

Narrative Building in the Age of Cyber Nationalism: Comparative Analysis of China and the United States

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Abstract

This paper tends to explore how national identity is contested in two global powers, China and the United State (U.S.) through the lens of cyber nationalism. Based on Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm theory and Manuel Castells, Network Society Theory, this research analyses the way ideological narratives are contested through digital platforms where government and citizens engage in powerful acts of storytelling. Despite the differences, both states rely on the digital space to support national identity and political legitimacy in a manner that is rooted in culture and emotionally appealing. The findings of this research reveals that cyber nationalism is not a mono-dimensional phenomenon, it is formed by both the top and bottom, the actions of the state and that of individuals. This research provides a nuanced perspective on the narratives that impact our digital age as masses increasingly turn to the internet to make sense of their belongings.

Keywords: Cyber Nationalism, Digital Identity, Narrative Theory, The United States (U.S.), China, Social Media, Network Society.

Introduction

In the rapidly changing digital world, the rise of cyber nationalism has altered the ways nations disseminate narratives. It is a growing force of

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making use of digital platforms to defend nationalistic ideologies. It's not just governments doing this, citizens play an equal and pivotal role, often blending their voices with official state narratives. To project their national identity and engage in strategic communication through narrative building, China and the United States (U.S.) have become increasingly dependent on cyber and social media platforms making it an integral part of both domestic and international politics.

In China and the U.S., challenges of narrative construction are persistent. Even though both differ in political and cultural aspects, their methods of shaping national narratives offer an intriguing comparison. The empirical argument of this research examines how national identity is contested and reconstructed through cyber nationalism in China and the U.S. The study is based on two key theories that offer complementary insights of how cyber nationalism unfolds in China and the U.S. According to Walter Fisher Narrative Paradigm Theory, people are storytellers and do not respond to facts and figures only.¹ In the context of cyber nationalism, stories that evoke collective identity and patriotic sentiments are crafted not just by the state institutions but equally by the common users on internet every day. At the same time, Manuel Castells' Network Society Theory assists to zoom out and see the framework behind these narratives. It shows us those who control the flow of information, hold significant influence.²

Drawing upon these complementary perspectives, this study aims to examine how differing socio-political and digital environments in China and the U.S. shape distinct manifestations of cyber nationalism. More specifically, it aims at providing an answer to two questions: First, how is digital environment different in China from the U.S. Second, how does it affect the formation of cyber nationalism in both the states? To respond to these research question, the study is a qualitative and descriptive research design in which primary data gathered from the participants through the use of a structured questionnaire for both Chinese and American nationals and secondary data collected from scholarly literature, government reports, official statistics, and research publications are gathered. Thematic and

¹ "The Narrative Paradigm Theory," Schools Essay Writing Services, <https://schoolus.co.uk/the-narrative-paradigm-theory-literature-review/>.

² Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, (Cambridge, MA; Oxford, UK: Blackwell, vol. 1 1996)."

comparative analysis of the data conducted focusing on three dimensions: i. Cultural and historical narratives, ii. Social media platforms' role, and iii. Cyber regulating mechanisms, exploring similarities and differences in the construction and evolution of cyber nationalism in both countries.

In China, power is held by the actors who can control the flow of information, that is, to specify what is watched, when, how and in what context, which in this case is the state that has developed complex systems of controlling digital spaces and directing nationalistic discourse. Conversely, the U.S. has a more decentralised structure whereby technology companies and online communities are rivals to influence the national story. However, both systems support the claim provided by Castells that the struggle over identity and belonging is becoming more a matter of digital networks.

To better understand how different socio-political factors shape cyber nationalism in China and the U.S., this study applies thematic analysis, focusing on three key areas: i. Cultural and historical aspects, ii. The role of social media platforms, and iii. Cyber regulating mechanisms. These themes guide the analysis focusing on China, and the U.S. The first and second themes are examined through the narrative paradigm theory which helps explain how stories rooted in culture, history, and state control are crafted to influence public perception. Meanwhile, the third theme is approached using the network society theory which helps us understand how digital infrastructure and state power shape online expression. Together, this framework offers a clear and comparative way to understand the forces driving cyber nationalism in both countries.

Table No. 1
Thematic Framework of Cyber Nationalism

Theory	Key Concepts	Applied Theme(s)	Relevance to Study
Narrative Paradigm Theory by Walter Fisher	1. Humans understand the world through stories 2. Focuses on coherence (logical consistency) and fidelity (alignment with audience values)	Theme 1: Culture and Historical Aspect Theme 2: Role of social media	Helps analyse how China and the U.S. construct nationalistic narratives through culturally resonant storytelling and public discourse.
Network Society Theory by Manuel Castells	1. Rise of ICTs forms a network society 2. Networks are dynamic, decentralised, and control flows of information 3. Power lies in switchers who control these networks	Theme 3: Cyber Regulation Mechanisms	Provides insight into how digital infrastructures and cyber governance reflect each country's power structures, shaping their control over online nationalism and discourse.

Source: Prepared by the authors based on the theoretical framework.³

Digital Transformation of National Identity and the Rise of Cyber Nationalism

In the current digital age, national identity is constructed and expressed online alongside the regulations brought about by the government and physical communities that people live in. People are constantly interacting

³ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, vol. I. (Cambridge, MA; Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1996).

with symbols and stories that define their concept of nation and in this aspect cyber has become a powerful space where these ideas of belonging are created, challenged and recreated. This change has resulted in a new form of nationalism, which is expressed through digital networks, refer to as cyber nationalism. The bottom-up process of this phenomenon is altering the way governments foster national identity and how does the masses express their commitment to the state.

Digital platforms have offered new and innovative ways for individuals to express their sense of national identity whether through memes, viral campaigns or online debates, where users are actively shaping what it means to belong to a nation.⁴ Specifically, social media has become a battleground where a multiplicity of actors, such as state agencies, political institutions, and everyday users all engage to narrate their version of national story. While state actors use these platforms to spread rhetoric of patriotism, regulate public opinion over online spaces, citizens are also making their voices heard.⁵

In addition to integrating the symbol of traditional nationalism into the online world, cyber nationalism has given rise to new digitally connected ways, people identify their nation. However, since the internet is global and does not follow national borders, therefore, its open nature often clashes with the idea of nationalism, which is usually tied to a specific territory. This creates a push and pull between digital connectivity and traditional state control, raising important questions about what sovereignty means in an age of networked communication.⁶

⁴ “Nations Made Memes: How Does Digital Communication Influence Nationalisms?,” Institute of New Europe, March 22, 2021, <https://ine.org.pl/en/nations-made-memes-how-does-digital-communication-influence-nationalisms/>

⁵ Ronald J. Deibert, The Road to Digital Unfreedom: Three Painful Truths About Social Media,” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 30, issue no. 1 (January 2019): 25-39, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-road-to-digital-unfreedom-three-painful-truths-about-social-media/>

⁶ Milton L. Mueller, Against Sovereignty in Cyberspace, *International Studies Review*, vol. 22, issue no. 4 (December 2020):779–801.

Synthesis: Cyber Nationalism as an Amalgamation

The concept of cyber nationalism is not a new development; on the contrary, it is a digital restructuring of existing traditions of nationalism, which have been altered to the online world. It combines the classical, modern and everyday nationalism each finding new life through the internet enabled mediums. As an example, state-directed discourse and online propaganda are often used by state actors to reinforce national pride and exercise sovereignty; this approach revisits the top-down methods of classical and modern nationalist structures. The other less glaring yet more ubiquitous aspect of cyber nationalism is the form of nationalism that is manifested in the day-to-day which comes through our daily scrolling, sharing and posting where national holidays celebrations and viral patriotic periodically resurfaced by algorithms. Together, these forms of nationalism blend into what we now call cyber nationalism: a hybrid, platform-driven phenomenon that reshapes how people express identity, belonging, and loyalty in the digital age.

Framework of Cyber Nationalism

The concept of nationalism was traditionally associated with geographic limits which are shaped by geographical borders, centralised states and state-controlled media machines. In this framework, national identity was defined as a construct that was formed within the specified boundaries of a specified territory and reinforced through official narratives.⁷ With the arrival of digital revolution, however, especially the internet, has opened up new ways for people to express and experience national identity. The internet, unlike the traditional media, operates as decentralised networks that enable individuals to bypass state control and freely share information across the borders. This shift has led to the emergence of what Manuel Castells' call "Network Society" where identity if not entirely dependent on geography but also how we connect online. This means that nationalism is no longer based on the physical state; it includes how people interact with their sense of nationhood in the digital space which can span continents allowing diasporic communities, activist groups and citizens to

⁷ Anthony Reid, 1985. "Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism: By Benedict Anderson. London: Verso Editions/NLB (Distributed in North America by Schocken Books, New York, 1983.) 160

participate in nationalistic discourse without being necessarily present within the nation's territory.⁸

Social media has become a key instrument in defining the modern experience of nationalism through users all over the world, viral content, online movements, and quick public deliberations. Numerous online spaces allow users to engage in mass discourse, disseminate content and form digital communities to challenge dominant narratives where cultural and political identity is actively debated.⁹ Consequently, a dynamic push and pull between top-down state influence and bottom-up public participation emerges that continuously reshapes national identity in the online world.

Narrative Building in the Age of Cyber Nationalism in China

To make sense of China's national identity today, it is important to dig deeper into its rapid economic development and aggressive foreign policy which involves exploring a profound historical awareness and a long memory of social trauma being reshaped using digital innovation. The age of cyber nationalism brings these factors together into a new powerful narrative, which is not merely propagated at the top but also generated in collaboration with digitally active citizens who represent pride and grievance simultaneously.

The essential part of China's national narrative is the memory of Century of Humiliation (1839-1949)¹⁰, when China was invaded by foreign countries and territorial disintegration. This period, which started with the opium wars, and ended up with the establishment of People's Republic of China (PRC), is entrenched in the mass consciousness. The

⁸ Pippa Norris, ed., "The Digital Divide," in *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide* (Communication, Society and Politics. Cambridge University Press, 2001).
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139164887.003>.

⁹ Jose van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (New York, 2013; online edn, Oxford Academic, 24 January),
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/298428277_

¹⁰ Council on Foreign Relations, "What Was China's 'Century of Humiliation'?", *CFR Education*, <https://education.cfr.org/learn/reading/china-century-humiliation>

story, according to Callahan, comprises a moral tale of national revival and places China as victim-to-victor in international order.¹¹

National identity in China in the 21st Century is not confined to textbooks anymore but constructed and communicated actively via social media, digital art, virtual reality, online games and algorithmically curated content. These platforms serve as both the vessels for traditional values and arenas of ideological engagement. Digital culture in China involves all stages of narrative process starting from creation, dissemination and consumption using media as literature animation, short videos and even, AI created content. These digital mediums are not just representations of national identity; they are active co-constructions, inviting users to be co-authors.

Cultural Digital Silk Road: Narrative Infrastructure as Diplomacy

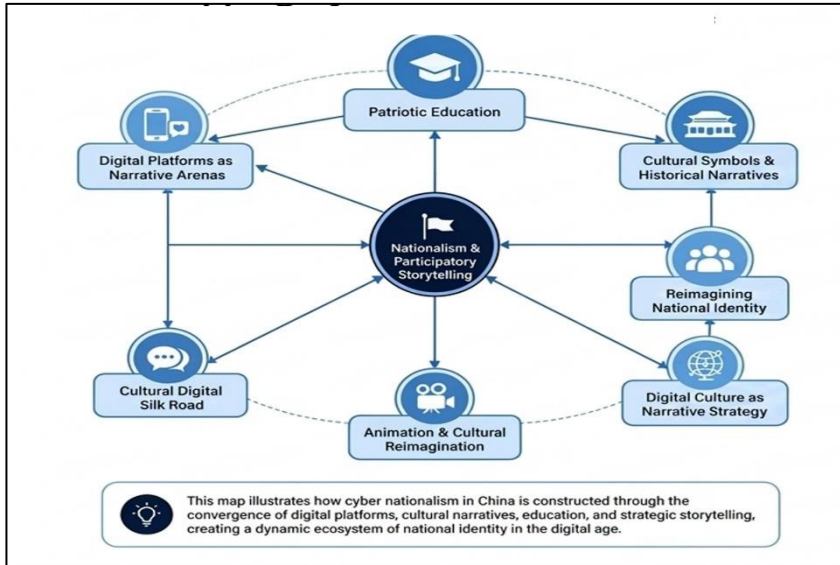
Under the initiative of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Digital Silk Road has been extended by China into the realms of culture and heritage through digital cultural exchange through AI, block chain and immersive technologies.¹² China is not only focused on shaping how its people see themselves but most importantly, how the world perceives China. For instance, digital technologies have been viewed as key drivers in transforming Chinese cultural stories bringing together the heritage into formats of video games and AI powered museums helping its rich heritage spread across the globe.¹³ According to narrative paradigm theory, this strategy works because it prioritises meaning over data, values over logic, and shared belief over mere fact which is why China is becoming quite skilled at creating such stories through design, animation and digital aesthetics.

¹¹ William A. Callahan, *China* (Oxford University Press, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199549955.001.0001>

¹² Key Takeaways from BRI White Paper, https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202310/11/content_WS6526994fc6d0868f4e8e024a.html

¹³ “WIPO China: Digital Technologies Bring Chinese Cultural Stories to Life,” Office-China, <https://www.wipo.int/en/web/office-china/w/news/2025/wipo-china-digital-technologies-bring-chinese-cultural-stories-to-life>

Diagram No. 1
Mapping Cyber Nationalism of Chian



Source: Prepared by the authors based on the thematic analysis.

The diagram above illustrates the interrelationship among the conceptual themes of cyber nationalism in China. The nodes represent the key themes, while the connections (edges) depict the relationships between them. This visualisation assists in tracing the convergence between various aspects of digital culture, national identity, and historical narratives in the age of cyber nationalism.

Role of Social Media Platforms in Narrative Formulation

China has the most active yet closed digital ecosystems in the world due to Great Fire Walls which has resulted in the creation of locally controlled services such as *Weibo*, *WeChat*, *Douyin*, *Zhihu*. These platforms are not just imitations of those widely used and known social media platforms, like *Facebook*, *X* and *Youtube* but different socio-political spaces where indigenous values, language and narratives created by the state influence the interaction of users. For instance, *Sina Weibo*, which is known as the ‘Twitter of China,’ has emerged as one of the biggest microblogging

platforms through which narratives approved by the state can be voiced along with the citizen voices but under tightly monitored parameters.¹⁴ All these media platforms contribute to creating and enhancing narratives that are aligned with the state priorities. Within the context of Fisher, the state's digital storytelling seeks to maintain narrative coherence by aligning content with accepted ideological patterns, and fidelity by invoking shared historical experiences or patriotic sentiment.

Surveillance, Real Identity Policies, and Narrative Control

Unlike Western platforms where anonymity is more commonplace, Chinese users are legally obligated to use their real identities on social media platforms. This system of real names is one of the major mechanisms of narrative enforcement as it provides accountability and traceability, which is solidifying a digital space in which it is unsafe to deviate to unaccepted narratives. This approach was further institutionalised by the Cybersecurity Law of 2017¹⁵ that required platforms to contain only media approved by the state, to engage in active content monitoring of “wrong-oriented” speech.¹⁶ Furthermore, Freedom House has consistently ranked China as the most abusive state of internet freedom in the world, a characteristic of authoritarian regime in controlling the internet.¹⁷ By relying on algorithms that have been trained to identify sensitive content, including dissident messages, the state guarantees that only the narrative with high fidelity to state ideology can survive in the digital space.

¹⁴ Rogier Creemers, “Cyber China: Upgrading Propaganda, Public Opinion Work and Social Management for the Twenty-First Century,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 26, no. 103 (2017): 85–100, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2016.1206281>

¹⁵ “Cybersecurity Law of the People’s Republic of China (Effective June 1, 2017),” translation, DigiChina, <https://digichina.stanford.edu/work/translation-cybersecurity-law-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china-effective-june-1-2017/>.

¹⁶ Xiao Qiang, “The Road to Digital Unfreedom: President Xi’s Surveillance State,” *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 1 (2019): 53–67.

¹⁷ Freedom House, “The Rise of Digital Authoritarianism.” <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/rise-digital-authoritarianism>.

WeChat as a Narrative Vehicle

WeChat, an owner of Tencent, perhaps is the most eloquent example of narrative power. In addition to a communication tool, *WeChat* has become a daily necessity for over billion users for integrating messaging, payments, health care, and even civic services. Having such a far-reaching functionality, *WeChat* does not merely enable the digital life, but assists in embedding the official narratives into the daily life. *WeChat* in 2020 also introduced a fact-checking feature and a page named “Top Ten Rumour” to police information. However, the bulk of its debunked stories were concerned with consumer products and health keeping out of the range politically charged issues. Critics argue that this selective fact-checking mechanism may help legitimise state-endorsed misinformation while erasing dissent.¹⁸

According to Fisher, this methodology strengthens coherence and fidelity by marginalising those narratives that do not conform to the meta-narratives of state linked with national unity, national progress and, national resilience. The studies at the University of Toronto reveals the depth of content surveillance on *WeChat* and similar platforms. With the help of such tools as optical character recognition and image comparison, the content with prohibited symbols, phrases or even historical images, such as the Tank Man of Tiananmen Square, is systematically detected and blocked.¹⁹ This collection of historical memory falls under the paradigm of narrative: the state is silencing the disruptive narratives into enforcing its own narrative, in which national pride takes precedence of national trauma.

The Case of Fang: Nationalism and the Digital Backlash

The backlash against Wuhan-based writer Fang, who posted a series of lockdown diaries during the COVID-19 outbreak, highlights how alternative narratives even when fact-based are met with fierce national resistance.

¹⁸ Matthew Brennan, *Attention Factory: The Story of TikTok and China's ByteDance* (Shenzhen: Matthew Brennan Publishing, 2020).

¹⁹ Jeffrey Knockel, Lotus Ruan, and Masashi Crete-Nishihata, “We Chat, They Watch: How International Users Unwittingly Build up WeChat's Chinese Censorship Apparatus,” Citizen Lab Reports, University of Toronto, 2020.

Despite her international acclaim, Chinese social media users demonised her and labelled her as traitor.²⁰

The state affiliated influencer and bots intensified this mass response, which was one of the aspects of government's approach to control the opinion on the internet and prevent opposing voices.²¹ In the version of Fisher, the story of Fang, although logical and coherent, but lacked fidelity for an audience primed by years of patriotic education. This paradox highlights the instability of other discourses in the Chinese-dominated digital space.

Cyber Regulating Mechanisms in China: Constructing Narrative Order in the Network Society

The Chinese cyber regulatory framework is not merely centred around surveillance or censorship but intended to engineer a digital environment that promotes state-defined values and identity. As Manuel Castells' network society theory posits, in the age of digital networks, power is increasingly exercised through the ability to program communication flows.²² The Chinese regulatory framework emerges as a key actor in programming these flows in consonance with their ideology.

The internet progress in China has been conceptualised as a milestone towards transformative civilisation.²³ Under this framework, the Chinese regulatory mechanisms are not merely coercive but essential for preserving civilised internet. Building upon network society theory, information networks are the pivotal grounds of social power where the authority over the communication flow transcends directly into the making social reality. The digital governance system of China is proactively narrative guiding social behaviour and shaping. As Creemer notes, the Chinese state has

²⁰ "Fang Fang: The Wuhan Writer Whose Virus Diary Angered China," May 18, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-52712358>

²¹ Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, "How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, Not Engaged Argument," *American Political Science Review* 111, no. 3 (2017): 484–501.

²² Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1996).

²³ Yajuan Liu, "Internet Governance in China: Toward a New Cyber Civilization," *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, vol. 08, no. 03&04 (Jan. 2022):359–77, <https://doi.org/10.1142/s2377740022500129>

deliberately reshaped its institution, ensuring the functionality of the digital platforms as tools of both governance and narrative formation.²⁴

The first internet service provider in China was launched in 1995 under the name of the Info Highway Corp.²⁵ The first financial fraud that was related to computer crime was documented in China in 1986 which awakened the concern of cyber security.²⁶ In 1996, the Provisional Regulations on the Administration of the International Networking of Computer Information Networks was the formal entry of the state in cyber regulations.²⁷

The internet penetration rates were drastically increased in early 2000 with 22.5 million users in 2001 to more than 384 million users in 2009.²⁸ The intensive growth of user-generated content, namely blogs, forums, and microblogs necessitated the shift in regulatory narrative as it became less about blocking and more about shaping behaviour and values.

In 2006, the Chinese Communist Party implemented the moral code of citizens to be adopted in cyberspace, referred to as “Eight Honours and Eight Shames.”²⁹ This action was a narrative approach which incorporated ethical expectations into digital interactions. This as Zheng argues was a

²⁴ Rogier Creemers, “Cyber China: Upgrading Propaganda, Public Opinion Work and Social Management for the Twenty-First Century,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 26, no. 103 (2017): 85–100, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2016.1206281>.

²⁵ China Global Television Network (CGTN), “First Internet Company 1995,” *CGTN*, November 9, 2022, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2022-11-09/First-Internet-Company-1995-1eOCV0hj95K/index.html>

²⁶ Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), <https://cup.columbia.edu/book/the-power-of-the-internet-in-china/9780231144216/>

²⁷ Provisional Regulations of the People’s Republic of China Governing the Management of Computer Information Networks Hooked Up With International Networks.” Translation. DigiChina. <https://digichina.stanford.edu/>.

²⁸ China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), 22nd Statistical Report on Internet Development in China (2008), <https://chinalab.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/11/cnnic22threport-en.pdf>

²⁹ March 4, 2006: CPC Sets Moral Yardstick, *China Daily*, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2013-03/01/content_29715054.htm. Also, “New Party Campaign on Morals Reaches Religious Communities | CECC,” July 25, 2006. <http://www.cecc.gov/publications/commission-analysis/new-party-campaign-on-morals-reaches-religious-communities>

moment when internet control was explicitly moralised, transforming cyberspace into a site of ideological education.³⁰

The increasing use of smartphones and mobile apps had made internet regulations more sophisticated and institutionalised which is clearly exemplified in the Cybersecurity Law of 2017 which requires platforms to censor content, verify identities and state access to data.³¹ As Sarah Cook and Yu Kakutani said in their book, *Beijing's Global Media Influence: Authoritarian Expansion and the Power of Perception*, this law formalised the narrative of China's digital space as a matter of national sovereignty.

The Great Fire Wall of China, at infrastructural level functions as a technical narrative device not only censoring data but also the ideological influence using methods like IP blocking, DNS filtering and packet inspection to make sure that users only get access to the content which aligns with the state narrative.³²

The role of the state as a public discourse editor is evident in the case of the suspension of *Weibo* accounts in 2018, those accused of spreading “wrong-oriented” information.³³ The cyber regulatory mechanism in China has emerged as an integral narrative institution to shape digital life through the use of surveillance mechanisms and state-driven narratives.³⁴ The state invests heavily in patriotic digital campaigns, youth-centered narratives of innovation, and cultural symbols to reinforce ideological

³⁰ Yongming Zheng, *Technological Empowerment: The Internet, State, and Society in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

³¹ Sarah Cook and Yu Kakutani, *Beijing's Global Media Influence: Authoritarian Expansion and the Power of Perception* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2021).

³² James Griffiths, *The Great Firewall of China: How to Build and Control an Alternative Version of the Internet* (London: Zed Books, 2019).

³³ Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net 2023: China* (2023).

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/2021-03-17-restrictions-online-freedom-expression-china-moynihan-patel.pdf>; Lim, Jaehwan, Asei Ito, and Hongyong Zhang, 2025. “Unpacking China’s Wolf Warrior Diplomacy: A Text-As-Data Approach.” *Journal of Contemporary China*, September, 1–17. doi:10.1080/10670564.2025.2557845.

³⁴ Deibert, “The Road to Digital Unfreedom,” *Journal of Democracy*, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-road-to-digital-unfreedom/>

messages.³⁵ According to Castells' network society theory, the state has successfully encoded political meaning into digital infrastructure and communication flow.³⁶

Wolf Warrior Diplomacy: Extending China's 'Victim-to-Victor' Narrative onto the Global Stage

The Chinese approach to narrative construction has evolved beyond domestic cyberspace and focuses more on countering Western-led narratives. A striking example in this context is the Wolf Warrior Diplomacy adopted by Chinese diplomats and state actors as a more assertive strategy in 2018.³⁷ Official spokespeople use social media like *Twitter* to actively counter criticism about Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan and China's global ambitions. Instead of a defensive stance, Chinese authorities are increasingly adopting a narrative approach to contest, presenting alternative versions of international events as well as asserting China's responsible role in the international community. According to the perspective of Fisher's narrative paradigm theory, Wolf Warrior Diplomacy represents an effort to strengthen narrative fidelity among both domestic and international audiences by presenting China as a nation unfairly targeted by external forces yet capable of defending its sovereignty and interests. This approach is consistent with the "victim-to-victor" theme of cyber nationalism and expands the theme into the international arena, with digital platforms being used not just to manage domestic narratives, but to challenge rival narratives, and influence global perceptions of China.

³⁵ Yajuan Liu, "Internet Governance in China: Toward a New Cyber Civilization," *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, vol. 08, no. 03&04, (Jan.2022): 359–77, <https://doi.org/10.1142/s2377740022500129>.

³⁶ See Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, vol. 1, 2nd ed., with a new preface (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010)

³⁷ Peter Martin, *China's Civilian Army: The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

Narrative Building in the U.S. in the Age of Cyber Nationalism

In the digital age, the question of what it means to be an American is no longer answered only in textbooks, monuments, or presidential speeches. Instead, being rewritten every day on social media. Much like how China draws on its ancient civilisational heritage and memories of national trauma to foster a sense of unity and purpose in its digital nationalism,³⁸ the U.S. leans into its foundational myths of freedom, moral righteousness, and the indomitable frontier spirit.³⁹ However, in a recent shift, once confined only to historical books and political discourse are now being interpreted across digital platforms. A single post on social media platforms can invoke the spirit of 1776, associated with the political ideals and values of American Revolution (1775-1783) and the Declaration of Independence (1776) which are the symbolic foundations of American National Identity can spark discussion over liberty and governance. In the same context, while a short video celebrating the commemorating the constitution may engage thousands of users each interpreting their opinions in contemporary American society.

The digital narratives in the U.S. are significantly shaped by moments of national trauma. For instance, the legacy of 9/11 still lives on in American culture through poignant tributes, and archived footage that circulates every anniversary. The incident of 9/11 has been molded into a story of good versus evil and has justified military and political actions both within the U.S. and abroad but such narratives often blur the lines between personal and collective memory.⁴⁰ According to the Pew Research, even two decades later, the memory of that day continues to unify Americans and influence public discourse.⁴¹

³⁸ Ratha Heang, "Digital Nationalism: Understanding the Power of Digital Technology in the Rise of Nationalism, National Identity, and National Narratives," *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs* 10, no. 2 (2024): 321–339, <https://doi.org/10.47305/JLIA24102321h>. *Open Access Library Journal* 11: e12129. <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1112129>.

³⁹ Deborah L. Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780585123455>

⁴⁰ Richard Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counter-Terrorism* (Manchester University Press, 2005), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.21995762>

⁴¹ Hannah Hartig, and Carroll Doherty, "Two Decades Later, the Enduring Legacy of 9/11," *Pew Research Center*, September 2, 2021.

By October 2001, 79 per cent of American adults displayed flags, and 62 per cent said they often felt patriotic as a result of the attacks. Public trust in institutions skyrocketed: 60 per cent had confidence in the federal government, and 69 per cent said the media had “stood up for America.”⁴² These emotional responses created fertile ground for the Bush administration’s 2002 National Security Strategy,⁴³ which wove patriotic storytelling into official doctrine and positioned the U.S. as a moral force across the globe.⁴⁴

In the American imagination, the past is not something to be studied but to be lived, performed, and shared. The stories that define the U.S. — of freedom, exceptionalism, and heroic struggle, are constantly being retold, in digital spaces and have been embedded in the national psyche. At the heart of this narrative tradition are enduring myths of American exceptionalism, manifest destiny, and a deep-seated belief in the moral righteousness of patriotism.⁴⁵ As political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset noted, American exceptionalism is a “double-edged sword,” a national mythology rooted in values like liberty, individualism, and a divine mission to lead the world.⁴⁶

From Social Tools to Storytelling Arenas

By the middle of 2000s, social media platforms in the U.S. had emerged as important online spaces where elements of collective identity, political

<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/politics/2021/09/02/two-decades-later-the-enduring-legacy-of-9-11/>.

⁴² Hannah and Doherty, “Two Decades Later, the Enduring Legacy of 9/11,” Pew Research Center, 2 Sept. 2021,

<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/09/02/two-decades-later-the-enduring-legacy-of-9-11/>

⁴³ The White House, The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, 2002, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002/>.

⁴⁴ James. *National Security Strategy 2002*. November 8, 2025. <https://nssarchive.us/national-security-strategy-2002-10/>.

⁴⁵ Questionnaire responses, collected by the author in 2025 on the subject of this article.

⁴⁶ Sidney Verba, “American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword. By Seymour Martin Lipset. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1996. 352p. \$27.50.” *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 1 (1997): 192–93. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2952295>.

discourse and patriotism attained new forms. Social media platforms like *Facebook*, *YouTube* and *Twitter* emerged as public platforms to shape American narratives in real time, instead of just communicating and connecting to people. As of March 2023, 83 per cent of American adults use *YouTube*, with *Facebook* coming in a second with 68 per cent users and *Instagram* with 47 per cent.⁴⁷ These figures just not only indicate popularity but the extent of American social media users to create, consume, and contest national narratives.

Narrative Power in the Age of Hashtags: Decentralisation, Activism, and American Identity

In the U.S., the most defining feature of their storytelling is the presence of multiple users sharing opinions and ideas ranging from individuals, to media users, activists and institutions. In such environment, narrative authority is earned through resonance. As Fisher's narrative paradigm theory suggests, people engage with those stories more that align more with their moral framework not only those which are factually right.⁴⁸ Content that provokes, entertains and is emotionally appealing is greater currency than factually accuracy and thus pushed more by the platforms. However, while this open structure brings narrative diversity, it fragments the sense of shared reality. Amid this fragmentation, one of the most powerful tools i.e. hashtag activism has emerged for reclaiming narrative space. To challenge dominant cultural scripts various movements like *#BlackLivesMatter*⁴⁹, *#MeToo*⁵⁰, *#StopAsianHate*⁵¹ use emotionally

⁴⁷ "Most Used Social Media Platforms by Type in the U.S. 2023," Statista, https://www.statista.com/forecasts/997190/most-used-social-media-platforms-by-type-in-the-us/?srsltid=AfmBOopNF-8vA0Lezq_UFBpIcRNPcTDgQGLF51_Y1EtHkypYcOieL4Dv

⁴⁸ Walter R. Fisher, "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument," *Communication Monographs* 51, no. 1 (1984): 1–22.

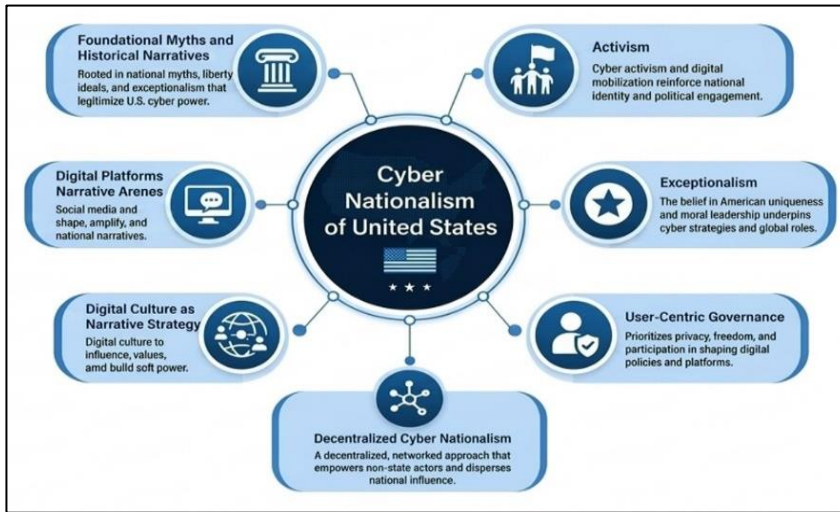
⁴⁹ Alicia Garza, *The Purpose of Power: How We Come Together When We Fall Apart* (One World, 2020).

⁵⁰ Fileborn, Bianca, and Rachel Loney-Howes (eds.), *#MeToo and the Politics of Social Change*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

⁵¹ Jeung, Russell, et al., "Stop AAPI Hate National Report," Asian Pacific Policy & Planning Council, 2021.

resonant storytelling⁵² to bring systematic injustices in limelight acting as digital megaphones for marginalised voices bringing together personal pain into collective memory and action that succeed by leveraging participatory storytelling to form what they call “networks of race and gender justice.”⁵³

Diagram No. 2
Mapping Cyber Nationalism of the United States



Source: Prepared by the authors based on the thematic analysis.

Understanding the U.S. Cyber Regulation through Network Society Theory

The U.S. in the evolving digital landscape of cyber space governance represent a unique case in which regulation is a mixed interplay between military history, market liberalism, democratic values and corporate

⁵² #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and #StopAsianHate are prominent examples of digital activism in which social media platforms have been used to mobilise collective action, shape public discourse, and advance causes related to racial justice, gender equality, and anti-discrimination.

⁵³ “#HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice,” *The Living Library*, n.d. <https://thelivinglib.org/hashtagactivism-networks-of-race-and-gender-justice/>

innovation. If viewed through the prism of Castells' network society theory, it is understood better that power is increasingly organised in the information age through networks and these networks are penetrated in social, political and economic structures of society.⁵⁴ Cyber space regulation in the U.S. is less about controlling data and more navigating freedom, security, innovation and control within a network society.

The underlying history of cyber regulations in the U.S. is entrenched in the geopolitical dynamics of the Cold War era. The establishment of ARPANET in the late 1960s, marked a technological milestone in the era characterised by Soviet supremacy and symbolised U.S.' growing command over the information frontier.⁵⁵

Drawing on the Castells' Military-Industrial notion "Network of Power," the development of this early cyber infrastructure provided both national security and ideological assertion.⁵⁶ In this framework, cyberspace became synonymous to American exceptionalism where technological advancement equated to democratic strength and global leadership.

The history of transformation of communication in the U.S. begin with the innovation of email in 1970 and 1980s, when its use expanded to universities and later to households. The late 1990s and 2000s witnessed surge of the U.S. technology giants like *Google*, *Microsoft*, and *Amazon*, to a name a few which became architects of the digital ecosystem.⁵⁷

These tech giants revolutionised the way people communicate through social media, like *Facebook*, which has become a facilitator for people to function as a community while *Google* has emerged as the gatekeeper of global knowledge questioning the power and control of information.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

⁵⁵ What Is ARPANET and What's Its Significance?' Search Networking, <https://www.techtarget.com/searchnetworking/definition/ARPANET>

⁵⁶ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, vol. 1 (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

⁵⁷ Robert Waterman McChesney, *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism Is Turning the Internet against Democracy* (The New Press, 2014).

⁵⁸ Siva Vaidhyanathan, *The Googlisation of Everything: (And Why We Should Worry)* (University of California Press, 2012).

The roots of the U.S.' cyber infrastructure are in the Cold War which saw the early development of ARPANET in the late 1960s, laying the technological foundations for the modern Internet.⁵⁹ In the eyes of Manuel Castells' network society theory, this was an early form of 'network of power' that made technological innovation a 'nexus' of national security, economic competitiveness and global influence.⁶⁰ The developments greatly contributed to the digital age, but today, the dominance of digital platforms and the growing power of technology corporations are influencing cyber governance in the U.S.

In the U.S., cyber regulation is a complex interplay between state institutions and private technology companies today. Engaging platforms like *Google*, *Meta*, *X* (formerly *Twitter*) and *YouTube* serve as significant gatekeepers of information, wielding significant authority over the visibility and dissemination of information online, as well as over its moderation. The U.S. has a largely decentralised approach to internet governance, where private institutions set community norms and play a role in curbing harmful discourse and regulating harmful content. The U.S. has a much more decentralised approach to internet governance, as private institutions establish norms and play a role in capping harmful discourse and content. This is done in line with the idea of Castells that power in the network society has become more prevalent in controlling communication networks rather than a direct act of the state.

Debates about cyber regulation in the U.S. have been growing more heated in the wake of the spread of misinformation, foreign influence operations, election-related misinformation and online extremism. As a result, more and more attention has been paid to subjects like platform accountability, data privacy, cybersecurity and content moderation. These regulatory controversies have a direct impact on the development of cyber-nationalist narratives, as they have the power to either promote, limit, or challenge their presence in digital environments. Accordingly, the development of cyber nationalism in the U.S. is inextricably linked to the governance of information networks and other competing interests of governments, technology companies, and online communities.

⁵⁹ Leiner, Barry M., et al. "A Brief History of the Internet." *ACM SIGCOMM Computer Communication Review* 39, no. 5 (2009): 22–31.

⁶⁰ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

In the early part of 21st century, the age of fragmentation began as the global resistance to U.S.' control of cyberspace increased with the development of the fire walls in countries like China and European Union's GDPR.⁶¹ These measures asserted the concept of cyber sovereignty, pushing nations to control data within their borders, posing a direct challenge to the border-less internet the U.S. had championed.

Comparative Thematic Assessment of Cyber Nationalism: China and the U.S.

In the contemporary world, where the digital connectivity defines the nature of communication, algorithms influence our views, the role of the state has not disappeared from the discourse of national identity and has re-emerged as coauthor, alongside the million voices online. While there are significant differences between the two countries, ranging from political to cultural and from history to the models of internet governance, both represent powerful examples of how cyber nationalism not only survives in the digital age but thrives because of it.

National identity in the digital age is no longer solely a narrative to be intellectually processed but an emotional experience repeatedly encountered through social media feeds. This thematic research concentrates on three key dimensions. First, the use of historical and cultural narratives, second, the role of social media in spreading nationalistic messages, and lastly, regulatory frameworks that shape online expression. Nationalism is no longer expressed through official political language, but daily online behaviours like memes, viral hashtags and orchestrated online movements which help obscure the former demarcations of a state and a citizen, of the web and the real world, allowing interactive and hybrid constructions of identity.

The social media sites serve as the modern-day social spaces, in which nationalism is no longer expressed through official political language, but daily online behaviours like memes, viral hashtags and orchestrated online movements. These terms help obscure the former demarcations of a state

⁶¹ Council on Foreign Relations, "Findings | Confronting Reality in Cyberspace: Foreign Policy for a Fragmented Internet," <https://www.cfr.org/task-force-report/confronting-reality-in-cyberspace/findings>

and a citizen, of the web and the real world, and therefore allow interactive and hybrid constructions of identity to take place.

The narrative in China is strictly controlled by the state and for the creation of coherent digital identity, it becomes intertwined with the elements of memory, pride and control. By comparison, the American online realm is freer yet anarchic with millions of voices creating both intersecting and competing visions of what it is to be an American.

A central analytical proposition is that there is a fundamental difference between the institutional architecture and the production of narratives of cyber nationalism in China and the U.S. In China, the cyber nationalism is more or less state-led and the centralisation of platforms allows strategic building and propagation of a unified national narrative. By contrast, the U.S. has a decentralised and market-driven approach to cyber nationalism, where expressions of cyber nationalism come from a multitude of actors such as civil society, political parties and digital communities. Consequently, in case of the U.S. model, the narratives of national identity are more fragmented, their contours more contested, driven by platform dynamics, ideological differences, and participatory digital culture.

Table No. 2
Thematic Comparison of Cyber Nationalism in
China and the United States

Themes	China	The United States
Cultural Symbols and Historical Narratives	“Victim-to-victor” arc built on the Century of Humiliation; state-sponsored epics, patriotic animation, mythic revival.	Exceptionalism narrative rooted in the Revolution and liberty; Founding Fathers, #NeverForget, digital folklore.
Social Media Platforms	Walled-garden ecosystem (WeChat, Weibo, Douyin) with real-name IDs, censorship, algorithmic boosting of approved content.	Open “town square” (X, Facebook, Reddit) where anyone can publish—fostering both grassroots movements and echo chambers.

Cyber Regulatory Mechanisms	Cyber sovereignty doctrine, Great Firewall, strict content moderation—regulation as narrative infrastructure.	Market-driven rules (e.g., Section 230), minimal federal oversight narrative power dispersed among platforms.
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Source: Prepared by the authors based on the thematic analysis.

The comparison illustrates differences in the narrative-building approaches of China and the U.S. China follows a state-led centralised model to shape cyber nationalism through government regulation and controlled digital platforms. In contrast, the U.S. follows a decentralised and participatory model where narratives emerge through public discourse and competing political actors. Consequently, Chinese cyber nationalism is essentially top-down, while the U.S. is bottom-up, as a result of digital participation and networked communication.

Conclusion

Cyber nationalism is an old concept, even though it is based on earlier models of national identity, it has been reshaped in the realm of digital age. The building of national belonging is now not only the prerogative of state institutions and conventional media. It is becoming disputed, formulated and co-created in digital space, where people are also engaged in the construction and distribution of national stories.

The narratives of national identity presented by China and the U.S. are highly different but still, they have a similar strategy i.e. the application of storytelling as a strategy of creating and strengthening national identity in the digital era. The story in the Chinese setting tends to be put in the context of historical recovery and the evocation of memories of previous humiliation, as well as the hopes of power, solidarity and renewal. By contrast, the themes of celebration as per the U.S. strategy which include heroism, personal freedom, and depiction of America as a positive international agent. China and the U.S. flood the digital areas with strong symbols and emotionally touching stories meant to give a feeling of national belonging and demarcation of the in-group and the other iconic landmarks like the ‘Great Wall of China’ and the ‘Statue of Liberty’ are re-imagined, distributed, and re-defined as living symbols that promote a sense of unity, strengthen patriotism, but also fuel geopolitical and societal divisions.

The emotional aspect is the vital component of cyber nationalism where individuals do not primarily engage with digital content to be persuaded by rational argument but through the emotional resonance it generates. In these two digital environments, it is clear that despite the two different systems — an authoritarian system and a democratic system, the pull of digital nationalism is strikingly similar.