

Maintaining Ideological Security and Legitimacy in Digital China: Governance of Cyber Historical Nihilism

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Abstract

This article studies the governance of ‘cyber historical nihilism’ (CHN) in China. By performing document analysis of the regulatory policies and actions against CHN, we found that CHN is mainly governed as harmful ‘online content’ and a threatening ‘ideological trend’, and its governance has incorporated agencies and measures of China’s ‘internet governance’ and ‘ideological and political education’. We argue that CHN has been securitised by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as an urgent threat to the nation’s ideological and political securities. The governance of CHN aims to maintain the CCP’s authority in history writing and its legitimacy and longevity as the ruling party. The CCP’s emphasis and intensity in governing CHN has not only demonstrated the ideological turn to Maoism in internet governance, propaganda and politics under Xi Jinping’s leadership, but also the CCP’s ability and resilience to adapt to new challenges in the ideological field in the digital age.

Keywords: cyber historical nihilism, governance, ideological security, legitimacy, securitisation

Introduction

In August 2013, one of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ordained historical narrations was seriously challenged on social media. A Chinese netizen posted an entry entitled ‘The True Story of the Five Heroes in Langya Mountain’ on Weibo, one of the most popular Chinese social media with hundreds of millions of users, claiming that the official story is a sham. The official story has it that in 1941, five soldiers in northern China’s anti-Japanese base area jumped off the Langya Mountain cliff rather than surrender when they ran out of ammunition in order to divert the enemy from the main force. Three died and two survived. The story has been included in primary school textbooks since the establishment of the PRC and was adapted into a ‘red classic’ movie in 1958, inspiring Chinese people until today, especially young people, to appreciate and emulate the revolutionary heroism of the five heroes. However, the Weibo post stated that the five soldiers were merely army ruffians who constantly bullied local villagers. In the end, the villagers could not take it anymore and secretly reported their whereabouts to the Japanese army. When they were pursued by the Japanese army, the fleeing five were deliberately led to the cliff by the villagers. The post that significantly challenges the official narration of the five heroes soon became viral on Weibo. The post was soon reported to the Guangzhou Public Security Bureau and the person who created it was detained for a week on a charge of fabricating and spreading rumours (Zhao, 2016).

Three months after the incident, Hong Zhenkuai, a historian and former executive editor of *China Through the Ages* (*yanhuang chunqiu*), one of the most influential liberal magazines published in China, brought the case back to public attention. He published an article online to query the legality of detaining the netizen who posted the alternative story of the Langya Mountain heroes. Moreover, he also wrote a few online articles that further questioned the credibility of the official story. This soon sparked heated online debate around

‘historical nihilism’ among liberal and conservative intellectuals, and further escalated into a series of defamation and anti-defamation allegations involving Hong, two scholars who criticised Hong and the children of the surviving Langya Mountain heroes. The incident ended up when Hong lost the lawsuit. The court ruled that Hong had damaged the image of the anti-Japanese heroes. He was ordered to post a public apology online. His appeal was rejected later by the Beijing Second Intermediate People’s Court (Wooley, 2017).

Since Xi Jinping came to power in 2013, similar cases that challenge the official writing of history have come thick and fast. Especially with the rise of social media and WeChat-based subscription accounts, alternative stories that challenge the authenticity and reliability of the CCP-endorsed heroes, role models and revolutionary events have been growing faster than ever, forming what the CCP terms ‘cyber historical nihilism’ (CHN hereafter) (*wangluo lishi xuwu zhuyi*). As a new political term putting the word ‘cyber’ in front of a not-very-new school of thought, ‘historical nihilism’, it has been frequently used in official criticism against nihilistic online discourses that ‘distort or smear the histories of the CCP, the People’s Liberation Army and China’ in the name of “reflecting”, “re-reading” or “subverting” official histories’ (Qiushi, 2021a). The phenomenon is seen by the government as extremely harmful with the ultimate political purpose of ‘deny[ing] the political legitimacy of the CCP and socialism with Chinese characteristics’ (Qiushi, 2021a). It has therefore incited stringent governing measures from the CCP. Our search on Baidu, the most popular search engine in China, with the Chinese words for CHN in May 2021, identified 14 CHN incidents since 2013 that had been widely covered by media. A few household CCP leaders, revolutionary martyrs and role models were involved, such as Chairman Mao Zedong, Qiu Shaoyun, Dong Cunrui, and Lei Feng. A few are ‘spiritually Japanese’ (*jingri*) cases, such as the incident of Ji Ziyue (see iNews, 2021), on which extremist views in support of Japanese

militarism and Japanese invasion are publicly beautified and therefore insult China and Chinese people.

The article does not intend to investigate the controversial CHN incidents from the perspective of historical studies. Instead, we examine how CHN is governed by the CCP as a response to a new challenge in the ideological field in the digital age. We ask, why CHN needs to be governed with such attention by the CCP, how it is governed and what are the politics of governing it? We will first explain the concept of historical nihilism in the Chinese context and its evolution in the digital era. We will then discuss the politics of historiography in China and the challenges of maintaining the legitimacy of the CCP in light of digital disruption. This is followed by our document analysis of the policies and practices of governing CHN. Last, we propose to understand the politics of governing CHN from the perspectives of ‘securitisation’ and ‘ideological security’.

From Historical Nihilism to Cyber Historical Nihilism

The original use of the term ‘nihilism’ is unknown. Despite its wide reference in various contexts, the concept remains vague in its meaning. It was appropriated by a Russian political movement in the mid-nineteenth century, referring to ‘almost any kind of allegedly radical political ideology or extreme form of anti-establishment dogma’ (Vazquez, 2021: 1201). German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche was a chief figure to define this term and is responsible for its widespread use. Nietzsche sees nihilism as intrinsic to western thought and described it as a ‘normal condition’ (1914). For him, ‘there is no answer to the question: “to what purpose?” ... the extremest form of Nihilism would mean that all belief—all assumption of truth—is false: because no real world is at hand’ (Nietzsche, 1914: 8–17). How to interpret Nietzsche’s meaning of nihilism is still a matter of philosophical debate. Some say that Nietzsche only viewed science and positivism as nihilistic in that they devalue the

meaning and value of earthly experience and life, by adopting a ‘moralistic interpretation of life’ rather than an ‘aesthetic one’ (Vazquez, 2021: 1205). However, Nietzsche’s conceptualisation of nihilism is often misunderstood, and the prevalent idea of nihilism in circulation in the twentieth century tends to be the political, anti-establishment interpretation (Vazquez, 2021).

The nomenclature of ‘historical nihilism’ in China’s official political language under the CCP’s leadership and governance is a pertinent example of the political interpretation of nihilism. Link (2013: 245) has observed that China’s modern official language has embraced ‘polysyllabic, western-derived abstraction’ that is ‘simultaneously austere and vacuous, intimidating yet elusive’. The abstraction and vagueness allows the CCP to ‘moor on meanings that were indeed useful but sometimes different from what they had originally been’ (Link, 2013: 249). The CCP’s creation of the term ‘historical nihilism’ is such a fine example. The term inherits the prevalent interpretation of nihilism in western philosophy as a negation of ‘truth’ and the lack of purpose in human life. However, by putting the adjective ‘historical’ in front of nihilism, the term represents a conception of historical narration which doubts and negates the truthfulness and legitimacy of the CCP-endorsed modern Chinese history. The critique of this conception of history allows the CCP to brand any scepticism and public doubt over the credibility of the historical achievements of the CCP, its leaders and heroes as ‘nihilistic’. By doing so, it forestalls any debate about CCP-endorsed modern Chinese history in order to maintain the CCP’s legitimacy and credibility in history writing.

Incidences of CCP-criticised ‘historical nihilism’ surged along with China’s economic reform since 1978 and gained momentum with the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. In the eye of Chinese Marxism scholars, historical nihilism as a political trend of thought has become increasingly ideological, evolving from the negation of native cultural tradition to the negation of the legitimacy of socialism and the CCP’s leadership (Wang and

Wen, 2017). There is a concern that historical nihilism can undermine the legitimacy of Marxism as the dominant ideology as well as traditional Chinese culture and cultural identity (Liang, 2009). It is also likely to shake the legitimacy of the CCP's leadership and provide theoretical foundation for 'peaceful evolution' from the West if not governed properly (Li, 2013; Li, 2014; Zhang and Mei, 2009).

The rise of the internet and digital communication has unprecedentedly increased the concerns of the Marxism scholars and the CCP about the harmfulness of historical nihilism. They believe CHN has several features and has posed new challenges for governance. First, CHN uses highly networked digital platforms, such as Weibo and WeChat. Usually packed with sensational clickbait headlines, its content can reach a wide audience within a short period of time (Chu, 2016; Li and Xu, 2016). Second, the content of CHN is highly fragmented in the digital environment. CHN content often utilise incomplete and unverified historical details and personal memories to challenge the authoritative official representations of significant historical events (Yang, 2016). They cater to the curiosity of netizens and their so-called 'independent and critical thinking' in the name of either re-reading official history or seeking the truth concealed by grand historical narratives (Tian and Yang, 2019). Third, comparing historical nihilism in the pre-internet era (which was mainly limited within 'academic field'), CHN has entered into 'public domain' in which not only intellectuals but also ordinary people can easily participate in the online discussion about controversial historical issues (Chu, 2016; Tao, 2016). CHN's challenges to official historical narratives, as pointed out by China's Marxism scholars, invite us to theoretically query why the official writing of history is unchallengeable and CHN is intolerable to the CCP.

The Writing of History as Contested Arena: Legitimacy Maintenance and (Digital) Disruption

Max Weber (1964: 328) famously argued that 'the basis of every system of authority, and

correspondingly of every kind of willingness to obey, is a belief, a belief by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige'. This belief is fundamental for any political authority to maintain its 'legitimacy' – that is, the justification of coercive political power that the state exercises (Ripstein, 2004). Similarly, Seymore Martin Lipset (1959: 86) defined legitimacy as 'the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate or proper ones for the society'. As a one-party regime, the CCP gained its legitimacy through wars and revolutions, and maintains the legitimacy to rule by propagating communist belief as well as the CCP's achievements in pursuing that common belief. The writing of the official history of the CCP, its revolutions for mass education and propaganda are fundamental to the maintenance of the CCP's legitimacy as the ruling party. As Wang Zheng (2012: 6) stated, 'how the government defines history is a deeply political issue that is closely related to the legitimacy of the government and rightly shapes the national identity of China'. Therefore, historical knowledge produced in schools and curricula, and then propagated through literature, arts and media, need to be carefully managed and guided.

As elsewhere, the official historiography is believed to play a significant role in political socialisation, promoting patriotism and nation building (Baques, 2006; Zajda, 2007). The factual historical knowledge endorsed by the authorities is usually what Williams (1961) called 'selective tradition', which reflects the official knowledge of the cultural, ideological and political power of dominant groups while excluding cultures and memories of less powerful groups (Crawford, 2000). In China, as Wang Zheng (2012) argued, the CCP has rather successfully cultivated a 'patriotic' national identity by the selective use of historical memories, enabling itself to rule with justification, legality and consent from citizens. However, the representation of modern history has always been a contested arena both in China and elsewhere. Competing discourses and diverse ideologies usually challenge the

linear and authoritarian views of politically correct historical narratives and memories (Zajda, 2009).

Historical nihilism, as well as other competing and de-legitimizing discourses, has gained momentum in the twenty-first century due to the rise of market-oriented cultural production in post-socialist China as well as the development of new media technologies, making the writing of history more contested than ever. The TV drama adaptation of *Red Classics* is a pertinent example of historical nihilism caused by market orientation in cultural production. As a historic-revolutionary literary genre that narrates the origin of the new China, and an important part of the historiography of the CCP, *Red Classics*, mostly created in the 1950s and 1960s, have been widely adapted into TV dramas in the last two decades (Gong, 2021). To produce ‘selling points’ and increase audience ratings, some of the original works have been greatly revised for more dramatic tension, especially the stories and images of some high-profile revolutionary heroes and CCP leaders. To curb the trend, the State Administration of Radio Film and Television (SARFT) issued a notice in 2004, stipulating that all *Red Classics* TV dramas had to be submitted to the Censorship Committee of SARFT for final approval after passing the initial censorship at the provincial level (Gong, 2008).

Due to the participatory nature of online communication, the rise of digital media has made nihilistic discourses much more complicated and challenging for regulation and governance than the censorship-prior-to-broadcasting of TV dramas. The internet has profoundly transformed the reading, thinking and publishing of historical knowledge (Dougherty and Nawrotzki, 2013). The internet as ‘technologies of memory’ (Armstrong and Cragg, 2006) has enabled ordinary people to participate in the production of popular memory and historical knowledge, making an oppositional reading of the past more prevalent and visible than ever, and causing what has been called the ‘democratization of history’ (Ayers, 2001). Lay historians, or ‘citizen scholars’, for example, have participated in research on

history and are co-creating historical knowledge on social media (Sikarskie, 2013). In the Chinese context, Liu Jun (2018) examined debates on historical events and key figures on Weibo, and found that social media have allowed individuals to articulate counter memories and question officially endorsed history, making historiography a much more malleable process, though a process still under internet censorship. This has directly caused the rise of CNH and has posed new challenges for the CCP to maintain their legitimacy.

Governing Cyber Historical Nihilism: Policies, Agencies and Actions

To identify and further interpret the main measures taken by the government and other associated agents to curb CHN, we conducted document analysis to analyse relevant policies, laws, regulations, notices and actions issued or taken by multiple stakeholders involved in the governing process from 2018 to 2021, the peak period for the governance of CHN. Document analysis allows researchers to systematically review and evaluate relevant documents, elicit the meaning of the data, and further gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge on an assessed topic (Bowen, 2009; Corbin and Strauss, 2008). We collected electronic rather than printed documents as all regulatory policies and actions are published online by regulatory bodies and most of them have been widely reported and commented on by news media on their online portals. Therefore, all relevant documents are searchable and accessible online.

We collected documents from Baidu by searching three pairs of keyword combination in Chinese in mid-January 2022, including ‘*wangluo*’ (internet), ‘*lishixuwu zhiyi*’ (historical nihilism) and ‘*zhili*’ (governance); ‘*fandui*’ (oppose) and ‘*lishixuwu zhiyi*’ (historical nihilism); ‘*dizhi*’ (boycott) and ‘*lishixuwu zhiyi*’ (historical nihilism). Baidu allows users to set a timeframe to filter the search results. We set a timeframe of 1 January 2018 to 31 December 2021 for our search. For each pair of keyword combinations searched, we saved

the results shown on the first 10 pages only as we believe they would cover the most widely read items that contained the keywords. We initially got 300 search results for further reading and analysis. One author read the 300 collected items and removed repetition. The other two authors read the remaining items carefully and further removed items that didn't specify any regulatory actions on (cyber) historical nihilism, such as media commentaries that only criticised (cyber) historical nihilism. We finally ended up with 39 documents which contained the policies, laws, regulations, notices and actions targeting (cyber) historical nihilism. Two authors then re-read the 39 documents and coded them into different categories mainly according to 'who' took 'what' regulatory actions. Four types of governing measures are identified and discussed below.

Online Content Regulation and the 'Internet Clean-up' Campaign

CHN is first and foremost seen as harmful online content circulated on various digital platforms. Therefore, it has been explicitly targeted in Provisions on the Governance of the Online Information Content Ecosystem (*wangluo xinxi neirong shengtai zhili guiding*) issued in 2019 and Opinion on Strengthening the Construction of the Online Civilization (*guanyu jiaqiang wangluo wenming jianshe de yijian*) issued in 2021. Issued by the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), the Provisions that oversee the overall regulation and governance of China's online content clearly stipulate that content producers should not produce, publish or distribute information that contains information 'distorting, vilifying, defiling, or denying the deeds and spirit of heroes and martyrs; or harming the names, images, reputations, and honor of heroes and martyrs through insult, defamation, or other such means' (Cyberspace Administration of China, 2019). The Opinion, jointly issued by the General Office of the Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council, points out that the construction of China's internet culture should be guided by 'socialist core

values’ and ‘take a clear-cut stand to oppose historical nihilism’ (Gov.cn, 2021a). These two leading policies guide the recent regulation of popular online platforms. For example, CAC and a few governmental organisations issued the Guiding Opinion on Enhancing the Regulation of Online Livestreaming (*guanyu jiaqiang wangluo zhibo guifan guanli gongzuo de zhidao yijian*) in 2021, explicitly prohibiting disseminating historical nihilism via livestreaming and severely punishing such illegal behavior (Gov.cn, 2021b).

State-level online content regulation goes hand-in-hand with the top-down ‘internet clean-up’ campaign (*jingwang xingdong*) to fight against CHN. The ‘internet clean-up’ is a national, annual and intensive (usually two to six month) campaign launched in 2011 by the National Office Against Pornography and Illegal Publications, Ministry of Public Security, CAC and a few other state-level regulatory bodies. Its aim is to regulate the online dissemination of harmful and illegal information, including pornography, online rumor, fake news, terrorism, extremism and so on. The campaign for 2021, starting in May and named ‘Clean-up: Governing Online Historical Nihilism’, explicitly focused on the regulation of CHN. According to the CAC, in the special campaign, more than two million pieces of CHN information had been removed from the internet and digital platforms (State Council Information Office, 2021). To complement the top-down campaign, ordinary internet users have also been mobilised to tip off authorities to examples of CHN. CAC’s Illegal and Unhealthy Information Reporting Centre set up dedicated sections on its website and mobile application for the public to report information related to historical nihilism (Cyberspace Administration of China, 2021).

In addition to the crackdown of CHN using the campaign-style governance, the CCP also actively defended the official positions on controversial issues about historical nihilism. Rather than avoid talking about the sensitive issues publicly, the CAC together with a few state-led research institutions selected popular CHN topics and refuted these rumours with

facts. A video of seven and half minutes titled ‘List of Rumors about CCP History’ was produced and widely circulated online, in which the government responded to ten of the most popular CHN topics, including the Five Heroes in Langya Mountain, by citing historical archives and eyewitness testimonies (12371.cn, 2021). The intensive governance was believed to be necessary and effective to create a ‘healthy’ online environment right before the celebration of the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the CCP in July 2021.

Self-regulation of Online Platforms

In China’s market-oriented but state-controlled internet industry, digital platforms and companies must comply with the state-designed regulatory policies and cooperate with the state regulatory bodies in the ‘internet clean-up’ campaigns to ensure their sustainable development in the market. This ‘state-capitalist power alliance’ (Lagerkvist, 2011) or ‘symbiotic and collaborative platform-state relationship’ (Zhang, 2020) can help effectively implement the state-made regulatory policies through the self-regulation of online platforms. To respond to the intensive governance of CHN, popular social media and livestreaming platforms that are seen as hot beds of CHN have taken actions to curb its dissemination.

For example, Sino Weibo, Kuaishou and some other platforms have incorporated regulations related to historical nihilism into their community management standards. Compared with the state-level online content regulation policies, the self-regulatory policies of these platforms have specified the content and extended the scope of historical nihilism. Take Kuaishou for example, one of the most popular short-video sharing platforms in China. In its community standards, historical nihilism content is not limited to information that distorts or denies the deeds and spirit of heroes and martyrs, but also includes information that slanders traditional Chinese culture, ‘red’ culture, and the historical achievements of Chinese revolution. It also includes content that pokes fun of state leaders or that smears the

military, army, police or CCP members (Kuaishou.com, n.d). During the 2021 ‘internet clean-up’ campaign, Weixin enhanced its machine and human censorship to self-check its millions of public and video accounts that could contain CHN content. Identified content was deleted and some accounts that hosted such content were permanently shut down (Beijing Daily, 2021).

Heroes and Martyrs Protection Law of China

For the government, online content regulation and censorship is not sufficient to comprehensively solve the problem of CHN as it lacks legal force and disciplinary power over individuals and organisations that create and disseminate CHN information. On 1 May 2018, China’s first Heroes and Martyrs Protection Law (*yingxiong lieshi baohufa*) came into effect, making it potentially criminal to defame or deny the deeds and spirit of historic heroes and martyrs, or to praise or beautify invasions. Offenders face administrative or criminal punishment according to the severity of their actions (Xinhua, 2018). Chinese rage comic firm, Baozou Manhua, was the first to be sued for defamation under the new law. The accusation related to a short video clip posted by the company to content aggregator Jinri Toutiao on 8 May 2018, joking about the civil war martyr, Ye Ting. The comic company was later ordered to pay 100,000 RMB in compensation to Ye Ting’s descendants who pursued a lawsuit against the company. The comics produced by the company were also blocked by multiple major online platforms due to the incident (Sina, 2018).

In the most recently amended Criminal Law, effective from 1 March 2021, the ‘infringement of the reputation and honor of heroes and martyrs’ is specified as a crime. The new clause in the Criminal Law further shows the government’s effort to protect the legitimacy and reputation of CCP-endorsed heroes and martyrs and legally supports the implementation of the Heroes and Martyrs Protection Law. Qiu Ziming, a blogger on Weibo

with more than 2.5 million followers, on 19 February 2021, released false information on his account to smear the ‘heroes defending the country and border’ (*weiguo shubian yingxiong*) who were killed in 2020 when dealing with the Indian military’s illegal trespass of the Galwan Valley Line of Actual Control. Qiu received a jail term of eight months for defaming martyrs in May 2021. This is the first conviction of defaming martyrs after the implementation of the Criminal Law Amendment (XI) (Chinanews, 2021).

Enhancing Ideological and Political Education

In addition to governance through regulations and legislations, a fundamental way to minimise the influence of historical nihilism is to mobilise the public, especially young people and CCP members, to consciously oppose the harmful trend by enhancing their ideological and political education. According to a survey conducted among 423 undergraduate students in a local university, 65.3% of students don’t know or know little about historical nihilism. Among the 34.7% who know about historical nihilism, 47.6% think they have been influenced by historical nihilism, more or less (Lu and Jin, 2018). To a certain degree, this small-scale survey justifies the urgency and importance of enhancing ideological and political education against historical nihilism among young people.

In fact, President Xi has been emphasising the significance of fighting against historical nihilism among young students and enhancing their ideological and political education since the Eighteenth National Congress of the CCP in late 2012 on various occasions. For example, at the Forum for National Ideological and Political Education Teachers in August 2020, Xi argued that ‘the compilation of textbooks in morality and law, Chinese and history for compulsory education needs to stand at a strategic height to maintain the country’s ideological security and train builders and successors of socialism’. When talking about history teaching, he urged history teachers to ‘guide students to respect heroic

spirit, learn from and embalm heroes, and consciously oppose historical and cultural nihilism’ (Xi, 2020). Against this background, universities have put ‘resistance against historical nihilism’, especially CHN, high on the agenda of their ideological and political education of students. This trend can be seen from increasing academic output published in the last few years by ideological and political education researchers who are at the forefront of these processes. See, for example, ‘Impact of historical nihilism on university students in the online environment and coping strategies’ (Liu and Chen, 2020) and ‘Impact of cyber historical nihilism on the ideological and political education for university students (Zhang and Huang, 2016), among others. According to these publications, a common strategy of coping with the negative impact of CHN on college students is to creatively use digital media in ideological and political education to make the teaching of CCP history and historical materialism more interactive and appealing to young people and refute and respond to CHN issues proactively and directly via online communication.

In the meantime, the CCP has also enhanced ideological and political education among its more than 90 million members in this critical moment against the rise of historical nihilism. On the eve of the celebration of the centennial founding of the CCP, the CCP Central Committee launched a campaign on learning and education in Party history among all Party members in late February 2021. At the mobilisation meeting of the campaign, Xi emphasised the urgent need to ‘take a clear-cut stand against historical nihilism’, ‘correctly and scientifically evaluate important events, meetings and figures in the Party history’, and ‘enhance ideological guidance’ of the Party members (Xi, 2021). On 12 July 2021, the CCP Central Committee and the State Council jointly issued the Opinion on Strengthening and Improving Ideological and Political Work in the New Era (*guanyu xinshidai jiaqiang he gaijin sixiang zhengzhi gongzuo de yijian*). The Opinion calls on the CCP members, cadres and the public to take a clear-cut stand against historical nihilism and requires enhancing

education of Party history, the history of new China, the history of China's economic reform, the history of socialism, and the international situation and politics, in order to influence the worldviews, ideological frameworks, political orientations and emotional affinities of the Chinese people (Xinhua, 2021a).

From the governing measures discussed above, it can be seen that the state agencies, digital platforms, schools and universities, and the public have all participated in the governance of CHN under the Party's call. CHN is mainly governed as harmful 'online content' and a threatening 'ideological trend'. For the former, the governance of CHN has been incorporated into China's internet governance through top-down internet 'clean-up' campaigns as well as online content regulation at the state and platform levels. Regarding the latter, the governance of CHN has been incorporated into the ideological and political education of young people and CCP members. The Heroes and Martyrs Protection Law and the amended Criminal Law have further provided a legislative base for this governance by legally punishing disobedience. These all-round regulatory measures demonstrate the CCP's emphasis and intensity in governing CHN in order to maintain what the CCP calls 'cyber ideological security' (*wangluo yishixingtai anquan*).

Securitising (Cyber) Historical Nihilism for the Maintenance of (Cyber) Ideological Security

'Cyber ideological security' is essentially a new form of 'ideological security' in the digital era, which intersects with 'cybersecurity' (mainly 'content security') and 'ideological security'. Wu and Huo (2020: 1) defined ideological security as 'the stability of the leadership of the state's dominant ideology'. In a state with ideological security, the dominant ideology can 'regulate, guide and integrate multiple trends of thoughts, and consolidate the base of the ruling class' (Wu and Huo, 2020). President Xi Jinping proposed the concept of a Holistic National Security Outlook (*zongti guojia anquanguan*) at the first meeting of the

National Security Commission of the CCP Central Committee in April 2014, emphasising the importance of both the ‘traditional security’ (for example political security, territorial security and military security) and ‘non-traditional security’ (such as cultural security, cybersecurity and societal security) (China keywords, n.d.). Following the framework of Xi’s holistic security outlook, Chinese scholars argued that ideological security straddles traditional and non-traditional securities (Chen and Zhang, 2018; Tang, 2019). Ideological security is foremost an important component of political security as clearly indicated by the CCP at various occasions (Tang, 2019), but has become more and more related to non-traditional securities, such as cultural security, cybersecurity and societal security, due to the penetration and impact of online information containing competing ideologies in everyday life (Chen and Zhang, 2018). Cheng and Xie (2020) also argued that the rapid development of digital media and communication has caused the transition of ideological security from an aspect of traditional security to an important component of non-traditional security. The term ‘cyber ideological security’ was coined against this background in which the internet is believed to become a battlefield for ideological struggle and has posed challenges to multiple national securities.

‘Cyber ideological security’ was first proposed by President Xi Jinping in his article titled ‘Resolutely Win the Ideological Struggle’ published in May 2015. In the piece, he pointed out ‘the internet has become the forefront of the current ideological struggle’ and ‘the risk of cyber ideological security is worth paying high attention to’. He further argued that winning the cyber ideological struggle is vital to ‘the security of the regime’, ‘the security of the state system’ and ‘the political security of the state’ (Xinhua, 2021b). Xi’s emphasis on the role of the internet in ideological struggle and security has inspired scholarly inquiry into ‘cyber ideological security’ among China’s Marxism scholars. Shi (2018) contends that ‘cyber ideological security’ is the state’s capability to utilise digital information technologies

to protect itself from being subverted by external powers. He (2018) further argued that the key task of maintaining 'cyber ideological security' is to guide the values of internet users through the dominant ideology to ensure the state's ideological stability. We think 'cyber ideological security' is an extension of the traditional ideological security, which underscores the role of the internet in producing, circulating and consuming political and ideological information and in influencing people's values, beliefs and the stability of socialism as China's ruling ideology. Ensuring cyber ideological security has become a strong rationale for the CCP to enhance its internet regulation, censorship and propaganda via digital media. Though the definitions of 'cyber ideological security' vary, there is consensus that 'cyber ideological security' is a critical component of China's socialist ideological security and Xi's holistic national security outlook (Sun, 2017).

Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, the harmfulness of (cyber) historical nihilism has been elevated to the height of (cyber) ideological security and national security, which can be seen from Xi's speeches, state media commentaries and the publications of China's Marxism scholars on (cyber) historical nihilism. In these texts, the rise of historical nihilism in China is mainly attributed to the ideological infiltration of a 'western hostile force'. As Xi once put it, 'they usually make an issue of China's revolutionary history and the history of the new China, attack, smear and slander our history. The fundamental objective is to befog the minds of people, incite and topple the leadership of the CCP and the socialist system' (Qiushi, 2021b). Historical nihilism is regarded as a conspiracy of 'peaceful evolution' to westernise, divide and demonise China in the ideological field (Pang, 2019). The collapse of the Soviet Union is widely seen as a lesson for the CCP to stay alert to historical nihilism (Qiushi, 2021b). The CCP and Marxism scholars argue that the internet has become a tool for 'western hostile forces' to export western values, ideologies and cultures, cultivate dissidents and opinion leaders, and fabricate historical nihilism information, in order to incite a 'Colour

Revolution' (Xiong, 2021). (Cyber) historical nihilism has been dominantly framed as 'ideological infiltration' and a 'conspiracy' that threaten China's (cyber) ideological security and the CCP's legitimacy and leadership, illustrating the securitisation of (cyber) historical nihilism.

The concept of 'securitisation' is defined by the Copenhagen School of security studies as a 'speech act' in which a certain issue is socially constructed as a security problem and threat (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998). The securitisation process of a specific issue is in fact a discursive process in which an actor claims a reference object as an existential threat, demands the right to take countermeasures to deal with the threat, and justifies the countermeasures to an audience (Van Munster, 2012). Once applying a security label on something, this will influence policy and policy making (Nyman, 2013).

As discussed above, (cyber) historical nihilism has been labelled by the CCP as an existential threat to China's (cyber) ideological security and political security. Therefore, it is urgent to 'take a clear-cut stand against historical nihilism', using Xi Jinping's words (Xi, 2021). The governing measures discussed earlier, including the making of regulatory laws and policies, demonstrate the countermeasures taken by the state and state-led actors to deal with this threat. The nation-wide ideological and political education campaign against historical nihilism, as well as the critique of this ideological trend from the CCP leaders, state media and state-backed Marxism scholars, all justify the necessity and importance of countermeasures to the Chinese people. The securitisation strategy has successfully made (cyber) historical nihilism an 'existential' security threat of the state which helps rationalise state-led regulation and governance. The linking of (cyber) historical nihilism to (cyber) ideological security also demonstrates the politics of governing (cyber) historical nihilism, that is, maintaining the ideological legitimacy and security of the CCP and the stability of the regime when faced with political and technological disruptions.

Conclusion

This article examined CHN and its governance in China. Performing a document analysis of the regulatory policies and actions against CHN, we demonstrated that state agencies, digital platforms, schools and universities, and the public have all participated in the governing process. The governance of this digitally facilitated ideological trend has incorporated agencies and measures of China's 'internet governance' and 'ideological and political education'. We argued that CHN has been securitised as an urgent threat to the state in the digital era and therefore requires regulation and governance. The governance of CHN aims to maintain the CCP's authority in history writing and the state's ideological security.

Borrowing the words of Xi Jinping, governing CHN is a critical component of the CCP's ideological work; it is vital to 'flag' (CCP's legitimacy and leadership), 'path' (socialism with Chinese characteristics) and the nation's 'political security' (Sohu, 2022). The CCP's emphasis and intensity in governing CHN on the one hand has demonstrated what Guobin Yang (2014) called 'the return of ideology' in China's internet policymaking and internet governance. On the other hand, it has shown Xi's 'effort to return to socialism' (McDonnell, 2021) in the ideological field. The swift response to all-round governance of CHN also demonstrates the CCP's ability and resilience to adapt to new challenges in the ideological field in the digital age.

CHN as a concept, its cases, the debate surrounding it and its governance provide an interesting case study and materials for internet studies scholars to understand China's internet regulation and censorship, the formation of online public opinion in China, digital activism, cybersecurity as well as the CCP's propaganda innovation in the digital age. This article focused on the policies, practices and politics of governing CHN. Future research on the topic could investigate specific CHN cases to contextualise the study of the governance of CHN and unpack the ideological contestation among different actors around controversial

issues. Another important direction is to critically explore how the CCP utilises digital media to tell 'good stories' about its leaders, heroes, role models and its revolutionary history as a proactive means to confront and govern CHN.

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