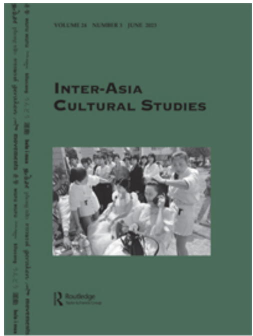

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Internet as an ideology: nationalistic discourses, and multiple subject positions of Chinese internet workers

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ABSTRACT
Ideology works. This article examines how the Internet as a capital actor has become a nationalist ideology in China. Disclosing how nationalism serves to facilitate the expansion of China-based Internet platforms in the age of informational capitalism, we directly confront the Chinese Internet as an ideology apparatus that works to fulfill a dual logic of capital and territorial power. This article contributes to the study of three types of Chinese Internet workers: programmers, white-collar employees (excluding programmers), and assembly-line workers, and focuses on how nationalist discourses are created, which enthrall but at the same time are questioned by different workers who help fabricate nationalism as well as challenge it. We conceptualize *topos of threat* and *referential strategy of collectivization* as cultural and media tactics, driven by the nationalistic sentiments that form part of the "common sense" of Chinese users. We further analyze the multiple subject positions of Chinese Internet workers into *hegemonic position, negotiated position,* and *oppositional position* to discover the complexity of labor subjectivity which may create discrepancy or sometimes even challenge the Chinese Internet as an ideology. This study sheds light on how subject positions could disrupt a homogenous process of merging nationalism with populist sentiments, a conservative ideology that is prevalent in today's China.

KEYWORDS
Techno-nationalism; digital capitalism; Chinese internet; ideology apparatus; subject positions; China

Introduction

"Across the Great Wall, we can reach every corner of the world"—this was the first email sent by a group of Internet workers at China's State Commission of Machine Industry in September 1987. This email has celebrated the start of the Chinese Internet, expressing strong nationalist sentiments which show the country's hope for the development of the Internet. The pioneers of the Internet in China may not have imagined that, 30 years after their endeavor, although it has become part of people's everyday life and one of the pillar industries of China, Chinese people can still not reach every corner of the world because of another wall—the Great Firewall. Yet, most Chinese people accept this situation, informed by a mixed feeling of techno-nationalism that trades off personal freedom over national pride and security.

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Ideology critique has been an important aspect of the study of the Internet and information society (Fuchs and Dyer-Witheford 2013; Webster 2014). Critical scholars point out that the myths of Web 2.0 serve as a marketing ideology (Scholz 2008) and illustrate how the criticism against alienation has formed a "new spirit of the Internet" that legitimates the exploitation of digital capitalism (Fisher 2010). Big tech companies, to a certain extent, manipulate the culture of "connectivity" for their own economic benefit (van Dijck 2013). There is a sharp critique that the ideology of "participatory Web 2.0" directly serves as a way to justify the exploitation of user labor (Fuchs 2011). While these studies have significantly examined the diverse discourses that legitimate or justify the capitalist and exploitative mode of the Internet, few have discussed how (techno-)nationalism influences or even shapes the Internet *as* an ideological apparatus. This article will disclose how techno-nationalism serves to facilitate the expansion of China-based Internet platforms in the age of informational capitalism. We directly confront the Chinese Internet as an ideological apparatus that works to fulfil a dual logic of capital and territorial power. Functioning as an ideology, we discern how the valorization of capital through the Internet requires a "camera obscura" approach to techno-nationalism as its premise.

Techno-nationalism could be defined as a logic of territorial power that national economic development is determined by national rates of innovation and the nation's high-tech industries, thus strategic national technology ideologies and policies would be construed to protect the "domestic" technology developments in the face of international competition. This term was first used by Reich to emphasize the necessity for America to protect its future technological breakthroughs "from exploitation at the hands of foreigners, especially the Japanese" (Reich 1987, 62). The discussion was then extended to cover Asian countries' developmental strategies in terms of new technologies, such as Japan (Lucaites and Mcdaniel 2004), China (Suttmeier 2004), and India (Chakravartty 2004). History has repeatedly shown that nationalism is highly reliant on appropriating technology as an ideological apparatus. Technological progress is almost seen as a representation of national progress in American culture (Smith 1994; Smith 1994). Technological determinism or techno-nationalism is always associated with a before-and-after narrative (Marx and Smith 1994, px) or what cultural historians call the "technological sublime" (Kasson 1999; Nye 1996) or "digital sublime" (Mosco 2005) claiming the end of history after the Cold War period in America.

Techno-nationalism has become a popular discourse or hegemony in shaping many countries' industrial and economic policies, neatly combining the logic of capital with the logic of territorial power (Harvey 2005). As elsewhere, techno-nationalism in China is built on a few imaginings concerning international competition, especially in the face of global economic crises (Kim, Lee, and Kwak 2020; Shim and Shin 2019). It relies on a historical interpretation of humiliation and suffering on one hand, and an emphasis on antagonistic "us" vs "them" discourses and identification with the Party-state and Chinese companies regarding technological developments on the other. This article examines how the Internet as an ideological apparatus actively functions through its multiple stakeholders to produce "its truth" —the sublime of techno-nationalism calling on supporters from its rank-and-file Internet workers who also actively negotiate or even challenge the ideology.

The complex, dynamic feature of ideology—or in Gramsci's term the chaotic configuration of common sense (Gramsci 1971)—however, means that it is not enough to study only the leaders or elites to understand ideology. It is equally important to understand ordinary Internet workers and how they articulate and make sense of techno-nationalistic sentiments. Thus, apart from the hegemonic speeches of the Chinese leadership and the speeches and statements of the CEOs of BAT (an acronym referring to three Chinese Internet giants: Badu, Alibaba and Tencent,

hereinafter BAT), this research conducted focus groups to better understand Chinese Internet workers' complex positions. Based on studies of digital labor (Fuchs 2014; Qiu 2016; Qiu, Gregg, and Crawford 2014), their positions in the process of production in relation to the ICT industry, and their value at different points in the whole process of value valorization and profit realization, three types of informants were selected: assembly-line workers, programmers, and white-collar users. Using "purposive sampling" (Bryman 2012, 416), this article conducted six focus groups in Shenzhen, where both high-tech companies, such as BAT, and manufacturing factories, such as Foxconn, are located. There were two groups with 5 and 6 white-collar users, two with 6 and 5 software engineers, and two with 7 and 8 manual workers (37 participants in total). Each focus group lasts around 2 h. In short, we analyze the multiplicity of workers' subject positions which are full of fluidity, interconnectivity, and conflicts—*dominant-hegemonic position, negotiated position* and *oppositional position* (Hall 1980)—to understand the complexity of labor subjectivity which may create discrepancies or sometimes even challenge the Chinese Internet as an ideology. This study thus sheds light on how subject positions could disrupt a homogenous process of merging techno-nationalism with populist sentiments, a conservative ideology that is prevalent in today's China.

In this article, we ask: how is the Chinese Internet as an ideology operated by the state, companies, and multiple Internet workers, and what kind of discursive politics are involved? When reconfirming Chinese techno-nationalism, what discursive remnants are left, creating space for Chinese Internet workers to question Internet ideologies?

Contextualizing Chinese techno-nationalism: the internet as part of China's ICT industry

The informational technology industry, especially ICT manufacturing, has been important for the Chinese economy since the introduction of the reform and opening-up policy. The ICT sector has largely helped shape an export-oriented and investment-driven economy (Hong 2017; Zhao 2007). However, this mode of production has slowed down since the late 1990s. Highly dependent on the core technologies of Western industry and the extensive use of Chinese cheap labor, the improving productive forces and industrialization did not lead to an independent development model that the Chinese leadership wanted for China. China is still subordinated to the hierarchy of global production despite its huge volume of outputs in the world market (Hardt and Negri 2001, 286). Thus, the ICT industry, especially the Internet, gained a strategic role in China's economic transformation and restructuring plan, especially in response to the Asian economic crisis in 1997. BAT emerged rapidly and shaped the Internet landscape, monopolizing Internet-related services and products, including e-commerce, finance, entertainment, and advertisements in China.

In this context, the state and Internet oligopolies collaborate to promote a techno-nationalist hegemony in China's infrastructural capitalism. "The Internet has no boundaries. If the Internet has a boundary, then it is only a tool. The Internet is a 'technological revolution'" said Jack Ma, the CEO of Alibaba (Ma 2017a). BAT assumes a strategic role in facilitating China's transformation from an export-oriented economy driven by transnational capital to a "consumption-based and innovation-driven economy" powered by domestic capital (Hong 2017, 3). The state has tried to encourage high-tech innovations in domestic companies in ICT industries. To boost domestic demand, the state invests tremendously in infrastructure projects and shows a great interest in promoting the Internet-related economy. This will transform China's focus from the ICT manufacturing industry (e.g. communication equipment, computer hardware, computer storage devices,

consumer electronics, semiconductors, telecommunications services) to Internet-based services and economy (e.g. computer services, printing and publishing, software and programming, catalogue retail). This transformation further boosts the latest "One Belt One Road" project (OBOR) that signifies the expanded reproduction of China's infrastructural capitalism (Su and Flew 2021; Pun and Chen 2022).

Moreover, there have been new developments under Xi's government: the logic of territorial power in addressing the nation's economic crises has become more apparent, conflating the logic of capital (Harvey 2003). Xi's government emphasizes the technological competition between China and other countries through an overarching nationalistic discourse. A friend/enemy scheme through discursive strategies was constructed. The government constructs this type of nationalist discourse for two reasons: to emphasize technological competition between nations; and to stress threats to national security from other countries. The *topos of threats* was used to shape conflicts and antagonism between "us" and "them," and emphasizes the danger of being restricted by or dependent on other countries in "core technologies."

The relationships between the state and global capital have also become more complicated. Despite consistent tensions between the state and capital in the ICT industry, it is worth noting that both capital and state are collaborators in creating a techno-nationalistic ideology that supports the rapid expansion of the Chinese Internet business on the world market.

Articulating a nationalistic ideology to form one unitary identity not only exists in the government's official discourse, but also in the economic dominant groups. For example, in 2019, Robin Li, CEO of Baidu gave a speech entitled "China is Shaping Global Technology." He stated several special features of the Chinese Internet and advantages for China in developing new technologies in comparison to America. In particular, he emphasized that China used to have the advantage of cheap labor, but now the advantages become the large scale of data, application scenarios, infrastructure, talents, and thus innovation in technology (Li 2019). His speech was widely circulated in mass media speech where Robin Li described the Chinese market as a unitary, homogeneous collective community defined by one unitary culture, language and law, thus it can "promote constant innovations in algorithms and bring new capabilities for computing power" (Li 2019). Li also claimed that present-day "China is the best soil for innovation and entrepreneurship … Baidu will continue to contribute to the construction of national strategic science and technology forces" (People's Daily Forum 2021).

Therefore, both economic and political actors have echoed and mined the same nationalist ideology in arguing for, or rhetorically asserting, a unitary China. Jack Ma, CEO of Alibaba, even identify the future of Alibaba to the future of China, and this identification legitimates Alibaba's dominant position in the market (Ma 2017b). The Chinese Internet thus acquires a paramount historic role in reshaping the Chinese development model as well as its relationship to the world economy. Combining nationalism and neoliberalism, the relationships between the state and capital should not be simplified as the ruler and the controlled, but a collaborative relationship with capital and businesses in acquiring the world market (Hong 2017).

More than the logic of capital, ICT and Internet technology that serve the logic of territorial power has been closely associated with the idea of national progress and hope for "the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." In Xi's 419 speech, "the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation" was "the greatest dream of the Chinese people since the Opium War and the highest and fundamental interest of the Chinese nation" (Xi 2016). "Backwardness brings on beatings by others" (*luo hou jiu yao ai da*) is still a key element in his speech. This framing is in line with Chinese nationalists' long-term attribution of technological backwardness to the national humiliation of China (Hughes 2011; Shen

2007; Zhao 2000). While the current state has constantly added more "rational" arguments that emphasize China's technological achievements and potentials, showing the official nationalist discourse's "techno-turn" (Wang 2020), it still needs to evoke the historical humiliation to mobilize nationalist sentiments.

But turning these ideas into an ideology requires the penetration of discursive tactics into society, in which *the topos of threat* and *the topos of history* must be effectively enacted. Mobilizing national sentiments or emotions the *topos of threat* claims that there are threats from other countries, threats of instability, threats from social struggles, etc. (Reisigl and Wodak 2001, 77–78) that render strict control of the Internet by the government. Related to this construed "political fear" is also the *topos of history*, which claims that a united nation is essential to constrain threats from outside and from below. As Reisigl and Wodak note, the *topos of history* exists "because history teaches that specific actions have specific consequences, one should perform or omit a specific action in a specific situation (allegedly) comparable with the historical example referred to" and it is sometimes used to "warn of a repetition of the past" (Reisigl and Wodak 2001, 80). In China, this *topos of history* usually refers to the popular notion of *guoqing*, the unique situation and disposition of one's country which justifies nationalistic sentiments and the control of the nation-state over civil society.

The Chinese Internet embodies a return to discourses of popular nationalism, using the "nationalist and anti-imperialist ideological discourses of the Mao era" under Xi's leadership (Wu and Yun 2015). However, the Internet and ICT industry is not all free to develop in China, and as Hong puts it, "it dances with the magic wands of both global capitalism and the Chinese authoritarian state" (Hong 2011, 41–42). Audiences and workers in China thus experience "double pressures": both from the party-state's control of content and from media entities' selling of advertising and other market-driven for-profit business operations. It is under this political-economic context and the delimitation of ideological context that we turn to our informants: Chinese Internet workers.

Chinese internet workers: are they really nationalistic?

Taking the Internet as an ideology, we examine how the state, companies, and workers actively participate in producing and reproducing this ideology, reconstituting techno-nationalism with populist sentiments.[1] We understand ideology as being generated by structural factors that "set limits" (Williams 2005, 34) on the arena in which political struggles play out, turning concrete content and connotations into the "black box" of ideology. Taking an organic approach, this study synergizes political economic analysis with critical discourse approaches to understand how the Internet, primarily a private capital actor, becomes an ideology to fulfill a dual logic of capital and territorial power, which nevertheless embody inescapable tensions and conflicts. If ideology derives from economic and political tensions, such as the conflicting interests among Internet companies, the nation-state, Internet workers and users, then it is necessary to first understand the conflicts in Internet-related areas, such as political control, censorship, digital labor issues, etc. It is these conflicts that may lead to a breaking down of the solid base of the Chinese Internet as an ideology.

Ideology is mediated through a series of discourses which is often not consistent but conflictual. We appropriate Hall's encoding-decoding framework to disclose a complex, dynamic ideology which, we argue, constitutes and is constituted by multiple subject positions. Hall (1980) identifies three positions in decoding media audiences or "receivers": a *dominant-hegemonic position* through which the audience decodes the message of media texts as if no decoding is actually necessary or in

a state of obliviousness—the meaning is seen as accepted and "obvious"; a *negotiated position* which means acceptance of dominant ideology at an abstract level but making its own rules at a situational level based on life experiences and self-interests; and an *oppositional position* through which the audience can deconstruct the message and reconstruct the meanings within alternative and contrary frameworks (Hall 1980). Among our three different types of Internet workers, assembly-line workers, programmers, and white-collar users, we note how Internet users can hold different knowledge or awareness of ideologies (unconscious, conscious, partly conscious, and critically conscious) and act differently (follow, follow parts of, not follow or resist ideology) within different political-economic contexts (Fuchs 2015, 87).

Compared to other groups, manual worker groups are more likely to hold *oppositional* positions to the dominant ideology, due to more structural oppressions experienced in their everyday life. Yet, the negotiated and hegemonic positions held by programmers and white-collar worker groups might only appear at a superficial level that they could act differently, such as using VPN and alternative platforms, as they have more economic and technological capabilities to circumvent the structural restrictions. It is worth noting that the three positions and their correlations with different types of Internet workers suggested in this article are not clearly delimited and could change according to situational contexts, such as escalating international conflicts or domestic crises. This research thus provides a more complex and nuanced image of digital laborers in China, that echoing Raymond Williams' understanding of hegemony or ideology and its interpellation on subjects is not a one-to-one correspondence process. Instead, ideology has "continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified" (Williams 1977, 112) by various discursive tactics, while the worker subjects at the same time always negotiate, challenge and resist with their own limits. Because of the struggles within specific social existence, Chinese Internet workers open up a multiplicity of subject positions in reacting, negotiating or resisting Internet as a dominant ideology.

A dominant-hegemonic position: "they" are enemies of "our" national security and social stability

We consider part of the Chinese Internet workers who take up the dominant-hegemonic position first. Among the interviewed groups, white-collar workers and programmers are more likely to hold a hegemonic position regarding the Internet and ICT structures in China, since their interests are more closely linked to that of the state, and they enjoy more benefits brought by the state-led infrastructural capitalism. A typical Internet worker who holds nationalistic views would have some basic knowledge about state and commercial surveillance and censorship, such as the operations of cookies, mechanisms of online advertising, and the collection and commodification of personal data, and is very familiar with the mainstream discourses. She or he might have heard about cases of police arresting people for publishing "sensitive content" online, or online fraud, yet she or he believes that there is no alternative to the current state-led capitalist system. She or he might also reckon that since "every country is doing the same," it is unobjectionable for the Chinese state to conduct censorship.

Echoing political leaders, the nationalist Internet workers usually apply the discourses relating to a friend/enemy scheme, which overtly represents other countries as enemies who should be opposed. She or he claims that some online content (mainly from the West) has negative influences on Chinese people's worldviews and threats from other countries would unsettle China's national security and stability. Hence, state control and support of "domestic" Internet companies are

"necessary" because the West tries to "corrupt" Chinese people's thinking through "their" platforms.

One participant in the white-collar group used the term "enemy state" (*diguo*) when he expressed his opinions about censorship:

> First of all, one country's *own* politics surely serves the interests of its *own* country. And *enemy states* [slight laughter], I mean *other country's politics* [slight laughter] surely also serve the interests of *their* own country. Just one simple example, often there are some *foreign anti-China forces* that *influence Chinese people's thinking* on some websites, such as Weibo. Therefore, it [the government] needs [to apply censorship]. (Interview, white-collar users group 1, #3, 31 July 2016, Shenzhen)

The informant used the deictic "them" to distinguish China from other countries, which echoes Reisigl and Wodak's definition of *strategies of collectivization* (2001, 48). Using pronouns, this *strategy of collectivization* indicates the similarities among "us" and differences between "us" and "them." Moreover, this quote also uses *topos of threat*: the participant negatively typifies "enemy states" as "foreign anti-China forces" who want to "influence [meaning corrupt] Chinese people's thinking." In terms of intertextuality (Fairclough 2015, 38), his expression resonates with other texts propagated by the Chinese government. This connection between civilian expression and the government's language implies the success of government hegemony to some extent. The participant explicitly referred to Weibo (a Chinese social media platform with similar functions to Twitter) and tried to refer back to some of the arguments he read there previously about "foreign anti-China forces." Another more implicit clue is his use of the phrases "anti-China forces" and to "influence Chinese people's thinking." These two phrases are normally used in the Chinese government's propaganda. In official language, the phrase "foreign anti-China forces" is always associated with domestic dissidents (such as liberal democrats or human rights fighters, ethnic separatists, feminist activists and labor activists), and international NGOs with Western backgrounds.

One programmer claims that, since there is an enemy against China, then Internet control conducted by the government is "necessary" to protect national security and national interests. She explained why she supports the government's ban on Facebook and Google in China:

> I have different opinions [about whether the Chinese government should allow Facebook to enter China]. *I think there are some concerns at the state level to ban Facebook*, because if people use some means for social communication so widely, there are some very, very important issues about information, for example some officials, if [they] all chat through Facebook, *America* can gain *our* information easily, *then it can do something about this information*, for example, two Chinese officials talk to each other, and talk about something, then Facebook, it, *after all, it is from a foreign country*, *we* cannot have full control, perhaps, maybe, Facebook, for example, it and America*, it and its government*, conduct some [exchange of information] and its information must not only be stored in Facebook, but also in some of *its national stuff*, right? *I think from the national level, it [the Chinese government] should not want it [Facebook] to come in …* (Interview, programmer group 2, #1, italics added, 24 June 2017, Shenzhen).

This female programmer points out straightforwardly that Facebook is a "foreign" company and that it co-operates with the American government or that it is very likely to do so. There is a direct *equivalence* between the American government with an American company. When asked whether Facebook could represent the interests of the American government, she explains:

> I believe so, because information on Facebook is not only stored in Facebook [servers], *its nation* has, for example *its nation* has a lot of information intelligence agencies, like I, hmm [other participants remind her: FBI, laughter], yes, FBI, etc. Then it can easily get information, right? Its responsibility is to collect this information, then analyze the information, give it to the state, to the leader, right? That's what it is doing, after it collects information, it can totally do something *against China …* unlike

> using *our* WeChat or QQ, etc, then America can't get *our information.* (Interview, programmer group 2, #1, 24 June 2017, Shenzhen).

This perception of state power as having primacy over business (power) is prevalent among Chinese Internet users and there is a tendency to identify with its positive necessity by internalizing friend/enemy nationalist discourse. One more implicit assumption in this quotation is that online information, which is "bad for China," is spread by the American government, with the purpose of being "against China," while American-founded or controlled Internet companies apply "soft power" in the service of the "hard power" of American aggression. Taking a hegemonic-dominant position, this informant immediately interprets online discontent as an "American conspiracy." The accusation that any discontent about the government is attributable to a Western conspiracy to contain China echoes part of the discourse applied by the Chinese government to demonize social activists and social movements, thus offering evidence to support an argument for the hegemonic function of such discourse.

A manual worker further emphasizes the necessity of oppression to keep social stability. This manual worker stated that some online posts are "extreme" and relate to "sensitive" issues, thus they should be censored in case they cause instability:

> If some individuals make extreme [statements], or use some sensitive terms, if [the statements are] browsed by other people, [they] *might cause others' to have similar attitudes or similar opinions,* so it is *normal to have some information deleted*, and then now there is a lot of "positive energy" (slight laughter). (Interview, worker group 2, #4, 30 July 2016, Shenzhen)

He provides no further explanations required about the problem of instability: it is "common sense" that stability takes priority over everything else in the development of the Chinese economy (and well-being). This claim about social stability surpassing all else serves as an ideology because it may disrupt people's attention from domestic conflicts and thus serves to reproduce the dominant-hegemonic position.

A negotiated position: "they" could be "our" allies

With economic and technological capacities, white-collar workers and programmers tend to hold a negotiated position that shared complicated and unstable discourses against the simplified confrontational relationship between China and other countries. Some of them may reject or resist nationalist ideologies by recognizing the positive sides of foreign companies and by thinking of them not as enemies but as (potential) allies. Some may subscribe to a friend/enemy ideology and accept techno-nationalism at an abstract level but act differently in their everyday practices. A few programmers even show alternative ideas about how to develop the Internet and new technologies which go beyond national boundaries or national identities.

Having an ambivalent and negotiated position, some informants interestingly argue for the positive side of the out-groups and see "them" as "our" allies. They offer some commentary about, for example, where the discontent that causes the instability comes from, who benefits most from the oppression of dissidents, who loses rights and freedom under a regime of strict control, and what consequences this control can have. The most salient example comes from discussions of websites or platforms banned by the government. Many participants in the white-collar and programmer groups expect that the banned "foreign" platforms will (re-)enter China and provide unfiltered information to Chinese people. One example concerns Wikipedia —the Chinese version

(zh.wikipedia) that is banned in China. One programmer expressed his concerns about its lack of availability:

> Wikipedia is authentic and has a large amount of information … There is no platform like it in China, for [spreading] knowledge, a systematic platform [Moderator: What about Baidu Baike?]. [Information on] it can be changed if you are willing to pay some money [laughter]. A lot of information on it is not comprehensive enough, it is not comparable to Wikipedia. (Interview, programmer group 1, #6, 3 August 2016, Shenzhen)

This programmer demonstrates an entirely positive attitude towards Wikipedia. It is also worth noting that this participant makes a comparison between Wikipedia and Baidu Baike which is a Baidu-owned online free-content encyclopedia. It works like Wikipedia but with far greater "problems," such as clearly false information, for-profit information, and censored content. The participant does not view Wikipedia as an "enemy" just because it is "foreign." Rather, the participant sees Baidu Baike as a bad example of an online encyclopedia. The origin of an Internet platform is not a criterion for judgment for this participant. Many programmers and white-collar groups spontaneously use Wikipedia as an example to challenge the government's ban, perhaps due to their higher levels of education and different Internet usage habits and purposes. Besides using the Internet for entertainment and seeking pragmatic information, programmers and white collars are more likely to search for historical and educational information online, thus ironing out the importance of alternative information sources.

We further observe that many white-collars and programmers agree with the government's Internet control by claiming a confrontational relationship between China and other countries on the one hand and justify users' behavior of using VPNs to bypass the Great Firewall on the other hand. One white-collar worker said: "to have a comprehensive understanding, to investigate the truth in history"; and to connect with friends outside China. He summarized his justification of the use of VPNs with an intriguing sentence:

> About politics, Wang Qishan once said, I just require people to love one's country and not to go against the Party, then it's okay [slight laughter]. (Interview, white-collar user group 1, #3, 31 July 2016, Shenzhen)

What makes this saying more intriguing is that there is no official record of this quotation from Wang Qishan, the vice-President of China. This indicates Gramsci's chaotic nature of common sense (1971) that enables this participant to use a real or imaginary quotation as strong support for his arguments.

This quotation also suggests that while accepting nationalistic ideologies at an abstract level, Internet workers make their own rules at a situational level, such as supporting the use of VPNs to bypass the Great Firewall, a measure to safeguard national security. More specifically, workers holding negotiated positions might have different knowledge of an ideology and only partly accept the nationalist ideology. For example, the participant in the white-collar group (who used the term "enemy state") also legitimated people's behavior in using VPNs to find out the "truth about history" (white-collar user group 1, #3). It looks like his acceptance of the nationalist ideology only works at an abstract level, thus showing the different operational mechanisms of techno-nationalism at the level of awareness and actions.

Moreover, with technological knowledge and innovations, programmers are more likely to imagine different technologies and different paths to develop technologies. For example, one programmer imaginatively suggested an alternative method to solve the issue of phone fraud caused by the

leak of personal information. She proposed to develop a specific type of app through which everyone can tag what type of number it is when they receive a phone call in order to prevent fraudulent calls. She even suggested that it would be better if this app is developed by the government, in case the company who owned would use its power to blackmail other companies, i.e. threatening others to pay for being listed as "good" numbers or otherwise be labeled as fraudulent numbers (programmer group 2, #1). She also imagined alternative ways to use big data for the benefit of the public. Both examples show that workers have different expectations about what type of Internet they want. These ideas show different possible ways to develop the Internet despite the government's desire to compete in the "Western" way. They further illustrate the potential failure of state and Internet companies' nationalist efforts to equate the interests of the nation to that of the companies.

An oppositional position: "they" are not "us"

It is uncommon for Chinese Internet workers to adopt an entirely oppositional position, rejecting the nationalist ideology which legitimates the suppression of civil society, yet such workers do exist. While the nationalist discourses try to equate the Chinese nation to the government, the CCP and companies in order to disguise domestic conflicts, Chinese workers with contrary opinions lived out the contradictions in the embodiment of the Internet as a nationalistic ideology. We observe two types of arguments against the Internet as an ideological construction: Chinese companies do not represent the Chinese people's interests; and China (as a nation) does not equate to the government or the state. Therefore, Internet control exists for the benefit of the government and not for the nation or its people.

First, there are explicit *oppositional* arguments against the equivalence between China and Chinese Internet companies. The most common complaint is to compare Baidu to Google and the expectation of Google returning to China. For example, the white-collar group argues that Wikipedia and Google are much more reliable than Baidu-Baike and Baidu (white-collar group 2, #2). One programmer criticized how Baidu charges money for documents shared by other users for free on the Baidu platform. It is, according to him, against the spirit of the Internet (programmer group 1, #4). Therefore, from these workers' opinions, Chinese Internet companies are not equal to China and are not serving the Chinese people's interests.

There are also *oppositional* positions against the claim that China and Chinese people equate with the party and the nation-state. For example, one worker claimed that the Internet is not a fair place because "we" do not hold the power of speech. This power, on the contrary, is held by someone else. It implies that Chinese people have different interests than those who have the power to control the Internet (the government or big companies):

> The power of speech is not equal … Because the power to have a voice is not held by *us*. Maybe if some of your speech does not conflict with *its* interests, then it can appear online. But if what you say is not related to *its* interests, if what is said is bad for *it*, then *it* will definitely block this speech. From this point of view, I think the Internet is not free or democratic. (Interview, worker group 2, #2, 30 July 2016, Shenzhen)

In this quote, the participant uses "us" to refer to Internet users and the public in general. There is an implicit confrontational relationship between "we" and "it" (the government or big companies), as shown from the statement "conflict with its interests." The *strategy of collectivism* is

applied to show common interests among Internet workers and the public as against the government.

Furthermore, there are oppositional discourses against the suggestion that China needs to employ censorship and an authoritarian regime because of its "national condition" (*guoqing*). A contrary view argues that it is the party or its *government* that needs to be controlled. One white-collar user said,

> I think as an authority in fact you can do better [in terms of maintaining stability but not through censorship], it's just that now [the authority] has some limitations, I mean, you only have this limited capability, that [censorship] is the only thing you can do so far [in order to maintain stability] (Interview, white-collar group 1, #1, 30 July 2016, Shenzhen).

This oppositional stance implicitly means that the reason for the government to control the Internet is not because of its unique "national condition" but to maintain its own limited power, attempting to transgress a technological gap, which is far from a technological ideal.

In sum, this research shows a variety of different subject positions among different groups, suggesting how class consciousness and actions are somehow related to structural conditioning in China. Compared to other groups, manual worker groups are more likely to hold *oppositional positions* to the dominant ideology, instead of, for example, a *negotiated position* as shown in the white-collar groups. The manual worker groups in general expressed a stronger attitude toward fighting censorship. Many participants from the worker groups claimed that they had experienced accounts and posts being banned or deleted because they criticized the government. They would then choose to change an account or wait for some time until their accounts were active again. The main reason why worker groups possess more confrontational attitudes might be that assembly-line worker groups are more severely exploited in China's integration into the world of informational capitalism (Pun 2005; Qiu 2016). What they post online and which is later deleted by platforms and the government are closely related to their lived experiences, such as their life in factories, labor rights movements, and revelations of exploitation. Therefore, it is unlikely they will entirely accept the hegemonic nationalist discourses of the "necessity of oppressing online dissent voices" conducted by the state and Internet companies.

Compared to the manual worker interviewees, the programmer and white-collar groups show a better "understanding" of official discourses and acceptance of hegemony. Censored or deleted posts by white-collar workers and programmers are more about freedom of expression and the right to information. This is partially due to the government's intentionally looser approach to controlling the rights movement in relation to single, individual, urban, and middle-class issues, compared to collective farmers and worker issues relating to provocative social movements (Yang 2009, 292). In the interviews, white-collar and programmer groups can recall or cite certain phrases and terms used in official discourses. This "intertextuality" (Fairclough 1992) and their legitimation for the current Internet system in China clearly show their hegemonic position, in relation to their more privileged positions in Chinese society compared to manual workers. Yet, this position might only appear at a superficial level that they could act differently, such as using VPN and alternative platforms. In particular, programmers are more likely to hold alternative imaginations and perceptions of the Internet, due to their specialized knowledge of technologies and capability to bypass the Great Firewall. However, they do not necessarily resist the current Internet system because of their working position in the system and their technological capabilities to circumvent the structural restrictions thus experiencing fewer disadvantages.

However, these tendencies do not suggest that there is a clear cut between the three positions or the different types of digital laborers' class consciousness and actions. These differences, instead, suggest the need for a more nuanced and in-depth analysis of popular nationalist discourses and perceiving nationalism as "a contested process that embodies dynamic interactions and negotiations among distinct societal groups and the party-state" (Fang and Repnikova 2018).

Conclusion

Informed by Gramsci's common sense (1971) and Hall's encoding and decoding framework (1980), this work sheds light on our understanding of the functions and "chaotic nature" of ideology and counter-ideology practices. Rather than simply rejecting or denouncing Internet ideologies, we identify and deconstruct Chinese Internet workers' nationalist discourses and unveil their complexities, contradictions, and incoherencies. Internet ideologies, including techno-nationalism, are not a seamless monolithic apparatus. Rather, people's "disjointed and episodic" conception of the world, as Gramsci points out, may strangely contain "Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced science, prejudices from all past phases of history at the local level and intuitions of a future philosophy which will be that of a human race united the world over" (1971, 324). Chinese Internet workers have different interpretations of this dominant techno-nationalist ideology and understandings of the Internet, as shown in the focus groups.

A typical position of agreement would follow the nationalist friend/enemy scheme that emphasizes the potential negative influences on Chinese people's worldviews and the threat of foreign forces, especially the "West," on national security. It also emphasizes the importance of social stability for economic prosperity, thus the necessity of suppression. While this position spreads the interests of a nation to the government, corporations, and the people, thus claiming the necessity of suppression to maintain stability, a negotiated position demonstrates more positive views regarding "Western" alternative Internet platforms, such as Wikipedia and the use of VPNs to bypass the Great Firewall. It is worth noting that, in the negotiated positions, while agreeing with the friend/enemy nationalist scheme at the abstract level, Chinese Internet workers practice differently at the situational level based on their life experiences and self-interests, such as using VPNs and privacy-protection tools, and imagining alternative platforms. It thus suggests the need to distinguish awareness of ideologies from actions (Fuchs 2015), providing a more complex picture and nuanced analysis of Chinese digital laborers. This position also provides alternative ideas about the Internet compared to a profit-driven, capital-accumulated model.

The oppositional position demonstrates a more radical departure from the dominant position. It is not uncommon for an Internet user who holds a nationalistic view of the Internet to post critical comments against the government regarding everyday oppression. Internet workers who hold oppositional positions directly confront the view that China (as a nation) and the Chinese people are equivalent to the party-state and the government. Ideology, in this sense, operates "in the articulation of different elements into a distinctive set or chain of meanings" and "takes place through social practice and political struggle" (Hall 1995, 18). Therefore, there are spaces for struggles by navigating through these gaps and discrepancies. The "imagined communities" of the nation-state (Anderson 2006) encapsulated in the nationalist model of the Chinese Internet can likely be challenged through the creation of alternative communities based on interests and awakened class consciousness, which requires further study.

Future studies could also focus on Internet workers' nationalist attitudes during key events to investigate the complex process and dynamics of the formation of techno-nationalism by different actors.

Note

1. Populism and nationalism are closely connected. Engesser and colleagues, for example, define populism as a "less elaborate" ideology that "gives protagonists the flexibility of enriching it with 'full' (more substantive) ideologies such as socialism, nationalism, or liberalism" (Engesser et al. 2017, 1111).

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