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Boris Johnson in hospital: a Chinese gaze at Western democracies in the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

In this article, we examine Chinese assessments of Western democratic systems in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This research is based on an up-to-date case study of how Chinese Internet users discussed the UK Prime Minister – Boris Johnson's infection with COVID-19 in late March and early April 2020. The research collected original data from the Chinese community question-answering (CQA) site – Zhihu. Using a mixed-method approach, consisting of content analysis (CA) and thematic analysis (TA), we show how Zhihu users evaluate the incident (1) as a way to express their sentiments towards Boris Johnson, (2) as a case to assess British politics and (3) as a vehicle for rationalizing their views on Western democratic systems in relation to China's domestic politics. The research findings shed new light on a Chinese gaze at Western democratic systems in the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

Keywords

Boris Johnson, China, Chinese gaze, community question-answering (CQA) site, COVID-19, pandemic, prime minister, the UK, Western democracy, Zhihu

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Introduction

On 27 March 2020, the UK Prime Minister – Boris Johnson announced that he had tested positive for COVID-19. Later, on 6 April 2020, he was admitted to the hospital as his condition deteriorated. As the first head of government of a major Western democracy confirmed to be infected with COVID-19 and subsequently hospitalized, this was a high-profile incident that caused political uncertainty in the United Kingdom. Given the intentional visibility of British politics, such discussions were fervent in China, where the pandemic started, evidenced by volumes of commentaries about the incident circulated on Chinese social media platforms. Chinese Internet users' engagement with the incident not only reflects their views on Britain's management of the pandemic but also, given the different political systems of the United Kingdom and China and their distinctive approaches to the crisis, it also provides a window into Chinese people's assessments of democratic political systems more broadly. These popular political sentiments and evaluations have complex impacts on relations between China and Western democracies in the long run (Zhang, 2020a).

Nowadays, the prosperity of the global economy is increasingly reliant on strong relations between China and major Western democracies (Guo et al., 2019). Yet, existing studies of international politics have largely taken China as a research object and analysed it using theoretical approaches developed upon Western experiences of capitalism, democracy and national identity formation (Chan and Lee, 2017; Song et al., 2019). To date, limited scholarly attention has been paid to how Western democratic politics is perceived and understood in the Chinese context (Lin, 2020; Peng et al., 2020; Zhang, 2020b). This is a major omission in cultural studies scholarship, pointing towards a Eurocentric research agenda in the field. Chinese popular Internet commentary on the hospitalization of Boris Johnson provides an up-to-date case study to challenge this long-standing Eurocentrism by accounting for a Chinese gaze at Western democratic politics in the pandemic.

This article is based on a case study, collecting data from the most popular Chinese question-answering (CQA) site – Zhihu. Allowing its users to generate original content by asking and answering questions, Zhihu has increasingly been used by researchers to observe China's socio-political trends reflected in Chinese digital cultures (Peng et al., 2020; Zhang, 2020b). In the present research, we analysed all the answers retrieved from two sampled questions about the hospitalization of Boris Johnson by triangulating content analysis (CA) and thematic analysis (TA). The analysis shows how Zhihu users' engagement with the incident not only expresses their views on the UK government's pandemic response but also their assessments of Western democratic systems in relation to China's domestic politics. The research findings shed light on a Chinese imaginary of Western democracies, helping us to foreground the diversity of thought in the context of the current global crisis.

In what follows, we proceed with a discussion of the hospitalization of Boris Johnson and the changing political landscape in the COVID-19 pandemic. We then explain the research methods employed in the present research, which is followed by our analysis of the empirical data. We conclude by contemplating the implications of our research findings.

Literature review

Understanding the COVID-19 pandemic from a Chinese perspective

The year 2020 is marked by the pandemic. Back in December 2019, when the first infected patient was diagnosed in China, doctors did not know what COVID-19 would mean for the world. A few

months later, the outbreak escalated into a pandemic, becoming an unprecedented global health crisis. With millions of confirmed cases and hundreds of thousands of deaths, countries across the world were forced to take drastic measures to combat COVID-19, which inevitably led to a great recession of the global economy. To many observers in major Western democracies, China is to blame because of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) coverup when the disease first emerged. Within China, however, there have been shifts in popular perceptions of the CCP's handling of the disease, particularly as Western democracies have seen far higher infection and death rates during the pandemic than China (Kloet et al., 2020).

When the outbreak first emerged in China, citizen's lives were heavily hit by the health crisis and strictly enforced lockdown, and many were indeed highly critical of the CCP's initial coverup (Zhang, 2020a). Yet, as the outbreak become a global pandemic and Western democratic nations came to see infection and death rates that greatly exceeded those in China, the severe measures adopted by the CCP to handle the disease seemed to have been effective, evidenced by the fact that recent cases in the country were mostly imported from abroad.[1] As Chinese people witnessed the escalation of the outbreak across the Global North, a discourse of China's victory in combating the COVID-19 pandemic has become widespread in the country (Kloet et al., 2020).

As COVID-19 came under control in China while escalating in major Western democracies, the discourse of China's victory prompted a Chinese re-examination of Western democratic systems. Such a re-examination is not only a result of the CCP's propaganda campaigns concerning its handling of the disease but is reflective of popular politico-discursive currents that were present prior to COVID-19 and Chinese people's wider geopolitical imaginaries (Kloet et al., 2020). As such, Chinese popular commentary on COVID-19 in a global context should be understood against the backdrop of the current Chinese socio-political climate and the populist nationalism that has come to characterize engagements with political affairs both within and outside of China (Cong, 2009). In the wake of the pandemic and its intensification of political tensions in the global arena, it is necessary for the international community to appreciate the broader context and complexity of Chinese discourses on COVID-19 and to recognize the disease as a vehicle for the expression of political sentiments.

A 'China gazing at the West' approach

In recent years, Chinese people's perceptions of major Western democracies have attracted increasing scholarly attention (Lin, 2020; Zhang, 2020b). From a Foucauldian perspective, the Chinese government and Western democracies share dramatically different social governance strategies (Ci, 2014). While the CCP relies on an authoritarian, interventionist strategy to regulate Chinese people's everyday lives, its Western counterparts tend to provide citizens with more freedom and rely on self-regulation in society (Ci, 2014). Recent literature reveals that Chinese people's assessments of major Western democracies often show anti-Western-democracy tendencies, which go beyond the scrutiny of the differing political systems per se (Lin, 2020; Zhang, 2020b). A better understanding of this tendency requires us to advance a 'China gazing at the West' approach, accounting for how a Chinese worldview is informed by the 'public narratives and the novel grounds [that have been] constructed for knowing and speaking about a post-socialist reality' (Rofel, 2007: 22) in the country.

In China, dominant narratives of national history are characterized by comparisons between the glory of ancient times and the century of humiliation between the 1840s and the 1940s caused by the Western and Japanese military invasions (Cong, 2009). In accordance with such narratives, interactions with the West since China re-opened to the global economy in the late 1970s have been understood to have had a twofold impact on Chinese society, highlighting both an urgent need to

'catch up' with the West and a path towards modernization through strategic engagement with Western nations and global capitalism (Cong, 2009; Hong, 2010). In this way, the modernization of China, in part, becomes a process of learning from the West. This modernization process has configured what Lisa Rofel (2007) refers to as 'cosmopolitanism with Chinese characteristics' (p. 111), under which Chinese people have come to see themselves and their nation as globally connected while remaining dualistically 'other' to an imagined West.

Following the Western-Chinese dualist worldview, the West often comes to represent progressiveness in contrast to the 'underdeveloped' nature of Chinese society (Gao, 2016). However, the Western-Chinese hierarchy in this dualist worldview is not fixed but subject to manipulation by the socio-political climate (Peng, 2020). Since the late 1970s, the CCP's four-decade implementation of reform policies that prioritize economic growth has created a booming, modern Chinese economy. With the notable increase in Chinese people's living standards, a renewed discourse of Chinese supremacism, in which China's rich ancient history is understood to have created a better cultural system compared to the rest of the world, is on the rise in China today (Cong, 2009). This discourse constitutes an important aspect of Chinese national identity, creating desires to see the restoration of China's ancient era glory in the contemporary field of international politics (Tang and Darr, 2012).

With China's return to the centre of the world stage, the discourse of Chinese supremacism has increasingly converged with the CCP's nationalist propaganda. China's rapid economic growth has come at the price of social stratification, wealth concentration, and official corruption, which all violate the revolutionary political manifesto promised by the CCP in the pre-reform era (Zhong and Zhang, 2016). In order to reaffirm its authority, the CCP invokes nationalist propaganda campaigns as a social governance strategy to address domestic critics, as national pride represents one of the few values shared by Chinese people occupying both liberal and the nationalist wings of the political spectrum (Tang and Darr, 2012). In these nationalist propaganda campaigns, Western democracies are often portrayed as 'external enemies', who are hostile to China's progress and return to the world stage, given the threats it carries to Western supremacy in international politics (Song et al., 2019). This leads to increasingly ambivalent Chinese perceptions of the West, influencing how Chinese people assess Western democracies in relation to the Western-Chinese dualist worldview.

Assessing Western democracies in the digital age

Today, ambivalent Chinese perceptions of the West are evident in aspects of Chinese digital cultures. With the widespread popularity of participatory social media platforms that facilitate user-generated content, the Internet has created 'channels for more pluralistic and critical discourses to emerge and spread' (Fang and Repnikova, 2018: 2164) in Chinese society today. In this process, Internet users are provided with leeway to engage with socio-political affairs occurring outside of China (Qiu, 2017), which allows them to express their opinions on Western democracies. On the one hand, many Internet users have openly advocated the consumption of Western cultural products over their Chinese counterparts as a way to celebrate their cosmopolitan identity (Gao, 2016). On the other hand, they have also enthusiastically shown their support for the CCP in international political affairs when China and major Western democracies are involved in disputes (Schneider, 2018; Wu, 2020). The latter orientation is particularly prevalent in Internet users' engagement with international politics (Pfafman et al., 2015).

During Xi Jinping's presidency, a series of crackdowns on digitally mobilized grassroots political movements highlights that the Chinese government has tightened its control over freedom of speech on participatory social media platforms (Tong, 2019). Research shows that such a control system includes not only censorship of political dissents but also the employment of

paid commentators who post positive messages about the CCP on the Internet in order to render dissenting voices less audible (King et al., 2017; Yang, 2017). Against this backdrop, Chinese Internet users' freedom of speech increasingly relies on their use of creative means, such as generating 'content that parodies or makes fun of an original work' (Wallis, 2015: 225), to indirectly express their political opinions. Such creative means of expressing political commentary have become a popular cultural phenomenon that is not limited to dissident voices (Fang and Repnikova, 2018; Meng, 2011). This was evident with the so-called 'cross-straits memes war', in which thousands of Chinese nationalist activists 'flooded social media platforms to protest Taiwan's political drift from China' by using 'numerous funny and provocative Internet memes' in the wake of Taiwan's 2016 general election (Fang and Repnikova, 2018: 2163).

In accordance with the domestic orientation of digital civic engagement, Chinese Internet users' discussions about external political affairs often contain sub-textual evaluations of the CCP in the domestic context (Pfafman et al., 2015). This allows them to implicitly articulate their expectations of the CCP by comparing its politics to political systems elsewhere, especially Western democracies (Lin, 2020). Such a domestic orientation has been well-documented by recent studies of how high-profile Western politicians, such as Angela Merkel (the German Chancellor), Donald Trump (the US President), and Theresa May (the former UK Prime Minister), are assessed in the Chinese context (Lin, 2020; Peng et al., 2020; Zhang, 2020b). An account of this phenomenon informs our advancement of the 'China gazing at the West' approach to the analysis of Internet users' discussions about international politics on Chinese social media platforms.

Research questions

In light of this 'China gazing at the West' approach, we use Chinese Internet users' discussions about the hospitalization of Boris Johnson as a case study to fully appreciate the entangled relationships between the Western-Chinese dualist worldview and the pursuit of domestic political agendas established in Chinese digital civic engagement in the COVID-19 pandemic. The questions underlying the present research are the following:

1. How do Chinese Internet users feel towards Boris Johnson when they discuss his hospitalization?
2. How do these Internet users assess British politics through their engagement with this political incident?
3. How do evaluations of this political incident enable these Internet users to express their views on Western democratic systems in relation to China's domestic politics?

Research methods

The data collection was conducted on Zhihu – the most popular Chinese community question-answering (CQA) site. Zhihu is used by 14.6% of the 772-million Chinese Internet-literate population (Peng et al., 2020). The architecture of the CQA site encourages Internet users to generate information-rich commentaries on a wide range of trending topics, which are predominantly posted by an educated middle-class population (Zhang, 2020b). Given the pivotal role, the middle-class population plays in establishing dominant mainstream opinions, an emerging body of literature has been using Zhihu a field site to explore mainstream public opinions among Internet users and, by extension, in Chinese society more broadly (Peng et al., 2020; Zhang, 2020b). Focusing on the hospitalization of the UK Prime Minister – Boris Johnson during the COVID-19 pandemic, we located the two most-answered, relevant questions.[2] As can be seen in Table 1, one of the questions

was asked at the beginning of the incident, when Boris Johnson was first diagnosed with COVID-19, and the other was raised after he was discharged from hospital. The two questions aggregated volumes of posts, which permitted an in-depth analysis of Zhihu users' engagement with this incident.

To answer the research questions with a consideration of both the general trends and the variations in Zhihu users' posting, we employed a mixed-method research design by triangulating CA and TA. CA is a quantitative, replicable data-reduction method used for compressing large volumes of text into specific categories (Neuendorf, 2017). In this research, CA techniques were used to code the sampled posts in order to capture the general trends in Zhihu users' posting, focusing on their sentiments towards Boris Johnson, and their assessments of British politics and Western democratic systems more broadly. The CA process minimized the possibility of cherry-picking data that support pre-conceived arguments, paving the way for the TA process. To provide further insights into the empirical data, we used TA, which is a representative qualitative research method. This method departs from simply 'counting explicit words or phrases' by 'identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data' (Guest et al., 2014: 9). Following this approach, we randomly selected 25 long posts (over 1000 words) and 25 short posts (less than 100 words) from each question, which resulted in a smaller sample of 100 posts for in-depth TA. The TA process provided a deeper, qualitative account of the data, uncovering the themes established in the textual production of Zhihu users' posting. This enabled us to avoid making sweeping claims by fully accounting for the complexity and nuance of Zhihu users' engagement with the political incident.
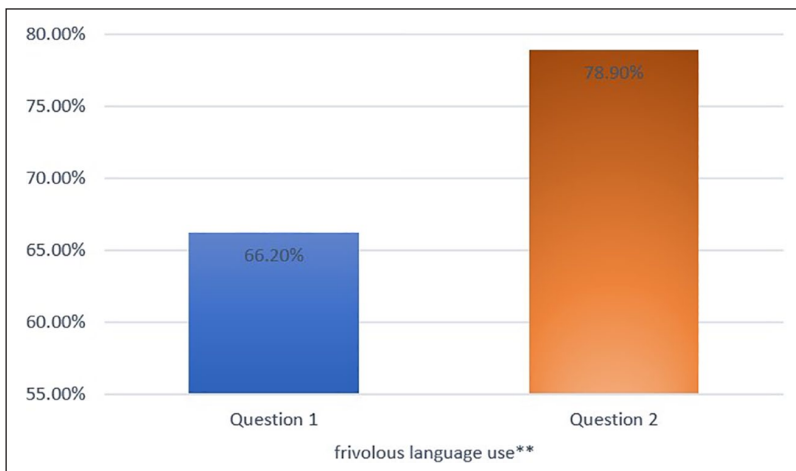
CA measures and results

The CA coding scheme consisted of the following four variables: (1) language style, (2) sentiments towards Boris Johnson, (3) assessments of the United Kingdom's crisis management, and (4) perceptions of Western democracies. The language style was determined, based on whether frivolous language use was noted in a post. A total of 396 posts (70.8%) were detected to be frivolous, while the rest did not show such this trait (163 posts, 29.2%). Each post was also coded for the posting user's general sentiments towards Boris Johnson (positive, negative or neutral/N/A).[3] In this category, 93 posts (16.6%) were positive, while 334 (59.7%) were considered negative (neutral/N/A: 132 posts; 23.6%). We then coded each post for its assessments of the United Kingdom's pandemic response. In total, 34 posts (6.1%) revealed positive assessments, while 158 posts (28.3%) gave negative assessments (neutral/N/A: 367 posts; 65.6%). We further coded for Zhihu users' perceptions of Western democracies in general. Only 16 posts (2.9%) meet the criteria for positive perceptions, while 87 (15.5%) were negative (neutral/N/A: 456 posts; 81.6%).

From the above statistics, we can see relatively adverse sentiments towards Boris Johnson, negative assessments of the United Kingdom's pandemic crisis management, and hostile attitudes towards Western democracies established in Zhihu users' discussions about Johnson's COVID-19 infection.

In particular, we were interested in how the above trends changed as the incident unfolded and, therefore, compared Zhihu users' responses to question 1 (posted right after Boris Johnson was confirmed to be infected) and question 2 (asked after Boris Johnson left the hospital). Cross-tabulation tests and chi-square tests of independence were used to identify such changes. As Figure 1 indicates, 66.2% of the posts retrieved from question 1 involved frivolous language use in the textual production, whereas 78.9% collected from question 2 involved the same feature. The analyses showed a 12.7% increase of frivolous language use in Zhihu users' posting between the two questions ($\chi^2 = 10.155$, $df = 1$, $p = .001$).

Table 1. A summary of the data sources.

	Question 1	Question 2
Content	What is your view on Boris Johnson using a video to announce that he was infected with COVID-19?	What is your view on Boris Johnson leaving the hospital after he recovered?
Retrieved from	https://www.zhihu.com/question/383016201	https://www.zhihu.com/question/387244923
Date posted	27 March 2020	12 April 2020
Number of views	2,241,418	895,149
Number of followers	1647	548
Number of answers	355	204

Figure 1. Development of language style in the posts.
**p < .01.

Furthermore, we also employed cross-tabulation tests to compare the development of trending political opinions in Zhihu users' discussions and used chi-square tests of independence to determine whether the detected changes occurred by chance. In general, as Figure 2 indicates, there were notable decreases in terms of positive assessments of the United Kingdom's crisis management ($\chi^2=3.952$, $df=1$, $p=.047$) and positive attitudes towards Western democracies ($\chi^2=6.501$, $df=1$, $p=.011$) in Zhihu users' posting. Interestingly, such decreases were accompanied with a significant drop in comments hostile towards Boris Johnson personally ($\chi^2=10.271$, $df=1$, $p=.001$). We also tested the increase in negative evaluations of the United Kingdom's crisis management ($\chi2=.717$, $df=1$, *ns.*) and the decreases of positive commentaries about Boris Johnson ($\chi2=2.680$, $df=1$, *ns.*) and negative perceptions of Western democracies ($\chi2=.180$, $df=1$, *ns.*) but found no statistically significant results.

It emerged from the CA results that there were growing hostilities towards the United Kingdom and the West in Zhihu users' discussions about Boris Johnson's COVID-19 infection. Yet, such growing hostilities seemed not to have translated into an increase of negative comments about Boris Johnson personally. On the one hand, the decrease of negative comments about Boris
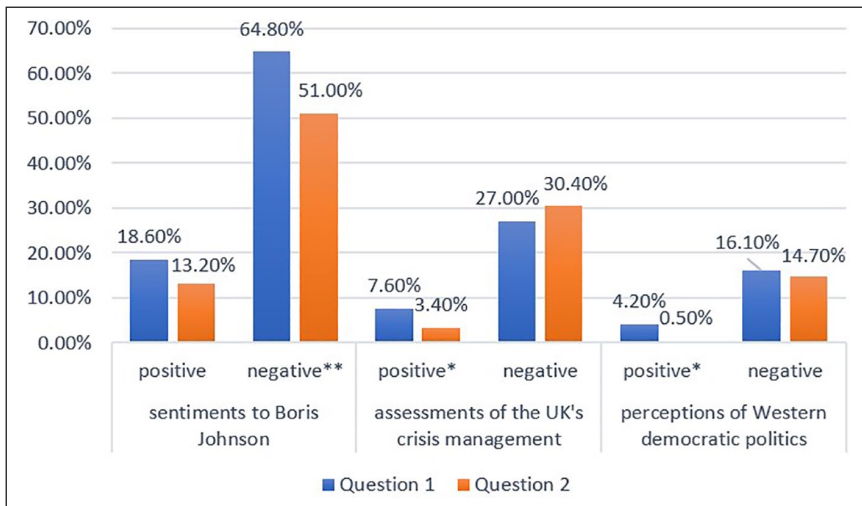
Figure 2. Development of political trends in the posts.
*p < .05; **p < .01.

Johnson was possibly a result of the fact that Boris Johnson experienced a life-and-death situation, which provoked compassion among Zhihu users and led to a decrease in negative comments under the second question. On the other hand, such a drop does not alter the trend that a greater number of Zhihu users expressed negative sentiments towards the UK Prime Minister in their responses to both questions asked on Zhihu. Such a trend provides a glimpse to Zhihu users' distrust of the UK government and, by extension, Western democratic politics, as the current incident unfolds.

TA analytical discussion

TA was conducted to both validate the CA results and gain a deeper understanding of Zhihu users' sentiments towards Boris Johnson, their assessments of the United Kingdom's pandemic crisis management, as well as their perceptions of Western democratic politics more broadly.

Sentiments towards Boris Johnson

Given that Johnson's COVID-19 infection became a matter of life and death, some Zhihu users posted sympathetic comments. In this regard, user Q1-A45, who shared a short comment to pray for Johnson's recovery from the disease, is representative of the sympathetic commentators:

> User Q1-A45: [I] hope Johnson could recover.

However, such sympathetic sentiments were far from the mainstream within the Zhihu community, as huge numbers of Zhihu users seemed to prefer to mock, rather than sympathize with, Boris Johnson's situation. Such a trend is especially notable in responses to question 2, which was asked after Johnson has passed the life-threatening stage and has been discharged from the hospital:

User Q2-A159: It seems he was just to 'take a seat' in ICU so that he would be prepared for intubation in case it was needed.

In the above extract, user Q2-A159 describes the hospitalization of Boris Johnson as an act to 'take a seat in ICU'. In doing so, the user invokes sarcasm as a way to voice their doubt of the fact that Boris Johnson was once in a life-threatening situation. Such findings help us to understand the CA results from a qualitative perspective, showing that the large proportion of the sampled posts involving frivolous language use often points towards sarcastic commentaries on Boris Johnson. However, Boris Johnson being mocked on Zhihu by no means suggests that Zhihu users lack empathic abilities at a personal level. Instead, such comments may be the result of Johnson being perceived as representative of Western democratic politics in the context of the pandemic. In this regard, users Q1-A256 and Q2-A30's remarks provide a good illustration:

Q1-A256: Why does the Prime Minister always have such an ugly hairstyle? Does he not care about the national image [of the UK]?

Q2-A30: Johnson has always been a 'weirdo' in British politics [. . .]. As Mayor of London, he showed youthful energy by cycled to work and used to pull all sorts of funny faces, this all helped him to build a persona as a friend of the people.

In these two quotes, users mock Boris Johnson by describing him as a deviant, whose personal image is opposed to their impression of a 'traditional' statesman. While showing slightly different sentiments towards Johnson, both excerpts place heavy emphasis on Johnson's personal traits and political characteristics. This shows little connection with his current situation but highlights his public persona established by the media long before the pandemic. As a high-profile politician in a major Western democracy, Boris Johnson is widely known by Chinese people and he frequently appears in both political news coverage and celebrity gossips in the Chinese media. In particular, Boris Johnson is a political figure representative of the compatibility between celebrity culture and state politics in Western democracies (Rafter and Hayes, 2015). He marks the so-called 'anti-politics' phenomenon in major democracies, providing an exemplar of how Western politicians adopt personalized campaign strategies akin to public relations techniques developed by the entertainment industry (Wood et al., 2016: 581). In the era of increasingly globalized media consumption, the celebrity image of Boris Johnson, as well as the type of Western politicians he represents in the Western media sphere, has been gradually introduced to Chinese society. This influences how he is perceived in the Chinese context.

Specific to this case study, the celebrity image of Boris Johnson provides the grounds for downplaying the seriousness of his hospitalization in Zhihu users' discourse. In this regard, the extracts below are exemplary:

Q2-A60: *Zhongtang Bao*[4] will be unbeatable amongst all national leaders in the world. With COVID-19 on his hands, all he needs to do is shake hands with his opponents and they will drop like flies.

Q1-A22: If *Zhongtang Bao* survives, he deserves the Nobel Prize. If he dies, he will probably get a Darwin Award.[5]

In the above extracts, both users offer predictions about Boris Johnson's future following his COVID-19 infection. The predictions point to surreal and seemingly irrelevant futures. What they share in common, however, is their use of the name *Zhongtang Bao* to refer to Boris Johnson.

Zhongtang was an official position in Imperial China, which was equivalent to Prime Minister in modern British politics. *Bao* is a Chinese surname and also the first character in the Chinese translation of 'Boris' (*Baolisi*). This appellation provides Johnson with seemingly Chinese roots. This way of referring to Johnson was popular on Zhihu. It involved a form of distancing through which commentators differentiated themselves from serious political commentaries. They stand out in Zhihu users' engagement with the incident by infusing an *e'gao* convention into the linguistic features of their posting.

The term 'e'gao', which literally means 'evil work', refers to a genre of user-generated content in Chinese digital cultures (Tan and Cheng, 2020). Content featuring *e'gao* could take various forms, such as 'parodies', 'photoshopped images', 'songs', 'lip-synced videos', and 'mashed-up film', and is often produced by Zhihu users to 'make fun of an original work' (Wallis, 2015: 225). At a textual level, the linguistic features of *e'gao* often involve the use of puns or juxtaposing seemingly irrelevant cultural elements to create irony, and the irony serves as a crucial vehicle to communicate meanings (Tan and Cheng, 2020). In Chinese digital cultures, *e'gao* has always been politicized. While challenging the traditional modes of media content production and distribution, it often becomes a way through which Zhihu users express their political opinions on social media platforms (Meng, 2011). Existing studies of the *e'gao* phenomenon tend to focus on how political dissenters generate *e'gao* content to challenge the CCP's Internet censorship system (Meng, 2011; Wallis, 2015). Yet, in this case study, we noted a differing trajectory in Zhihu users' *e'gao* of Boris Johnson, which is associated with their opinions on British politics; this is discussed below.

Assessments of the United Kingdom's approach to the pandemic

Serving as the UK Prime Minister in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, Boris Johnson's crisis management has been a topic of public debate, both domestically and internationally. As expected, such a focus is also found within the Zhihu community. It emerged from the sampled posts that Zhihu users' mocking of Boris Johnson is, in part, connected to their opinions on the UK government's response to COVID-19:

> Q1-A248: Haha! [. . .] I thought they were pretending to combat COVID-19 with herd immunity, while secretly profiting [from of the crisis] behind the scenes. Only when the Prime Minister was infected did I realize they were working towards herd immunity. I completely misunderstood them before.

At first glance, user Q-A248 appears to praise the transparency of British politics. Yet, the use of laughter, alongside the anachronistic use of the term 'the British Empire', shows frivolous, sarcastic characteristics, which implicitly reveal the user's disagreement with the UK government's pandemic response. In this way, the mocking of Boris Johnson's infection is invoked to heighten the irony in the commentary. This pattern of textual production is not unique to user Q1-A248 but identified in volumes of answers to the sampled questions. In most cases, such posts refer to the herd-immunity public health policy that the UK government adopted at the early stage of the pandemic.

In epidemiology, the term 'herd immunity' refers to a way of controlling infectious diseases by, paradoxically, allowing certain proportions of the population to be infected with the virus to prevent its further spread in communities (John and Samuel, 2000). Although it has been repeatedly denied by Boris Johnson's government, there is a general consensus among the British press that the United Kingdom was one of the few countries in the liberal West that attempted to cope with the pandemic using this strategy.[6] This news coverage has not only shocked the British general public but also surprised the international community. This is especially the case for Chinese

people, who found the United Kingdom's crisis management dramatically different from their experience early and strictly enforced lockdown. This is apparent in the below excerpt:

> Q1-A9: The UK has been under the spotlight lately. First Brexit and then herd immunity. Brexit is still understandable; it simply shows the shit-stirrer role Great Britain plays [in European politics]. But I really do not understand why they have used herd immunity [. . .]. Their prince and *zhongtang* are both infected now. I am convinced that they are not just talking about herd immunity.

User Q1-A9's comment centres on their disbelief at the United Kingdom's employment of a herd-immunity strategy in the pandemic. By referring to Boris Johnson as '*zhongtang*', sarcastic language is once again noted in this user's posting. Such frivolous style of posting is used in association with describing the United Kingdom as the 'shit-stirrer'. It presents highly negative assessments of British politics to underline a vocal objection to Britain's public health policy in the current crisis.

While Zhihu users disagree with the so-called herd-immunity approach, their assessments of the UK government's handling of the crisis are sometimes divergent on Zhihu, with some attempts to rationalize the legitimacy of the United Kingdom's choice. This is exemplified below:

> Q2-A25: The UK is a country of liberalism, and administrative power cannot be used to restrict people's freedom [. . .]. As such, it has been announced that everyone should be free to build their immunity, while instead of building hospitals they have set up a morgue in Hyde Park. This scares people to stay at home, which allows this to push for restrictions to limit people's free movements with fewer obstacles.

User Q2-A25 justifies Boris Johnson's crisis management strategy. Similar to most of their peers on Zhihu, they deny the effectiveness of herd immunity as an infectious disease-control method. Yet, they justify its contextual application in Britain by referring to a conspiracy theory, describing the UK government's implementation of the policy as a nudge which indirectly encourages British people to accept a subsequent nationwide lockdown. In doing so, the hospitalization of Boris Johnson can be seen as a part of this nudge, involving an attempt to communicate the severity of the pandemic to the British general public. In this way, the user rationalizes the United Kingdom's differing public health policy without accepting it as an appropriate strategy.

The conspiracy theory proposed by user Q2-A25 was not a popular one among the sampled posts retrieved from Zhihu. Yet, what makes the post salient is that the user frames the conspiracy theory in the context of the United Kingdom's political infrastructure. Specifically, by labelling the United Kingdom as a 'country of liberalism', the user's post feeds into an imagined global division of nations along lines of 'liberal' and 'authoritarian' systems. In this narrative, the United Kingdom's strategy, which shows notable differences compared to Zhihu users' experiences, is attributed to the policymaking process in Western liberal democracies, suggesting an underlayer logic associated with the user's vision of international politics. Such references to the political infrastructure of Western democracies were common in Zhihu users' responses to questions on Zhihu. As shown in the CA results, this is especially the case with responses to question 2. Such a trend shows how the pandemic opens up opportunities for broader political commentaries in the Chinese context.

Sub-textual comparisons between Western democracies and the CCP

Zhihu users' discussions about the hospitalization of Boris Johnson often link British politics to their broader imaginaries of Western democratic systems. In many cases, this direction of posting is predicated on a Western-Chinese dualist worldview, which compares the political infrastructures

of Western democracies and those of China. While the Western-Chinese worldview is ambivalent in its nature (Cong, 2009), it contributes to Zhihu users' fluid assessments of liberal democratic systems. Such ambivalence is evident in the below excerpt:

> Q1-A135: [I] feel all Western politicians are trying to make themselves micro-celebrities. They would post anything on social media [. . .] It is really hard to believe that a national leader would upload a video on the Internet telling everyone he was infected with COVID-19. What I saw from this is that Western governments are more willing to communicate with people via the Internet, while Eastern governments are more mysterious.

Here, a seemingly 'objective stance' is taken by user Q1-A135 to differentiate between 'Western' and 'Eastern' politics. While describing 'Eastern governments' as 'mysterious', the user invokes the United Kingdom's communication about Boris Johnson's personal health status as an illustration of the transparency of Western democratic politics. This opinion, to a certain extent, echoes existing political science literature, which recognized the symbolic value of the disclosure of national leaders' personal medical condition in liberal democratic systems (Streiffer et al., 2006). Yet, relatively positive assessments of Western democracies, such as user Q1-A135's above example, are in the minority in the Zhihu community, evidenced by the aggregation of volumes of comments taking an 'anti-Western'. The below excerpts are exemplary of such 'anti-Western' sentiments:

> Q1-A51: You have to admire democratic countries' courage. If this [national leaders being infected with COVID-19] happened in China, it would never be known to the general public. However, this thing cannot happen in China either!

> Q2-A191: Thus, [in China,] we combat COVID-19 based on [the strength of] our country's political infrastructure; in the UK, they combat COVID-19 based on [the strength of] an individual's health.

Commentaries involving negative assessments of Western democracies, such as those above, typically make their argument based on an evaluation of the UK government's performance in the pandemic crisis. Showing a consistent trend in their linguistic features, these comments are generally characterized by their frivolous, sarcastic language use, as evident in the above extracts. User Q1-A51 refers to the United Kingdom not by its name but by the nature of its political infrastructure as a 'democratic country'. While appearing to praise Britain's democratic traditions and transparency, the comment ends with an insult to democratic politics by comparing the UK government's performance to that of China in the context of the pandemic. Such a comparison is also apparent in the user Q2-A191's comment, who exploits phonetic similarities between the words 'political infrastructure' and 'individual health' in the Chinese language (both '*tizhi*') to mock the effectiveness of the UK government's crisis management. Interestingly, in both extracts, China comes to symbolize alternative to Western democratic politics that helps cope with the pandemic crisis more effectively.

Zhihu users' positive assessments of the Chinese government are grounded in the development of the COVID-19 outbreak at first nationally and later internationally. To a certain extent, the outcomes of the CCP and major Western democracies' differing pandemic responses are indicative of Jiwei Ci's (2014) observation that, in the context of the pandemic, reduced freedom and the acceptance of authoritarian, interventionist governance appear to be the price paid for effective public health management. Following the CCP's centralized mobilization of political and healthcare resources in late January, the outbreak was brought under relative control in China in early March.

These positive signs from China were accompanied by a growing global health crisis that saw rapidly rising infections and deaths elsewhere, especially in Western Europe and the United States. In particular, the United Kingdom and the United States, which are widely considered to be representative of Western democratic societies in the eyes of Zhihu users, were heavily hit by the pandemic. As such, within China, there has been widespread praise of the nation's achievements in combating the pandemic. This, by extension, feeds into the discourse of the superiority of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', which has long been a crucial aspect of the CCP's propaganda campaigns to reaffirm its authority in the post-reform era (Rofel, 2007). The apparent success of the management of COVID-19 in China has led Zhihu users to move away from criticizing the CCP's coverup at the beginning of the outbreak (Zhang, 2020a), as exemplified by volumes of comments supportive of the CCP's handling of the crisis retrieved from the sampled questions.

Following the Western-Chinese dualist worldview that shapes their engagement with international politics, Zhihu users' positive assessments of the CCP often translate into hostility towards major Western democracies. This is evident in the below passages:

Q2-A14: He [Boris Johnson] and other leaders of Western countries, such as Donald Trump, only took pleasure out of our misfortune and hit us when we were down during the early stage of the outbreak in China [. . .]. They wasted the precious time that China bought the world at an enormous cost to itself.

Q2-A110: [Boris Johnson and Donald Trump] are annoyed because Chinese people held back the flood! And they discovered how to hold back the flood! They are outraged that China first created troubles and then found the solutions! As such, they are now doing everything they can to smear China's achievements, discouraging the general public from accepting China's model.

As shown in the above extracts, both responses to question 2, Zhihu users' have moved away from commenting on Johnson's hospitalization and, instead, express their political views framed by a Western-Chinese dichotomy. Nationalist sentiments are infused into these commentaries, by discursively constructing major Western democracies 'external threats' to China. In general, this nationalist sentiment is manifested as a backlash against major Western democracies' accusations that the CCP is responsible for their losses in the pandemic, as both parties politicize the crisis for domestic political gains.[7] In this way, Zhihu users' engagement with the pandemic in a global context is deeply marked by populist nationalism in wider Chinese society, which is consistent with the current political climate.

As previously discussed, dominant narratives of Chinese history underscore the importance of China's return to a position of global power, requiring its national government to restore the country's ancient glories (Tang and Darr, 2012). With reference to the Western-Chinese dualist worldview, such narratives provide the grounds for the CCP to devise nationalist propaganda campaigns by portraying major Western democracies as 'external threats', who are hostile to the rise of China on the world stage, based on an assumption that China poses a challenge to Western supremacy in contemporary international politics (Song et al., 2019). As evidenced in a series of international disputes, the portrayal of major Western democracies as an 'external threat' has been accepted by Zhihu users occupying the nationalist end of the political spectrum (Schneider, 2018). This shapes how public opinions supportive of the CCP become increasingly mainstream in digital civic engagement in China today (Fang and Repnikova, 2018; Pfafman et al., 2015). As evident in responses to the two questions explored, such a nationalist sentiment has notably shaped Zhihu users' perspectives on both the CCP and Western democracies and, by extension, their perceptions of authoritarianism and democratic politics. These perceptions have the potential to shape the trajectory of the CCP's political reform, which will shape the international socio-political landscape

by influencing diplomatic relations between China and major Western democracies in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

In this article, we have presented an analysis of how Zhihu users engage with international political affairs. In doing so, we used their discussions about the infection and hospitalization of the UK Prime Minister – Boris Johnson in the current COVID-19 pandemic crisis as a case study. The analysis focused on Zhihu users' discussions at the following three levels: (1) their sentiments towards Boris Johnson as a foreign political figure, (2) their views on the United Kingdom's performance in handling the pandemic crisis and (3) their perceptions of Western democratic systems in relation to the CCP. With largely frivolous, sarcastic language use identified throughout the sampled comments, the analysis reveals that Zhihu users often express negative assessments of both the UK Prime Minister and the United Kingdom's crisis management. This also points towards their disapproval of Western democratic politics. In particular, such hostilities towards Western democracies seem to have shown a notable increase, as the pandemic continues to unfold (Zhang, 2020a). The research findings capture changing perceptions of democratic political systems among Zhihu users in the wake of the pandemic, which are compatible with the rise of nationalist sentiments in wider Chinese society identified by existing studies (Fang and Repnikova, 2018; Schneider, 2018).

Certainly, this research relies on a case study conducted on Zhihu, meaning that the research findings might be limited in terms of their generalizability. Yet, given the user demographics of the CQA site, it is a valuable data repository for exploring mainstream opinions shared by the middle-class population, which have wider impacts on socio-cultural trends and the future trajectory of political democratization in Chinese society (Peng et al., 2020; Zhang, 2020b).

Empirically, the research findings foreground the changing political landscape in China and its interplay with international politics in cross-border news consumption (Guo et al., 2019). As previously discussed, the COVID-19 pandemic is not only an unprecedented global health crisis but is also an international political incident involving multiple actors and tensions (Kloet et al., 2020). In some Western nations, there are growing voices critical of the transparency of the CCP's politics and its handling of the pandemic. Within China, such criticisms are seen as the desperate attempts of right-wing Western politicians to politicize the pandemic for their own political gains. In particular, major Western democracies' poor handling of the crisis, in contrast to the CCP's severe measures that have proven relatively effective, has fuelled Internet users' support for the CCP and given rise to their distrust of Western democracies (Zhang, 2020a). This political trajectory is likely to shape Chinese perceptions of Western political systems in the long-term and may impact the possibility of the democratization of China's political infrastructure. Such a phenomenon poses challenges to the international community in negotiating conflicting interests with China in trade and political disputes, which urges further intellectual intervention.

Theoretically, this research has advanced a 'China gazing at the West' approach to understanding Chinese Internet users' engagement with international politics. Existing literature lacks an in-depth understanding of how Western democratic politics is accessed in Chinese society. This is because the existing theoretical approaches are largely based on Western experiences, which do not encourage scholars to pursue non-Eurocentric research agendas (Chan and Lee, 2017). Given the increasingly important role the opinions of Internet users play in China's domestic politics, the international community needs to assess how Western democratic politics is perceived by this group and the potential implications of these perceptions for cultural exchange and trade between China and major Western democracies (Lin, 2020; Peng et al., 2020). In this research,

our development of a 'China gazing at the West' approach addresses both the international and domestic orientations of Internet users' engagement with international politics. This approach helps us to evaluate the impacts of the pandemic on Chinese public opinions and explore the transformations of Chinese society from a non-Eurocentric theoretical perspective.

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Notes

1. Retrieved from https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-52225475
2. The posts were in Chinese. We have translated extracts of the posts to English when quoting them in this article.
3. The 'positive' category included both 'highly positive' and 'relatively positive', while the 'negative' category included both 'highly negative' and 'relatively negative'. The same rule applies to the coding of 'assessments of the United Kingdom's pandemic response' and 'perceptions of Western democracies'.
4. A Chinese nickname given to Boris Johnson, discussed below.
5. The Darwin Awards are a comedy honour awarded by the website darwinawards.com to individuals seen to have contributed to human evolution through acts of stupidity that result in their own death.
6. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/03/matt-hancock-government-policy-herd-immunity-community-surveillance-covid-19
7. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/31/us-china-coronavirus-diplomacy

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