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#PositiveEnergy Douyin: Constructing ‘Playful Patriotism’ on a Chinese Short Video Application

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Abstract

‘Positive energy’ (*zheng nengliang*) is a popular buzzword in Chinese political discourse that has embodied mainstream political ideology in China since 2012. This term has also become prominent on Douyin, a prominent Chinese short-video platform. By June 2018, there were over 500 Chinese governmental accounts on Douyin promoting ‘positive energy’ videos, with content being viewed over 1.6 billion times. Douyin even created a separate trending section called ‘Positive Energy’ for videos that promote the dominant State ideology. This study argues that the Positive Energy feature on Douyin is significant, as the Chinese government has accused, and even permanently shut down, several digital platforms for spreading what it considers ‘vulgarity’, or the antithesis of positive energy. Using the app walkthrough method and a content analysis of over 800 videos collected from the ‘Positive Energy’ section of Douyin, this study explores how Douyin promotes the Chinese State’s political agenda by promoting a new form of ‘playful patriotism’ online.

Keywords: short-video; Douyin; China, playful patriotism

#PositiveEnergy Douyin: Constructing ‘Playful Patriotism’ on a Chinese Short Video Application

Introduction

Douyin is a mobile short video platform first released in China in September 2016 by Chinese tech giant ByteDance. It has recently become one of the most successful short-video platforms in the country. At a curator conference hosted by Douyin in August 2019, the platform’s general manager, Zhang Nan, claimed the app’s development was ‘beyond expectation’ as Douyin’s daily active users had reached 320 million (China Daily, 2019). Government support is a necessity for the success of Chinese internet companies (Keane & Zhao, 2012) and Chinese information and communication technologies (ICTs) are often shaped by techno-nationalist policies (Plantin & Seta, 2019). Though not as closely associated with the Chinese government as Baidu, Alibaba, or Tencent (collectively ‘BAT’), ByteDance still reflects the logics of other major Chinese media companies who walk a fine line between achieving commercial goals and fulfilling political goals of the Chinese State (Zhao, 2008). On Douyin, users feel the presence of the Chinese State through the platform’s promotion of *#PositiveEnergy* trending videos.

‘Positive energy (*zheng nengliang*)’ has been a buzzword in China’s political discourse since 2012 (Yang & Tang, 2018). Positive energy generated a kind of ‘transcendental Chinese patriotism’ (Du, 2014, p. 5) that differs from mainstream Chinese patriotism constructed by the State by being more ‘grassroots’ in nature. Since 2012, however, the State has effectively appropriated the discourse of ‘positive energy’ and associated its meaning with ‘attitudes or emotions that are aligned with the ideological or value systems of the [Chinese Communist Party],’ (Yang & Tang, 2018, p. 3). By June 2018, there were over 500 Chinese governmental accounts on Douyin

promoting Positive Energy, including government institutions and State media, whose videos had collectively amassed over 1.6 billion views (Zhulan, 2018). To support the State's exploitation of 'positive energy', and in a symbolically important move, Douyin developed a separate *Positive Energy* trending section on its platform. The inclusion of this feature, which did not appear in earlier versions of Douyin, is important as it may have been added after a public relations incident in which parent company ByteDance ran up against China's media regulator (Ho, 2018).

The platform governance of Douyin appears to follow internet regulations from the State, similar to other Chinese video platforms (i.e. Lin & de Kloet, 2019; Wang & Lobato, 2019). In April 2018 ByteDance was required to permanently shut down *Neihanduanzi*, a humorous memes application, after the app was accused of spreading vulgarity online (Ho, 2018). Previous research has also evinced more complex and co-regulatory governance frameworks in the way the Chinese government regulates its flagship digital platforms owned by BAT (Hong & Xu, 2019). In considering ByteDance, this study analyses how Douyin encapsulates values of *Positive Energy* into its platform to align with the State's political agenda. This study offers insight as to how a Chinese short-video platform can be a tool to promote a more *playful* style of patriotism online. This digitally enacted playful patriotism reflects the State's efforts to ally with Chinese grassroots cyber nationalism and lead it to be more consistent with the State's patriotic agenda.

This article begins by reviewing short videos as a medium alongside the *Positive Energy* phenomenon in China of the past decade. Next we discuss forms of Chinese patriotism and nationalism, as well as our conception of playfulness in the context of short video. We follow by describing our methodology; an app walkthrough of Douyin (Light, Burgess, & Duguay, 2018) and content analysis (Neuendorf, 2017) of videos

systematically collected from Douyin's *Positive Energy* trending section. The findings and discussion section present themes from our analysis that support our development of *playful patriotism*, the process through which official accounts and individual users make patriotic content more palatable, appealing, and spreadable. We conclude by arguing that the emergence of playful patriotism on Douyin is emblematic of a broader shift in online nationalistic and patriotic discourse in Chinese digital media.

Literature Review

Short Video, Douyin, and Positive Energy

Short video refers to video content that is shorter than five minutes, often between 15 and 60 seconds, distributed digitally by platforms such as Douyin and many others. Short video is a relatively new media format with features such as low-cost production, highly spreadable content, and blurred boundaries between producers and consumers (Kong, 2018). By October 2018, an estimated 648 million users were on Chinese short video platforms like Kuaishou, Meipai, and Douyin (Su, 2019), accounting for almost 80 percent of all internet users in China (CNNIC, 2019). Short video content has proven to be a valuable tool for aspiring online content creators (Mehta & Kaye, 2019).

From the homepage, Douyin allows users to view algorithmically curated short videos in an endless scrolling mode (Elegant, 2019) (Figure 1). Users may also switch to view videos in a separate trending page. Trending videos on Douyin are agglomerated by hashtags (Figure 2) or collected under a separate special section on the trending page called 'Positive Energy (*zhengnengliang*)' (Figure 3). The positive energy

page displays specific types of videos that conform to a specific state ideology.



Figure 1 Douyin Homepage

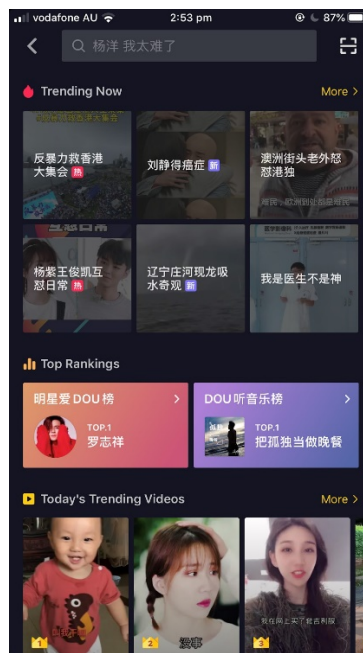


Figure 2 Douyin Trending Page

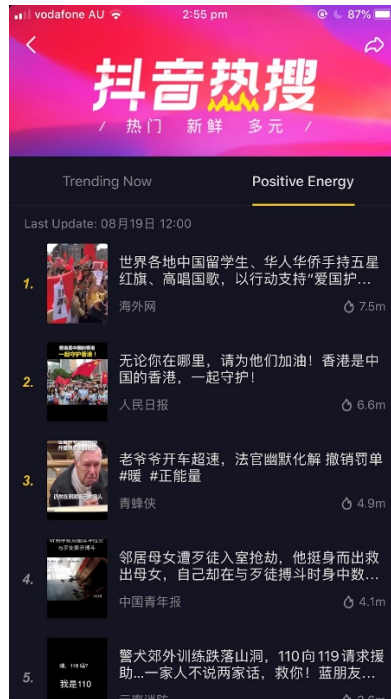


Figure 3 Douyin Positive Energy page

It is important to note that Douyin, like other short video and digital media platforms in China, are beholden to State governance that ‘demand[s] a compliant culture’ online (Lin & de Kloet, 2019, p. 4). In recent years, the Cyberspace Administration of China (2017) has passed a series of regulations governing the emerging content production space, which dictate content on platforms must conform to official ideologies or face penalties ¹.

Moving on to the specific ideology promoted on Douyin, *Positive Energy* has become a widely used keyword in Chinese social and political discourse (Yang & Tang, 2018). Originally stemming from Western positive psychology, earlier iterations of *Positive Energy* in China were associated with re-appropriating scientific terminology into lay language and referencing Chinese folk beliefs of charity, emotionality, and psychology (Yang & Tang 2018, p. 10). More recently, *Positive Energy* has been used

¹ For a broader discussion of short video regulation, see Lin and de Kloet, 2019.

to describe Chinese wellbeing, prosperity, and national strength, as part of a broader political narrative of Chinese happiness (Hird, 2018).

Positive energy first appeared in China in the early 2000s (Yang & Tang, 2018) and was popularized during the 2012 London Olympics, around the same time as the Xi Jinping government came to power (Triggs, 2019). The term is widely described as a grassroots movement, for its seemingly spontaneous emergence in China (Du, 2014). Positive energy focuses on ‘societal and moral issues accompanying marketisation and undermining Party dominance, the reinforcing of a common duty to resolve such problems in unison with the state, a promotion of active moral behaviour, and support for state control of the Internet,’ (Triggs, 2019, p. 105), making it a useful byword to promote Chinese patriotism and nationalism.

State-Sponsored Patriotism and Cyber-Nationalism in China

Chinese nationalism (*minzu zhuyi*) is rooted in the nation’s century-long fight against invasions from Western and Japanese imperialist forces since the 1839 Opium War (Harris, 1997). Nationalism is described as ‘an undercurrent’ that has shaped ‘China’s political landscape in the past century’ (Wu, 2007, p. 73), particularly amid the backdrop of China’s rising global economic and political influences in recent decades (Cheung, 2012; Harris, 1997). Previous research attributes the contemporary surge in Chinese nationalism to governmental campaigns, such as the State-led ‘Patriotic Education Campaign’ beginning in the 1990s (Zhao, 1998; 2004).

Wu (2007, p. 72) differentiates Chinese state-sponsored patriotism (*aiguo zhuyi*) from Chinese nationalism (*minzu zhuyi*); ‘patriotism refers to one’s love toward one’s state or government, and nationalism refers to one’s feeling toward a set of symbols of cultural identity.’ Wu (2007) continues that ‘patriotism and nationalism may concur

sometimes, but they may conflict with each other too,' (p. 73). Indeed, the ruling State party has never officially endorsed Chinese nationalism (*minzu zhuyi*) and has instead advocated for a Chinese patriotism that conflates the 'love' toward the State with the 'love' toward the Communist Party of China (Zhao, 1998). While the State has constructed state-sponsored patriotism to legitimise its regime (Cheung, 2012; Wu, 2007), a rival ideology, *Chinese cyber nationalism*, has emerged on the Chinese internet over the past twenty years (Gries, 2005; Wu, 2007).

Chinese cyber nationalism is a bottom-up spontaneous nationalistic sentiment fuelled by internet users' perceptions of external threats against China (Liu, 2012; Wu, 2007). A distinguishing feature of Chinese cyber nationalism is its grassroots and spreadable style, which contrasts with the State's more traditional forms of top-down patriotic propaganda (Guo & Yang, 2016). As an example, in February 2009 Chinese users began circulating the slogan 'Go! Baobao²! (*Baobao jiaoyou!*)' to support Wen Jiabao, former Premier of China, in response to an anti-China protestor who had interrupted Wen's speech at Cambridge University (Qiu, 2015). *Baobao jiaoyou* was spontaneously popularized by Chinese internet users, which illustrates the more light-hearted and humorous language used in expressions of Chinese cyber-nationalism.

Humorous content and memes also play an important role in Chinese cyber-nationalism. Memes are not restricted to one platform or template (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Here we define memes as a form of sharable and remixable visual content spread through imitation and competition among users (Ask & Abidin 2018; Shifman, 2013). Qiu (2015) notes the rise of 'image-driven nationalism' in Chinese internet discourses, meaning large amounts of memes circulated in response to Chinese online nationalistic

² Baobao', literally meaning 'baby', is Wen Jiabao's nickname.

events. A culminating moment for Chinese nationalistic memes was the 2016 ‘Diba Expedition’. On the night of 20 January 2016, thousands of mainland Chinese internet users from an online group called ‘Diba’ surged through China’s primary digital censorship apparatus, known as the Great Firewall of China (GFW), to bombard Taiwanese pro-independence Facebook pages such as the page of Taiwan’s president, Tsai Ing-wen, and *Sanlih News*. The coordinated action included posting slogans like ‘D8 Goes to Battle, Nothing Will Grow’ and other Chinese nationalistic messages and memes; some playful, others more aggressive (Guo & Yang, 2016, p. 54). As Facebook has been banned in mainland China since 2013, Chinese internet users had to use virtual private networks (VPN) for their ‘expedition’ and the entire event was live streamed on Chinese social media platforms. As a result, the topic ‘Diba Expedition’ went viral on Chinese social media, demonstrating how playful and memetic internet culture can morph into nationalistic expressions (Han, 2019; Wang, 2016).

Compared to state-sponsored patriotism, another distinguishing feature of Chinese online nationalism is that it often includes expressions of extreme populism (Guo & Yang, 2016). In contrast to State-sponsored patriotism that aims to legitimise the Party-State, the bottom-up online nationalistic sentiments might be destabilising to Chinese society with its populist and unpredictable nature (Han, 2019). Chinese scholars have criticised this populist nationalism as parochial nationalism under the ‘disguise’ of patriotism (i.e. Liu, 2016; Zhao, 2007). The patriotic ‘disguise’ of Chinese cyber nationalism may stem from the loose usage of ‘patriotism’ in the Chinese language. For example, Liu (2012) interviewed Chinese university-student internet users who expressed that ‘the nation is higher and greater than the party-government,’ online (p. 63). Interviewees embraced the idea of ‘*aiguo zhuyi* (patriotism)’ in their online expressions, which is literally identical to the word (*aiguo zhuyi*) used to refer to

state-sponsored patriotism (Liu, 2012). However, Liu found that students' understanding of *aiguo zhuyi* differed from the Chinese governmental construction of patriotism, in that it was more populist and nationalistic.

The Chinese State has taken assertive action to address the incongruities between Chinese cyber nationalism and official state-sponsored patriotism (Wang, 2016). However, prior to the 2010s, the Chinese State appeared to be unskilled in harnessing or domesticating Chinese cyber nationalism as they lacked sufficient understanding of internet logics and cultures, as well as the advanced regulatory technologies, that would aid them in their mission of political indoctrination (Plantin & Seta, 2019).

Cultivating the Chinese Patriotic Internet

The advancement of internet industries in China has been associated with the political agenda of 'Chinese dream' and 'national rejuvenation' (Keane & Chen, 2017), which can be interpreted as an effort of the Chinese government to imbue Chinese technology industries and technology policies, such as renewable energy and ICTs, with *techno-nationalism* (Kennedy, 2013). Techno-nationalism is the belief that technology is a crucial element of national security and a vital national asset (Kennedy, 2013). Chinese techno-nationalism is more consistent with the state-sponsored patriotism, but distinguishable from the extremist and populist 'cyber nationalism'. In order to shape the techno-nationalist internet, the State has continuously tightened its control over the Chinese internet through internet censorship systems (Plantin & Seta, 2019). Many, like the GFW, have been ongoing projects since the mid-1990s and have required major financial investments and commitments from designers, architects and providers to refine the technology (Plantin & Seta, 2019). While the State has led the development

of ICT infrastructures, the iterations of Chinese internet applications - from web-based portals to mobile platforms - have been driven mainly by entrepreneurial innovations.

By the 2010s, regulatory technologies, such as the GFW, had matured significantly (Plantin & Seta, 2019). The development of State strategies for engaging with the internet, on the other hand, went through several phases of transition. First, the Chinese government implemented a structural change in its internet management, shifting from a model of centralised top-down control to decentralised and elastic model of engagement (Wu, 2007). Wu (2007, p.109) describes this approach as a ‘composite horizontal-vertical’ style of managing the internet. This governing strategy ensured the State kept a tight grasp on the internet up until the advent of Chinese digital platforms. After China’s major micro-blog service, Weibo, launched in 2009, the platform quickly became a public space for discussing social issues and political dissidence (Wang, 2013). In response, Chinese authorities took a proactive approach to engaging with Weibo by introducing tens of thousands of governmental accounts. These Weibo accounts propagate official messages to guide public opinion, enhancing the Chinese government’s influence over the micro-blogging sphere (Schlæger & Jiang, 2014; Sullivan, 2014).

Additionally, the Chinese government has sought to adopt an innovative style of propaganda, given the traditional political indoctrination has become incompatible with the fast-changing internet cultures. Memetic styles communication has become the most salient part in internet cultures among younger Chinese generations (Guo, 2018). The example of the ‘Diba Expedition’ (Han, 2019) illustrates how memetic communication can be effectively utilised by Chinese cyber-nationalists. Thus, understanding memetic online cultures would aid State social media accounts to effectively exploit affordances of digital media to promote pro-state ideologies. As a result, formerly ‘grassroots’

internet cultures are now being adopted by various State institutions. In certain online incidents, such as the Leon Dai incident in 2016, the State social media accounts succeeded in using memes to advocate their own style of state-sponsored patriotism and build alliances with nationalist netizens (Guo, 2018).

Separately from State actors, Chinese netizens are also joining propagandist discourses online in what Repnikova and Fang (2018, p. 765) term ‘authoritarian participatory persuasion 2.0’ (APP 2.0). APP 2.0 directly engages ordinary users in co-producing persuasive propaganda content. This approach, spurred by President Xi, marks a clear departure from earlier approaches to online propaganda that were more ‘overt and crude’ (Repnikova & Fang, 2018, p. 763) and represent a counterpart to grassroots online resistance against State propaganda.

Douyin is a useful case study to explore novel State patriotism promulgated by APP 2.0 (Repnikova & Fang, 2018). Its format and content creation tools make it a digital *tabula rasa* for playful creators and State actors. On Douyin, users can easily engage in creating, viewing and sharing short-videos and participate in playful and fluid meme cultures. With the introduction of the *Positive Energy* trending page, State accounts, actors and patriotic users have their own unique space to post and share patriotic content alongside non-patriotic humorous meme content.

As noted above, Douyin features a *Positive Energy* trending section that is designed to promote more a specific type of patriotic content. To analyse Douyin’s *Positive Energy* section, we adopt Nieborg and Poell’s (2018) platformization of cultural production theoretic framework. Platformization argues that digital platforms develop new approaches and strategies and adapt their digital infrastructures to match changing markets and governance. These digital infrastructures, markets, and governances are mutually articulated and mutually supportive (Nieborg & Poell, 2018).

In China, the volatile Chinese commercial and political environment has required platforms to adapt digital architectures in accordance with state-imposed platform regulations (Wang & Lobato, 2019). Further, Duffy, Neiborg, and Poell (2019) recently called for further investigation into platform practices defined as the ‘strategies, routines, experiences, and expressions of creative labour and citizenship that shape cultural production through platforms,’ (p. 2). Platform practices on Douyin involve creating, viewing and sharing short-videos and participating in playful and fluid internet cultures. On the *Positive Energy* trending page, State actors, as well as ordinary users, participate by viewing, promoting and interacting with content that fit with a broader Chinese statecraft agenda.

We argue below that the inclusion of a *Positive Energy* section on Douyin fosters the platformization of political indoctrination using the cultural logics of the Chinese internet. Douyin’s *Positive Energy* section is unlikely to be a State-run project. The platform is one of ByteDance’s core commercial products that derives its value from user innovation and was developed for the Chinese social media entertainment market; it was not designed to be a state-controlled propaganda machine. However, by adding a dedicated *Positive Energy* section, Douyin can be a powerful tool to promote state-sponsored patriotism through playful short videos and Douyin’s platform practices. As such, this study asks: *how does the platformization of Positive Energy on a playful short-video platform reinforce Chinese patriotism?*

Methodology

We employ the app walkthrough method (Light, Burgess, & Duguay, 2018) and content analysis (Neuendorf, 2017) to investigate how Douyin is used as a tool to reinforce State-sponsored patriotism. We began by collecting data using the app

walkthrough method. An app walkthrough is ‘a way of engaging directly with an app’s interface to examine its technological mechanisms and embedded cultural references to understand how it guides users and shapes their experiences’ (Light et al., 2018, p. 882). Recent studies have employed the app walkthrough to study the Chinese platforms iQiyi (Wang & Lobato, 2019) and Kuaishou (Lin & De Kloet, 2019). We conducted multiple walkthroughs of Douyin in August 2019, during which we systematically identified Douyin’s features for creating, sharing, and interacting with content. We also identified structures related to Douyin’s app governance, which is hardcoded into certain features and formally articulated through Terms of Service (ToS).

Next, we conducted a content analysis to investigate videos collected from Douyin’s ‘Positive Energy’ section. We sampled videos from Douyin’s positive energy page, which is publicly available for viewing and, in certain cases, downloading without signing into a Douyin account. Between 29 August and 7 October 2019, we manually collected 800 videos and their associated metadata, such as captions, publishers, and view count by taking screenshots and downloading the top twenty-five Positive Energy videos each day. Unlike videos displayed on the highly personalized endless scrolling portal, trending and positive energy videos are not influenced by user preference or location. We collected all 20 videos that appeared in the *Positive Energy* category at each moment of collection. To minimize algorithmic bias, we collected all the videos in our sample without signing into an account on Douyin. Because our video data were collected during the 2019 Hong Kong protests and leading up to the 70th anniversary of the People's Republic of China, the content analysis offers insights into Douyin’s construction of patriotic discourses during politically significant events, however we also address this historical moment as a source of bias in the conclusion.

The 800 videos in our dataset were published by 275 unique accounts. We delineated these accounts into five categories: government agencies, educational institutions, state media, commercial media, and individual accounts. Two coders manually categorised the accounts and we calculated Cohen's Kappa based on a random sample of 20 percent of accounts to measure the intercoder reliability ($\kappa=0.78$), which indicated a substantial agreement between two coders. We then conducted a thematic analysis of short video content informed by our initial walkthrough findings. We employed multi-step coding to identify themes by coding a subset of our total sample. We randomly sampled 500 videos from the *Positive Energy* section for thematic coding. In the first stage, we attached labels to each video to denote themes. In the second step, labels were organised into higher thematic categories. These non-exclusive themes and sub-themes were the basis of our code book. We again calculated intercoder reliability between the two coders using Cohen's Kappa ($\kappa= 0.81$).

Findings and Discussion

Data analysis proceeded in two phases. First our walkthrough identified four aspects in which Douyin promotes 'positive energy' through its features and app governance. First, promoting Chinese socialism is explicitly stated in Douyin's ToS. Second, as noted above, positive energy is hardcoded in Douyin's features, namely in the Positive Energy trending section. Third, *positive energy* content is facilitated by Douyin's tight content moderation, which relies on a vast dedicated team of moderators and Bytedance's proprietary algorithm that curates trending hashtags and content. Fourth, we noted 'positive energy' content from state media accounts on Douyin are promoted by the platform.

Our walkthrough and content analysis revealed that content posted by State media accounts on Douyin clearly deviate from their posts on other platforms or traditional media. As we note above, positive energy has been used explicitly by the State to promote its ideologies on Chinese social media (Triggs, 2019; Yang & Tang, 2018). These studies focus on the state's construction of the positive energy discourse on more *traditional* social media such as Weibo. Previous research has examined how short-video platforms empower (disadvantaged) individuals (i.e. Li, Tan, & Yang, 2019), but almost no studies yet consider how these short-video platforms could potentially be appropriated by the state. In examining how Douyin constructs patriotism through short videos, we first consider how the platform governance and features of Douyin, framed by platformization (Nieborg & Poell, 2018), supports patriotism. Second, we describe how patriotism is constructed through playful positive energy videos and finally we discuss the role of playfulness in Chinese platformed patriotism.

Platform Governance and Features

Based on our walkthrough, Chinese patriotism is supported and facilitated by Douyin's infrastructure and platform governance, specifically the inclusion of the 'Positive Energy' trending page. We found no publicly available data as to when exactly the 'Positive Energy' feature was added to Douyin. From the archive of Douyin's update logs, however, we can see that the *Positive Energy* section was not a feature of the platform when it debuted. The addition of this feature might be related to the shutdown of ByteDance's app, *Neihanduanzi*, in April 2018 due to vulgarity. This event pushed ByteDance to rethink how it could better align with the State's dominant ideology. After *Neihanduanzi* was shut down, ByteDance founder, Zhang Yiming,

published an extensive apology letter³, vowing to promote socialist core values in Bytedance's products and Douyin's general manager Zhang Nan explicitly stated that Douyin should imbue *positive energies* in the platform. This shift highlights Douyin's efforts to balance its commercial pursuits alongside the Chinese State's interventions. If ByteDance were to completely revamp the platform replete with *Positive Energy* videos they might risk a loss of their user base. In response to the State's warning, ByteDance may have inadvertently, or perhaps intentionally, transformed Douyin into a digital enclave for the State to promote its *positive energy* brand of patriotism.

Further, platform governance on apps is 'often enacted through formal Terms of Service (ToS) documents and informally by encouraging users to behave in ways that align with the norms of the ideal forms of user the app is targeted at' (Light et al., 2018, p. 890). The ToS of Douyin states that the content, 'undermining the regime, overthrowing the socialist system, inciting secessionism, and subverting the unification of the country,' is forbidden on the platform (Douyin, 2019, p. 1).

In this way, Douyin formally states that content posted on the platform should align with the 'socialist core values' in China. We acknowledge that Douyin is not forcing users to agree to create videos that promote socialist core values; nowhere on the platform or in Douyin's ToS is there mention that users *should* post positive energy videos. Still, the volume of videos posted in the Positive Energy section from a variety of State and individual accounts, many with millions of views, clearly suggests to users what types of content creation is deemed to be 'positive' on Douyin.

³ See Zhang Yiming's (2018, April 11) apology letter (in Chinese) posted on Toutiao, <https://www.toutiao.com/a1597389902009351>

Positive Energy Videos

In our analysis we determined two strategies of providing content in Douyin's 'Positive Energy' section. First, based on our categorisation of Douyin accounts in our dataset, (Table 1), we determined Chinese governmental accounts to be the core providers of positive energy videos. This includes all accounts related to the state institutions, including State media accounts (e.g. People's Daily), government agencies, and official groups (e.g. Communist Youth League of China). As Table 1 displays, the majority of videos from the 'positive energy' section were published by state media or state institutions. Of the 274 accounts, 151 (55%) were affiliated with the Chinese government, which accounted for 504 (63%) of the 800 videos in the total pool sampled. Further, the average view count for state media accounts was higher than individual accounts, commercial accounts, and educational accounts. These governmental accounts were relatively new to Douyin, but they have been highly active in other Chinese social media (i.e. Weibo) promoting Chinese patriotism (Guo, 2018).

We also found governmental accounts native to short-video platforms. For example, Young Video (*xiaoyang shipin*), affiliated with China Central Television (CCTV), posted 77 (9.6%) videos during our data collection. *Young Video* is a State-sponsored content creator dedicated to creating and distributing content on short-video platforms such as Kuaishou and Douyin. Our content analysis indicated a consistency in the way governmental accounts promote and construct ideology on Douyin, which similar to a state-sponsored patriotism that conflates a *love* of country with *love* of the state-party (Zhao, 1998). We found that videos from governmental accounts featured in the Positive Energy section were primarily designed for promoting patriotism and videos from individual or commercial accounts featured in the positive energy section also depicted the dominant ideological ethos.

Table 1 Account Categories, Video Count, and View Count

(n=800)

		Accounts count	Video count	Avg view count
Governmental accounts	State media	95	397	1,689,544
	State institutions	56	107	1,225,643
Educational institution accounts		2	4	803,750
Commercial institution accounts		14	47	1,011,117
Individual accounts		107	245	1,099,656

The second strategy we observed to shape Positive Energy was to ensure themes of videos posted to the eponymous trending tab were consistent and comprehensive. Generally, the themes of these videos in Douyin's *Positive Energy* section fell into two major categories: the positive representation of the nation in the macro level; and, the positive representation of the people in the micro level. Beyond these two broad thematic groups, we categorised positive energy videos into seven non-mutually exclusive sub-themes based on the subsample of 500 videos coded (See Table 2).



Table 2 Positive Energy Video Themes

Theme		Video Count	Percentage	Avg view count
<i>Macro-level Construction of Patriotism</i>	the people's liberation army and police force	125	25%	1,253,891
	70th Anniversary of PRC	115	23%	1,992,979
	National prosperity and advance	65	13%	1,692,252
	Hong Kong protests	29	6%	1,426,323
<i>Micro-level Construction of Harmony</i>	Social role models	343	69%	1,293,231
	Family Harmony	55	11%	1,072,054
<i>Other</i>		24	5%	1,304,929

The macro-level construction of patriotism features videos such as Chinese military forces, support for the Hong Kong police, and celebrations of the 70th anniversary of China. Videos featuring macro-level construction of patriotism are evident in fostering national pride. Those videos focused on depicting the national prosperity and advance with introducing high-tech projects, such as space flight projects, 5G mobile networks, and nuclear power plants. On top of this, these videos also featured a playful tone that imbue funny, cheerful elements into serious and technological content. With light-hearted background music and playful video edits, national pride has been embedded in captions such as ‘Thumbs up for Chinese projects!’ and ‘1958, China ended its history of relying on importing penicillin!’ The micro-level construction of harmony among individuals features videos promoting filial piety (the responsibility to care for one’s family), sibling love and role models (e.g. scientists, devoted labour workers). Social role models were the most recurrent theme,

which included videos featuring both ‘elite role models’ (e.g. top scientists, mechanics, doctors) and everyday ‘grassroots role models’ (e.g. delivery couriers, cleaners, bus drivers)⁴. Videos in this category linked individuals’ dedication and success to the harmony and advance of the country. For ‘elite role models’, videos often associated the achievements of these individuals with the achievements of the nation. For example, a video featuring a welder of Tianwan Nuclear Power Plant welding an important and dangerous piece of machinery was repetitively posted for 13 days (Figure 4). This video was posted by an account titled ‘The artisan of the great nation (*daguo gongjiang*)’, which is another CCTV project. In these types of videos, being an elite role model means devote oneself to building the country. One will be admired for contributing to the country’s social, economic and technological developments.



Figure 4 The artisan welder of Tianwan nuclear plant

⁴ We acknowledge the problematic nature of using such dichotomous language of ‘elites’ and ‘grassroots.’ However, as with previous scholars, we note that these terms are included based solely on their prevalence in Chinese online discourses (See Lin & DeKloet, 2019, footnote 5).

The videos depicting the ‘*grassroots role models*’ promoted ordinary altruism that contributes to the stability and harmony of Chinese society. These videos were posted both by State media accounts and individual user accounts. Role models in these videos included manual labourers, such as public janitors. In our sample, we found one video featuring a public janitor cleaning a playground created by an individual account that was featured on ‘Positive Energy’ for 10 different days. This video is titled ‘*Pay our respect to those lovely people. Because of you, our city is becoming better. #The loveliest people #pay respect to public janitors,*’ (Figure 5). Like many other Douyin short videos, the plot of this video is self-evident from its title.



Figure 5 Pay Respect to Public Janitors

These ‘grassroots role model’ individuals can come from a variety of unexpected areas. In our coded sample, we found six videos featuring food delivery couriers, among which one of them was posted for three consecutive days on the Positive Energy section. This video was posted by *Huacheng +*, a Douyin account affiliated with the Guangzhou government, titled ‘*#HuachengPositiveEnergy*’ with the caption, ‘*a delivery courier brother was delivering food in the typhoon weather, and*

cleaned sewage on his way, his hands were soaked into pale. @Douyin Assistant.

Several ‘grassroots’ role model videos also challenged the impression of Douyin’s ‘middle-classed sensitivities’ (Li et al., 2019, p. 9). The ‘*grassroots role model*’ videos depict the proletariat sensibilities of the Chinese communist regime, whose endorsement of ‘*grassroots role models*’ is helpful in constructing the patriotic sentiments among everyday citizens and is therefore important to legitimize the State regime.

According to Douyin’s general manager, Zhang Nan, the aim of promoting *Positive Energy* on Douyin is to align the platform’s ideology with *core socialist values*. Core socialist values was first mentioned by former Chinese president Hu Jintao, including ‘prosperity, democracy, civility, and harmony at the national level; freedom, equality, justice, and rule of law as societal values, and patriotism, dedication, integrity, and geniality as citizens’ concerns,’ (Gow, 2017, p. 99). Our findings suggest Douyin has its own emphasis in promoting *core socialist values* in the *Positive Energy* section. Among all the videos we analysed, we found none that explicitly fit the theme of promoting *democracy*. Instead, videos focused on promoting ‘harmony’ and ‘patriotism’ on a macro and micro level. In Chinese Confucian culture, supported by the State, the nation is often viewed as an extended family. The harmony of the family (*jia*) and the strength of the nation (*guo*) are closely related concepts (Wang, 2019). We, therefore, argue that videos in the *Positive Energy* section that promote micro-level harmony also contribute to the macro-level construction of patriotism.

Playful Patriotism

Based on the foregoing discussions of our findings on the *Positive Energy* section we propose the term *playful patriotism* to encapsulate how the Chinese State is transforming its approach to propaganda online. We define *playful patriotism* as state-

endorsed, but not necessarily orchestrated, light-hearted or amusing media content that promotes an established State ideology, in this case ‘positive energy’.

We specifically employ the term ‘playful,’ as playfulness connotes a light-hearted tone; something intended for amusement rather than to be taken seriously (OED, 2019). As discussed above, we observed playfully patriotic content posted by both individual and State media accounts. We argue this content, selected and distributed by Douyin in the ‘Positive Energy’ section, is distinct from previously reported norms of Chinese cyber-nationalism discussed above (Liu, 2012; Wu, 2007). Our findings suggest videos in Douyin’s ‘Positive Energy’ section approach serious topics in an unserious manner, both from State actors and individuals. Further, our observations suggest that content created by State accounts is more ‘playful’ in comparison with the State political indoctrination efforts in pre-digital media era and later via governmental web-based portals.

We understand most content in the Positive Energy section as ‘patriotic’ because, as discussed above, patriotism has been a key concept in defining ‘Positive Energy’ in China (Triggs, 2019; Yang and Tang, 2018). Importantly, we do not suggest that all videos posted by State accounts on Douyin exemplify *playful patriotism*. However, we do suggest that the Positive Energy section was deployed as a vehicle to promote *playful patriotism*, as we found 95% of videos coded from the Positive Energy section directly or indirectly promoted either macro or micro level constructions of patriotism.

The themes we developed through our analysis are somewhat unsurprising in terms of the ideological messaging used to construct patriotism on Douyin. As we have seen, positive energy videos can take several forms and the ways in which they support patriotism is not always apparent, but tonally the content was quite consistent. Douyin is

a playful platform. If the positive energy section was filled with more serious, traditional patriotic content, it would be a jarring departure from other content found on the main trending page or homepage. Through creating unserious or light-hearted patriotic content, the patriotic videos in the *Positive Energy* section fit with the overall playful culture constructed on Douyin.

Further, by creating playful patriotic content the State can capitalize on the power and spreadability of memes. After all, memes are pliable and can take on lives of their own long after their original creation (Katz & Shifman, 2017). Meme content has also been shown to be a useful medium for fomenting image-driven nationalism in China (Qiu, 2015). If the messages encoded into positive energy videos aim to encourage patriotism, playful meme content is the obvious choice for a platform like Douyin. Our findings indicate that State actors have learned to adjust the packaging of their message to fit Douyin's platform practices. As noted, the content posted by some State accounts to Douyin is, in some cases, quite different in tone from content these organizations would publish in other media. By learning to play by Douyin's rules, State actors may tap into younger markets or audiences that would be harder to reach with traditional patriotic content.

Playful content can also potentially ameliorate sensitive or controversial topics in Chinese media. As we note, the timeframe when we collected our sample coincided with a tense moment for the Chinese government during the mid to late 2019 Hong Kong extradition bill protests (BBC News, 2019). In our sample, we observed several videos that present soldiers acting silly or relatable, by depicting unusual or everyday action. One popular video, for example, showed a group of soldiers enthusiastically cheering for the National Volleyball Team during the parade of the 70th anniversary of the PRC. The imagery of mirthful soldiers cheering from the side-lines sharply contrasts

with the serious or severe in which they are usually presented in Chinese media. In this way, presenting Chinese military in playful view offers another avenue for State media to combat conflicting narratives from within China or from international media.

Playful patriotism is not state PR as such. As we observe on Douyin, popular playful patriotism content can be replicated, imitated, or even originated by individual users or non-State accounts. Owing to the market in which Douyin as a platform exists, our findings suggest there are individuals and organizations who post content to Positive Energy due to their own sense of patriotism (Wu, 2007). These feelings of national pride or patriotism are not unique to Chinese citizens; however, Douyin provides a special digital space for Chinese users to express those nationalist sentiments and express them playfully.

Conclusion

Over the past twenty years, Chinese patriotism and nationalism has moved through several iterations online; from the digitalized traditional state-sponsored patriotism carried over from the pre-internet era, to the undercurrent of radical populist cyber-nationalism circulated by independent internet-savvy cyber-patriots, to the utopian techno-nationalism that hails Chinese technological superiority as the pathway to future prosperity. *Playful patriotism* represents a new variant that combines the messaging of state-sponsored patriotism with the savvy of cyber-nationalism, which scaffolds well with future-oriented techno-nationalism. The inclusion of the Positive Energy trending section offers the potential to transform Douyin from a purely mobile media entertainment short-video platform towards a more patriotic Chinese online space, similar to the State's earlier harnessing of Weibo (Zheng, 2013). This study thus contributes to the knowledge of how mobile entertainment technologies can be used to

reinforce social norms and structures in China. We also contribute to the growing body of literature on Chinese digital platforms by operationally defining *playful patriotism* as a construct for further use and analysis on Chinese platforms, short video or otherwise. Finally, this study contributes to advancing a clearer conception of Chinese patriotism online. Whereas Chinese cyber-nationalism has been found to promote patriotism externally, or outside Chinese borders, such as in the ‘Diba Incident’ (Liu, 2012), *playful patriotism* in the *Positive Energy* section of Douyin depicts a much more internally-focused patriotism to support the legitimacy of the Chinese government from within. Future studies should continue to explore the distinctions between internal and external-facing manifestations of patriotism online.

This study sheds insight on State attempts to platformize authoritarian participatory persuasion 2.0 (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Repnikova & Fang, 2018) in China. Rather than overt propagandist strategy, we argue that Douyin’s construction of *playful patriotism* is more akin to camouflage; Bytedance’s survival tactic rather than the true aim of the platform. As a commercial enterprise, Bytedance has no intent to challenge State regulators. It focuses more on *playful* content to generate profit. Even so, like other Chinese media companies before it (Zhao, 2008), ByteDance must comply with a State fixated on promoting patriotism for social stability and the legitimacy of its regime (Wu, 2007). Following the closure of *Neihanduanzi*, the addition of a *Positive Energy* section on Douyin appears to be a clear signal that ByteDance is willing to make creative compromises with the State that do not alter the fabric of Douyin. On the other hand, affordances of popular Chinese social media are not necessarily designed by the State; instead, the State also needs to ‘learn’ logics of radically evolved digital media to engage with digital platforms to achieve political ends. As a predominately mobile app, *playful patriotism* signifies the State’s advancements in using audio-visual media, meme

cultures afforded by Douyin to effectively engage with Chinese netizens on short-video apps.

We must acknowledge that findings from this study should be interpreted within the unique historical context during which our data were collected. Due to time limitations, our data set were collected during two historic events: the 70th anniversary of the CCP and the 2019 Hong Kong Protests and it was not possible for us to collect archival videos from earlier in 2019. Future studies may replicate our methodology at different moments to investigate the persistence of *playful patriotism* on Douyin.

As more studies begin to explore Chinese platform practices and platformization, researchers should keep a watchful eye for manifestations of *playful patriotism*. Even on platforms where a specific positive energy section is not present, there are still opportunities for the Chinese State to incorporate its novel approaches to propaganda in the form of *playful patriotism*. Recent studies illustrate that platform practices (Duffy, Nieborg, & Poell, 2019) are rapidly evolving in China. The programmatic content on certain platforms is become more depersonalized and unified (Wang & Lobato, 2019). Further, individual content creators are finding ways to use the unique Chinese platform affordances, markets, and governance to achieve success (Lin & De Kloet, 2019). As we observe here, technology companies, like ByteDance, are learning to appease the State by adding features like *Positive Energy* to their platforms. Further exploration of the Chinese State's shifting strategies to harness the disruptive power of platforms will help disentangle the unique and contradictory logics of Chinese digital spaces; spaces like Douyin, which appears to be increasingly patriotic, albeit playfully so.

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