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Discourse on Europe's Migrant Crisis in Chinese Social Media: Recontextualising Nationalism and Defending Perceived Homogeneity

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Since 2015, the strong resentment in Chinese social media against international immigration triggered by the European migrant crisis has been noticed, and in many cases harshly criticised, by foreign media. Using primary sources retrieved from a major microblogging site, this paper provides a critical review of the way in which the crisis was represented in popular discourse between 2015 and 2017 and explores the intricate sentiments it provoked. It employs the analytical framework of critical discourse analysis developed by Fairclough to illustrate how multi-dimensional discourse construction shaped the perceptions in social media. It argues that the mostly sensationalist narratives, created through recontextualisation of long-standing nationalist discourses, reflect the dilemma between China's ambitious globalist vision for future development and the persistent myth of homogeneity of Chinese nationhood. As China undergoes a slow and reluctant transition from a traditional source of emigration to a budding destination for international immigrants, such a dilemma has broader implications for the Chinese perceptions of the European Other and China's self-positioning in the world.

Keywords: China; Europe; migrant crisis; discourse; social media

Introduction

The summer of 2015 saw the drastic escalation of Europe's lingering trouble of irregular immigration from the Middle East and Africa, which was later given the name 'migrant crisis' or 'refugee crisis' in official discourses and media narratives. In China, the European migrant crisis was among the most discussed topics of 2015 in social media, as indicated by multiple analyses from both public and private institutions. In a report on internet public opinions published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and People's Daily, the migrant crisis was listed as the third most trending news item throughout the year, after the 'Belt and Road' initiative and the Chinese stock market

turbulence (Liu et al. 2016). Topics related to the crisis constantly appeared in the 'top searches' chart on major Chinese social media sites in the two years following.

Foreign observers, mainly journalists and columnists, noticed the trend and were surprised by the overwhelmingly negative opinions expressed by Chinese social media users. A Dutch blogger who followed Chinese social media trends summarised the general view as 'the road to ruin', quoting blunt posts and comments like 'the immigrant wave is catastrophic to Europe's economic and political climate' and 'Europe is becoming a Third World country' (Koetse 2015). In addition to xenophobic and nationalistic sentiments, it appeared that quite often Chinese social media users associated the crisis in Europe with the situation at home. In fact, the European migrant crisis triggered the first round of social media debates over China's own cross-border immigrant and refugee issues. Many young Chinese learnt for the first time that their country actually hosted over 300,000 refugees and asylum seekers (see UNHCR 2015), who had stayed nearly invisible for the past four decades.

Meanwhile, politicians and scholars in Europe made repeated calls for China to be more involved in tackling the global challenge of irregular migratory movement, but only received a muted response. Media reports revealed that the European Union (EU) first proposed to discuss the migrant crisis with China on the occasion of the 17th bilateral summit, which took place in June 2015 in Brussels, but the proposal was swiftly turned down by China (Tatlow 2015). The Chinese government's stance on the migrant crisis was first articulated at a Foreign Ministry press briefing in September 2015. When asked if China had been demanded by other countries to accommodate refugees from Syrian and Iraq, spokesman Hong Lei replied: 'The Chinese side has taken note of the recent refugee issue as well as measures taken by relevant EU countries…We believe that the EU and relevant countries are able to rise to the critical

challenge, properly deal with related issues and safeguard regional stability with concerted efforts' (Chinese Foreign Ministry 2015). Notwithstanding its commitment to providing financial and other humanitarian aid to Middle Eastern countries impacted by the influx of refugees, China remained firm on staying away from the centre of the crisis and keeping a low-profile role, and was particularly sensitive about the presumption of Western powers using refugee and migrant issues to justify their intervention in other countries' domestic affairs (Xinhua 2017). In the multi-faceted network for EU-China dialogues established since 1975, migration had remained a peripheral subject that yielded no visible results. The first formal bilateral dialogue on mobility and migration, at a Directorate-General level, took place in October 2013 in Brussels, but only produced a two-paragraph press release that contained little more than empty rhetoric (European Commission 2013). No concrete topics discussed were revealed and the dialogue discontinued the next year. The two sides were then engaged in a one-off dialogue project on migration between 2015 and 2018, known as the EU-China Dialogue on Migration and Mobility Support Project and facilitated by the International Organisation for Migration and the International Labour Organisation. Funded by the EU's Partnership Instrument, the aims of this project were to improve mobility and legal migration between the EU and China, and to reduce the presence of Chinese irregular migrants in the EU, excluding any aspect of the migrant crisis in Europe (ILO 2015).

Compared to the ambivalent official discourse, opposition to China's involvement in the migrant crisis was more explicit, cynical and emotionally-charged on the internet. In May 2016, Amnesty International published a survey claiming that Chinese people had the most welcoming attitude towards refugees, with 46 percent of the respondents willing to host refugees in their own homes. This, however, was

ruthlessly mocked by social media users in China. In an online survey on the same question launched by the Global Times, a state-run newspaper known for its provocative nationalist stance, 90.3 percent of the respondents said no to hosting refugees. The newspaper consequently suggested that the Amnesty International survey was 'peculiar', and possibly an attempt to 'incite antagonism against the government among the public' (Bai and Zhen 2017).

In this context, this paper explores a small perspective on China's intricate attitude towards Europe and international immigration in changing global and domestic environments by answering the following questions: what constitutes the negative discourse on the European migrant crisis in Chinese social media? What's the connection between the discursive phenomenon and social realities in China?

As there has been no previous academic attention paid to this specific topic, my research builds upon existing studies on the Chinese perceptions of Europe, international immigration to China and discursive practices in Chinese social media, in particular the rise of online nationalism.

Research on the Chinese perceptions of Europe has so far mainly focused on the perceptions of the EU and has been largely based on surveys and traditional media (mainstream broadcast and newspapers) content analyses. Dai and Zhang (2007) found that Chinese people did show a strong interest in different dimensions of Europe, and the opinions were consistently positive, in which the EU represented 'a great power', 'interior harmony', 'a new strength' and 'a new model for other countries'. Such idolisation began to wither after the 2008 Beijing Olympics, which as some scholars argued signified the beginning of China's return to the central stage of the world as an economic and cultural powerhouse (Ding 2011; Lee 2016). A series of disruptions during the Olympic torch relay in Paris and London and the European Parliament's call

to boycott the Games were deemed by enraged Chinese cybercitizens as a vile attempt to sabotage China's most glorious moment in a century, which sparked an outburst of anti-West online Chinese nationalism with an increasing populist character (King 2010). Moreover, the financial and debt crises that followed jeopardised the EU's credibility as able 'soft power' and a 'well-governed entity' (Chaban and Holland 2013). Chang and Pieke (2018) noted the shifting Chinese views of Europe due to more recent events like the migrant crisis and Brexit, in which the EU was perceived as a 'troubled actor' unfit for a global leadership role. In the present study, the concept of Europe transcends the institutional framework of the EU, as first, the online discussions about the European migrant crisis involve a number of non-EU countries; second, the Chinese understanding of Europe has been consistently obscure since ancient times in both geographical and ideological senses and can hardly be equated with that of the EU (Racknitz 2013).

Since the beginning of the 2010s, international immigration to China has gained attention from anthropologists. Pieke (2012) concluded that immigrants from a much greater variety of backgrounds and countries would find their way to China, and that China was beginning to face the formation of more permanent immigrant communities. His arguments were later proven true by the emerging African community in the southern megacity of Guangzhou, the Russian community in northeastern border cities and the Arab community in eastern Zhejiang province. Studies indicated that the Chinese administration found it challenging to cope with a surge of immigrants as employment, social welfare and related laws were not yet well-developed (Shen 2011). Researchers have so far focused on empirical case studies of immigrant communities in Chinese economic and manufacturing hubs (see Adams 2015; Bodomo 2010; Farrer

2019), and not so much on how the concept of immigration is represented in official and popular discourses and how it affects public perceptions.

In recent times, social media have emerged as an important source of empirical evidence in scholarly endeavours to make sense of Chinese social phenomena. The number of mobile internet users in China reached 817 million by the end of 2018, accounting for 98.6 percent of its total online population (CNNIC 2019). With the massive user base, social media provide an active public discourse platform outside the heavily regulated traditional media sector in a transition period marked by the collisions of different interests and cultural demands (Kuang 2018). However, it would be naive to assume that social media content could bypass China's multi-layer mechanism of mass media censorship. The mandate of supervising the cyber communicative space is shared among the Cyberspace Administration, founded in 2014, and traditional government and party organs that oversee media operations, including the Department of Propaganda of the Communist Party of China, State Administration of Press and Publication, Radio, Film, and Television and the State Council Information Office (Miao and Lei 2016). Nonetheless, social media have facilitated new discursive practices. One of the prominent phenomena is the rise of various new forms of nationalist rhetoric, which include the responsive anti-West sentiments mentioned above, the grassroots movement that injects elements of individualism, transnationalism and universalism into existing nationalist ideals (Du 2014), and the appropriation of Western-style right-wing populism to 'paradoxically criticise Western hegemony on one hand, and discursively construct China's ethno-racial and political identities on the other' (Zhang 2019). The discourse on the migrant crisis appears to have absorbed elements from all these three forms of discursive practice.

Sources and Methodology

The interactive nature of social media has blurred the line between the roles of producer and receiver of media content, which adds to the complexity of discursive practice in the digital age. Discourse on a microblogging site like Weibo is mainly manifest through the interaction between two types of text: posts and comments. My analysis is primarily based on a set of texts sampled from Weibo, one of China's most popular social media sites. Since almost all the widely-used social media abroad, including Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, are banned, China has developed its own set of equivalences of these platforms. Weibo was chosen for this topic for its sizeable user group, open source of data, relevance to the topic and influence on public opinions.

Launched by Sina Corporation in 2009, Weibo was the first Chinese microblogging site to gain nationwide popularity and had attained a staggering monthly active user group of 462 million by the end of 2018 (Weibo Data Centre 2019). Posts on Weibo are real-time and public by default. Unlike Twitter, it has no character limit. Most of the other popular Chinese social media also operate Weibo accounts to repost trending content from their own sites. Therefore, Weibo can be treated as a comprehensive source overarching the diverse social media landscape of China.

Statistics from Weibo Data Centre showed that between 2015 and 2017 there were eight dates on which the amount of posts containing the keyword 'nanmin' (refugee) exceeded 100,000 per day: 5 September 2015 (166,910), 6 September 2015 (110,117), 9 September 2015 (177,933), 6 January 2016 (210,323), 29 May 2016 (101,776), 10 August 2016 (205,431), 6 December 2016 (187,651), 22 June 2017 (479,841). I collected the 20 most commented from all the posts mentioning 'nanmin' on each of these eight days, using Gooseeker's content retrieving service. Preliminary screening showed that only three of the 160 posts were not about the European migrant

crisis, which were filtered out and replaced with the subsequent. Reposts with no original content were also excluded. Next, I manually extracted the five most 'liked' comments left on each post. The final collection of textual sources was composed of 160 Weibo posts and 800 comments.

I shall point out that I did not intend to conduct a meticulous theoretical analysis focusing on variable linguistic features of the sources. Instead, I employed Fairclough's three-dimensional model for critical discourse analysis to study discourse formation unveiled by the sources as a fragment of ongoing changes in the discursive space of Chinese society, from which one could derive an understanding of a grander historical phenomenon. The analytical model corresponds with Fairclough's three-dimensional notion of a 'discursive event', defined as being simultaneously a piece of text (including verbal and visual), an instance of discursive practice, and an instance of social practice (Fairclough 1992: 4). Accordingly, the analysis of such an event covers a textual object, the processes by means of which the object is produced, and the socio-historical conditions which govern these processes (Fairclough 1995: 57-62, 2015: 58). In this case, I examined the construction of the negative discourse on the migrant crisis by interpreting thematic representations in the sampled texts, identifying discursive schemes applied by the participants, and situating the phenomenon in historical and socio-cultural contexts.

From 'Europe Bashing' to 'Immigrant Bashing'

The sampled posts are mostly migrant-related news stories produced by three types of media: state media, marketised media and the so-called 'self-media' (zimeiti), an umbrella term for individual users who operate their accounts as an outlet for news content and have a substantial amount of following. In their reportage of the crisis, traditional media, whether state-run or marketised, maintained a plain and fact-based

reporting style, whereas 'self-media' adopted a more sensationalist approach of storytelling, which often included unverifiable details translated from foreign tabloid material and sometimes internet rumours. These stories prompted voluminous discussions among individual Weibo users, wherein the dominant discourse initially focused on criticism of Europe but later turned into a synthesis of nationalistic and xenophobic arguments against international immigration.

The first incident that triggered large-scale emotional responses was the death of Aylan Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian refugee who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea as he and his family attempted to reach Europe on an overcrowded boat operated by human traffickers. A photo taken of Kurdi's lifeless body lying face-down on a Turkish beach evoked much sympathy on Weibo. At the same time, the majority of the sampled comments blamed American and European intervention in the Middle East. The following example represents the prevailing argument.

> The saddest part is, that the hometown of this little boy is located in a Syrian region controlled by the Islamic State, and the year he was born, the Westerners who now tear up over his death were staging street protests, demanding their governments to 'subvert the Assad regime by any means necessary'.

Neo-interventionism has long been framed in Chinese official discourse as something exercised only by Western powers and the root cause of many domestic problems in the developing world, such as political violence, economic collapse and religious extremism. China considers itself, on the other hand, a 'staunch, selfless defender of the sovereignty principle' (Kounalakis 2016). Such narratives have been consistent since the 'non-interference' doctrine was enshrined as one of the pillar principles of Chinese foreign policy in 1954 and have dominated Chinese media reportage of Middle Eastern and African wars and conflicts over the recent decades (Liu 2012; Pang 2009; Zhang 2013). As shown by the given example, Weibo users

approached the tragic fate of Kurdi and other migrants with their predefined perception of the Syrian civil war and the rise of the Islamic State as consequences of Western intervention in regional affairs, through which 'Western hypocrisy' was established as a consistent argument against Europe's subsequent handling of the crisis.

Shortly after Kurdi's death, Germany and Austria opened borders for migrants stranded in Hungary, to which Weibo users had mixed reactions. While some praised these countries for showing 'true humanitarian values', others stuck to the 'Western hypocrisy' theory, arguing that the decision was irrational and would eventually lead to chaos. Several stories of migrant-related crimes, including the mass sexual assaults in cities around Germany on the 2015/2016 New Year's Eve and the rape of a Chinese student by an Iraqi refugee in the German city of Bochum, were considered solid evidence, with several sampled comments calling the situation 'a real-life version of The Farmer and the Viper'. The comments below exemplify the popular rhetoric.

> The bitter fruit grown by the German 'shengmu'. And now ordinary people are going to pay for it.
> Another typical case of the 'baizuo' doing something detrimental to the whole society just so that they can uphold political correctness and feel good about themselves.

The texts express a curious amalgam of schadenfreude and anti-elitist ideology resembling right-wing populism in Europe. The derisive terms 'shengmu' and 'baizuo' were widely used in the sampled comments to describe Europeans who were sympathetic towards refugees and illegal immigrants. The former literally means 'holy mother' and the latter 'white left', both referring to 'hypocritical humanitarians who advocate for peace and equality only to satisfy their own feeling of moral superiority' and 'have no sense of real problems in the real world' (Zhang 2017). The two terms resemble the American slang 'libertard' but are not as closely tied to the liberal-

conservative political spectrum. They are more of a generalisation of the 'classically Western' image in Chinese public discourse. The well-liked internet slang emerged prior to the migrant crisis but gained greater prominence in formulating the discourse on the crisis. The connotations of naivety, irrationality and hypocrisy carried by the terms implied a defiant attitude towards the moral and political premises attached to the Western notions of 'holy mother' and being 'white and left'.

For Weibo users, a majority of whom grew up in China's post-reform era, the chaotic picture of European society presented in highly sensationalised news stories broke an Occidentalist 'fantasy' of Europe derived from imported Western cultural products, in which Europe was the materially and morally superior Other (see Chen 1995; Min 1992). For example, the popular myth of 'deutschen Perfektion', a nearly unrealistic perception of Germany as the epitome of discipline and professionalism (see Neidhart 2015), became the target of mockery, as many referred to a report that a Chinese tourist in Stuttgart was wrongly admitted to a refugee shelter while going to the police to report a stolen wallet (Xinhua 2016).

The migrant crisis was seen as another watershed moment after the financial crisis in the prevailing 'decline of the West' narrative. In addition, Weibo users voiced substantial support for anti-migration populist movements in Europe. The decision by a wealthy village in Switzerland to pay a hefty annual fine instead of accommodating ten refugees received mostly affirmative responses. Resistance in eastern Europe to the EU's 'refugee quota' was also widely applauded.

> Why do they (the Swiss village) even have to pay a fine? Don't Europeans always claim that they respect the public will?
> They (Europeans) criticise China for having all sort of political taboos and censorship, but I don't see any difference with them.

Weibo users argued with a contemptuous undertone that Europe did not live up to its reputation as a 'model democracy'. The enduring left-right confrontation over migration and the fact that Europeans who embraced right-wing populist thoughts were villainised in the left-leaning mainstream discourse was regarded evidence of the ineffectiveness of the European political structure and the hypocrisy of the liberal interpretation of European values and norms.

'Immigrant bashing' emerged abruptly in June 2017 when the sensitive question of whether China should get involved was finally brought to the fore. The uproar was instigated by the UN refugee agency (UNHCR)'s failed attempt at raising public awareness. The agency launched a series of promotional campaigns both online and offline in China on 20 June, the World Refugee Day, featuring the high-profile endorsement of its goodwill ambassador, actress Yao Chen. A rumour started circulating two days later that the UN planned to build refugee camps in 20 Chinese cities, inducing a great wave of panic and fury. The UNHCR was accused of 'the unspeakable intention to destabilise China' by various 'self-media' platforms. Yao, at that time one of the most beloved actresses in China, was eventually forced to apologise but the incident still nearly ended her acting career. Despite swift actions taken by the government to clear up the rumour, Weibo users began associating forced immigration and asylum, which had just entered the public discursive space as pure perceptual issues about the European Other, with Chinese society. The online discussions quickly turned into a stunning display of nationalism powered by populist and chauvinist arguments.

> Capping the growth of our own population with the one-child policy just to make room for Muslims and Africans? I've never seen anything more stupid. Don't people inside the system have a conscience?
> The Chinese civilisation just got back on the right track towards rejuvenation. The so-called refugees will never be able to live in our secular society and accept our culture and customs.

The comments above exemplify two dominant arguments: first, getting involved in the migrant crisis does not correspond with China's demographic, economic and cultural realities; second, immigrants could potentially jeopardise the highly-anticipated revival of the Chinese civilisation. Most Weibo users seemed to be oblivious of China's involvement in international refugee resettlement over the past decades and hold a taken-for-granted self-perception as a homogenous nation. Most of the sampled comments expressed or implied cultural and racial biases, similar to the rhetoric developed throughout the anti-black student movements in China in the late 1980s (Sautman 1994). The widespread narrative around an imminent 'Islam takeover' of Europe refreshed the long-standing negative framing of Muslim and Islam in China (Luqiu and Yang 2018), and consequently incited an outburst of angry anti-Islam rants in social media, such as opposing the construction of new mosques and protesting the Halal label on food delivery services. The Middle Eastern expatriate community in China experienced the rise in Islamophobia first-hand. A Yemeni businessman who had lived in east China for 21 years told Deutsche Welle (2017) he could feel the attitude towards Muslims worsening, for which he blamed 'Western media influence'. In the same report, a 25-year-old actor from Syria confessed that he had to change his name from Ahmed to Mike in order to get cast.

During a period of two years, the discourse on the migrant crisis on Weibo developed into a multi-dimensional communicative event. The 'Europe bashing' discourses were formed mainly through reactions to the sensationalist portrayal of foreign news events. Such reactions were based more on the presuppositions acquired from pre-existing popular narratives about Europe in general rather than the specific stories. During the processes of recontextualising the ideological premises, a new narrative about the downfall of a 'hypocritical Europe' was constructed. The 'immigrant

bashing' discourses were more of a reflection of the conflicting self-image of Chinese society, in which the nationalist narrative of Chinese identity and the globalist narrative of a 'Chinese rejuvenation' coexisted. The rumour of refugee camps in China and the media sensationalism around migrant-related crimes in Europe triggered fear among many Weibo users, who consequently argued that immigration would be detrimental to a prosperous, stable and orderly society. In the meantime, the perceived failure of multiculturalism in Europe strengthened their inherited faith in socio-cultural homogeneity.

Recontextualising Nationalist Discourses

Two types of historical discourses dominated the process of constructing the Chinese perception of the migrant crisis: the evolving way in which Europe had been portrayed in mainstream historical narratives since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the PRC's self-perception in these narratives, both embedded within the development of the systemic ideology of Chinese nationalism. The general characteristics of cyber communication, such as drastically increased accessibility, unprecedented dissemination speed, and difficulty to ensure information accuracy, reinvented the public discursive environment, wherein social media users applied these discourses to interpret the crisis in a way markedly influenced by changes in the broader political, economic and socio-cultural contexts.

Mixed Sentiments Towards Europe

Although my reasoning is primarily confined to the history of the PRC, the several millennia prior to its founding are not in any sense irrelevant to shaping its current perceptions of Europe. As rightly argued by Wang (2000: 1-37), the differences in world views and power structure between China and Europe date back to their

encounters through early migratory activities. The dissemination of Western secular modernity by early journalistic publications founded by European missionaries (Zhang 2015), so well as the 'hybrid civilisation' that evolved under partial European domination in the first half of the 20th Century (Godement 1997: 25-9), also left their mark on the modern Chinese perceptions of Europe, as they gave rise to early popular culture in modern China and have remained to date a source of inspiration for Chinese literature, art and fashion. In its turbulent Republic era, Europe was labelled both a source of modernity and an adversary that forced the Celestial Empire into the 'Century of Humiliation' (Wang 2012: 71-94). The first wave of immigrants to China in the 20th Century was part of this bitter memory. As parts of China were de facto colonised by Western (mainly European) nations between the two World Wars, an unregistered number of people from these countries moved to China (see Johnstone 1937). Their lives in China were mostly limited to their own communities with little contact with the local Chinese. The most notorious story told repeatedly in Chinese history textbooks, notwithstanding controversies over its origin and accuracy, was that a sign that read 'dogs and Chinese not admitted' was hung at the entrance of a park in Shanghai exclusively open to European residents. The PRC inherited the usage of nationalist discourses in its historiography to justify the authoritative one-party rule (Chang 2001).

In the early years of the Cold War, the PRC went through an intricate process of rapprochement with Western Europe, but distrust remained acute (Schaufelbuehl et al. 2019). Mao Zedong's Three Worlds theory added ambiguity to the framing of Europe in the 1970s. In Mao's view, Europe belonged to the 'middle zone', exploiting the Third World while being exploited by First World superpowers, namely the United States and the Soviet Union, and a power that could be absorbed in the Third World-led anti-hegemonism (Deng 1974). Mao's positioning of Europe continued to play a vital role in

both official and popular discourses after the 1978 reform but faced challenges in the 1980s from Chinese intellectuals who aspired to a presumably superior liberal world and the material and spiritual abundance that an imagined Europe represented (Lin 1992). The perceived image of the 'European Other' was appropriated by both communist hardliners and liberal reformists to support their respective vision for China's future after Mao (Chen 1995: 47-8).

The deeply rooted mutual distrust between China and Europe was highlighted in the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen protests, as the Chinese government took swift actions to limit the introduction of 'subversive ideas' from the West (Harding 1990). Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, with China reclaiming wealth and power at an unprecedented pace, official discourses constantly recalled its unpleasant past as a victim of European imperialism to celebrate milestone achievements, such as the return of Hong Kong and Macau and the 2008 Olympics (Zheng 2013). The grand 'Chinese rejuvenation' narrative was constructed against the backdrop of Europe struggling to recover from the financial crisis, giving rise to strong nationalistic self-confidence in public discourse. At the same time, Chinese and European economies grew more interwoven and interdependent. Positive rhetoric of strategic partnership and friendly cooperation was required to facilitate the economic relationship and address common concerns at the global level. As a result of contradicting discursive efforts, the common Chinese sentiment towards Europe developed into a dubious mixture of admiration and hostility.

As China's nouveau riche set out to explore the outside world, contrary to popular speculation in the West, their journeys were not able to 'globalise' the Chinese mindset. Instead they strengthened the nationalist mentality. Many Chinese social media users claimed that they 'became more patriotic after going abroad' (Li 2016). Their

experiences in major Western European cities did not match the assumption of a Europe that was 'white, advanced and safe'. As an article published by German newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung said, 'Europe is seen by even cosmopolitan young Chinese, many of whom studied in England or France, as a dangerous place of chaos everywhere' (Ankenbrand 2016).

The persistent 'love-hate' attitude towards Europe served as the first trigger for the negative reactions when the migrant crisis suddenly occupied mass media agenda. The historiographical tradition of positioning Europe as an ambiguous adversary allowed some social media users to take joy in its awkward situation amid the crisis. For Chinese nationalists, the impassioned 'Europe bashing' was not only a 'revenge' for the colonial-era humiliations, but also an eager demonstration of the newly reclaimed sense of superiority. The resentment towards immigration stemmed from the fear that the influx of outsiders would impede China's ambitious national mission to restore its long-lost wealth and glory, and more importantly, challenge the spiritual backbone of this national mission: a homogeneous Chinese identity.

The Myth of Homogeneity

With 56 officially recognised ethnic groups, it is fair to consider the PRC a multi-ethnic society. However, with the Han ethnicity accounting for 91.51 percent (Chinese National Bureau of Statistics 2012), most of the 55 ethnic minorities have been heavily assimilated by the dominant Han culture. In mainstream media narratives, most minority languages and customs are represented as museum pieces instead of evolving lively cultures. The few exceptions are the ethnic groups with distinctive racial and religious features such as Uyghurs, Tibetans, Russians and Kazakhs, but young people of these ethnicities are still expected to prioritise the learning of the Han language as it is a prerequisite for higher education and most jobs (Zang 2015). Overall, the self-

perception as a homogeneous nation state prevails in contemporary Chinese society.

Opponents of immigration in the sampled texts often referred to the Han-centric discourses on Chineseness to argue for the necessity of fending off outsiders with different cultural identities and safeguarding 'the purity of Chinese civilisation'. However, they seemed to overlook the fact that what was regarded the superior and highly assimilative Han culture was itself a result of several millennia of ethnic integration and contained varied regional features (Carrico 2017: 48-51; Meissner 2016). The perceived homogeneity was centred around the Han-centric worldview, which had been an indispensable part of the political construction of Chinese nationalism since the collapse of the Qing empire (Friend and Thayer 2018).

Early Chinese nationalists' quest for a distinct national identity had its roots in the anti-imperialist struggle and the remorse over a shattered Sinocentric worldview (Chang 2001: 87-106). The failure of the Qing ruler, a Manchu minority regime, provided an opportunity for nationalists, predominately Han, to construct an ethnocentric anti-West front. Mao's China followed the anti-West line and drew from communist ideology to construct a common identity for all Chinese nationalities oppressed by Western imperialism, but at the same time maintained the supremacy of the Han as the most representative of the Chinese nation (Friend and Thayer 2017). In the post-reform era, neither conservatives nor reformists had problems with the Han-centric identity discourse, and the self-perception of homogeneity was strengthened among Chinese millennials through state-led patriotic education following the Tiananmen crackdown (Chang 2001: 182-5).

As rightly observed by Hughes (2006: 151), Western media reports seem to present two Chinas: one nationalistic and the other linked firmly in the discourse of globalisation. To some extent the media portrayal reflects the political reality in China.

China has benefited greatly from a globalised economy and is keen to brand itself as a proponent of globalisation. But at the same time the government has been holding on to the legacy of employing nationalism as a powerful political tool. The migrant crisis was not directly related to China, but it provided an occasion for situating the traditional nationalist discourses in new contexts and adjusting them to current ideological needs. This political motivation was manifest in state media's coverage of the crisis, which frequently employed arguments formulated by traditional anti-West nationalist doctrines. The presumed root causes of the migrant crisis, including neo-interventionism and Western liberal norms, and the chaos that it brought to European societies were deemed by government supporters as solid evidence to substantiate the rejection of the 'Western path' and the 'stability trumps everything' doctrine coined by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1980s (Hu et al. 2017: 54).

In addition, the collectivistic nature of modern Chinese nationalism supported a popular claim in social media that the right of seeking protection, like all individual rights, should not come at the expense of the collective good of society, in this case containing order, stability, a strong sense of national identity and nationalistic pride. Hence, it was difficult for most Chinese social media users, who grew up in a collectivist culture characterised by ethnocentric nationalism, to empathise with the liberal discourse on diversity and multiculturalism in Europe. The proliferation of negative news about immigrants in Europe led them to further question the diversity discourse and sympathise with far-right populist rhetoric.

Defending Chineseness

State media's active participation might have contributed to the 'Europe bashing', but the radical defensive responses to immigration were largely spontaneous. Much as the ideological premises employed by social media users were the results of state-led

construction, the Chinese government's position on immigration remained ambivalent. The urge to defend perceived Chineseness among social media users was to a great extent a reaction to the changing domestic environment, in which the presence of international immigrants became more prominent, and an increase in international marriages and mixed-race citizens raised questions about the homogeneity discourse.

A Long Absence in Public Discourse

Notwithstanding ancient China's long and complex history of both emigration and immigration, the PRC had been perceived only as an origin of international migration by most of its citizens and outsiders, due to steady and continuous emigration to the West from the 1960s on (Shen 2010). These migratory movements were thoroughly studied, but the mindset that China was a country of emigration, not immigration, created a blind spot in the perception of China's global role (Pieke 2012).

Immigration to China during the 'Century of Humiliation' was rarely represented in mass media products for obvious reasons. The sojourn of Jewish refugees in Shanghai was one of the few exceptions. During the interwar period, around 25,000 Jewish people from Nazi-controlled lands fled to Shanghai, taking shelter in the city's small Jewish community formed at the beginning of the 20th Century by migrants from Russia, Central Europe and Baghdad (Eber 2012: 5-38). This less-known fragment of war history was briefly recollected in August 2015 when the Israeli Consulate General in Shanghai posted a video online expressing gratitude to Shanghai and its people. The gesture was gladly accepted by Chinese authorities and therefore prominently featured on state media agenda.

By the time that the communists won the civil war, there were around 200,000 foreigners living in China, whom were regarded by the Communist Party as a disgracing legacy of Western imperialism and were later forced to leave or persecuted

(Hooper 2016: 11-21). In the following decades, foreigners residing in China were reduced to a small number of 'foreign experts' and students. Meanwhile, the unstable political situation and limited material resources forced many Chinese to flee the mainland. Immigration to China thus became a non-issue. From the late 1970s to early 1980s, around 265,000 refugees of the Hoa ethnicity (a Sino-Vietnamese minority), who had their property confiscated by the Vietnamese communists and were purged from Vietnam, were resettled in China (see Lam 2000). Their stories were rarely reported by Chinese media and thus remained largely unknown to China's younger generation until it was brought up in recent discussions about the European migrant crisis. Further growth of the market economy in the 1990s and 2000s created the conditions for autonomous immigration and settlement, notably traders from Russia, the Middle East and Africa (Pieke 2012). However, they appeared in public discourse as 'guests', not 'residents', let alone an integral part of Chinese society. Overall, the PRC's population had little real collective memory of these immigrant groups and the concept of 'immigration' remained somewhat strange to them.

What ended this decades-long absence was a documentary show 'Foreigners in China' (Waiguoren Zai Zhongguo) launched in 2013 by state broadcaster CCTV, which it described as 'the first documentary series featuring the lives of foreign residents in China'. The show did not go beyond the ingroup-outgroup mentality, as suggested by its title, but managed to put long neglected subjects, such as international marriages, mixed-raced children, citizenship and permanent residency for foreigners, on Chinese media agenda. Meanwhile, a younger generation of immigrants in China became unprecedentedly active in the public sphere, among whom many found success as entertainers and social media influencers (CGTN 2018). The increasingly prominent

presence of immigrants in public discourse was a crucial element of the backdrop against which the anti-immigration discourse was constructed.

The Looming Challenge

The PRC's strict control over both internal and cross-border migratory movements has not stopped international immigrant communities from growing steadily in both numbers and sizes. UN statistics reveal that the number of international immigrants in China reached 999,527 in 2017, compared to 508,034 in 2000 (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2017). Given the historical and socio-cultural contexts discussed hereinbefore, policies addressing international immigration in China have long been incomplete and ineffective. The State Immigration Administration (SIA) was only established in April 2018. Prior to that, all immigrant-related matters were handled by local police departments, which struggled to cope with the recent increase in arrivals due to the lack of resources and mandates (Huang and Yan 2018). Since the late 2000s, a substantial amount of news reports and social media posts had claimed that the number of undocumented migrants increased drastically in the southern economic hub of Guangzhou and in small towns bordering Vietnam, Myanmar and North Korea, but local authorities were reluctant to act since there was no standardised administrative procedure (Shen 2011).

The government launched in 2013 a rather ambiguous immigration law, which was expected to lay the ground for new residency rules, but so far it has mainly benefited investors, celebrities (for example naturalised athletes) and foreign nationals of Chinese descent (Ives 2017). The more vulnerable immigrant groups, in particular refugees, stay in an awkward grey zone. Without access to permanent residency or citizenship, many registered refugees, no matter how long they have legally resided in China, still face an uncertain future and often encounter problems regarding education

and job prospects (Fang 2014). In urban areas, lives of foreign and local residents remain segregated in many aspects including education, housing and financial services (Han 2017). Whether the new immigration administration will be able to make a difference in this regard and to what extent are still to be assessed.

As the Chinese government continues to push ahead with its ambitious global projects like the 'Belt and Road' initiative, international immigrant communities in China are likely to grow larger and further diversify, and their interaction with local societies likely to become more extensive and complicated. Furthermore, it has long been speculated that China's imminent demographic problem would push the government to adopt a more liberal immigration policy. A renowned sociologist who follows Chinese demographics has warned that with a birth rate lower than the EU, the world's most populous nation would see its population enter a long-lasting decrease in ten years (Wang 2015). China also suffers from a severe gender imbalance as a legacy of the one-child policy and the traditional feudal mentality of needing a son to inherit the family name, which has resulted in an increase in cross-border arranged marriages in rural and border regions (Liang and Chen 2014).

Nevertheless, the contradiction between the prevailing ethnocentric perception of Chineseness and the evolving reality of a more globalised Chinese society persists in both official and popular discourses. The general public in China has been better informed about the global issue of migration thanks to social media discussions prompted by the European migrant crisis, but the defensive rhetoric shows that Chinese society is still reluctant to acknowledge that a transition from 'emigrant China' to 'immigrant China' is slowly taking shape.

Conclusion

The social media discourse on Europe's migrant crisis illustrates a conflicting picture of

Chinese society: the globalist ambition for development against a set of stubborn nationalistic and ethnocentric values.

The crisis as a distant event was initially able to instigate massive responses in China due to the rapid popularisation of social media, which proliferated and diversified accesses to foreign news while offering an alternative forum for public opinions. The responses quickly turned into an impassioned display of nationalistic sentiments. Chinese social media users first approached and interpreted the crisis with the systemic anti-West ideological traditions, the premises of which were set by the representation of Europe in modern Chinese historiography as an ambiguous adversary. Pre-existing nationalist discourses were recontextualised to generate new arguments about Europe, the West and China's self-image. The changing socio-cultural context, wherein the subject of immigration became increasingly difficult to avoid, motivated them to draw a connection between Europe's trouble with the crisis and the possible threat faced by the taken-for-granted homogeneous Chinese identity.

This paper does not intend to give an all-encompassing explanation of the rationale behind the discursive practice. Only a fraction of the long chapter of migration and integration in Chinese history has been discussed here. The roots of Chinese nationalism and the development of nationalist discourses could be traced further back through history. The remote origin of the Sinocentric mentality is much more extensive than what this paper contains. Besides, it does not explore the possible involvement of Chinese media policies, such as editorial intervention and censorship, due to a lack of transparency in policy making and implementation. What it proposes is a multi-dimensional framework for understanding the social media resentment against Europe and immigration as a unique discursive phenomenon. There is much more to be explored in both breadth and depth, for instance, the state-society interactions in online

nationalist movements. A series of recent events, such as the backlashes encountered by multiple Western luxury brands for 'undermining China's national sovereignty and hurting the feelings of Chinese people' (see Paton 2019), have shown a growing tendency among Chinese social media users to adopt self-motivated policing to defend nationalist claims and prevent any perceived harm to national interest without being provoked by official discourse.

The public perception of the migrant crisis could eventually have a negative impact on the PRC's slow and reluctant transition from a source of emigration to a destination of international immigrants. Notwithstanding the steadily growing number of foreign residents, the Chinese government's immigration policy reform has yet to take off, while society's acceptance of non-ethnically-Chinese immigrants desperately awaits improvement. Both the official and popular discourses on international immigration and Chinese nationhood seem out of date. At the time of this writing Chinese authorities have not yet shown signs of a plan to balance the nationalistic culture and the impending demographic changes. How China plans to tackle this issue will be an interesting subject for years to come.

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