

## Chinese Cyber Nationalism in the Year of Olympics

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### Abstract

*This article is based on the readings of news, weblogs, BBS, and video clips posted on the Internet. It aims to examine the theory and characteristics of Chinese cyber nationalism fuelled by the antagonism toward Western media's coverage over the Tibet riots and the widespread anti-China protests staged by pro-Tibet activists and China bashers during the Olympic torch relay in 2008. It is pointed out that Chinese cyber nationalism had an enormous influence upon the Chinese government and its policy decisions. There was a huge gulf between Chinese netizens and the Western media in their understanding of the Tibet issue. Chinese netizens, who had lost their confidence in the Western media, began to align with the Chinese government. They used the cyber space to express their views, voice their concerns, disseminate information, mobilize and rally the support of millions of Chinese nationals to fight against Western media's bias and misrepresentation, and to protect and safeguard national sovereignty, pride and territorial integrity. Cyber nationalism shored up China's position over the Tibet issue, and played a critical role in consolidating China.*

### Key words

*Internet; China; Chinese netizens; nationalism; Western media; bias; Tibet riots*

### Introduction

With seven years of intensive preparation, the sixteen days of Beijing's 2008 summer Olympics started with a grand opening on August 8 and ended on August 24 with a spectacular close. Jacques Rogge, the IOC President, described the Olympics as "truly exceptional Games" at the closing ceremony. China was very proud of its historic breakthrough in sports: having won 51 gold medals, 21 silver medals, and 28 bronze medals.

Hosting the Olympic Games was supposed to be a chance for Chinese leaders to promote China's international image of a "harmonious society" as a peace-loving country, to elevate the country's standing, to "demonstrate China's confidence, achievement, and status as a rising power" (Epatko, 2008), and to showcase to the rest of the world the country's sports powerhouse, soft power, and its economic growth and political progress in terms of freedoms and human rights (Economy & Segal, 2008). The selection of the opening ceremony on August 8, 2008 was supposed to bring good luck to China and the world<sup>1</sup>. The theme slogan "One World One Dream" fully reflects Chinese expectations that a common dream would be shared by people worldwide. The Olympics enabled China to stand on the central stage of the world and provided a rare and valuable opportunity for China to realize its century-old dream (Xu, 2008). The success turned over the page of the Chinese history of "the century of humiliation"<sup>2</sup> in the hands of Japan and Western powers ("Beijing sets", 2008).

However, the run-up to the Beijing Games was marred by the Lhasa riots in March 2008. According to the Chinese official statistics, eighteen civilians and one police officer were killed, 382 civilians and 241 police officers were injured. The rioters set fire to seven schools, five hospitals, 88 vehicles, and 120 buildings, and looted 908 shops ("Eighteen civilians", 2008). The Chinese government blamed the "Tibetan People's Uprising Movement", and the "Tibetan Youth Congress" which China labelled as "a terror group worse than Bin Laden's" ("TYC a terror", 2008) for their "premeditated" violence and killings, and for hijacking the Olympics to serve their ulterior motives of splitting China ("How RFA", 2008) and "to turn it into a bully pulpit for the claims of Tibetan independence" ("What's wrong", 2008).

"Race riots and rebellion cannot be tolerated" by any responsible government in any part of the world that commits to safeguarding the core interests, security and well-being of the nation (Rudmin, 2008). The mainstream media in the West, however, saw the unrest as the result of the China's suppression, its repressive Tibet policy, and what the Dalai Lama called the "cultural genocide." They therefore ferociously condemned China for cracking down on the riots and violence (Bezlova, 2008; "Dalai Lama", 2008). A media war directed against China and supported by Western leaders was waged. It was an asymmetric media war, with

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<sup>1</sup> "Eight" is a lucky number in Chinese numerology.

<sup>2</sup> "The century of humiliation" refers to China's defeat in the Opium War with Britain in the 1840s and later defeats in the wars with Japan and other Western powers up until 1949 when the Peoples' Republic of China was founded.

the Western media's hegemony of the discourse prevailing over China's comparatively weak voices (Luo, 2008).

Although China may not have won the campaign waged in the Western media, it nevertheless won the battle about its legitimacy to re-enter global politics and this was in no small part due to the agency of Chinese netizens. The purpose of this article is to examine the background of the Chinese netizens, the features of Chinese surging nationalism, and their perceptions of and attitudes toward Western media's coverage of the Tibet unrest during the run-up to the Beijing Games. The article will then discuss the impact of Chinese cyber nationalism upon China's foreign policies. Finally the article will analyse the underlying causes for the rift between China and the West.

### **Chinese netizens and the Internet in China**

Hauben and Hauben (1997) coined the word "netizens" to refer to Internet users using the worldwide forums of the Internet to engage in online activities, including the use of emails, online chats, instant messaging, Internet forums, blogs, file sharing, Gopher, and wikis. They defined *netizens* as

...the people who understand it takes effort and action on each and everyone's part to make the Net a regenerative and vibrant community and resource. Netizens are people who decide to devote time and effort into making the Net, this part of our world, a better place (p. x).

*Chinese netizens* here refers to Chinese nationals, inside and outside China, who use the Internet as a social capital to engage in online activities, giving and receiving information and viewpoints, making an effort to foster self-organised vibrant virtual communities.

According to the statistics provided by the CINIC (China Internet Network Information Centre, 2009), China tops the world in Internet users. By the end of 2008, the total netizens reached 298 million, at an annual growth of 41.9 per cent. In addition, there were 117.6 million mobile phone netizens connected to broadband. About two thirds of netizens were between the ages of 10 to 29.

The Chinese government pays close attention and gives a strong support to the growth of the Internet in China. The Chinese Premier's Facebook page has been a big hit. It enables him to communicate with his "fans" and it earns him a reputation of being "approachable" ("Chinese

Premier's", 2008). Chinese President Hu Jintao visited the Qiangguo (Strong China) Forum of People's Daily Online on June 20, 2008 and held his first live chats with netizens. He said,

I am willing to get an idea on people's complaints of and proposals to the work of our Party and the government. ... It is important to garner national wisdom by hearing opinions from the people. ... The Internet is an important space to know about people's thoughts. ("Chinese President promises", 2008).

The Chinese leadership, having realised the importance of the Internet in mass and international communication, begins to embrace it with confidence. Drezner (2005, p. 3) explained that the Chinese leadership had chosen a risky path to allow the Internet to boom to reinforce the pre-existing political structures and to "exploit the vast economic possibilities of the information society."

MacKinnon (2008) pointed out that it is netizens in large numbers "organised by charismatic and capable leaders" (p. 32) that can be a cause for social, economic and political change. In these "right circumstances", the Internet can "facilitate, amplify and accelerate" such a cause (p. 32). MacKinnon argued that the Chinese leadership has to be innovative enough in order to "prevent the Internet from serving as a tool for 'colour revolution' in the way that online media and communication tools empowered activists" (p. 32) in some former Soviet republics<sup>3</sup>.

It would be an erroneous assumption that Chinese netizens execute the government's biddings and are united behind the government ("What's wrong", 2008). Chinese official government's influence is minimal in spite of the government strong media control.

According one article -- What Tibet and Carrefour Can Teach Us about the Chinese Internet (2008) -- published on the website *The China Vortex*, Chinese netizens have their own "personalities":

They are mostly self-organised.

They trust unofficial sources more than the official media.

They are anonymous and their numbers are in the millions.

They are likely to focus around certain important and sensitive issues at a certain moment.

They disappear as fast as they appeared.

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<sup>3</sup> The "Colour Revolution" refers to the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003), the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (January 2005), and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan (April 2005), all spearheaded by the US foreign policy establishment. The aim of the revolution was to impel regime change from below.

They are the audience as well as leaders for disseminating information and spreading rumours.

They can influence government policies and decision-making.

For decades, Chinese voices could only be heard from either the Chinese government's mouthpieces, or the dissenters (J. Wang, 2008). However, information and communication technologies, especially the Internet, have changed the global communication landscape. Esraey's (2008) quantitative survey of political discourse in Chinese blogs found that Chinese bloggers had freedom to discuss any politically sensitive issues and criticise the government policies on the Internet and that the netizens' voices had a huge impact on government policies and behaviour (Bremmer, 2008). The "China-bashing" campaign and Western media's humiliation of the Chinese pride triggered the outburst of Chinese cyber nationalism (Zhao, 2008).

### **Surging Chinese nationalism**

Chinese cyber nationalism began to surge amid the waves of violent protests during the Olympics torch relay from different groups representing different political interests relating to China's human rights record, the Lhasa crackdown, the outlawing of Falun Gong, and China's trade with Sudan, Myanmar, and Zimbabwe, environmental concerns, the East-West war of economic power, and the capitalist-socialist war of political power (Bajoria, 2008; Portillo, 2008; "What is", 2008). The Tibet riots became a flash point for all different interest groups and China critics to stage their attacks on China. The Dalai Lama, who was depicted as a character with "unsullied goodness", was used by Western media and some Western leaders as a tool against Beijing (O'Neill, 2008).

The coverage of the events by the Western media came under Chinese netizens' close scrutiny. Millions of Chinese netizens, well-educated in China and in the West and technologically savvy, found their voice in the cyber space and began to use it as a powerful platform to fight back for their own national pride and dignity, against what they perceived to be the deeply rooted double standards, hypocrisy, and arrogance of the Western media (Da & Luo, 2008; Bremmer, 2008; Elegant, 2008; Luo, 2008). It was their belief that waves of anti-China protests throughout the world had been fanned by Western media's biased reporting, some Western politicians' manoeuvring of the media for their personal gains, and "the overtly anti-China sentiments and hypocritical moralizing in the West" ("China waves", 2008).

Chinese netizens, assisted by the Internet, began fight a cyber war. They used the Internet, emails, mobile phones with internet connections, Instant Messengers, weblogs, the Facebook, and Youtube, as a unifying vehicle for social and political goals, “as a communication centre, organisational platform, and execution channel to promote the nationalism causes” (Wu, 2008, p. 1). Through the cyber space, they voiced their concerns, expressed their feelings, anger and nationalist sentiments, and exposed what they saw as the lies, hypocrisy, and mistakes in Western media’s coverage (Hauben, 2008). BBS, though outdated in the West, became a dominant platform for Chinese netizens to disseminate information, organise protests, counter-demonstrations, picketing, and boycotts (J.S. Wang, 2008; J. Wang, 2008). In Kennedy’s (2008) words, they were declaring a war on Western media’s Tibet coverage. To most Chinese netizens, the real aim of the West was “to deny them the triumph they deserve for their success” (Mahabubani, 2008).

Almost all major Western media condemned Chinese repression of the Tibet unrest, instead the rioters’ violence, and showed no sympathy for the innocent civilians who had been killed and seriously injured in the riots (O’Neill, 2008). Chinese netizens were utterly disappointed and disillusioned with the Western media that often claimed to uphold justice, fairness, objectivity, and “universal human values” did not report the violence and destruction by the Tibetan rioters (Dewan, 2008); they sided with the rioters and the Dalai Lama by distorting and manipulating the facts in an attempt to demonise and split China, smear the Chinese image, and disrupt the Olympic Games (Da & Luo, 2008; Luo, 2008; O’Neill, 2008).

Many of the most educated liberal learning sophisticates began to align themselves with Beijing and protested against Western media’s biased coverage of the Tibet riots (Forney, 2008; Kwok, 2008). They accused the West of failing to understand China’s core interests, “chiefly out of economic jealousy” and their conspiracy to drag China down and deprive China of its world position it deserves (Bezlova, 2008; Callick, 2008; Wacker, 2008; Zhao, 2008). Feeling that Chinese core interests are threatened, Chinese pride is at stake, and Chinese self-image as a rising superpower is battered, Chinese nationals would like to choose patriotism over Western hypocritical democracy (Zhao, 2008). They were very sensitive to the issues regarding Chinese collective identity, national insecurity, loss of face, insult and humiliation when foreign arrogance, bullying, lecturing, sense of superiority, and condescension are involved (Schell, 2008). To the dismay of those who wished to transform an authoritarian China into a democratic one through the nationalist fervour of the Chinese youths, these young Chinese became the strongest opponents of the Western media’s reporting and they became leaders in rallies, protests, demonstrations and counter-demonstrations (Callick, 2008). As Kurlantzick (2008) observed, “they are pushing Beijing

ANZCA09 *Communication, Creativity and Global Citizenship*: Refereed Proceedings: <http://anzca09.org>

to become more nationalist than the Chinese government itself desires.” The backlash of Western media’s misrepresentation inflamed Chinese intense nationalism on such a large scale that cannot be found in the Chinese contemporary history (Bell, 2008; Callick, 2008; Hauben, 2008).

### **Characteristics of Chinese cyber nationalism**

Wu (2008, p. 1) defined Chinese cyber nationalism as “a non-government sponsored ideology and movement that has originated, existed, and developed on China’s online sphere in the past decade.” Wu explained that Chinese cyber nationalism, an ideological alternative to the state-sponsored patriotism, is grassroots-oriented, technologically driven, and culturally and historically shaped. The Internet has created an online public sphere that has made possible the revival of Chinese cyber nationalism. It is important to understand that Chinese cyber nationalism contains some major forms of Chinese nationalism developed over the Chinese contemporary history (Bell, 2008; Gries, 2004). The following discussion will focus on the interrelatedness and characteristics of different forms of Chinese nationalism from which Chinese cyber nationalism derives.

In Zhao’s (2005) view, Chinese nationalism did not exist before the 19<sup>th</sup> century when China was still an empire. Tianyang Zhang (2005) stated that accommodating all others was a traditional Chinese world view which was different from Western-style categorical nationalism with a clear boundary. Zhang said that “Chinese nationalism was a modern outcome based on the introduction of Western thoughts” (p. 13). Bajoria (2008) agreed with Zhang that Chinese nationalism was “a creation of Western imperialism”. Foreign imperialism played a critical role in shaping modern Chinese nationalism (Leibold, 2007).

Chinese nationalism is deeply rooted in China’s “pervasive collective memory of past national experience” (Carlson, 2009, p. 22). It is anchored on the memory of Chinese pride, greatness and glory of its past empires as well as its disgrace, plight, suffering and “century of national humiliation” at the hands of foreign powers, lasting from the Opium War with Britain in 1840 to the founding of the People’s Republic China in 1949 (Gries, 2004). Humiliation has been an integral part of Chinese nationalism that has been “used by political leaders and public culture to mobilize populations” (Callahan, 2004, p. 200) to cleanse national humiliation and to fuel “stronger nationalist forces in the country” (Kolhammar, 2008). Callahan (2004) concluded, “Humiliation is a key part of modern Chinese subjectivity” (p. 206), which testifies to both foreign invasion or interference and domestic corruption.

Callahan (2008) used the word “pessoptimist” to describe the duality of Chinese nationalism: co-existence of both optimism and pessimism in “a land of contradictions”, with a strong sense of pride and humiliation. Such pessoptimist nationalism, focusing on national humiliation, consumed by Chinese nationals through school education and the party-state patriotic education campaign, could often lead to “aggressive nationalism” that calls for counter-offensive strategies and such preparations (Callahan, 2008; D. Zhang, 2005).

Callahan stated:

China’s pessoptimism is fundamentally unstable, producing shifting feelings, which at any time could spill over into mass movements that target domestic critics, foreigners, and even party-state itself. ... China’s pessoptimist nationalism is out of anyone’s control (Callahan, 2008).

For generations, China has been seeking its new national identity which had been lost after the Opium War with Britain in 1840s. Former psychological balance has been upset, and as a result,

Pride and humiliation, hatred and blind faith for foreign countries, learning from and excluding the West, all these complicated feelings are just mixed up among Chinese. (D. Zhang, 2005)

According to Wang (2006), Chinese nationalism contains three developmental stages: nationalization (shaping national identity when dealing with territorial integrity and national sovereignty), modernization (reconfiguring Chinese identity, reforming and restructuring foreign policies, opening to the outside world, and resolving the tension of tradition and modernity), and internationalization (promoting China’s renaissance, striving to “peacefully” rise in the world, and assuming its lost glory as a world power). Due to Chinese historical reasons, the three stages can overlap. For example territorial integrity and national sovereignty are still Chinese core concerns in its diplomatic relations, such as Taiwan and Tibet issues and border disputes with neighbouring countries (Callahan, 2004).

Oksenberg (1986) stressed that ever since 1980, Chinese confident nationalism had emerged, although other forms of nationalism had also continue to exist, such as aggrieved nationalism that blames China’s ills on foreign powers, xenophobic or isolationist nationalism that seeks to eradicate any foreign influence and uphold indigenous virtue, strength and ideas through

self-reliance, and assertive nationalism that shows irredentist concerns over territorial integrity and national sovereignty. Oksenberg (1986, p. 505) said that confident nationalism

is a patient and moderate nationalism rooted in confidence that over time China can regain its former greatness through economic growth, based on the import of foreign technology and ideas. ...It is also a determined and resolute nationalism, flexible in tactics, subtle in strategy, but deeply committed to the preservation of national independence, the reunification of China... and the attainment of national wealth and power.

Gries (2004) suggested that Chinese nationalism is dynamic, evolving, and changing in its international relationships. He warned that it is dangerous for the West to oversimplify Chinese nationalism as the “party propaganda” an “instrument” or a “tool” (p. 20) and Chinese people’s feelings and national collective mentality and psyche shaped by its own specific history should not be overlooked.

A series of key events in 1990s and 2000s were believed to have catalysed the surge of cyber nationalism, such as tension with the USA in 1996 when Taiwan President Lee Tenghui visited the United States, the Indonesian anti-Chinese riots in 1997, the Chinese Belgrade embassy bombing by the USA on May 7, 1999, the collision of an American spy plane with a Chinese fighter plane in the South China Sea in May 2001, the world-wide Chinese online petition against Japan’s bidding for UN Security Council permanent membership in May 2005, and the Tibet riots, the Olympics tortuous and humiliating torch relay, Western media’s biased coverage of the events, and CNN commentator Cafferty’s insulting remarks in 2008 (Callick, 2008). The Chinese complex emotions and patriotic feelings were powerfully articulated through creative online activities. Chinese cyber nationalism has played a critical role in shaping Chinese politics, foreign policies, and the future of the country (Carlson, 2009; Hauben, 2008).

### **Western media caught in the fraud**

If the protests against the Olympics in China and Western media’s distorted reporting over the Tibet riots could achieve anything, they were counterproductive had “merely stimulated patriotism within China” (Nolt, 2008). They could hurt the feelings of Chinese people. The newly surged Chinese nationalism vehemently defied Western mainstream media represented by CNN and BBC (Hauben, 2008).

CNN claims to be “a network that reports the news in an objective and balanced fashion” (“China demands”, 2008). However, in Yi’s (2008) view, misreporting about the Tibet riots by Western mainstream outlets, including CNN, breached professional ethics based on “objectivity, fairness, and truthfulness”. Yi contended that the Western media, with their coloured glasses, frame-ups, and set agenda in the hegemonic media discourse, had unscrupulously spread political prejudice, slandered and defamed China, and used double standards in international affairs.

“Don’t be too CNN” has become a most popular expression and a smash hit song<sup>4</sup> in the Chinese language, meaning “Do not lie to me”, “Do not turn black into white”, “Don’t turn a blind eye to reality”, “Do not fabricate stories for own gains,” and “Do not be a racist”. A rap song called “Don’t Be Too CNN” gained popularity among Chinese netizens (Hung, 2008). LierDalai, a blogger’s name on *iReport*, explains:

Recently "Don't be too CNN" turns to be a common sentence in China, especially among millions of young people. CNN and their reporters are desperately attacking China on their websites and TV programs, and just ignore truth and what the Chinese people's feelings. CNN has turned to be a word to describe a person who is easy to tell lies and has biased brain to hysterically attack other people without caring their feelings<sup>5</sup>.

CNN has become a symbol of biased reporting, arrogance, hypocrisy, and double standards (J. Wang, 2008). The expression “Don’t be too CNN” reflects the Chinese netizens’ rising resentment and disappointment (Hung, 2008).

The Chinese netizens found that CNN cropped one photo, with a man raising his arm to fend off the blow from a Tibetan youth wielding a stick, while the part with the 12 Tibetans holding weapons was deliberately cut off to diminish the menacing tone of Tibetan mob violence<sup>6</sup> (“Chinese netizens versus”, 2008). Similarly, in another photo, CNN also cropped out the rioters throwing stones at an army truck, leaving a man running for life in front of the truck, deliberately creating a violent environment and a perception of the heavy presence of the Chinese army, intentionally neglecting the “cruelties of the mobsters” (“CNN's distortion”, 2008). CNN, however, strongly refuted the allegations by Chinese netizens, saying “the image in question had to be cropped to fit the standard story-size image” (“CNN

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.cctv.com/english/special/tibetriots/20080418/103503.shtml>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ireport.com/docs/DOC-9872>

<sup>6</sup> Ref: [http://zoniaeuropa.com/20080326\\_1.htm](http://zoniaeuropa.com/20080326_1.htm)

accused”, 2008). In one of CNN’s manipulated video footages entitled *Turmoil in Tibet*, the Chinese police allegedly repressing the Tibet demonstrators in Gansu Province in China were found to be Indian police in their khaki uniforms with berets in Himachai Pradesh, India (Chossudovsky, 2008b).

Not only CNN was caught in the fraud; many other Western mainstream media were also caught and exposed by Chinese netizens. They were angry over the irresponsible and rampant media distortion against China and over their pro-Tibet stance (Ye, 2008a). The American Fox News website published a photo captioned "Chinese troops parade handcuffed Tibetan prisoners in trucks"; the photo was actually taken in India, with Indian police dragging a man away (Ye, 2008b). The websites of Washington Post, BBC, Times, Germany’s Bild national newspaper, Der Spiegel, N-TV, N24, RTL TV all used photos with policemen wielding sticks to chase demonstrators, claiming that these officers were Chinese police. These alleged Chinese policemen turned out to be Nepalese in Kathmandu in clashes with Tibetan demonstrators (“CNN's distortion”, 2008; “CNN, what’s”, 2008).

Like CNN, the Berliner Morning Post in Germany used a similar manipulating technique. Its website posted a picture in which the police in Lhasa was rescuing a young man assaulted by rioters. But the caption says "Police are arresting Tibetans" (“CNN's distortion”, 2008). In late April, a German television station N24 broadcast a photo of Chinese policemen monitoring monks’ religious activities. It was revealed that the photo was but a manipulated handwork through Photoshop, merging a Chinese police photo (where the police wore the uniform that had been replaced in 2005) with another photo. Such a craft gave the audience an impression that Tibetan monks did not have any religious freedom because the Chinese police were always watching (Mu & Lin, 2008).

Similarly, BBC posted a photo on its website, showing Chinese Armed Police officers helping medical staff move a wounded man into an ambulance. In spite of the clear Red Cross sign on the ambulance, the caption says, "There is a heavy military presence in Lhasa." After a wave of Chinese protests, BBC re-captioned it “There have been many reports of injuries and deaths in Lhasa.”<sup>7</sup>

On April 2 in his speech in India, the Dalai Lama, using a photo as supporting evidence, accused the Chinese army of posing as Tibetan monks to stage riots in Tibet. He theorised that

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<sup>7</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/7300312.stm>

It's possible some Chinese agents are involved there. Sometimes totalitarian regimes are very clever, so it is important to investigate. (Eberlein, 2008)

The photo was actually taken in 2001<sup>8</sup>. The army men in the photo were posing as actors in a theatrical movie and their uniform was the pre-2005 army style (“The Dalai Lama”, 2008).

In an Indian video footage, one Tibetan woman was interviewed. She was denouncing the Tibetan separatists who were damaging the good life of the ordinary Tibetan people. However, the caption showed, “All Tibetans have come out to demonstrate on streets and the army troops have fired poisonous gas on these demonstrators” (“Indian”, 2008).

Chinese netizens were fumed with anger over these misleading reports of mainstream Western media which deliberately used graphic images to highlight the perceived brutality of the Chinese security forces in Tibet, and to turn the world’s attention away from the violence of the Tibetan rioters (Gardner, 2008). To expose these Western media’s distorted reports, many Chinese netizens fought back through the Internet websites. One video clip titled “Tibet was, is, and always will be part of China,”<sup>9</sup> posted on YouTube by a Chinese student studying in Germany on March 15, attracted over three million viewers in just one week. The clip concluded with an angry voice:

Thank u, the West. Your fair news media like CNN and BBC have never stopped attacking other countries' sovereignty and your GOVs never stop trying to split other countries apart. Dream on for China to become the next Yugoslavia, Bosnia. Because we know that is our country called HOME and no one could never, ever, ever, ever break it apart.

Another video clip named “Riot in Tibet: True face of Western media” posted on Youtube on March 19, 2008, was a collection of the evidence of how “Western media make fake reporting about riot in Tibet by modifying and misjudging pictures purposely” in order to slander China.<sup>10</sup> More than one million netizens visited viewed the clip within one week. A third video clip, titled “2008 China Stand Up”<sup>11</sup>, posted on Sina.com on April 15th by a student from Fudan University in Shanghai, was another smash hit. It warns that “Imperialism will

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<sup>8</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7\\_-Xie1aiE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7_-Xie1aiE)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x9QNKb34cJo>

<sup>10</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSQnK5FcKas](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSQnK5FcKas)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSTYhYkASsA>

never abandon its intention to destroy us” (Osno, 2008). These short video clips certainly sparked strong Chinese nationalist sentiments and assertive nationalism.

Rao Jin, 23, created a non-governmental website called Anti-CNN.com on March 20. The website outlines its aim as follows:

This website is established to expose the lies and distortions in the Western media. The site is maintained by volunteers, who are not associated with any government officials. We are not against the western media, but against the lies and fabricated stories in the media. We are not against the western people, but against the prejudice from the western society<sup>12</sup>.

When interviewed by the *China Daily*, Rao further explained that the aim of the website was “to collect, arrange and publish evidence of distorted reports from Western media”, to expose the fake, and dishonest reports from CNN, BBC, TRL and other Western mainstream media that “ignite strong repulsion among Chinese netizens”, and to “speak out our thoughts and let Westerners learn about the truth” (“CNN, what's”, 2008). The website, worked out and run by volunteer Chinese netizens inside and outside China, became a huge success and drew the attention of the world media. Millions of Chinese and non-Chinese have visited the website.

*Sina.com*, a very popular website in China, had a special forum called “Don't be CNN. All Netizens Unite to Confront the Western Media.”<sup>13</sup> The forum became an important site for Chinese netizens to vent their feelings. It has had millions of hits since March 2008. The *Sina.com*'s survey in which 24,300 people participated shows that 92.3% expressed their desire to join in the fight against Western media's biased reporting.

### **The power of Chinese cyber nationalism**

Sparked by their nationalist passion and a general perception that Western media reports had been “purposely warped and skewed by anti-China forces in the West” (Jenne, 2008), Chinese netizens took to the Internet to stage counterattacks. They believed that the aim of such media manipulation was “intentionally to smear China's image” (“Netizens hit”, 2008) and to “safeguard the interest of Western powers” (Yi, 2008).

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.anti-cnn.com/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://bbs.sina.com.cn/zt/w/08/attackenn/index.shtml>

There is an assumption that Chinese anger over Western media coverage and all the rallies, protests and picketing were stoked, incited and orchestrated by the Chinese party-state (Hill, 2008; Pierson, 2008b). Mahbubani (2008) warned that it would be a huge mistake for Westerners to have such an assumption. He wrote:

The reality is that some of the strongest anger toward the West at the moment is coming from liberal Western educated Chinese intellectuals who have access to accurate information.

Contrary to Western media's preconceptions that these Chinese nationals are uneducated, loyal to the Chinese Communist Party, narrow-minded, and "have been spoon-fed propaganda since they were in kindergarten" (Hill, 2008), they were well educated, intelligent, technologically savvy, creative, and had a good command of technological, multilingual and PR communication skills ("Western media", 2008). They "rank among the most patriotic, establishment supporting people you will meet" (Forney, 2008). Their rational response, confidence, nationalistic fever, and skills in the media fight for justice stunned older Chinese who had previously held a view that Chinese children born after 1980s were individualist, self-centred, unpatriotic, and lacking a sense of social responsibility, morality and ethics (Huang, 2008). Forney (2008) observed that

As is clear to anyone who lives here, most young ethnic Chinese strongly support their government's suppression of the recent Tibetan uprising.... Westerners are not going to find allies among the vast majority of Chinese on key issues like Tibet, Darfur and the environment for some time.

The Internet provided a media platform for these Chinese netizens to fight for a space for their voice to be heard in a world strongly monopolised by Western mainstream media (Bremmer, 2008). Chinese cyber nationalism has never been so extensively, so unanimously, so powerfully and so effectively expressed (Ye, 2008b). An anonymous article published in the EastSouthWestNorth website commented that in fighting Western media's arrogance, biases, injustice and prejudice, "Chinese netizens are not dupes; if anything, they are the most resistant people in the world" and "this is a case of 'Chinese netizens versus Western media' and definitely not 'Chinese government versus Western media'" ("Chinese netizens versus", 2008).

The Western media, which had a love affair with Tibet independence and with the Dalai Lama and had persistently ignored Chinese people's interests and core concerns, were not

prepared for such new rivals who could fight tenaciously where the Western media felt hurt. Consequently they began to censor "Chinese netizens from using the Internet to combat Western criticisms and voicing nationalistic views" when they were challenged ("Chinese Internet", 2008). Fuelled with waves of violence in the Olympic torch relays in London, Paris, San Francisco, Canberra, and Seoul, Chinese cyber nationalism reached its height and messages calling for Chinese solidarity and boycotts against foreign goods were spreading like wildfire on the Internet<sup>14</sup>. The Chinese government, fearing the boomerang effect of nationalism, called for "rational nationalism" (Branigan, 2008), reminding the Chinese netizens that, instead of acting on impulse and agitation, they should consider building the country into a strong and powerful one as a best response to the insults of the West which bends on subverting China ("Patriotism", 2008).

Portillo (2008) pointed out that China's economic might was such that would make any Western power and company hesitate to take actions, such as boycotts against China because of the predictable costs incurred. Just in a few months after the Tibet riots, a number of companies and individuals in France, USA and UK had been singled out and actions had been taken by the Chinese netizens, who had an enormous influence upon the Chinese government decision-making, in retaliation for the Western media's insults and humiliation.

## **France**

Having been insulted by those pro-Tibet rioters who made all attempts to disrupt the torch relays and attacked the torch bearer Jin Jing, a 27-year-old Paralympic athlete, in Paris, Chinese netizens, through various websites, forums and mobile SMS, called for a boycott against French goods. Carrefour, a French international hypermarket chain with 122 hypermarkets and two million customers in China, became the first target as it was rumoured that it had allegedly donated a large sum of money to the Dalai Lama ("Netizens call", 2008). The nationalist passion surged and a nationwide picketing in front of Carrefour started in late April, close to the May 1<sup>st</sup> Chinese holiday. The netizens urged the Chinese government to cancel the 21-billion contracts signed with France in 2007 in retaliation for French President Sarkozy's pro-Tibet stance and his indication to boycott and Olympic opening ceremony to insult China (Steinmetz, 2008; "Say no", 2008).

While calling for boycotts against French goods, Chinese netizens also called for a boycott against tourist travel to France ("Chinese netizens call", 2008). According to Herve Ladsous,

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<sup>14</sup> [http://video.on.nytimes.com/?fr\\_story=47cd419aac1d8304c7cec53bb615bb583d43dbf5](http://video.on.nytimes.com/?fr_story=47cd419aac1d8304c7cec53bb615bb583d43dbf5)

French Ambassador to Beijing, the number of Chinese tourists to France had dropped 70 percent in two months following the attacks on the Olympic torch in Paris in April 2008 (Steinmetz, 2008). In 2007, around 700,000 Chinese tourists visited the country. Paris, which bestowed honorary Parisian citizenship on the Dalai Lama, “urged the Chinese government to halt a perceived official boycott against tourist travel to France” (Steinmetz, 2008), but China denied the allegation, saying that Chinese citizens had freedom to make their own choice (“China discouraging”, 2008). Jiang Yu, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, said at a press conference,

Recently, some Chinese have expressed their views and feelings. There are reasons for this. France should seriously reflect upon the issue. Friendship is the result of mutual efforts. ... France should listen to the Chinese voice, adopt an objective and fair stand, respect the facts, and distinguish between right and wrong in dealing with important international affairs. (Chang & Wei, 2008)

A new round of anti-France online campaign started in early July when French President Sarkozy threatened to boycott the Beijing Olympics. According to a survey by Sina.com, by July 3, eighty-nine per cent of the 173,527 respondents did not want Sarkozy to attend the Olympic opening ceremony (“Survey shows”, 2008). This was a strong response from the Chinese netizens following Sarkozy’s remarks on June 30 that whether he would attend the open ceremony or not depended on the progress of the talks between the Chinese government and the Dalai Lama’s representatives, and that he would meet the Dalai Lama in Paris before attending the opening ceremony in Beijing if the barriers to his participation were removed (“Sarkozy’s conditions”, 2008).

Chinese netizens’ inflamed anger over Sarkozy’s arrogance and hostile attitudes dominated almost all Chinese language websites. One posting titled “French Present Sarkozy and dogs not allowed”<sup>15</sup> called for a second round of a comprehensive boycott against French goods. The posting said, “Sarkozy, you are not welcome in China” (“French President Sarkozy”, 2008). Another posting on the Tianya.cn website called the Chinese government not to compromise Chinese core interests, and not to give in to this unfriendly “political opportunist”, “blackmailer”, “womanizer”, “political idiot”, and “China basher” (“Sarkozy’s difficult choice”, 2008). The posting regarded Sarkozy’s presence at the Olympic opening ceremony as an “international disgrace” and “a loss of face” to China. Chinese netizens’

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<sup>15</sup> A parody of “Chinese and dogs not allowed,” a public notice at the entrance of a park in the foreign-leased-territory in Shanghai during the semi-colonial era in 1910s and 1920s. It has been seen as a sign of insult to the Chinese.

views quickly drew the attention of the Chinese government and had an enormous impact upon the government and public media discourse.

Chinese netizens put pressure on the Chinese government to retaliate against French President Sarkozy's meeting with the Dalai Lama in Poland in early December 2008 while he held the EU rotating presidency. China postponed the 11th China-EU Summit scheduled on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2008, and suspended its 35-billion-euro contracts with France in early 2009. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's "Tour of Confidence" in Switzerland, Germany, the European Union (EU) headquarters, Spain, and Britain did not include France. Beijing snubbed France by refusing to attend the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the establishment of the Sino-French diplomatic relationships on January 27, 2009. The Chinese Foreign Ministry stressed that the Sino-French relationships could not be improved unless France was honestly prepared to "correct its wrongdoing" over Tibet ("Chinese PM's trip", 2008). To mend the Sino-French relationships, former French Prime Minister visited Beijing. He said on February 10<sup>th</sup> 2009 that "France sticks to the one-China policy, respects and supports China's sovereignty, reunification and territorial integrity," and that France did not intend to infringe upon China's major core concerns over Tibet and other sensitive issues ("Former French PM", 2009).

## USA

Chinese nationalistic anti-CNN emotions reached their peak when Jack Cafferty called the Chinese "goons and thugs" and the Chinese products "junk" on April 9 on CNN's political programme, the Situation Room. His vicious and racist comment brought thousands of Chinese netizens to protest outside CNN's offices in Hollywood on April 20, calling for his dismissal (Pierson, 2008a). Chinese netizens expressed their anger and condemned Cafferty through numerous web websites, Youtube videos, Facebook groups, and SMS (Mostrous, 2008). Two Chinese filed a \$1.3 billion defamation lawsuit, seeking \$1 for every Chinese national that Cafferty had offended (Zambito, 2008). Three times, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs demanded an apology from CNN. The Ministry's spokeswoman said,

We are shocked by and strongly condemn the malicious attacks on the Chinese people by CNN's Cafferty. We demand CNN and Cafferty himself take back his vile remarks and apologize to all the Chinese people. (Mostrous, 2008).

Chinese netizens called for deportation of CNN offices in China and prohibition of CNN's signal from entering China ("Chinese netizens", 2008).

In the meantime, millions of netizens, put off by the Western media's biased reporting and Cafferty's racist comments, festooned their MSN Messenger names with hearts and China, meaning "I love China" ("Don't be", 2008). According to Shanghai Dragon TV, five million Chinese decorated their MSN Messenger with "hearts" China<sup>16</sup>.

While China was suffering from pains inflicted by the earthquake and had not recovered from the indignation over Cafferty's racist remarks and the attacks by anti-China and pro-Tibet groups during the course of the torch relay, China was stunned by Sharon Stone's "bad karma" comment over the quake which was posted on Youtube. She said

I'm not happy about the way the Chinese are treating the Tibetans because I don't think anyone should be unkind to anyone else.... And then this earthquake and all this stuff happened, and then I thought, is that karma? When you're not nice that the bad things happen to you?" ("Sharon Stone", 2008)

Her comment was severely condemned by Chinese netizens who described her as a woman with "a heart as cold as stone" ("Netizen", 2008).

Although Stone said twice "deeply sorry" for causing anguish and anger among Chinese people, and offered to take part in quake relief efforts, Chinese people would not forgive her ("Sharon Stone's quake 'karma'", 2008). On an online survey by qq.com, it was found that 69 percent of 250,000 respondents said they didn't accept her apology and would never forgive her ("Sharon", 2008).

The repercussion of her comment resulted in her being banned from attending the Shanghai International Film Festival. All the Stone-related posters, ads, film and music stores were banned in Hong Kong and mainland China ("Sharon", 2008). Luxury retailer Christian Dior made an apology to China and dropped her from their China campaign by distancing itself from her and pulling advertisements featuring Sharon Stone from stores across China ("Sharon", 2008).

Following Dior's apology, Fiat, an Italian car maker, also made an apology to China over a TV ad featuring Hollywood actor Richard Gere with a reference to Tibet independence, "The power to be different"<sup>17</sup> (Adams, 2008). The TV commercial infuriated Chinese netizens and the Chinese government ("Fiat", 2008). Fiat said it did not endorse Gere's political view

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<sup>16</sup> [http://shanghaiist.com/2008/04/18/dragon\\_tv\\_claim.php](http://shanghaiist.com/2008/04/18/dragon_tv_claim.php)

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFmvmXchfW0>

about his strong criticism of Chinese Tibet policies and reiterated its neutrality in connection with any political matter (Castonguay, 2008).

### **The UK**

Chinese netizens' national pride was severely hurt when London Metropolitan University awarded the Dalai Lama an Honorary Doctorate of Philosophy on May 21<sup>18</sup>, a time when China was mourning the deaths of the quake victims (He, 2008). Chinese netizens viewed such an award as a political "farce", a blasphemy to the Chinese quake victims, the raping of Chinese feelings, a sign of the university's ignorance and stupidity, and a declaration of war on Chinese people ("A farce", 2008).

Utterly disappointed with the university's interference with Chinese internal affairs, Chinese netizens started a wave of online protests and calls for a boycott to British pro-Tibet universities ("Education", 2008). A survey of 20 international education consultancies in Beijing revealed that 17 agreed to participate in the boycott (Lei, 2008). An online survey by the Global Times showed that within only one day, 2,500 netizens cast their votes, 93% strongly supported the boycott (Lei, 2008). China is the largest international student source country, and the boycotts would be disastrous to British universities. Facing such an imminent risk of losing Chinese students, the Chancellor of London Metropolitan University wrote a letter of apology to the Chinese Embassy on June 16, 2008, for the mistake of granting the Dalai Lama an Honorary Doctorate, promising that it would never happen again (L. Wang, 2008).

To sum up, Chinese netizens used the Internet and other Internet-related communication technologies to register their fierce protests, expose lies, fake reports and misrepresentation in Western mainstream media outlets, fight Western media's bias and bigotry, and repair China's tarnished image. It is apparent that Chinese netizens seemed to have lost their trust in Western mainstream media, and at the same time have built up their strong and confident nationalism. There is a misperception among the Western media that the Chinese government was behind the Chinese netizens' nationalistic activities (Bhattacharya, 2008). However, Yang (2008) asserted that there was no convincing evidence to prove such an allegation. In fact, Kwok (2008) affirmed, these "Chinese netizens are the most resistant against government censure and it is they, not Beijing, who fight against Western media." The

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/news/latest-news/his-holiness-the-14th-dalai-lama-to-receive-honorary-doctorate-from-london-metropolitan-university.cfm>

Chinese government and Chinese netizens had found a common voice and were fighting the same battle against the Western media represented by CNN and BBC (Hung, 2008).

### **A deep gulf in understanding**

The above discussion suggests that there exists a deep gulf in the understanding of the major issues between Chinese netizens and the Western media regarding the Tibet riots and subsequent demonstrations and protests. In Crossick's (2008) words, the gulf is huge and "diametrically opposed."

Chinese netizens were bound together by a shared belief that the Tibet rioters committed violence, murder, arson, and other acts of savagery against civilians, and caused huge damage to public and private property ("The question", 2008), and the riots was "an outburst of hooliganism and wanton violence" (Jacob, 2008b). Therefore, these netizens strongly supported the Chinese government's response over the riots and condemned the Dalai Lama's separatist activities ("Netizens hit", 2008). The Western media, however, expressed their sympathy for pro-Tibetan agitators. The Lhasa unrest was described as "a revolt against the oppressive rule" (Jacobs, 2008b). They presented the riots with the "democratic" potential by fabricating "fanciful news stories, images, and opinion pieces" (Ram, 2008), and thus creating a moral ground for the violent protesters attacking Olympic torch bearers without being punished.

China sees Tibet as part of its sovereignty and Tibetans, one of the 55 ethnic minorities. China declares that:

For more than 700 years, the central government of China has continuously exercised sovereignty over Tibet, and Tibet has never been an independent state. No government or any country in the world has ever recognised Tibet as an independent state. ("The Tibet", 2008)

When Chinese President Hu Jintao met with Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on April 12, 2008, Hu stressed that the riots in Lhasa were not peaceful demonstrations; they were but sheer violent crimes violating human rights, disrupting social order, and jeopardising the life and property of the masses. He concluded:

The affairs in Tibet are entirely internal affairs of China. Our conflict with the Dalai clique is not an ethnic problem, a religious problem, or a human rights problem. It is a

problem either to safeguard national unification or to split the motherland. (“Chinese President Hu”, 2008)

Such a Chinese position is supported by almost all Chinese and helps the Chinese government to rally support from its citizens and netizens (Crossick, 2008). Frank Sieren, a best-seller German author, maintained that Chinese leadership had “an unwritten contract” with its people; the contract was to be cancelled by the people if the leaders failed to accomplish their contractual duties (“The West”, 2008). Sieren argued that China could never bow to foreign pressure and Western arrogance (“The West”, 2008). He pointed out:

On the issue of Tibet, the position of the Chinese leadership coincides with that of the large popular majority. We in the West tend to sweep this fact under the carpet. (“The West”, 2008)

The Western media, however, held a different view, assuming that “Tibet was effectively independent for decades before communist troops entered in 1950”, failing to register Chinese core interests and acknowledge the Chinese view that Tibet had been part of China ever since the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368) (Eberlein, 2008). N. Ram, editor of the *Hindu* newspaper, stressed that the Chinese constitution could not accommodate the kind of autonomy and political independence demanded by the Dalai Lama who was a “consummate politician” and “separatist political figure” (“Senior”, 2008). He pointed out,

Western politicians vie with each other to meet with the Dalai Lama in an attempt to put pressure on the Chinese government to give in to the demands by the Dalai Lama for his self-claimed “maximum autonomy” of the “Greater Tibet” which is interpreted by most Chinese as independence.

He accused Western journalists of manipulative and agitating reports to achieve their unspoken goals, which could turn some Dalai Lama’s followers into extremists resorting to violence as was evident in the Lhasa riots.

For local Tibetans, they could not find any benefit from the anti-China and anti-Olympic campaigns as they, one of the 55 ethnic minorities, enjoy many privileges and favourable policies that cannot be imagined in Western countries (von Borries, 2008). von Borries concluded that the Dalai Lama’s accusations that Tibet was experiencing repressive rule and “cultural genocide” were “utter nonsense”.

There is a widely held belief among Chinese netizens that Western powers, led by the United States, were “trying to keep China down and stop it from taking its rightful place in the world”, by supporting and inciting the Dalai Lama to stage the riots (Anderlini, 2008) and to seek independence, as evidenced from US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Dharmasala, India, March 21, 2008, to shore up her support for Tibet independence (Anna, 2008; Sengupta, 2008). The CIA was believed to have “supported and incited the Dalai Lama to launch the recent Tibetan protests” (Anderlini, 2008). The Dalai Lama wanted Tibetan autonomy and political independence. Yet, ironically, he lost his autonomy and political independence by allowing himself to be used as a ploy by western powers keen to humiliate China (O’Neill, 2008).

Facing a competing China, not many people in the West are happy to see a rising power and therefore, politicians and media resort to human rights issues as a political ploy against China to win more votes, to blacken China’s image, and to weaken China’s influence (“Frank Sieren”, 2008; Trabanco, 2009). Tibet and the Dalai Lama, whose role has often been romanticized and idealized, provide Western hawks with ammunition to attack China (“The West”, 2008), to stir people’s fear of the new emerging power, and to turn the world stage into “hysterical demonization of China” (von Borries, 2008).

According to Trabanco (2009), there are three components in the US plans toward China:

- An updated version of classical containment of China;

- An imminent threat of using American sea power to enforce a naval blockade against China;

- Divide and rule, i.e. American efforts to dismantle Chinese territorial integrity and dissolve China’s internal political unity, and eventually to balkanize China.

Trabanco made it clear that the CIA and CIA-supported Western media were behind the scene of the Tibet riots and had “predictably provided covert support for both Islamic and separatist forces” in Tibet and Xinjiang-Uyghur to enable them to “carry out terrorist attacks”. He said that the anti-China protests during the Olympic torch relay in London, Paris, San Francisco, Canberra, Nagano, and Seoul had been planned, coordinated, and orchestrated by the CIA with the media disinformation campaign.

Chossudovsky (2008a) agreed with Trabanco that the organisation of the Tibet riots, the torch relay protests, and biased media reporting were part of the US “consistent pattern” that constitutes “an attempt to trigger ethnic conflict in China”, to weaken China by providing support to secessionist movements, and to “serve US foreign policy interests”. The Dalai

Lama's frequent visits to the USA and some European countries reflect such a grand plan in which the Western media as a "smokeless weapon" play a critical role (Han, 2008).

The rift is miles apart. Chinese netizens, having hoed their cyber fighting skills, have become more skilled in fighting an asymmetric battle for their national sovereignty, pride, and territorial integrity in a world of Western media's hegemonic discourse, with the West setting the agenda and framing the discourse (Han, 2008). The surging Chinese nationalism is consolidating China.

### **Conclusions**

This article provided the background of Chinese netizens and Chinese cyber nationalism that surged amidst of anti-China protests and attacks on Olympic torch bearers. The discussion of some major aspects and characteristics of Chinese nationalism established a theoretical framework to understand the role of the Internet in shaping Chinese cyber nationalism triggered by Western media's manipulated coverage of the Tibet riots. The Chinese netizens were enraged as they found that they had been insulted and humiliated, and their national image tarnished by the Western media operating on the perception of cultural superiority and on a preset agenda to purposely run down China over the human rights issues. These Chinese netizens, intelligent, well educated, and technologically savvy, staged a tenacious fight against Western media's arrogance, prejudice and injustice. They used the Internet and Internet-related tools to express their views, receive and disseminate information, mobilise and organise boycotts, protests, rallies, and counter-demonstrations. They fought uncompromisingly to safeguard their national sovereignty, pride and territorial integrity. Having lost their trust and confidence in the Western mainstream media, they turned to support the Chinese government for the position it had taken in dealing with the Tibet crisis. There existed a huge gulf in the understanding of the Tibet issues between the West and the Chinese. The bashing-China campaign in the West had shored up the Chinese position, stimulated and consolidated Chinese cyber nationalism, and educated a powerful army of Chinese cyber nationalists.

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