted. This study aspires to inspire future scholars to explore the complexities of Chinese identity, politics, and culture, even in the face of growing challenges. Ultimately, it enriches the global conversation about China by encouraging more nuanced perspectives and fostering a deeper understanding of the forces shaping its society today, as well as its implications for the future of global relations.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Data collection summary: keyword search results

Keyword search (i.e., "*baizuo*" + "[keyword]")	Total number of posts collected pre-exclusion criteria	Number of posts kept post-exclusion criteria	Percentage (%) of posts kept post-exclusion criteria
"new crown virus" (新冠病毒)	121	61	50.4
"new crown pneumonia" (新冠肺炎)	68	33	48.5
"coronavirus" (冠状病毒)	82	36	43.9
"face masks" (口罩)	63	22	34.9
"pandemic" (大流行)	67	19	28.3
"virus" (病毒)	87	53	60.9
"coronavirus disease" (冠状病毒病)	76	31	40.8
"epidemic" (流行性)	92	43	46.7
"lockdown" (封锁)	58	17	29.3
"pneumonia" (肺炎)	89	24	26.9
Totals	803	337	41.9

Appendix B – Summary of data excluded from data analysis

Criteria for discarding Weibo post	Number of posts discarded	Percentage (%) of posts discarded from total number of posts
Reposts or duplicated content	302	37.6
Irrelevant content	164	20.4
Totals	466	58

Appendix C – Overview of Weibo post users' verification types

*Due to multiple Weibo posts being authored by the same user, the total number of post authors is noticeably different to the number of posts kept post-exclusion criteria.

	Individual accounts				Organisational accounts
Icon status	None	Yellow V	Orange V	Gold V	Blue V
User type	None verified authors	Verified authors	'High-quality creators'	'Highly Influential creators'	'Enterprise certification'; 'Content/IP agency certification'; 'Government certification'; 'Media accreditation'; 'Campus accreditation'; 'Public welfare certification'
Number of post authors*	92	72	23	34	0