SM+S
social media + society

Countering Nationalist Politics Through Distant Witnessing: An Affective-Discursive Approach

S Sage

Altman Yuzhu Peng[1] (iD), Yu Sun[2] (iD) and Chunyan Wu[3] (iD)

Abstract

Advancing an affective-discursive approach, this article examines how distant witnessing bolsters digital activist organizing that challenges a Southern authoritarian regime's nationalist politics on international social media. The research foregrounds an initiative coordinated by a group of overseas dissidents who sought to expose China's foreign policy regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine on X (Twitter). Amid ongoing battlefield stalemates that have prolonged the war, this initiative has evolved into a broader form of resistance, staging distant witnessing through X postings to circumvent the party-state's internet censorship. As this process unfolds, activists capitalize on social media affordances to curate witness testimonies that counter China's distorted geopolitical narratives and beyond. Resorting to both pre-discursive and discursive gestures, this repertoire contributes to the formation of affective publics, thereby stimulating public contention over the party-state's authoritarian rule from afar. The findings highlight how such digital platforms as X enable an informal model of organization, allowing Southern activists to act as mediators who coordinate distant witnessing in a transnational context.

Keywords

affective-discursive approach, China, distant witnessing, Twitter, X

Introduction

The global resurgence of right-wing populism lends weight to pessimistic views on digital democracy, but this by no means repudiates social media's progressive potential (Uldam, 2018). Instead, new practices are invented as grassroots actors navigate digital technologies to revamp civic engagement (Domaradzka, 2022; Kaun et al., 2016; Mattoni et al., 2020). Among these practices, distant witnessing has recently gained currency. Distant witnessing occurs when a mediator observes and bears witness to institutional violence or structural injustice from afar, thereby allowing first-person witness experiences to reach a wider audience (Martini, 2018). This practice is materialized upon social media, which serves as the organizing network; it is essential for enabling connective actions that are pivotal to contemporary digital activism. According to Bennett and Segerberg (2012), social media fosters connective actions by promoting personalized political engagement, wherein individuals partake by sharing their own experiences, stories, emotions, and interpretations. By leveraging social media affordances to bear witness, grassroots actors publicize instances of institutional violence or structural injustice occurring at a distance, thereby igniting public

contention and transforming audiences into engaged citizens who feel a moral obligation to respond to their fellow citizens' suffering (Kavada & Poell, 2021). Consequently, distant witnessing is established as an activist repertoire, assembling affective publics that scaffold connective witnessing (Papacharissi, 2015).

Distant witnessing represents a significant form of civic engagement in Southern authoritarian regimes, where grassroots actors contend with a draconian sociopolitical milieu characterized by stringent media control and severe crackdowns on dissent (Uldam, 2018). Notably, the pervasive nature of state censorship has sanctioned the limited public visibility of institutional violence and structural injustice on the Chinese-language internet, hampering the grassroots building of progressive momentum from within the nation

---

[1]University of Warwick, UK
[2]University of Glasgow, UK
[3]Northeastern University London, UK

Corresponding Author:
Chunyan Wu, Faculty of Social Sciences, Northeastern University London, London E1W 1LP, UK.
Email: chunyan.wu@nulondon.ac.uk

(Guo, 2021; F. Yang, 2016). In the absence of the media fulfilling its role as the fourth estate, distant witnessing emerges as a viable activist repertoire (Guo, 2021). This phenomenon transforms social media into an organizing network, creating opportunities for ordinary citizens to challenge societal injustices and revitalize civil society (Sun & Wright, 2024).

This article examines an initiative of distant witnessing orchestrated by a group of the Chinese diaspora in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Advancing an affective-discursive approach, we probe into the entangled relations between the pre-discursive and discursive processes, elucidating how overseas Chinese activists leverage social media affordances to witness and critique China's distorted rhetoric from afar on X (formerly known as Twitter). By considering the convergence of this initiative with domestic street protests, the study demonstrates how distant witnessing amplifies public contention over the party-state's nationalist politics and its promotion of extremist ideologies at the societal level. In this context, X serves as the primary organizing network, transforming the initiative into a form of connective action by assembling affective publics in their challenge to the regime's authority. The findings emphasize the potential of distant witnessing as an activist repertoire and its context-specific application in an initiative that contests the party-state's nationalist politics and its broader repercussions.

Literature review

Understanding the conceptual basis of distant witnessing

The functionalities of witnessing have consistently been a focal point in civic engagement. Moving beyond forensic scholarship, Ellis (2000) initiated an exploration into how omnipresent news coverage generates witness testimonies that elevate public concerns over events occurring in distant locations. Building on this conceptual foundation, Peters (2001) further theorizes witnessing by distinguishing between the agents who bear witness, the semiotic residues of witnessing, and the audiences who witness. By considering the temporal and spatial dimensions of the concept, he posits that witnessing is contingent upon the agents being (1) "present in space and time" (e.g., spectatorship of real-time events), (2) "present in time but absent in space" (e.g., television broadcasts), or (3) "present in space but absent in time" (e.g., visits to museums) (Peters, 2001, p. 721). This heuristic approach, particularly through the recognition of the second category, provides a conceptual basis for interpreting distant witnessing in the context of digital activist organizing (Kyriakidou, 2015; Martini, 2018). Yet, his qualification of witnessing as a privilege marginalizes scrutiny of the complex power dynamics that underlie the act.

The publication of Frosh and Pinchevski's (2009) anthology marks the evolving foci upon witnessing through a media-centric lens. In it, Ashuri and Pinchevski (2009) propose an intriguing model, defining witnessing as a triadic field comprising witness, mediator, and audience zones. Following this model, witnessing necessitates specific actions, including "obtain[ing] agency," "attain[ing] voice," and "compel[ling] the audience to take notice" (Ashuri & Pinchevski, 2009, p. 136). This process is primarily facilitated by mediators who not only interpret events from the witnesses' perspectives but also adopt a moral stance that imbues their first-person accounts with significance, thereby aiding audiences in forming judgments (Tait, 2011). Their model, thus, elucidates how media professionals develop various tactics to "obtain audiences' trust in [their] claims about the truth of an event" (Ashuri & Pinchevski, 2009, p. 155). It enables an interrogation of the power struggles that unfold behind the scenes, as diverse actors negotiate their distinct agendas through interlocked discourse, meaning, and judgment in the context of witnessing.

As Allan (2013) critiques, conventional media scholarship frequently upholds objectivity as a conceptual cornerstone for defining the nature of witness testimonies. In the realm of news-making, this often manifests as an emphasis on factual accuracy through the attainment of "privileged (raw, authentic) proximity to facts" in event reporting (Peters, 2001, p. 79). However, Ashuri (2012) contends that witnessing, however seemingly objective, is fundamentally a subjective human act that involves interpreting contingent evidence to articulate a personal experience. This renders witness accounts inherently political (Allan, 2013). In transplanting such practices to partake in civic engagement, witnessing is predicated upon a moral obligation rather than privilege, sanctioned by observations of institutional violence or structural injustice (Gray, 2019). Consequently, this necessitates the pursuit of a trajectory in which witness accounts are not presented to "expose an objective truth," but rather to communicate a "personal truth about the harsh realities in which each individual partakes" (Ashuri, 2012, p. 48).

Powered by the pervasive use of social media, distant witnessing now enables witness testimonies to transcend geographical boundaries upon netizens' sharing of both mundane and extraordinary experiences (Chouliaraki & Mortensen, 2022). This development contributes to the democratization of the witnessing process, as grassroots actors are no longer confined to a singular witness zone; rather, they are able to navigate and oscillate between various roles (Allan, 2013). Positioned at the nexus of multiple dynamics, mediators play a crucial role in reconfiguring the connections among those imminently involved in an event, the witnesses of that event, and the broader public (Martini, 2018). However, as grassroots actors increasingly assume this mediator role, they are empowered to continuously curate witnessing projects from afar. This phenomenon is encapsulated by Tait (2011, p. 1220), who refers to it as "practices of enacting responsibility." Such grassroots-led initiatives of distant witnessing

emerge as a counterbalance, challenging the once-entrenched institutional power monopoly.

Distant witnessing bears the potential to enable further "connective witnessing" (Mortensen, 2015). This aligns with what Bennett and Segerberg (2012, p. 739) describe as the "logic of connective action," illustrating how flexible and adaptable campaigns are orchestrated on social media to mobilize citizens around shared issues through personalized, network-based participation. Specifically, by amplifying public contention over institutional violence or structural injustice, distant witnessing prompts fellow netizens to follow suit by producing and disseminating witness testimonies on a larger scale. This process contributes to a rather dynamic mode of digital activist organizing, unfolding as individuals' "personalized political participation and connective action in the recording and sharing of visual documentation" (Mortensen, 2015, p. 1393). Rather than relying on hierarchical structures to achieve rigid goals, such activist organizing hinges on grassroots actors who constantly create and share content on social media, thereby connecting concerned stakeholders as agents of societal change.

Foregrounding distant witnessing in authoritarian regimes

Purposively staged distant witnessing constitutes a viable activist repertoire in the Southern authoritarian context, as it exposes institutional violence and structural injustices in the public realm to bolster grassroots resistance. Numerous initiatives following this trajectory are spearheaded by global NGOs. For instance, Gray (2019) and Ristovska (2016) have conducted systematic evaluations of several longitudinal projects coordinated by Amnesty International and WITNESS. These projects are led by these resourceful NGOs, which utilize datafication tools or produce professional videos to publicize scattered eyewitness accounts of human rights abuses perpetrated by local governments or Western conglomerates. Particularly active in Africa and South America, these NGOs assume the role of mediators, curating distinctive repertoires of witnessing human rights violations from afar through testimonies provided by local communities (Gray, 2019; Ristovska, 2016). Consequently, public concerns over focal issues are elevated to the global stage, pressuring responsible institutions into corrective or mitigating action.

While acknowledging the pivotal role of resourceful NGOs in structured projects, it is equally essential to recognize the resilience of Southern grassroots actors in advancing distant witnessing, which serves to enhance bottom-up civic engagement in authoritarian regimes. For instance, Martini (2018) foregrounds how near-scene activists utilize camera drones to document conflict zones in Gaza. By adopting a sympathetic stance toward Palestinian victims, these YouTubers constantly traverse the witness and mediator zones, facilitating the dissemination of testimonies regarding the brutalities inflicted by the Israeli state and its settlers to a broader audience through video-sharing and live-streaming technologies. In the same vein, the anthology co-edited by Mcgarry et al. (2019) offers a panoramic assessment of social movements in such Southern nations as Argentina, Thailand, and Turkey. Their analysis sheds light on how grassroots actors partake not only in street rallies but also in the deployment of video-sharing and live-streaming technologies to articulate their witness accounts. In these instances, the operationalization of distant witnessing depends on the activists' innovative engagement with global communicative infrastructures, enabling them to contest the narratives propagated by state apparatuses. By inciting public contention on international social media, their endeavors compel global audiences to take moral responsibility for the action-based violence perpetrated by authorities that they witness, setting the stage for subsequent responses from the global community (Kavada & Poell, 2021).

Contextualizing distant witnessing in Chinese society

In China, the revitalization of civil society is progressively contingent upon grassroots actors traversing the mediator zone once reserved for journalistic professionals, amid party-state leadership that resorts to authoritarian governance doctrines, which further impedes the media's capacity to convey narratives that diverge from official rhetoric (Guo, 2021). Such power dynamics manifest during national and local disasters, as netizens leverage social media to document and publicize their experiences of witnessing fellow citizens' struggles (Wu & Montgomery, 2020). While the act of bearing witness per se does not invariably allude to an anti-regime position, it effectively subjects the state to critical scrutiny (Guo, 2021). In the absence of formal institutions leading the charge, participation in such witnessing projects is predominantly shaped by netizens' personalized engagement with social media content, which fosters the formation of "connective action networks" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 755). Demonstrating the ingenuity of grassroots actors, such initiatives, characterized by individualized forms of participation, increasingly feature the creative deployment of various social media affordances to cultivate informal networks that facilitate large-scale connective witnessing of diverse forms of structural injustice (Sun & Wright, 2024).

Yet, China's grassroots actors are increasingly confronted with a repressive domestic environment. Arguably, the party-state has now established the world's most sophisticated censorship system (Guo, 2021). In addition to building top-down control infrastructures, China's official apparatus has also initiated numerous propaganda campaigns, seizing opportunities presented by intensified Sino-foreign geopolitical frictions to rejuvenate its nationalist politics at the grassroots level (Schneider, 2018). These nationalist campaigns have

effectively bolstered the party-state's popular support, resulting in a proliferation of pro-regime voices echoed on the Chinese-language internet (Peng et al., 2024).

In light of China's domestic sociopolitical milieu (Guo, 2021), a novel paradigm of distant witnessing has gained traction, amid members of the Chinese diaspora playing their parts as mediators from outside the country. Initiatives of this variant primarily revolve around overseas grassroots actors who curate the act of bearing witness to controversial rhetoric propagated by the regime and its supporters from afar, utilizing international social media that remain largely inaccessible to most domestic audiences as their battlefield. These initiatives are organized against the backdrop of the party-state's extensive top-down control over domestic platforms (G. Yang & Jiang, 2015), which creates severe obstacles for digital activist organizing to sustain momentum from within the nation. Simultaneously, such initiatives are also orchestrated as counter-responses to the party-state's domestic nationalist propaganda (de Kloet et al., 2021; Schneider, 2018), as the regime's highly effective dissemination of distorted rhetoric paradoxically carries contentious potential on international platforms. This dynamic has become particularly salient in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, during which the party-state's monstrous pro-Kremlin interpretations of the military crisis have facilitated criticisms of the regime.

Theorizing an affective-discursive approach to distant witnessing

This study employs an affective-discursive approach to unpack how aspects of distant witnessing constitute an activist repertoire that counteracts China's nationalist politics. The affective-discursive approach is theorized under the critical discourse studies (CDS) rubric, primarily drawing on a discourse-historical approach (DHA). As a transdisciplinary research program that offers both theoretical and methodological guidance, CDS elucidates how discourse figures in societal dynamics (van Dijk, 2014). By emphasizing context-specific linguistic patterns and ideology-driven framing methods, Wodak's (2009) DHA specifically investigates how interlocked linguistic actions, as well as thematically organized symbolic representations, contribute to the functioning of power.

A notable aspect of DHA pertains to its methodological categorization of various discursive strategies, including nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, and intensification/mitigation. Nomination refers to the act of naming individuals or objects to delineate in-group/out-group memberships (van Dijk, 2014). Predication entails attributing specific characteristics to a subject to qualify an actor, object, phenomenon, event/process, or action (Wodak, 2009). Argumentation is employed to construct content-related warrants that justify an argument and its conclusion (van Dijk, 2014). In contrast to the aforementioned strategies, perspectivization and intensification/mitigation do not operate independently; rather, they often collocate with one or more of the aforementioned categories. Perspectivization is employed to convey communicators' viewpoints, while intensification/mitigation serves to modify the epistemic statuses of their propositions in communicative actions (Wodak, 2009). Such discursive strategies typically manifest as calibrated lexical choices (e.g., deictic expressions to reference various actors) and rhetorical devices (e.g., metaphorical associations that link elements with non-apparent logical connections) (van Dijk, 2014). By decoding the functionalities of these discursive strategies, DHA establishes a text-centric framework for interpreting ideology-informed communication.

Yet, sense-making is neither exclusively discursive nor solely affective (Wetherell, 2012). An understanding of the pre-discursive is crucial for digital activist organizing, as the success or failure of an initiative also resides in activists' ability to assemble or disband individual citizens around affective bonds (Papacharissi, 2015). Yet, the assemblage of affective publics is perpetually ready to "give way to the next set of trending topics and related sentiments" (Kavada & Poell, 2021, p. 203). Staging distant witnessing to engage members of the citizenry, this repertoire necessitates that activist mediators not only present factual evidence but also position themselves as individuals who are affected. This requires the presentation of witness testimonies from specific perspectives, often adopting a sympathetic stance toward those who are imminently impacted, to elicit audiences' affective responses (Kyriakidou, 2015; Martini, 2018). In this manner, mediators facilitate the establishment of affective connections among the imminently impacted, the witnesses, and the audience, thereby playing into broader digital activist organizing (Allan, 2013). Building upon such scholarship, we aim to elucidate the affective-discursive entanglement embedded in distant witnessing through a critical analysis of its semiotic residues in social-mediated communication.

Advancing a Spinozian understanding of affect, which encompasses but is not equivalent to personal sentiment, Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. xvi) conceptualize affect as the result of interactions among different bodies, defined by "a pre-personal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another." Affect opens up the capacity of a body to affect others and vice versa (Anderson, 2014). Affective experiences "are driven by a fixation with instantaneity and intense anticipation of what might happen next" (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 128), functioning through their potentialities to enable sense-making that transcends feeling per se. However, an exclusive focus on pre-personal intensity is counterproductive (Wetherell, 2012). As Papacharissi (2015, p. 17) observes, affects often "breathe new meaning into the texture of a performance, frequently through linguistic play or reversal of norms." The inherent affective-discursive entanglement mandates the necessity of integrating accounts of the pre-discursive with the discursive.

An affective-discursive approach acknowledges the significance of pre-discursive affective gestures. In social-mediated communication, such affective gestures are registered upon such social media affordances as content-sharing, hash-tagging, posting, and reposting, which provide the material basis for stimulating netizens' sensory reactions to organize affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015). In particular, distant witnessing plays out as activist mediators re-appropriate such affordances to report witnesses' first-person spectatorship of events and curate an activist repertoire aimed at engaging a wider audience afar for connective witnessing (Kyriakidou, 2015). Pre-discursive affective gestures are deployed to convey witness testimonies, effectively communicating "what it feels like to see atrocity" to mandate "modes of response from the audience" (Ristovska, 2016, p. 1037). An affective-discursive approach, therefore, also considers how distant witnessing is intentionally structured to unleash the affective potential of witness testimonies, rendering affective connections among private netizens to promote their civic engagement.

Yet, pre-discursive affective gestures do not exclusively govern social-mediated communication, where digital platforms serve as framing devices that shape publics out of crowds (Papacharissi, 2015). Drawing on Anderson's (2014) conceptualization of affective modulation, the affective-discursive approach also interrogates how the intensities of affects are discursively amplified or mollified. As Papacharissi (2015) notes, grassroots actors frequently contribute collaborative narratives to frame events according to their own terms. Such practices enable mediators of distant witnessing to mobilize discursive forms of affective gestures, which are constitutive of subject positioning and interpretive actions that underscore their stance as the affected. Upon re-narrating witnesses' first-person accounts, they construct "vantage points of speaking that enable specific ways of relating to others and self" to present a group of expressions that convey "shared cultural membership" (Glapka, 2019, p. 604). In this manner, activist mediators are able to align themselves with those who experience suffering at a distance, thereby encouraging fellow netizens to follow suit from afar.

Bridging analyses of pre-personal intensities and discursive structures, the affective-discursive approach recognizes the significance of perspectivization and intensification/mitigation in the social-mediated curation of distant witnessing. Specifically, perspectivization frames a speaker's viewpoint "through the statement of assumptions and/or acts of inter-discursivity" to express engagement/distance; intensification/mitigation qualifies or modifies "the epistemic status of a proposition by intensifying or mitigating the illocutionary force of utterances," sharpening their stance-taking act or toning it down to amplify its impact (Wodak, 2009, p. 44). Both discursive strategies permit a discourse producer to articulate their involvement in an event and their relationships with other parties involved. Accounting for such linguistic maneuvers as essential components of interlocked affective-discursive processes, we probe into how activists orchestrate distant witnessing through their deliberately crafted texts to mediate the relationships among various actors. In doing so, we unpack the act of bearing witness afar as an evolving activist repertoire, which facilitates the development of connective witnessing on international social media, thereby supporting the organization of overseas Chinese dissidents' anti-regime resistance.

Research questions and methods

Initially launched against Beijing's support for Moscow in its war against Ukraine, the focal initiative sought to hold the party-state accountable for its strategic partner's aggression. According to media interviews (Liu, 2022), the initiative is spearheaded by members of the Chinese diaspora who share a common goal of challenging the oppressive regime, with X serving as their primary organizing platform. The campaign entails activists translating Chinese-language texts that expose distorted narratives of geopolitics from within China into other languages and disseminating them on X through an official account. Within the first calendar year of its launch, the account accumulated over 200,000 followers by 31 December 2022. These followers comprise a diverse array of netizens from around the globe who subscribe to critical perspectives regarding the party-state. While the activists are cognizant of their followers' varied nationalities, they mainly target English speakers, reflecting their consideration of the substantial userbase size of that language.

Accounting for an affective-discursive entanglement, this research explores how X postings encapsulate the repertoire of distant witnessing, as their posters record and narrate their experiences of witnessing China's nationalist rhetoric from a vantage point beyond the regime's censorship reach. This yields the following questions to underpin the inquiry.

1. How do activists coordinating the initiative selectively publicize texts forwarded by netizens from within China to testify against the party-state and its supporters' distorted narratives of international geopolitics and beyond?
2. How do these activists affectively process these texts to publicize witness testimonies against China's nationalist politics from afar to engage international audiences on X?
3. How do these activists discursively narrate their experiences of distant witnessing, positioning themselves as affected individuals to ignite public contention over the party-state's authoritarian rule?

Empirical data were collected from the initiative's X account over a sampling period of approximately ten months, spanning from 7 March 2022, when the first tweet was posted, to 31 December 2022, marking the conclusion of the
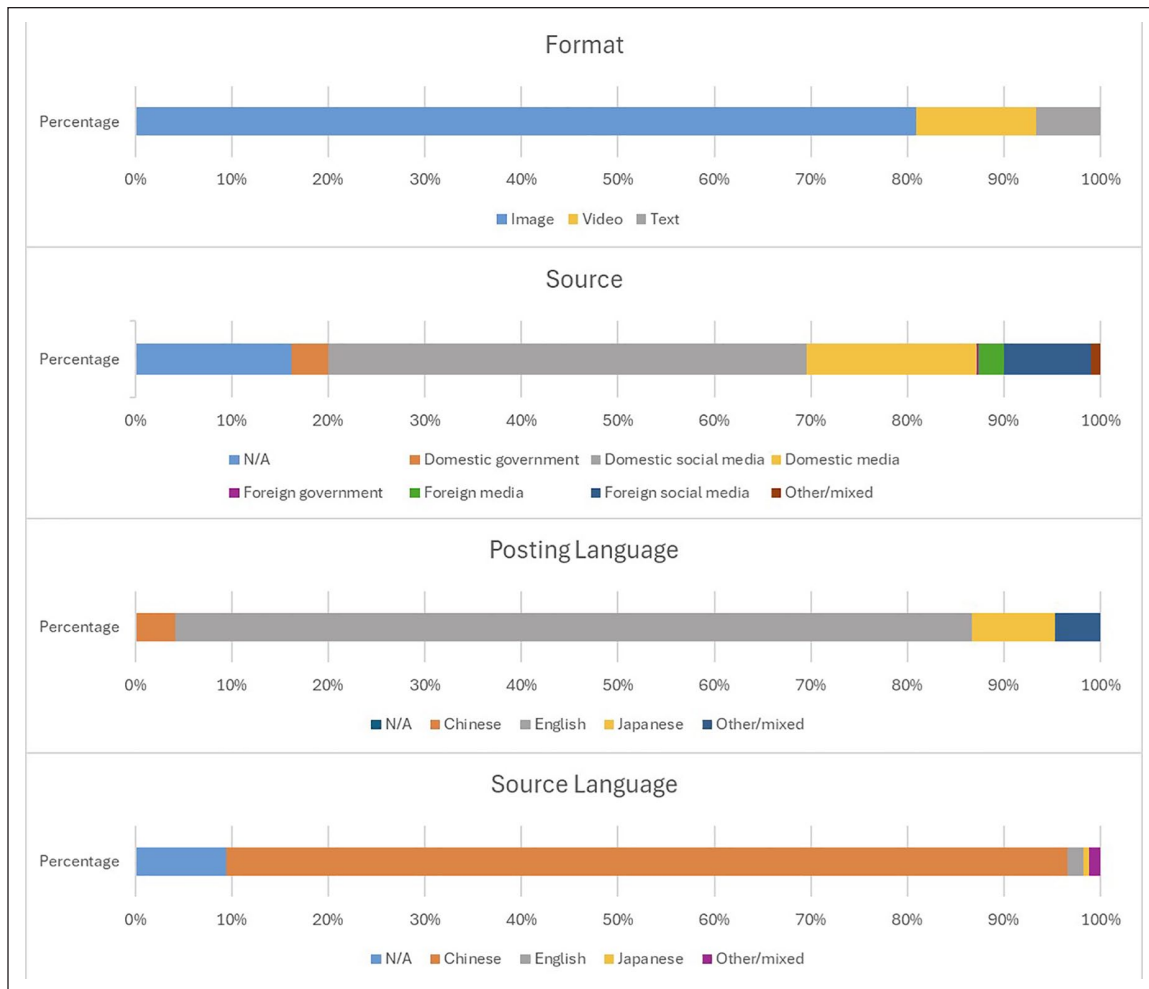
Figure 1. A summary of the dataset.

calendar year. A total of 1675 tweets were collected during this timeframe. The sampling period was deliberately designed to capture the initiative's X postings throughout the three evolving stages of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The first stage occurred between March and April 2022, during which Russia made attempts to occupy Kyiv. The second stage, characterized by the initial stalemate of the war, took place from May to September 2022, a period during which media coverage of the battlefield diminished. The third stage extended from September to December 2022, during which Ukraine commenced counteroffensives, coinciding with notable high-profile street protests documented in China.

To scaffold a structured analysis of the tweets, we adopted a two-step coding process. In the initial phase, a co-author manually coded the tweets based on a thematic categorization. Key features identified included the format of the main content, the source of the original content, the posting language, and the source language. These features were instrumental in recognizing general patterns in the sampled tweets (Figure 1) insofar as they allowed for a more detailed analysis. Building upon the preliminary results, the lead author

subsequently conducted a theory-informed close reading of the data, concentrating on a typical cluster of tweets identified during the initial coding phase. With a dual account encompassing both pre-discursive and discursive dimensions, the analysis operationalized an affective-discursive approach, uncovering how overseas Chinese activists incited public contention on X by articulating their accounts of fellow Chinese netizens' first-person witness of the party-state's nationalist politics.

Analytical discussion

Challenging grassroots support for the regime

The dataset predominantly consists of a substantial volume of tweets that translate Chinese-language social media content into the English language. These tweets exemplify the manner in which overseas Chinese activists curate the initiative based on fellow grassroots netizens' recommendations, highlighting content that critically exposes distorted narratives originating from within China. This illustrates how the

Figure 2. A screenshot of Tweet-107.

X account's administrative collective performatively enacts the mediator role, curating witnessing of the party-state's nationalist politics from a distance and fostering affective connections among concerned members of the public on X.

Tweet-107 (Figure 2) offers a pertinent example of how two interlocked affective gestures are deployed in the sampled postings. Specifically, the tweet features two snapshots that document commentaries from Zhihu, a prominent Chinese-language question-answering site well-known for hosting political debates. These images, likely forwarded to the initiative's X account by liberal-leaning netizens, encompass ten commentaries concerning the Russian army's killing of a Ukrainian soldier in action, a topic that garnered considerable attention in mid-March 2022. The commentaries are intentionally quoted, reflecting several Zhihu users' celebratory sentiments in response to the Ukrainian soldier's death. Activists coordinating the initiative have utilized photo-editing software to enhance these images by incorporating English-language translations of the commentaries, which are highlighted in red to increase their visual prominence. These edits transform the images into valuable archives of distorted narratives, reformatted for the convenience of English-speaking audiences. This represents an affective gesture, as the pre-personal intensities of the tweet are established through its vivid depiction of evidential events, illustrating the manifest prevalence of grassroots support for the Russian invader among China's internet population.

As demonstrated in Tweet-107, affective modulation is further achieved through its discursive structure, wherein activists offer their personalized interpretations of the documented archives. The textual component of the tweet, comprising only 17 English words and 34 Chinese characters, positions the initiative's X account at the nexus of a dynamic process of distant witnessing. It effectively communicates the experiences of several liberal-leaning netizens as they confront unsettling narratives related to the war, thereby extending their witness accounts to a broader audience. Importantly, the tweet attributes these distressing narratives to specific actors, echoing Wodak's (2009) remarks on the functionalities of perspectivization. This discursive strategy enables activists to performatively self-identify as those affected, aligning themselves with individuals who submitted the original screenshots to their X account for critical exposure, in stark contrast to the unaffected posters of the original Chinese-language content on Zhihu. Furthermore, this strategy is devised alongside a metaphorical association that establishes a nonliteral comparison (van Dijk, 2014), linking the posters' experiences of witnessing real-life military atrocities to the act of watching fictional Hollywood comedies. In doing so, the tweet conveys a sense of irony by juxtaposing these logically unrelated scenarios. It implicitly establishes a deontic trajectory of intensification, highlighting the nationalist Zhihu posters' incapacity to empathize with war victims, rather than merely critiquing their pro-Russian stance. At first glance, the tweet seemingly refrains from overtly emotional assessments to avoid the impression that the takeaways are being hijacked by personal emotions. However, its intricate discursive structure necessitates a profound expression of anger directed toward nationalist Chinese netizens' celebratory reactions to tragedies caused by the war.

Concentrating on the party-state's nationalist politics, the sampled tweets showcase overwhelming focuses upon China's domestic actors, diverging from the original Eastern European context during the early stage of the war. An illustrative example is presented in Tweet 105 (Figure 3), which documents a significant event that took place in March 2022. This event involved a Chinese family residing in Ukraine who were contemplating a self-resilient plan to evacuate from the warzone, as shared on the Chinese-language microblogging platform, Weibo. Without political statement-making, their deliberation per se carries a subtextual, critical undertone as they juxtapose the operational costs of their escape plan with the absence of support from the state. The original content was initially reported by a micro-influencer on Weibo and was subsequently brought to the attention of the X account's administrators by anti-nationalist netizens.
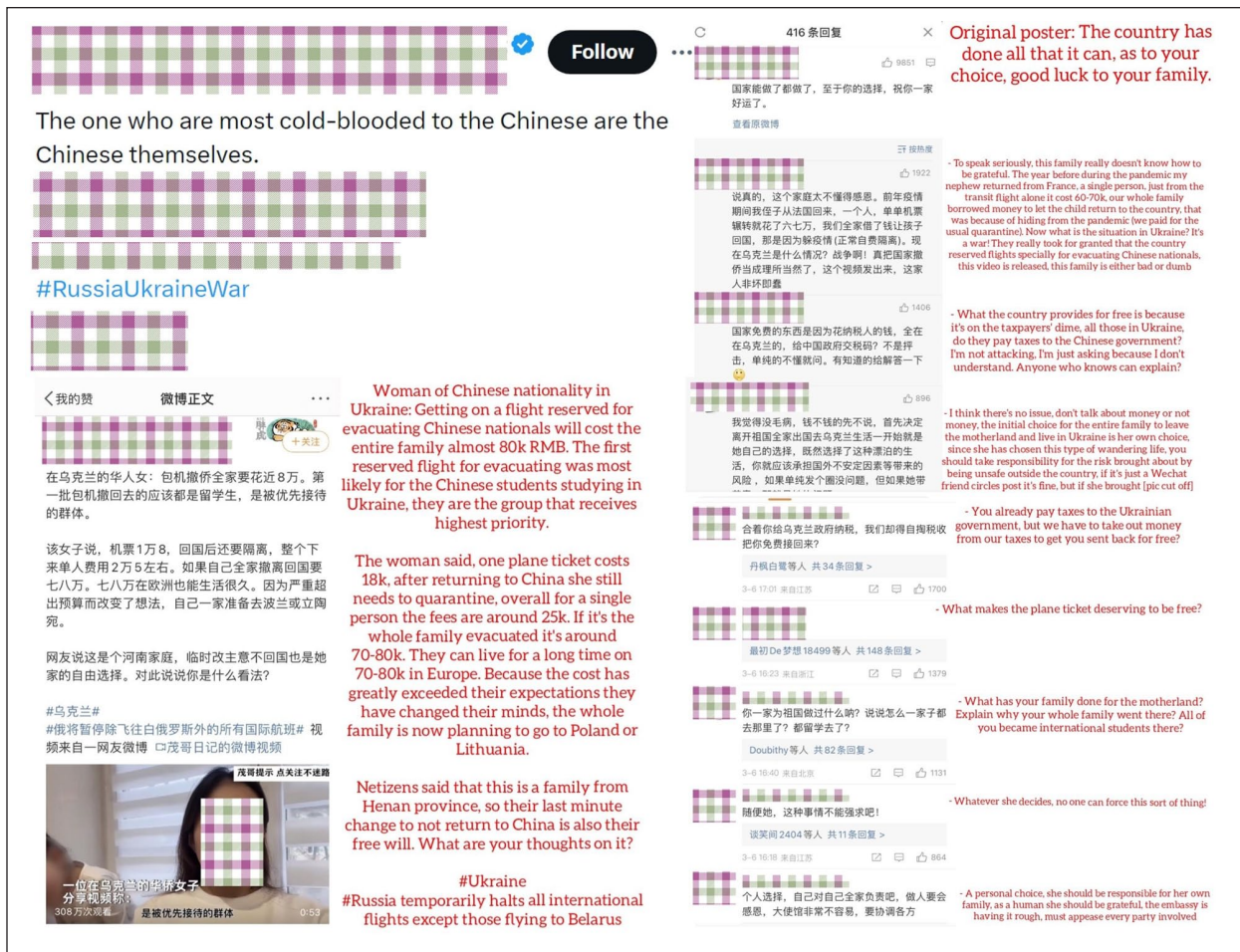
Figure 3. A screenshot of Tweet-105.

In contrast to a mere recounting of the original story, Tweet-105 cites two additional screenshots from the Weibo commentary section to document the experiences of broadly liberal-leaning netizens as they encounter their nationalist counterparts on the Chinese-language internet. Each Weibo commentary, which illustrates nationalist netizens accusing the Ukraine-based Chinese family of ingratitude toward their homeland, is accompanied by corresponding English-language translations, highlighted in red, to enhance the visibility and accessibility of these witness accounts for English-speaking audiences. The pre-personal intensities of the tweet are effectively conveyed through its visual elements, which illustrate these nationalist netizens' incapacity to empathize with their compatriots' suffering. Affective modulation, once more, persists into the discursive structure of the tweet through an intensification that explicitly labels the original content posters as the "most-cold-blooded" in the superlative form to augment the level of anger being expressed. Simultaneously, perspectivization is at play, positioning the activists coordinating the X postings as the affected parties, thereby creating a binary opposition to the posters who exhibit extremist tendencies. By reiterating the nationality of the involved parties to establish a sense of group membership, the tweet emphasizes the incident's potential to depict shared characteristics of the pro-regime majority of China's internet population, in contrast to the minority that is critical of Russia. Rather than limiting their narratives to emotionally restrained takeaways, these activists articulate their accounts of the event with an explicitly intense and critical tone. In conjunction with Tweet-107, this serves as a salient example of how the discursive structures of the sampled tweets harness their capacity to modulate the affective responses of international audiences, thereby provoking broader public contention on X.

In particular, activists coordinating the initiative adeptly leverage the affordances of social media to augment the visibility of their accounts regarding the distorted rhetoric witnessed by fellow netizens in China. As demonstrated in Tweets-105 and 107, the tagging function available on the platform is strategically employed to remind prominent X influencers of the incidents in question. These tags are supplemented by hashtags that juxtapose keywords pertinent to
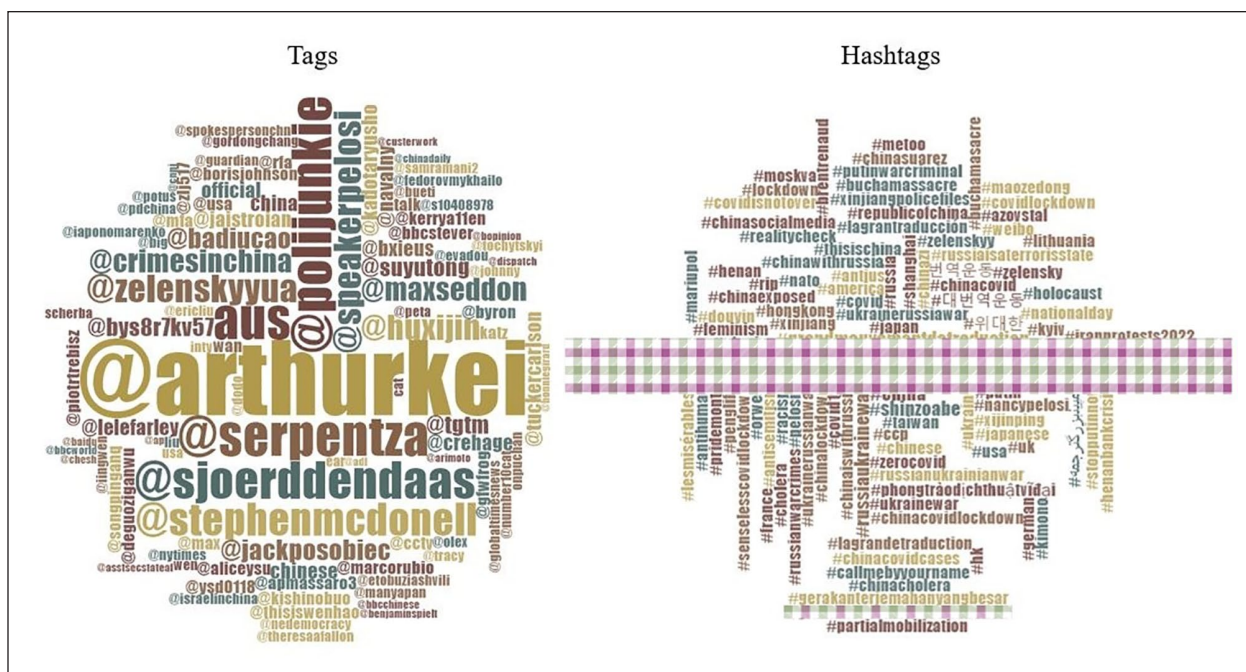
Figure 4. Word clouds of tags and hashtags.

the focal event and its broader context, thereby constructing collaborative narratives. The consistent use of hashtags and tags constitutes a stylized affective gesture that not only establishes connections with and among international audiences but also encourages them to follow suit on X (Figure 4). This practice underscores how tags and hashtags enhance the visibility of threads on the platform, thereby invigorating fellow netizens' personalized engagement in the process of distant witnessing. Consequently, these X postings exemplify a well-tested and strategic adoption of social media affordances in activist organizing, which grassroots actors recurrently employ to scaffold connective witnessing on a larger scale across digital platforms (Mortensen, 2015).

Building affective connections with international audiences

Since July 2022, activists coordinating the initiative have notably broadened their foci beyond the Russo-Ukrainian war to encompass otherwise-related events. This paradigm shift is tellingly evident in their comprehensive coverage of the assassination of Shinzo Abe. This shift illustrates these activists' mindfulness of the temporal nature of sensory stimulation, especially in light of the increasing fatigue experienced by global audiences due to the incessant updates on the conflict during its protracted stalemate.

Tweet-897 (Figure 5) again addresses the distorted narratives that have emerged within China, specifically focusing on excerpts from Weibo commentaries related to media coverage of the assassination of the former Japanese prime minister. This tweet engages in a stylized act of scrutiny,

highlighting the Weibo commentary section, which is inundated with numerous nationalist Chinese netizens' comments on the news, presented through English-language translations. The accompanying screenshots capture instances of individuals expressing celebration over the former Japanese prime minister's death. The discursive structure of the tweet is marked by its issuance of a brief, solemn English statement, which stands in sharp contrast to the direct quotations that depict various Chinese netizens' celebratory reactions to the assassination. This juxtaposition of linguistically heterogeneous texts facilitates affective modulation, aligning activists who orchestrate X postings with fellow netizens who have withstood first-person encounters with the distorted nationalist narratives from Weibo. By orchestrating witness testimonies against such distorted narratives from afar, this approach alludes to a differentiation of these activists from the nationalist masses, as the former group is capable of affectively connecting themselves to X-based international audiences, who are presumed to be sympathetic toward the Japanese politician in the wake of his abrupt demise.

The sociopolitical significance of Shinzo Abe's death is particularly pertinent to East Asian geopolitics. Given the former Japanese Prime Minister's reputation as a right-wing populist and his hardline stance on China issues, he was never a foreign leader who garnered affection from the majority of the Chinese populace (He, 2023). These sentiments are deeply rooted in the historical context of Japanese imperial expansions, which culminated in World War II and resulted in significant military defeats and substantial civilian casualties for China, offering the contextual grounds for the party-state to leverage public animosity toward the

Figure 5. A screenshot of Tweet-897.

Figure 6. User engagement with the sampled tweets.

eastern neighbor to consolidate its grassroots support (Schneider, 2018). In light of this historical context, it is not surprising that the expressions of mourning for the assassinated Japanese leader, which permeated global media, were met with skepticism and disapproval by a considerable segment of the Chinese population (He, 2023). Furthermore, observers from the international community may experience cognitive dissonance upon encountering the extensive derogatory commentaries circulating on the Chinese-language internet in response to this event. Activists coordinating the initiative have capitalized on this situation, as their X postings continue to highlight troubling commentaries from China amid growing public fatigue regarding news of Russia's warfare against Ukraine. This strategy serves to provoke public condemnation of the regime and its supporters from an imagined, globally like-minded audience on X.

Indeed, distant witnessing serves to prime connective witnessing on a larger scale, thereby engaging a broader public audience. This phenomenon is notably illustrated by the fact that the sampled tweets typically elicit an average of 40 follow-up commentaries, 220 retweets, and 647 likes (Figure 6). These engagement metrics pale in comparison to those of mega X influencers, who often boast subscriber counts in the millions. Yet, being intentionally designed to incite public contention, these tweets have magnetized significant attention from international audiences, as well as a substantial
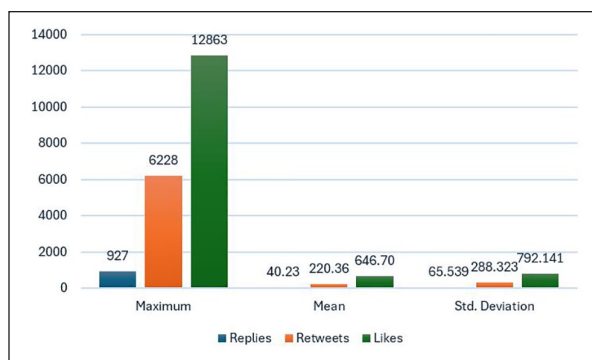
segment of the Chinese diaspora and their digital-savvy counterparts within China, who are skilled in circumventing state censorship through such available digital resources as virtual private network (VPN) services. By situating themselves at the nexus of social-mediated connections, these postings effectively facilitate personalized engagement among members from the aforementioned cohorts and cultivate connective networks among them. This process further spreads the act of witnessing to their respective networks, thereby amplifying the societal impact of their witness accounts.

Nevertheless, as an initiative revolving around grassroots actors' self-voluntary participation, activists' curation of distant witnessing is by no means without its challenges.

> Tweet-3: When deciding what materials to translate, please choose influential items such as Weibo posts with over 10,000 reposts/likes or Zhihu posts with over 10,000 upvotes. I don't think translating sheer extremist views is worthwhile [. . .].

At the inception of their X account, activists curating the initiative posted a series of tone-setting tweets, elucidating their cause as a progressive movement aimed at exposing China's distorted narratives of geopolitics to global audiences. However, given that the account is co-administrated within a decentralized dissident community, aspects of the initiative appear to be hijacked by certain members who seek to hold the entire Chinese populace accountable. This is achieved by framing the citizenry as a homogeneous collective "characterized by pride, arrogance, populism, cruelty, bloodthirstiness, and a complete lack of compassion" (Liu, 2022, n.p.). Illustrative of this distorted intention, some of the sampled tweets repeatedly employ nomination strategies, which, as demonstrated in earlier examples, tend to oversimplify the group membership of the nationalist netizens they target. This distorted intention defines a notable, problematic dimension of the initiative.

While sharing anti-regime agendas with domestic dissidents who contest these distorted narratives from within China, the affective connections that activists establish with them generally operate at the backstage of the initiative. At
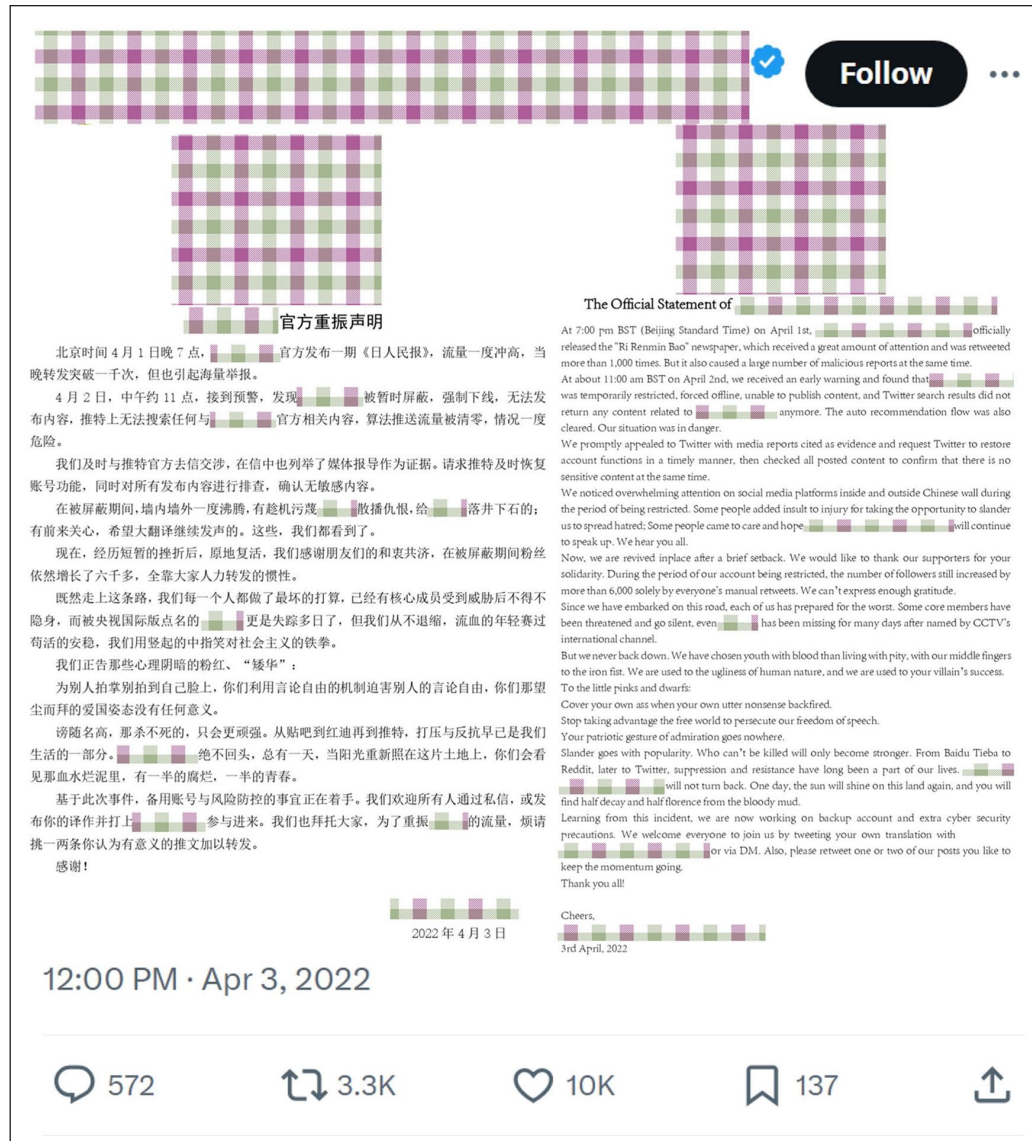
Figure 7. A screenshot of Tweet-279.

its forefront, numerous sampled tweets seem to indict the entire Chinese populace, irrespective of the political beliefs or actions of its individual constituents. This situation alludes to a paradoxical inversion of nationalist political dynamics, wherein certain activists perceive their oversimplified critiques of the "Chinese national character" as justified (Guo, 2021, p. 164). However, such critiques have marginalized a more nuanced examination of the diversity present within China's public opinion and the intricate dynamics that shape its formation, thereby risking the exacerbation of distorted dissent against the regime (Bolsover & Howard, 2019). On this note, uncritically glorifying the progressive potential of digital activism is counterproductive (Gustafsson & Weinryb, 2020), as it not only perpetuates an authoritarian-democratic dichotomy in the interpretation of civic engagement within the Chinese context but may also fuel Sinophobia, which

has experienced exponential growth across the globe in recent years.

Fighting for existence to retain vitality

Playing into social-mediated anti-regime mobilizations, the focal initiative, despite the risk of exacerbating distorted dissent, has inevitably antagonized the ire of Chinese authorities. This scenario effectively renders the activists coordinating the initiative not only as mediators who facilitate the witnessing of distorted rhetoric emanating from within China from a distance but also as directly impacted actors who persistently endure orchestrated attacks from pro-regime netizens in a first-person capacity.

Tweet-279 (Figure 7) documents an incident involving the temporary suspension of the initiative's X account by the

platform in April 2022, as self-declared by its administrative collective. This suspension occurred in the context of a targeted negative campaign orchestrated by Beijing's official mouthpieces, which mobilized a wave of malicious and accusatory reporting from regime supporters directed at the account. To elucidate the rationale behind the suspension to their X followers, the account issued a bilingual statement consisting of 710 Chinese characters and 483 English words. Emulating a style reminiscent of press releases, the first half of the statement provided basic, instructive information to contextualize the event. The second half, while maintaining a degree of linguistic heterogeneity, built upon the established facts and transitioned into a more eloquent pattern of political critique. In affectively expressing gratitude for its followers' support, the account called for solidarity among them. By oscillating between the dual roles of those affected by the suffering and mediators curating distant witnessing to forge affective connections with wider international audiences, activists effectively transformed the state-led negative campaign and its supporters' accusatory reporting into a focal, contentious issue on X.

Amid the growing prevalence of nationalist sentiments in China, much-existing scholarship has primarily concentrated on the domestic implications of this phenomenon (de Kloet et al., 2021; Schneider, 2018). However, there has been limited investigation into the multi-trajectorial tensions that arise from a cross-border perspective. On the one hand, international platforms frequently function as incubators for anti-regime sentiments among members of the Chinese diaspora (Bolsover & Howard, 2019), but their affordances for global interconnectedness are concurrently exploitable to China's domestic pro-regime actors (Lu et al., 2024). Digital-savvy regime supporters are now capable of orchestrating large-scale campaigns to promote Beijing's agendas internationally (Han, 2023). On the other hand, due to pervasive state censorship, pro-regime Chinese netizens have become adept at employing coordinated accusatory-reporting strategies to counter dissenting voices on domestic digital platforms (Wang & Tan, 2023). Such accusatory-reporting actions are often organized in response to opponents whose views are perceived as incompatible with official ideologies, thereby reinforcing the participatory mechanisms inherent in the nationwide internet regulatory system.

With the nationalist and participatory vectors colliding on international social media, activists coordinating the initiative are caught in a challenging situation where their X account constantly endures coordinated accusatory reporting by pro-regime netizens. It is crucial to recognize that the operational logic of international platforms dramatically differs from that of their Chinese counterparts, which are subjected to the stringent, top-down controls imposed by the party-state. The ongoing presence of the initiative on X indicates that, to a certain extent, the platform remains a level-playing field for dissidents contesting the party-state's authority. In this context, the initiative has adaptively leveraged the incident of a

Figure 8. A screenshot of Tweet-1572.

pro-regime accusatory-reporting campaign aimed at silencing anti-regime voices, reframing it as a contentious issue to provoke public scrutiny of China's interference with free expression on X.

Converging with street activism from within

Beyond their continued embodiment of anti-regime efforts through critical exposure of distorted nationalist rhetoric, the initiative's X postings toward the end of 2022 are particularly noteworthy. This evolving coverage of domestic dissent, to a certain degree, remedies the initiative's overwhelming foci on domestic nationalist voices, which may have unfairly implicated the entire Chinese population.

The second paradigm shift identified in the analyzed tweets was significantly influenced by the A4 revolution. Specifically, Tweet-1572 (Figure 8) casts an account from activists, posted on 28 November 2022, just hours after the onset of street protests. The A4 revolution was triggered by a building fire in Urumqi, which resulted in the deaths of ten victims, allegedly due to the government's excessive Covid-19 control measures that hindered rescue operations (Zeng &

Cheng, 2024). Protesters utilized blank A4-sized white papers as a symbol of dissent against the government's repression of civil liberties, leading to a rapid escalation of protests nationwide. Although the momentum of street activism dissipated within a week, the protests evidently compelled the party-state to retract its extreme counter-outbreak measures, which had inflicted significant collateral damage across the country (Connery, 2024).

With four snapshots of a rally at Shanghai's Wulumuqi Road, Tweet-1572 documents the then-unfolding A4 revolution. By reposting street protesters' synchronous recordings, the tweet features the temporary, yet unprecedented street-level mobilizations across China. Accompanied by an extremely succinct caption of thirteen words, the tweet alludes to an affective gesture, resorting to the pre-personal intensities conveyed by the attached images, capturing the scenes to ignite international audiences' affective responses. The symbolic value of the rally derives from the intertextual reference linking the protesting site (Wulumuqi Road) to the location of the triggering event (Urumqi City) in Chinese language (Connery, 2024). The brevity of the accounts offered in the tweet deliberately avoids overtly emotional expressions at a textual level, yet it paradoxically discharges a profound underlying public outcry. This affective gesture empowers activists coordinating the initiative to optimize their performance as mediators, fostering the establishment of affective connections among domestic dissidents protesting in the streets, fellow citizens who observe the protests and empathize with their causes, and international audiences who watch the unfolding protests on X. In this manner, these activists contribute to amplifying the visibility of the protesters' sufferings, as well as their endeavors, thereby rendering the X community morally and collectively accountable. Consequently, more nuanced witness accounts of China's domestic political landscape are presented in the sampled tweets, enhancing the initiative's progressive potential by energizing the momentum of domestic street activism beyond Chinese territories.

It is noteworthy that the frequency of video uploads significantly increased in the sampled tweets during the A4 revolution. With various modalities being exploited, an emphasis on first-person observations of the protests is further foregrounded to augment the affective capacity of the witness accounts. In the same vein, the discursive structures of a large barrage of these postings, as exemplified in Tweet-1592 (Figure 9), are simultaneously distinguished by their calibrated lexical choices, seeking recourse to direct quotations to vocalize street protesters' pleas. By highlighting domestic dissidents' frustration with the oppressive party-state during periods of heightened tension, these activists further reinforce the affective connections among A4 protesters, their domestic sympathizers, and members of the international community watching the unfolding events at large. In collaboration with fellow anti-regime actors on X (Zeng & Cheng, 2024), this collective effort broadens their cause into

Figure 9. A screenshot of Tweet-1592.

a more extensive resistance movement, reiterating the organizational logic of distant witnessing as an activist repertoire in cross-border, social-mediated mobilizations aimed at challenging the party-state.

Concluding remarks

This article has delved into the dynamics of cross-border digital activism led by members of the Chinese diaspora on X, using a case study to enrich our understanding of distant witnessing as an activist repertoire. Amid the proliferation of global digital infrastructures that facilitate the production and consumption of witness testimonies across geographic borders, grassroots actors have proactively traversed the mediator zone, turning distant witnessing to the forefront of digital activist organizing (Martini, 2018). Intentionally serving political objectives, their practices contribute to reconfiguring the relationships among those imminently impacted, witnesses, and the broader public by retelling witness accounts of citizens' suffering to render concerned members of the citizenry morally responsible (Allan, 2013). With social media functioning as the organizing network (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), distant witnessing can be operationalized as an activist repertoire capable of catalyzing large-scale mobilizations. Its effectiveness hinges on the mediators capitalizing on the opportunities offered by available social media affordances to bridge the witness and audience zones, fostering affective connections among the actors inhabiting there (Martini, 2018). A focal point of this research, thus, emphasizes advancing an affective-discursive approach to elucidate how two interconnected affective gestures clarify the operational rationale underlying the connective formation of affective publics through distant witnessing.

As depicted in the case study, pre-discursive gestures are typically poised upon activists' relentless posting actions, publicizing screenshots and videos that have been recommended by fellow liberal-leaning Chinese netizens to document both the distorted geopolitical narratives and the grassroots dissent emerging from within China. By employing stylized tags and hashtags, these activists attempt to maximize the exposure of their X posts and encourage their audiences to follow suit within their own networks, thereby fostering collaborative narratives on the platform. Such pre-discursive affective gestures are performed by activists as they seek recourse to social-mediated communication to convey witness testimonies to a wide audience.

However, affective gestures consistently transcend the pre-discursive and persist into the discursive through stylized storytelling that amplifies or moderates affective expressions (Papacharissi, 2015). Without sidelining the pre-personal intensities present in evidential texts, the discursive structures of the focal initiative's X postings also purposefully position activists as the affected, who feel obligated to share their subjective takeaways from observing both distorted rhetoric and progressive dissent. These discursive structures convey subtle nuances, articulating their resentments toward the regime and its supporters on one hand, while expressing their sympathies for fellow domestic dissidents on the other. Materialized upon both pre-discursive and discursive gestures, the sampled tweets consistently underscore the moral imperative of observing the party-state's nationalist politics and its broader ramifications. Distant witnessing is, thus, operationalized to compel audiences to assume collective responsibility, thereby inciting public outrage that extends beyond the party-state's censorship reach. Consequently, this analysis reiterates Mortensen's (2015) observation of personalized political participation by sketching out how distant witnessing plays into connective witnessing through an affective-discursive lens.

It is worth noting that the findings resonate with prior scholarship regarding a dilemma encountered by China's civil society, specifically the dual crackdowns imposed by the party-state on both collective and connective actions on domestic digital platforms (Guo, 2021; F. Yang, 2016). Amid the leadership tightening its grip on civil liberties, the space for civic engagement, whether systematically organized by NGOs or loosely led by grassroots actors from within, has shrunk rapidly in recent years. In response to this constriction, members of the Chinese diaspora are increasingly taking the lead in orchestrating initiatives challenging the legitimacy of the party-state. Certainly, characterized by decentralized digital organizing, these initiatives are vulnerable to malicious intent. As evidenced in the case study, this reflects certain members of the focal X account administrative collective's self-essentialization of a "national character" thesis, which alludes to Sinophobia by misattributing a variety of sociopolitical issues faced by civil society under the party-state polity to imagined, shared qualities of the Chinese populace (Guo, 2021, p. 164). Yet, despite the inherent risks, efforts organized through distant witnessing indeed contribute to an evolving trajectory of progressive intervention in which international digital platforms are leveraged to confront the regime beyond the heavily censored Chinese-language internet. With global digital infrastructures setting the stage, once-sidelined overseas Chinese communities are now empowered to revitalize grassroots dissent, reinvigorate public contention over the party-state and its supporters' distorted narratives, while also advancing domestic dissidents' causes.

Beyond the part enacted by digital platforms as organizing networks, overseas Chinese activists have evidently distinguished their efforts from other incidental paradigms of mobilizations. We argue that such initiatives have the capacity to ignite "connective witnessing" (Mortensen, 2015, p. 1393) as "individualized and technologically organized sets of processes" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 750) in a transitional context. In this process, activists emerge as super participants, curating distant witnessing from the mediator zone to inform an informal mode of digital organizing. By mobilizing both human and technological resources, their endeavors escalate into collective anti-regime movements originating from small-scale, individualized campaigns. Although these activists may not necessarily participate in on-the-ground protests due to the inherent risks and challenges of coordination under China's current circumstances, their initiatives exert external pressure on the party-state, collaboratively countering its oppressive rule. The findings demonstrate how global digital infrastructures, despite the potential for exploitation by malicious entities (Bolsover & Howard, 2019; Gustafsson & Weinryb, 2020), continue to provide a counterbalance that levels the playing field for grassroots mobilizations against Southern authoritarian regimes.

ORCID iDs

Altman Yuzhu Peng (iD) https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3440-0761

Yu Sun (iD) https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7319-8933

Chunyan Wu (iD) https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6531-1219

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

Allan, S. (2013). *Citizen witnessing*. Polity Press.

Anderson, B. (2014). *Encountering affect*. Ashgate.

Ashuri, T. (2012). Activist journalism: Using digital technologies and undermining structures. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, *5*(1), 38–56. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-9137.2011.01116.x

Ashuri, T., & Pinchevski, A. (2009). Witnessing as a field. In P. Frosh & A. Pinchevski (Eds.), *Media witnessing* (pp. 133–157). Palgrave Macmillan.

Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2012). The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalisation of contentious politics. *Information, Communication & Society*, *15*(5), 739–768. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661

Bolsover, G., & Howard, P. (2019). Chinese computational propaganda: Automation, algorithms and the manipulation of information about Chinese politics on Twitter and Weibo. *Information, Communication & Society*, *22*(14), 2063–2080. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1476576

Chouliaraki, L., & Mortensen, M. (2022). Flesh witnessing: Smartphones, UGC, and embodied testimony. *Journalism*, *23*(3), 591–598. https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849211060646

Connery, C. L. (2024). Wulumuqi road. *Cultural Studies*, *38*(1), 149–162. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2023.2261950

de Kloet, J., Lin, J., & Hu, J. (2021). The politics of emotion during COVID-19: Turning fear into pride in China's WeChat discourse. *China Information*, *35*(3), 366–392. https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203x211048290

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus*. University of Minnesota Press.

Domaradzka, A. (2022). From local to digital and back: E-resourcefulness among urban movements in Poland. In Z. Kravchenko, L. Kings, & K. Jezierska (Eds.), *Resourceful civil society* (pp. 145–170). Palgrave Macmillan.

Ellis, J. (2000). *Seeing things*. I.B. Tauris.

Frosh, P., & Pinchevski, A. (Eds.). (2009). *Media witnessing*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Glapka, E. (2019). Critical affect studies: On applying discourse analysis in research on affect, body, and power. *Discourse and Society*, *30*(6), 600–621. https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926519870039

Gray, J. (2019). Data witnessing: Attending to injustice with data in Amnesty International's Decoders project. *Information, Communication & Society*, *22*(7), 971–991. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2019.1573915

Guo, S. (2021). *The evolution of the Chinese internet*. Stanford University Press.

Gustafsson, N., & Weinryb, N. (2020). The populist allure of social media activism: Individualised charismatic authority. *Organisation*, *27*(3), 431–440. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508419828565

Han, R. (2023). Debating China beyond the great firewall: Digital disenchantment and authoritarian resilience. *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, *28*(1), 85–103. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-022-09812-4

He, R. (2023). Hashtag nationalism: A discursive and networked digital activism. *Media, Culture & Society*, *45*(1), 1471–1488. https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437231169917

Kaun, A., Kyriakidou, M., & Uldam, J. (2016). Political agency at the digital crossroads? *Media and Communication*, *4*(4), 1–7. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v4i4.690

Kavada, A., & Poell, T. (2021). From counterpublics to contentious publicness. *Communication Theory*, *31*(2), 190–208. https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtaa025

Kyriakidou, M. (2015). Media witnessing: Exploring the audience of distant suffering. *Media, Culture & Society*, *37*(2), 215–231. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443714557981

Liu, W. (2022). *The great translation movement*. https://www.dw.com/zh/a-61105169

Lu, Y., Schaefer, J., Park, K., Joo, J., & Pan, J. (2024). How information flows from the world to China. *The International Journal of Press/politics*, *29*(2), 305–327. https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612221117470

Martini, M. (2018). On the user's side: YouTube and distant witnessing in the age of technology-enhanced mediability. *Convergence*, *24*(1), 33–49. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517736980

Mattoni, A., Barassi, V., & Kavada, A. (2020). Movement cultures and media in grassroots politics. *Information, Communication & Society*, *23*(12), 1713–1717. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2019.1675739

Mcgarry, A., Erhart, I., Eslen-Ziya, H., Jenzen, O., & Korkut, U. (Eds.). (2019). *The aesthetics of global protest*. Amsterdam University Press.

Mortensen, M. (2015). Connective witnessing: Reconfiguring the relationship between the individual and the collective. *Information, Communication & Society*, *18*(11), 1393–1406. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1061574

Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics*. Oxford University Press.

Peng, A. Y., Liu, F., & Wu, C. (2024). Gender fluidity versus homohysteria: How young Chinese male fans consume athletic bromance. *Men and Masculinities*, Advance online publication, 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X241290809

Peters, J. D. (2001). Witnessing. *Media, Culture & Society*, *23*(6), 707–723. https://doi.org/10.1177/016344301023006002

Ristovska, S. (2016). Strategic witnessing in an age of video activism. *Media, Culture & Society*, *38*(7), 1034–1047. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443716635866

Schneider, F. (2018). *China's digital nationalism*. Oxford University Press.

Sun, Y., & Wright, S. (2024). Relay activism and the flows of contentious publicness on WeChat: A case study of COVID-19 in China. *Information, Communication & Society*, *27*(2), 257–277. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2023.2205474

Tait, S. (2011). Bearing witness, journalism, and moral responsibility. *Media, Culture & Society*, *33*(8), 1220–1235. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443711422460

Uldam, J. (2018). Social media visibility: Challenges to activism. *Media, Culture & Society*, *40*(1), 41–58. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443717704997

van Dijk, T. A. (2014). *Discourse and knowledge*. Cambridge University Press.

Wang, Y., & Tan, J. (2023). Participatory censorship and digital queer fandom: The commercialisation of boys' love culture in China. *International Journal of Communication*, *17*, 2554–2572. https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/19802/4126

Wetherell, M. (2012). *Affect and emotion*. Sage.

Wodak, R. (2009). *The discourse of politics in action*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Wu, X., & Montgomery, M. (2020). Witnessing in crisis contexts in the social media age: The case of the 2015 Tianjin blasts on Weibo. *Media, Culture & Society*, *42*(5), 675–691. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443719855300

Yang, F. (2016). Rethinking China's Internet censorship: The practice of recoding and the politics of visibility. *New Media and*

Society, *18*(7), 1364–1381. https://doi.org/10.1177/146144481
4555951

Yang, G., & Jiang, M. (2015). The networked practice of online political satire in China: Between ritual and resistance. *International Communication Gazette*, *77*(3), 215–231. https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048514568757

Zeng, J., & Cheng, C. Y. (2024). Diasporic citizen journalism: Exploring the discussion on the 2022 blank paper protests in the Chinese Twitter community. *Journalism*, *26*(5), 1047–1066. https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849241250191

Author biographies

Altman Yuzhu Peng (PhD, Newcastle University, UK) is Associate Professor in Intercultural Communication at the University of Warwick, UK. His research interests lie at the intersections of critical discourse studies, feminism, media and cultural studies, and masculinity studies. Email: altman.peng@warwick.ac.uk.

Yu Sun (PhD, University of Groningen, NL) is Lecturer in Media, Culture and Society at the University of Glasgow, UK. Her research interests include data activism and data publics, the public sphere, online deliberation, civic engagement, feminist studies, digital infrastructure, and social governance. Email: yu.sun@glasgow.ac.uk.

Chunyan Wu (PhD, Loughborough University, UK) is Assistant Professor in Communication Studies at Northeastern University London, UK. Her research interests focus on social media analysis, digital journalism, political communication, international communication, and media and cultural analysis. Email: chunyan.wu@nulondon.ac.uk.