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Playful, Coded, and Emotional Language: Discursive Strategies of Online Criticism on Chinese Social Media

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1. ABSTRACT

Language has always been essential in collective actions. Because offline collective actions are highly controlled in China, Chinese people often resort to online criticism, which heavily relies on the creative use of language to circumvent the government's control of public communication. This study collects and analyzes the data of the #JiangshanjiaoandHongqiman# public discourse on Weibo to investigate the discursive characteristics of Chinese people's online expressions. In February 2020, a mass organization of the government launched two official virtual idols on Weibo, one of the most widely used social media platforms in China. Amidst widespread discontent with the management of the pandemic, this intervention in fandom culture triggered a backlash among the Chinese Internet users. This study shows that the Chinese netizens expressed criticism through coded, playful, and emotional language. This article contributes to the literature on discursive strategies of online public discourse in China.

2. KEYWORDS

Discursive strategy; public discourse; social media; Chinese Internet; coded language

1. Introduction

The popularization of personal computers and the Internet in China in the 1990s and the early 2000s has led to the emergence of a lively, complex, and at times chaotic, Internet culture in China (Yang, 2003). The creative use of language has always been an essential part of Chinese Internet culture. Specifically, the use of coded and playful language has become the daily repertoire of the Chinese Internet users, and arguably, an indispensable part of their online identity. In recent years, especially since the introduction of the concept of “positive energy” (正能量 *zhengnengliang*) into the public discourse (Chen et al., 2021; Yang, 2018), there has been increased adoption of emotional language by the Chinese Internet users out of strategic reasons (Liu, 2022). Importantly, however, not all creative use of language on the Internet is strategic. Among the three, playful, coded, and emotional language, playful language is undeniably partly about play. Many occasions of the use of coded language, such as the famous case of “*cao ni ma*” (grass mud horse) (a discussion of which can be found in Section 5.1.), are part dissent part humor (Li, 2011).

This paper is a case study of the #JiangshanjiaoandHongqiman# discourse on the Chinese Internet. #JiangshanjiaoandHongqiman# became a trending hashtag on Weibo (also known as Sina Weibo), one of the most popular social media platforms in China, in February 2020. The hashtag referred to the official virtual idols published by a mass organization of the government.

The Chinese Internet users engaged with the public discourse, as with many other online public discourses, to make playful, coded, and emotional commentaries on the socio-political realities of China. By examining the public discourse of #JiangshanjiaoandHongqiman# this paper aims to showcase the creative use of language by the Chinese netizens. In our analysis, we draw attention to the netizens' discursive strategies, but we also recognize that many of the commentaries are also humorous expressions meant to catch the attention of family and friends, colleagues, and other Internet users. We believe that playfulness and strategy do not contradict each other. On the contrary, their coexistence adds to the complexity and nuance of Chinese Internet culture.

The contributions of our empirical study are primarily twofold. Firstly, by unpacking the various discursive characteristics of online criticism through the case of the #JiangshanjiaoandHongqiman# discourse, our study further advances existing literature on online public discourse with a unique dataset. As social movements are quickly censored and controlled in today's China (Zeng, 2020), online criticism becomes one of the few remaining means of political participation for the Chinese citizens.

Secondly, also our most surprising finding, by analyzing the discursive strategies of the Chinese netizens, we discover that these discursive strategies assist the netizens to speak that which is unspeakable, but, at the same time, also fundamentally limit what the netizens can say about the virtual idols. For example, openly feminist expressions remain unspeakable. Besides, much of the critique is voiced alongside emotional declarations of one's loyalty to the country. This surprising finding attests to the complexity of Chinese Internet culture and the nuances of human action.

We use qualitative research methods, including thematic analysis and textual analysis to analyze a total of 5,489 Weibo posts gathered from February 17, 2020, to March 17, 2020 under the hashtag #JiangshanjiaoandHongqiman#. We ask the following question: What are the key discursive strategies of the #JiangshanjiaoandHongqiman# discourse which were given birth to by citizens who lack fundamental means of social participation online and offline?

2. Background

The Communist Youth League of China (CYLC) launched two official virtual idols, *Jiangshanjiao* and *Hongqiman* (江山娇与红旗漫), on Weibo on February 17, 2020. Officially, CYLC is a mass organization (群团组织 *quntuan zuzhi*) led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The launch of the two official virtual idols took place amidst the early pandemic in China. An overwhelming number of critical comments by the Chinese netizens eventually led to the deletion of all the virtual idol posts on the CYLC Weibo account merely five hours after the launch. Many of the netizens used the hashtag #JiangshanjiaoandHongqiman# to criticize not only the virtual idols, but also the government's general mismanagement of the pandemic. The online discourse lasted well beyond the launch and the swift deletion of the virtual idols on February 17, 2020, resulting in an Internet mass incident, which is the term the Chinese government uses to refer to large-scale online events.

Jiangshanjiao and *Hongqiman* first appeared on December 26th, 2019, when they acted as the virtual hosts of the Fourth China Manufacturing Day, a memorial activity held by the CYLC to commemorate a Chinese manufacturing pioneer, the late President Mao Zedong (see Figure 2). The names of the two figures derived from Mao's poems. The meaning behind the name "*Jiangshanjiao*" (the female virtual idol) was "the charming land," while the meaning behind the

name “*Hongqiman*” (the male virtual idol) was “the unrestrained red flag.” The two idols had not aroused any public attention until they were publicized by the CYLC as official virtual idols on February 17th, 2020 (see Figure 1).

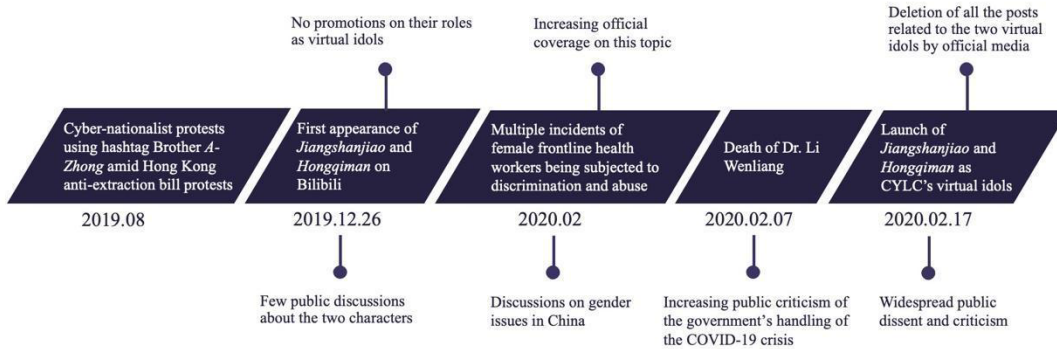


Figure 1. Social context and timeline



Figure 2. Screenshot of *Jiangshanjiao* and *Hongqiman* in a video published by the CYLC on Bilibili. Link: <https://www.bilibili.com/video/av80860654/> (accessed 8 December 2022)

The widespread dissatisfaction with the handling of the pandemic in early 2020 was spurred by the death of Dr. Li Wenliang¹ and the inconsiderate treatment of female medical workers (Yang, 2022) (see Figure 1). Angered by the unfair treatment of female medical workers, on February 18, 2020, the second day after the launch of the virtual idols, a new hashtag #*JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod*# became popular on Weibo. With the extended hashtag, netizens used political satire to question sexism in their everyday life (Wang & Ouyang, 2023; Yang, 2022).

¹

3. Literature Review

3.1. *The tug-of-war on the Internet*

Scholars have noticed that the Chinese government has been actively utilizing the Internet to steer public opinion and facilitate public services (MacKinnon, 2011; Zhou, 2006). In Weibo alone, the number of verified government and state-affiliated accounts has reached 140,837 by December 2020 (China Internet Network Information Center, 2021). Undoubtedly, Weibo, as well as other popular social media platforms, has become a new political arena for the continuous tug-of-war between the Chinese people and the Chinese government (Li, 2011; Liu, 2015; Sullivan, 2012; Tong & Lei, 2013; Zhou, 2006).

Specifically, earlier scholarship has focused on the democratizing effect under a purportedly authoritarian regime, as well as its role in the construction of the Chinese civil society (Sullivan, 2012; Zhou, 2009). Recently, some scholars have gradually shifted their focus from the political potential of the Internet to the underlying role of the Chinese government in shaping the networked space through censorship and management (Han, 2015; King et al., 2013; Schneider, 2018).

While some scholars focus on the Chinese government's strategic use of the Internet, others have focused on the Chinese netizens by illustrating the antagonistic relationship between the Chinese government and the Internet users using the framework of control and resistance (Chase & Mulvenon, 2002; Li, 2011; Zhou, 2009). As opposed to following the framework of control and resistance, another line of recent research examines the cooperative relationship between the Chinese government and the Chinese netizens, either in terms of the government's adoption of incorporation and infiltration strategies (Brady, 2009) or in terms of the netizens' defense of the regime (Fang & Repnikova, 2018; Han, 2015).

A body of literature explores the tug of war on the Chinese Internet amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Scholars have examined the ways in which the authorities practice online governance, for instance, through the use of visual elements (Schneider, 2021), sonic elements (Zhang & Chow, 2021), and emotional politics (Song & Liu, 2022). Additionally, some researchers have documented public reactions and online resistance to the government's handling of the pandemic (Sun & Wright, 2023; Yang & Zhang, 2021; Yang, 2022). Others have focused on the involvement of social media platforms and commercial entities in these complex processes of negotiation (De Kloet et al., 2021).

3.2. *Discursive features of online criticism in China*

Previous studies on the creative use of language on the Chinese Internet have shown that online contentious political expressions in China tend to be coded, playful, and emotional. First, as Yang points out, "Chinese netizens have developed a rich culture of using ... coded language to express protest" (2014, p.111). Pinyin acronyms, for instance, are utilized for political deliberation as a form of resistance against Internet censorship (Chen, 2014). For examples, the term "MZ" is the shorthand for "*minzhu* (民主)," meaning "democracy" (Yuan, 2012). Scholars have also examined the political potential of homonyms that are created and widely circulated online (Tang & Yang, 2011; Nordin & Richaud, 2014). The use of coded words allows the netizens to bypass censorship by rendering visible what has been made invisible (Yang, 2016).

Another key discursive feature of China's online discourse is its "playful style" (Yang, 2009, p.85). Netizens adopt diverse playful ways to communicate social and political issues online, such as satire (Luqiu, 2017; Tang & Bhattacharya, 2011; Yang & Jiang, 2015) and parody (Gong & Yang, 2010; Guo, 2018; Li, 2011). Using entertaining and humorous discourses is an alternative way for ordinary people to participate in social commentary in response to political control and social stratification (Meng, 2011; Tang & Yang, 2011). Due to the difficulty of conducting serious political debates on the Chinese internet, playful texts afford the public "a safer route of communication" (Meng, 2011, p.29). Such "indirection that involves attributed meaning and the creative use of language" is also seen as helpful to the state, because it allows a safe degree of criticism and reduces violent expressions of political dissent that may put the Party's political leadership at stake (Wu & Fitzgerald, 2021, p.10).

Emotions also play a key role in Chinese online discourse. Internet users engage in contentious politics often out of sympathy for victims of social injustice (Yang, 2009), as well as out of anger at the government authorities for mismanagement of social issues (Xie, 2012). The emotional outbursts on Chinese social media allow the public to make their voices heard and mobilize engagement, giving rise to an "agonistic public sphere" (Tong, 2015). Researchers show that in order to prevent collective actions, Chinese government authorities have made consistent efforts to reorient public sentiment into "positive energy" (*zhengnengliang*) which stands for supportive sentiments towards government agendas (Chen et al., 2021; Yang, 2018), such as regime-supportive nationalism (Song & Liu, 2022). In such contexts, emotions are conveyed through "strategic, deliberate packaging and manipulation" to express critiques that can survive (Liu, 2022, p.280). For example, instead of directly condemning the government for information control, social media users often convert their negative emotions into positive ones by showing gratitude for those who dared to release information (Liu, 2022).

The utilization of these tactics in online public discourse is nothing new in China, but the digital technologies have transformed the ways in which these expressions are generated and circulated. Online criticism has become "a networked practice" (Yang & Jiang, 2015, p.3), with "strong vitality thanks to collective action, such as the anonymous production, distribution and sharing of work on Chinese social media" (Luqiu, 2017). The highly decentralized and networked circulation of public expressions give rise to an ambivalent online sphere, with "a remix of different symbols and units of meaning" (Yang & Jiang, 2015, p.3). As a result, online criticism in China is characterized by "the fluidity and fuzziness of cyberpolitics" (Han, 2018, p.79). Moreover, the fuzziness of Chinese cyber public sphere is not only a result of networked practice and the remix of symbols and meanings (Yang & Jiang, 2015), but also that of the integration of serious criticism with humor (Yates and Hasmath, 2017). Coded playful expressions allow Internet users to feel a sense of connectivity (Meng, 2011; Yates and Hasmath,

2017), and in some cases, act as an essential part of their identity and community formation online (Chen, 2014; Guo, 2018; Zou, 2020). Our study contributes to previous literature on the complexity and fuzziness of online cyberpolitics in China by analyzing the discursive features of the case of the #JiangshanjiaoandHongqiman# discourse .

4. Methods

This paper employs qualitative research methods, including thematic analysis and textual analysis to analyze the collected data. The dataset has a total of 5,489 Weibo posts gathered through the data mining software *Houyi*. The dataset consists of all the Weibo microblogs that used the hashtag #JiangshanjiaoandHongqiman#, or mentioned “*Jiangshanjiao* and *Hongqiman*” without hashtags, or were direct messages to the official CYLC virtual idols by using the “@” function on Weibo, for the period of February 17, 2020, to March 17, 2020. The launch of the CYLC virtual idols itself was a short-lived online event which lasted only five hours on February 17, 2020, before the virtual idols were taken down by the managers of the official CYLC Weibo account. Arguably, the discursive event itself was for a much longer period, due to the continuous active participation of the Chinese netizens who kept utilizing the hashtag, retweeting, and writing direct messages to the CYLC virtual idols, knowing well that the idols had already been taken down. We have chosen the period of February 17, 2020, to March 17, 2020, for the purpose of building a dataset of a manageable size for qualitative analysis.

We first employed thematic analysis to analyse the collected data. During this process, from June 2021 to August 2021, the group convened weekly to discuss the discovered themes until we reached consensus of the major themes. Based on these iterative processes, we identified these major themes:

- (1) Nation (国家 *guojia*) and nationalism
- (2) Fandom and fandomization of politics
- (3) Gender inequalities

During this initial stage of analysis, we discovered that a sub-hashtag #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod# has emerged around midnight on February 18, 2020, which led to an increase in the discussion of gender. We also discovered that the main hashtag #JiangshanjiaoandHongqiman# remained prominent well after February 18, 2020. We chose to keep our original dataset for this study.

As the second step of our analysis, we used textual analysis to analyze the collected texts (McKee, 2003). We focused on the prominent discursive features we found in the dataset and crosschecked our findings with the existing literature on the discursive features of online political discourse in China. Following our results, we hence divided the discussion part into the following parts: “Coded language,” “Playful Style,” “Emotional language.” Finally, we connected the three key discursive features to the three identified major themes in the #JiangshanjiaoandHongqiman# discourse, investigating whether certain discursive strategies are connected to a certain theme(s) in the discourse (see Section 6 “Discussion”).

5. Analysis: Discursive Characteristics of Online Public Discourse in China

5.1. Coded language

A common strategy among Chinese netizens to defy censorship is to use coded language (Yang, 2014, p.111). The use of coded language not only helps netizens bypass Internet censorship and express criticism, but also highlights the very existence of censorship by making visible what have made invisible (Yang, 2016). When netizens replace parts of their texts with codes understood among themselves but undetectable by the automated censorship system on Weibo or other platforms (MacKinnon, 2008), they also make the censored parts stand out against the rest of the text as the “unspeakable.” In this way, coded language adds another layer of meaning to the original text. Because of the frequency of its use, coded language also becomes part of the rich Internet culture in China (Yang, 2014) where both censorship and the evasion thereof are the norms. Our dataset shows that coded language is widely used in all three themes, which confirms existing literature on the frequency of its use on the Chinese Internet.

In our dataset, we discovered that the netizens use Pinyin acronyms, English synonyms, and homonyms to replace politically sensitive vocabularies, which confirms existing literature on the topic (Chen, 2014; Yuan, 2012; Tang & Yang, 2011). Most of these vocabularies are political terms or names of significant political entities. For instance, one netizen wrote,

I don't believe that loving my country (爱国 *aiguo*) is the same as loving the party (爱 *party*), or loving socialism (爱 *sh* 主义). To me, the latter two are only tools to protect the former. This land is eternal. “Zh” nation evolved here for generations. I love this country, and I love our nation, but it does not mean that I love the Qing Dynasty, or the Ming Dynasty, or the Yuan Dynasty... I do not deny him completely. I have witnessed where he did well. Where he did not do well, I have to speak out loudly, so that he accept the supervision of “rm.” Only in this way he can protect the motherland in the long term, right? *Jiangshanjiao* and *Hongqiman* is the results [of his blunder?].

Instead of using the Chinese word for party (党 *dang*), the commenter used the English synonym “party” to refer to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Moreover, socialism was referred to as “sh 主义,” with a combination of the Pinyin acronym of “social” (社会 *shehui*) and the Chinese characters for “ism” (主义 *zhuyi*). Another coded word in the text is “rm,” which is the Pinyin acronym of “the people” (人民 *renmin*). Notably, political terms which emphasize the oppositional relationship between state and society, such as “citizen” (公民 *gongmin*), “citizen society” (公民社会 *gongmin shehui*), and “the people” (人民 *renmin*), have become increasingly sensitive and disappeared from the public lexicon in recent years (Snape, 2019). This explains the commenter’s choice to use

the Pinyin acronym of “the people” in a statement that stressed the opposition between “he,” which implied the CCP (the “party”), and the people.

Other frequently used Pinyin acronyms in the #JiangshanjiaoandHongqiman# discourse include “zf” for the government (政府 *zhengfu*), “wxhq” for the five-star red flag of China (五星红旗 *wuxing hongqi*), and “d mei” for “*dang mei*” (党媒, which means state media). We found that netizens also often used homonyms when they mentioned sensitive political terms. For example, state media was also often written by the netizens as “党煤” (*dang mei*), which sounds exactly the same as “state media,” but actually means “party coal.”

An overview of the #JiangshanjiaoandHongqiman# event, however, shows that most of the participating netizens did not shy away from using the term “citizen” (公民 *gongmin*) in their expressions. In fact, many netizens expressed their criticism fearlessly, “We are citizens, not fans!” Variations of this statement became a slogan for the #JiangshanjiaoandHongqiman# event. The slogan captured the anger of the criticizing netizens towards the “fandomization” (饭圈化 *fanquanhua*) of politics in a time when the pandemic remained a serious public health crisis in China.

Apart from covering up sensitive vocabularies, Chinese netizens also use coded language to substitute vulgar expressions which are also banned on the Chinese Internet. On January 5, 2009, the Chinese government launched a campaign to “clean up vulgar content on the Internet” (清理互联网低俗内容 *qingli hulianwang disu neirong*) (Shang, 2009; Tang & Yang, 2011). Thereafter, to avoid their posts being deleted for vulgarity, Chinese netizens commonly code their vulgar expressions on the Internet. For instance, many netizens used “tm” to replace “*ta ma*,” which is a Chinese curse word equivalent to “fuck your mother.” Similarly, many netizens used “cnm,” which is the Pinyin acronym of “*cao ni ma*,” which also means “fuck your mother.” Netizens used these curse words to express their anger towards the incident and the authorities behind it. There was also an undeniable sense of sassy humor in these utterances. For instance, one netizen said, “You want to make the people all turn into fans? *cnm* I’ll let you see the truth of fandom. In the face of the epidemic, I overcome all the difficulties to just take part in *Jiangshanjiao* and *Hongqiman*’s funeral.” The funeral referred to the deletion of the two virtual idols, which acted as a clever reminder to the other netizens that the death of the two virtual idols came only five hours after their birth.

5.2. Playful Style

In the #JiangshanjiaoandHongqiman# event, we found that the netizens used playful styles in their expression of dissent (Yang, 2009, p.85). The most used playful discursive tactic in this online discourse is satire, which confirms the findings of previous literature (Luqiu, 2017; Tang & Bhattacharya, 2011; Yang & Jiang, 2015). Satire as a “form of grassroots political expression

which is produced through networks of meaning” (Yang & Jiang, 2015, p. 2) constitutes an essential discursive strategy for the netizens. To our surprise, we found that satire is most often used as a discursive strategy in feminist expressions in the discourse (for more see Section 5 “Discussion”). Many netizens asked satirical questions to the two virtual idols, while evoking issues of gender inequality they have suffered or witnessed in their everyday life. For instance, one netizen asked,

#JiangshanjiaoandHongqiman# *Jiangshanjiao*, do you get treated as an object in the society after studying hard for so many years and get "suggested" to get married? *Jiangshanjiao* and *Hongqiman*, do you get the comment that "rebuilding the nation depends on foreigners" after years of hard work? *Jiangshanjiao*, are you moved? *Hongqiman*, are you thankful?

The entire comment consists of only rhetorical questions which do not intend to be and cannot be answered. Rather, these questions speak to the unanswerable questions of gender inequalities in Chinese society (Guo et al., 2022). Many similar gender related questions were asked by the netizens directly to *Jiangshanjiao*, the female virtual idol, such as, “Can you get a divorce after suffering from family violence?” “If you are 30 years old and still unmarried, will anyone want you anymore?” “If you have a baby, will he or she have your family name?” On the one hand, these sarcastic questions appear to be harmless on the surface, but reveal truths of women’s oppression in Chinese society. By asking these unanswerable questions to *Jiangshanjiao*, the netizens not only mocked the virtual idol who is seen as a product of the patriarchal social system, but also ridiculed patriarchy (父权 *fuqian*) itself. On the other, the sense of self-deprecating humor embedded in these questions connected the Internet users by addressing, cultivating, or even embracing, the identity of “left-over women” among them (Fincher, 2023; Ji, 2015; Yating, 2019). Moreover, these questions, touching upon various aspects of women’s life in China, created a network of symbols and meanings which was most powerful when read in relation to one another (Yang & Jiang, 2015, p. 3). By playfully addressing *Jiangshanjiao*, the participating netizens addressed one another.

One of the most asked satirical questions regarding the virtual idols is a question directed to *Jiangshanjiao*, asking if she gets her period. The hashtag #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod# started to become popular on February 18, 2020. Not all commenters used the new hashtag. Some just asked *Jiangshanjiao* directly about her menstruation, such as the one below,

Jiangshanjiao, how can you not get married in the future? If you don’t get married, what else can you do?! *Jiangshanjiao*, why do you have menstruation? Isn’t it a waste of national resources? You can just receive progesterone shots or simply stop your period! *Jiangshanjiao*, your skirt is too short. Do you want to seduce someone? *Jiangshanjiao*, why do you read so much? You’ll be someone else’s wife anyway! *Jiangshanjiao*, why should I raise you? You’re a money-loser! *Jiangshanjiao* and *Hongqiman*!

Here, *Jiangshanjiao*’s menstruation becomes a symbolic term that speaks to the inhumane treatment of female medical workers who were working on the frontline (see Figure 1). Reports about female frontline workers being injected of progesterone, ridiculed about the “inconvenience” of their menstruation, and forced to have their heads shaved, sparked fury

across China, but led to little change to the status quo of the working conditions of female medical workers. By incorporating sarcastic questions about female menstruation in their hashtag activism, the Chinese netizens have resorted to a safe route of dissent. No specific responsible parties were named. No proposals for change were made. No political leadership was threatened.

We found that many netizens also use satirical expressions to voice their criticism of fandom and fandomization of politics. For example, many asked if the CYLC membership fees served as fan fund for the virtual idols. Others asked if the CYLC membership fees were used to boost popularity (打榜*dabang*) of the idols. Some asked if CYLC's collection of membership fees is the same as "fandom fundraising" (饭圈集资*fanquan jizi*). By playfully comparing CYLC's launch of the virtual idols to fandom activities, the commenters exposed the ridiculousness of the situation. However, similar to the discourse of gender inequality, while the satirical expressions afforded the netizens a safer way to voice their critical views, they arguably also rendered these utterances less powerful by making them indirect and, to some audience, esoteric.

5.3. Emotional Language

The emotional dimension on the Chinese Internet is an essential means for Chinese people to make their voices heard and exert their influence on social life (Tong, 2015). In this event, the participants expressed different types of emotions in their posts, such as anger, disappointment, sadness, and nationalist sentiment. We discovered that the use of emotional language is more associated with the first and second themes, namely nationalism and fandomization of politics. There are angry posts about gender inequality, but only a few. Most netizens resorted to sarcasm to engage in feminist expressions (for more see Section 5 "Discussion").

Negative emotions constitute a crucial part of the participants' critique of the incident. Anger is a common reaction to the virtual idols. The launch of the virtual idols was seen as an attempt to fandomize politics, which infringed the rights of the participants as citizens. Participants often used "you" to address the management team and creatively adopted rhetorical questions, swear words, and repetitive punctuation marks, among other methods to evoke an emotional response from readers. One poster asked, "Are you trying to be fucking funny?????" Another stated, "Are you sb? I am the master of the country, not its fan, okay?! You spent all your time doing something useless. I don't know what the management team is even thinking. Mdzz." "Sb" and "Mdzz" are slangs on the Chinese Internet meaning "stupid cunt" and "fucking retarded" respectively. Others used less vulgar language but expressed no less intense emotions, such as disgust and extreme sadness. One wrote "I thought Brother A-Zhong was already disgusting enough. There had never been a winter as cold and miserable as this one."²

Besides the negative emotions, the venting of fervent nationalist sentiment and the expression of loyalty to the nation state (国家*guojia*) are also prevalent in our dataset. The participants saw the two idols as inappropriate personalization of the nation state, which harms the national image and pride. They often adopted romantic terms such as "homeland" and "motherland" in their passionate expression of loyalty. For example, one netizen expressed that,

2

Maybe individuals have different ways of expressing love, but to me, the homeland is like my mom. No matter how old I grow, her seniority in the family hierarchy will always be the same. My homeland is my mother, my immediate family, great and selfless. My spirit and blood belong to my motherland.

We discovered that nationalist sentiment often went hand in hand with negative emotions to convey more nuanced feelings. For instance, one netizen said that “I am kind of disappointed. Don't do this with the official accounts. This is an insult to our country and does not represent its character.” The commenter made it clear that his or her disappointment at the authorities was purely grounded on the concerns about his or her country, because there was no way the virtual idols could capture its graceful quality. Another stated that,

I beg the management team to stop misleading public opinion. Do what you should do. To personalize the country is bad enough. How can you idolize it?? I am already very upset at the motherland becoming Brother A-Zhong... I love my country even without you trying to put it on a pedestal. I fucking love every individual in it. I need you to put these individuals in the news, not to used them as parts to build the so-called virtual idols.

By claiming to be a patriot, the commenter declared that despite his or her dissent, he or she harbored unwavering love for the country, and therefore, was in line with the official political agendas. Arguably, the netizens' declaration of their love for the country allowed them to create safer and more acceptable contexts for their critique, so that their criticism could better survive the scrutiny of the censorship agencies.

6. Discussion

This study explored the online discourse of Chinese netizens against the CYLC's official virtual idols on Weibo. Their critiques of the *Jiangshanjiao* and *Hongqiman* incident are deeply embedded in complicated social contexts during the early pandemic in China. This hashtag activism needs to be situated in thriving feminist awareness in China in recent years (Wu & Dong, 2019), the unique fandom culture in China (Liu, 2019), and the Chinese public's discontent towards the draconian methods used by the government during the pandemic. Our thematic analysis showed that the Weibo posts centered around the topics of nationalism, fandomization of politics, and gender inequalities. We offered a close textual analysis and identified three discursive characteristics in the political expressions of the criticizing netizens: coded language, playful style, and emotional language.

Specifically, we found that, facing censorship the participants creatively used coded terms to avoid being detected by the censorship system. Moreover, their criticism was characterized by playfulness, such as the use of satire to question the prevalence of gender inequalities in contemporary Chinese society. Finally, emotions also played an essential role in their expressions. Most interestingly, their anger at the authorities was accompanied by emotional declarations of their loyalty to the country. As Yang and Wang notes (2016), there is minimal space available for acts of openly subversive activism in an authoritarian state such as China. Our analysis revealed that by incorporating these discursive tactics the netizens have created for themselves a safer context to express their critique online, but the critique often remained indirect.

We discovered that the netizens adopted different discursive strategies in response to both the perceived threats associated with the particular themes and the objectives of their communication. According to our observations, the netizens most often used playful styles to critique gender inequalities. Emotional language was more associated with nationalism and fandomization of politics. We found that there were no obvious connections between the use of coded language and the three major themes we identified in the discourse. As a popular discursive strategy on the Chinese Internet, coded language was widely used by Chinese netizens to speak the unspeakable.

At the same time, it must be recognized that these discursive features are not always employed with deliberate and strategic intent. Coded, playful, and emotional language has become ingrained in the daily social media practices of netizens. These styles are used partly as a response to the existing online censorship, but other factors may also influence their online discourse. For example, playfulness might be employed to attract attention, enable connectivity, and facilitate identity formation.

We found that participants often resorted to sarcasm to engage in feminist expressions. Angry posts about gender inequality also existed, but were less common. This could be attributed to the rising feminist awareness in China on the one hand, and the Chinese authorities' wary attitude towards it on the other. As feminist activism gradually became a sensitive topic in China, Chinese netizens had to resort to lighter and more humorous expressions when voicing their discontent about the unfair treatment of women and especially female health workers during the early pandemic. Another factor that led to satirical expressions of feminist sentiment was the stigmatization of feminism in China which denounced radical feminism as non-authentic and pseudo-feminism (Yang et al., 2023). The fear of being attacked and stigmatized might have caused the online netizens to refrain from using emotional language when expressing feminist concerns.

We also found that the netizens opted for affective language as a discursive strategy when they spoke of the nation and the fandomization of politics. The netizens preferred more romantic and emotional speech in praise of their “motherland” (祖国母亲 *zuguo muqin*) and avoided humorous expressions when speaking of the nation state. In recent years, the Chinese authorities have shown a high level of adaptivity in incorporating nationalism into its own political agenda to garner political support (Yang, 2019). The praise of the “motherland” has had a long history of being used as an essential part of nationalist expressions (Zhang, 2022). Hence, by addressing the “motherland” affectively, the netizens borrowed the ideological legitimacy of nationalism to dress up their critical utterances. Moreover, the Chinese authorities have started to integrate fandom culture into online nationalist practices in recent years (Liu, 2019; Wong, 2021). As a new addition to the Chinese authorities' public experiment, the fandomization of politics and the criticism thereof have yet to become a sensitive topic on the Chinese Internet.

In other words, compared to feminism, both nationalism and the fandomization of politics are less of a target of censorship on the Chinese Internet, but how these important themes – feminism, nationalism, and fandomization of politics, evolve and play out in China in the long term require further research and continuous monitoring. For now, what can be said at all are spoken loudly and passionately. What cannot be said are spoken nevertheless, but quietly with sarcasm and humor.

7. Conclusion

This study sheds light on the complexity of online discourse on the Chinese Internet. Our study found that the discursive characteristics, which have become an essential part of Chinese Internet culture, afforded netizens a safe way to express their political opinions on the one hand, but simultaneously restricted the power of these utterances on the other. Our most surprising discovery is that the powerful discursive strategies also mark the very limitations of what can be spoken on the Chinese Internet. The dynamics between censorship and counter-censorship practices in China is constantly evolving. The two sides are actively adapting to each other while testing each other's limits.

Notes:

¹ The public regarded Dr. Li as a whistle-blower of the coronavirus. Dr. Li, an ophthalmologist in Wuhan, informed his colleagues about the appearance of a SARS-like virus in December 2019, at the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak in China.

² “Brother A-Zhong” is a nickname for China. It became popular during a series of cyber expeditions by patriotic fangirls on social media platforms amid the Hong Kong anti-extraction bill protests in 2019. The fangirls used a fandom term to personify China as a male superstar. Many netizens in the #JiangshanjiaoandHongqiman# protest compared the two incidents, regarding both as “fandomization” of politics.

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