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Despicable 'other' and innocent 'us': emotion politics in the time of the pandemic

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This study investigates the emotional management strategies employed by the Chinese maintream media *Huanqiu Shibao (HQSB)*, through the use of nationalistic rhetoric during the Covid-19 pandemic. By conducting a discourse analysis of the coverage of Covid-19 on *HQSB*'s WeChat account, this research reveals two primary emotional management strategies: defensive nationalism and aggressive nationalism. Defensive nationalism utilizes fear and positive emotions to uphold and defend Chinese politics, while aggressive nationalism employs disgust to counter external criticisms and delegitimize the US democratic system and international leadership. By examining how *HQSB* emotionally differentiates the world, the study unveils that tactics Chinese mainstream media use to construct national identity, drawing a divisive line between a despised 'them' and an innocent 'us'. The Covid-19 pandemic presents a unique opportunity to reflect on the emotionalisation of Chinese digital propaganda and the evolution of state-led nationalism during a public health crisis. The research concludes that the use of emotion in *HQSB*'s Covid-19 coverage aligns with China's broader strategy of nation-building and global influence promotion. It underscores the need for greater awareness of the emotional mobilization used in political communication, particularly during times of crisis.

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Introduction

Emotions have long played a significant role in sustaining authoritarian rule. Previous studies have explored how mainstream media in authoritarian states mobilizes emotions such as fear (Huang, 2015, 2018), pride (Greene and Robertson, 2020), and gratitude (Chen and Wang, 2019) to enhance regime legitimacy. In the context of China, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government has been found to use emotions of sorrow and humiliation in national identity building and regime legitimation (Callahan, 2004; Wang, 2008; Zhao, 1998). Recent scholarship has observed a shift towards more positive emotions in Chinese official propaganda. Emotions such as pride, gratitude, and optimism are being utilized to cultivate loyalty and voluntary obedience to the party-state regime (Chen et al., 2021; Chen and Wang, 2019; Yang and Tang, 2018).

The Covid-19 pandemic presents a unique opportunity to examine the emotional management strategies of the Chinese government (Zhang, 2022). Amid accusations regarding its delayed response, strict lockdown policy, and stringent censorship measures, Chinese mainstream media has proven adept at deflecting external criticism—particularly from the United States—and rechanneling internal dissatisfaction into regime-supportive nationalism (Jacob, 2020; Song and Liu, 2022). This transformation of public distrust and disappointment into regime confidence and solidarity illuminates authoritarian resilience in communication (de Kloet et al., 2021; Song and Liu, 2022), particularly within the context of Sino-American political tension.

While previous studies have observed the co-evolution of public emotions and nationalistic discourse on China's digital landscape during the pandemic (de Kloet et al., 2021; Zhang, 2022; Zhang and Xu, 2022; Yang and Chen, 2021), few have examined the mechanisms by which Chinese official propaganda incorporates emotional management with nationalistic discourse.

To map the affective pandemic governance strategies of official Chinese propaganda, we conducted a discourse analysis of 158 posts from the official Wechat account of *Huanqiu Shibao*'s (*HQSB*), focusing particularly on the representation of the United States as the primary 'other'. *HQSB* was chosen due to its status as an official media outlet and its nationalistic market positioning (Larson, 2011; Zeng and Sparks, 2020). We chose to analyze its WeChat account over its newspaper format because the former reaches a larger audience base with its concise, entertaining, and interactive style.

Our research unveils two main strategies in Chinese official propaganda's affective governance: defensive nationalism and aggressive nationalism. While defensive nationalism is enacted through the integration of fear, praise, and joy from both domestic and international realms to defend Chinese politics, aggressive nationalism is enacted through the manipulation of disgust to neutralize external criticisms, primarily from the US, and delegitimize its democratic system and international leadership through the demonstration of fury, astonishment, and disappointment from within American society.

These strategies should be understood within the broader context of ongoing Sino-American political tensions. These tensions have been intensified due to various issues including trade disputes, human rights concerns, technology and intellectual property theft, as well as geopolitical tensions in regions like the South China Sea. Such tensions have fostered a heightened sense of rivalry and opposition between the two countries, influencing their respective domestic and international narratives. In particular, these dynamics significantly inform the portrayal and perception of the United States within Chinese official propaganda. The charged emotions and nationalistic sentiments that such propaganda aims to evoke are embedded in these larger political dynamics, with the US often depicted as an adversary,

challenge, or threat to China's national identity and regime legitimacy.

This paper demonstrates a convergence between the global distribution of power and emotional gravity in global imaginaries constructed by Chinese mainstream media. Contrary to the monolithic presumption about Chinese official propaganda, *HQSB* adopts a more complex emotional management mechanism that amalgamates negatively sentimentalized victimhood, positively charged pride, and even a sense of superiority. Transcending the conventional focus of propaganda studies on domestic political information management, this paper contributes to unpacking the emotional-discursive mechanism that official Chinese propaganda uses to transform international news, particularly those related to the US, into domestically relevant propagandist content. By explicitly identifying and emphasizing the role of the United States as the primary 'other', this study provides a more nuanced understanding of the emotional strategies utilized by official Chinese propaganda during global crises.

Emotion politics in China

The mobilization of emotions in the Chinese propaganda system to facilitate nation-building and enhance regime legitimacy has been extensively studied. Research suggests that the CCP has employed a model of "emotion work," utilizing emotions such as fear, grief, rage, and shame to exert a sustainable influence on contemporary Chinese politics (Perry, 2002). In the post-Mao era, as the ideological foundation of the CCP shifted from Marxism to a combination of nationalism, meritocracy, and traditionalism (Zeng, 2014), emotional management strategies took on a humiliation-focused approach.

Emerging from China's tumultuous encounters with Western and Japanese invaders, the narrative of national humiliation activates a collective sense of shame about China's loss of territory and prestige, fostering a common aspiration to regain its status as a great power (Wang, 2008). The 'century of humiliation' serves as a linear narrative that connects China's historical glory with its contemporary resurgence, perpetuating a recurring fear of the external "other" represented by Western imperialism, as well as an internal "other" embodied by the underperforming "self" (Callahan, 2004).

In the 1990s, in response to the ideological challenge posed by the Tiananmen Square incident, the CCP government initiated the "patriotic education campaign," which packaged China's suffering as a confrontation with foreign atrocities, imbuing it with a narrative of victimization (Wang, 2008). This initiative in memory management constructs a self-victimized national identity among the younger Chinese generation, contributing to the legitimization of CCP rule and fostering a sense of social solidarity (Zhang, 2020). While shame politics served as a prominent and effective ideological tool for cohering society under CCP rule in the 1990s (Zhao, 1998), compassion politics became the predominant approach to emotion management during the Hu-Wen government's tenure. Xu (2018) observes that Chinese nationalism softened considerably during this era, evident notably during the Sichuan Earthquake. Official mourning rituals surrounding the natural disaster not only demonstrated the leadership's paternalistic compassion but also fostered a confident sentiment regarding the capacity of the socialist political system.

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, the emotional tone of Chinese official propaganda has shifted to the concept of "positive energy." At the collective level, the "wolf warrior" spirit fuels national pride and confidence in celebrating China's strength (Shi and Liu, 2019; Sullivan and Wang, 2022). At the individual and societal levels, gratitude, generosity, and altruism are encouraged

to address dissatisfaction stemming from social inequality and conflicts (Chen and Wang, 2019). At the political level, nationalism, trust in the government, and confidence in the socialist system with Chinese characteristics are mobilized to align public emotions with the "ideological and value systems of the CCP party-state" (Yang and Tang, 2018: 3). Contextualizing the "positive energy" campaign within a neoliberal emotion management regime, this strategy can be seen as an inherent characteristic of affective biopolitics in Foucauldian terms, disciplining citizens into docile subjects who internalize state interests and manifest affective responses aligned with state expectations (Chen and Wang, 2019; Hird, 2018). Chinese scholars have coined the term "emotion-setting" to describe the transition of Chinese official propaganda from "agenda-setting" to emotion-setting (Gao and Wu, 2019).

As noted by Gries (2004), contemporary Chinese nationalism has dynamically evolved in its relationship with other nations and its own historical narrative. The current sense of pride evident in Chinese nationalism is projected onto an imagined ever-renewing Western "other" and a shameful past "self." Increasing literature suggests that younger generations in China are embracing a more empowering and positively oriented nationalistic sentiment, favoring empowerment rather than passive victimization (Guan and Hu, 2020).

The emotional management of Chinese pandemic propaganda. A public health crisis elicits a range of collective emotions, including fear, anxiety, and anger. These emotions can intensify to the point where they lead to feelings of distrust and suspicion towards the domestic government, as well as exclusionary nationalism against perceived "others" (Mylonas and Whalley, 2022; Zhou and Xie, 2022). In the case of China, the management of the COVID-19 pandemic has attracted particular scrutiny due to the government's delayed response, lack of transparency, censorship, and strict containment measures, which have generated significant dissatisfaction and anger from both domestic and international audiences. The outbreak of COVID-19 provided the CCP with an opportunity to exercise affective governance, directing public fear and anxiety towards collective trust and confidence in the authoritarian regime (Sorace, 2021; Zhang and Jamali, 2022: Zhang et al., 2023). In response to the initial wave of public fear, anxiety, and panic, the government redirected its own uncertainty and insecurity towards legitimizing the strict containment measures (de Kloet et al., 2021).

In response to public dissatisfaction with the government's handling of whistleblower Dr. Li Wenliang, the CCP implemented punitive measures against local officials who attempted to assuage public anger and redirect resentment (Zhang, 2020). Furthermore, the CCP invoked the classical model of disaster nationalism (Schneider and Hwang, 2014) by posthumously declaring Dr. Li Wenliang a "martyr," positioning him as a hero who sacrificed his life during the pandemic to counter the prevailing public narrative that portrayed him as a champion of free speech. This strategy effectively demobilized public outrage and redirected dissent towards regime-supportive nationalism (Song and Liu, 2022). By downplaying its own mismanagement of information during the initial outbreak and demonstrating paternalistic compassion, the government aimed to assuage grief and temper public anger (Zhang, 2022).

In addition to traditional techniques such as highlighting exemplary individuals, the CCP has championed ordinary citizens as part of its strategy. Through media coverage and the portrayal of everyday people as "heroes" in the fight against COVID-19, state-sponsored media has created an image of citizens voluntarily cooperating with the government and embracing a patriotic ethos aligned with the CCP (Xie and Zhou, 2021). Extensive coverage of medical workers as national heroes by state-owned media fostered a sense of solidarity among the collective "we," encouraging unity and resilience in overcoming the crisis under CCP leadership (de Kloet et al., 2021).

As contagion rates within mainland China declined and the number of COVID-19 cases globally continued to rise, Chinese affective governance shifted towards externally focused, exclusionary nationalism. This transformation, driven by a politics of pride, with the Chinese government emphasizing national achievements in combating the virus, juxtaposed against the high death toll and extended quarantine measures implemented in the West (de Kloet et al., 2021). These accomplishments reinforced the belief that effective biopolitical containment measures demonstrated the superiority of the Chinese political system and geopolitical prowess, fueling a sense of "biopolitical nationalism" within China (de Kloet et al., 2020). Moreover, this sense of triumph over the West is propagated through the lens of the "century of humiliation," transforming the initial shame of the pandemic's outbreak into a form of "anti-imperialist nationalism" (Jaworsky and Qiao, 2021).

To amplify nationalistic fervor, Chinese national media portrays Western countries as intentionally malicious and inefficient in their handling of the pandemic, fostering enmity, resentment, and contempt among domestic citizens towards this imagined rival (Zhang, 2022). A systematic content analysis of China Daily, People's Daily, and Xinhua News' coverage of COVID-19 confirms that Chinese English-language official media employs the enemification of the United States, victimization narratives, and heroization of China to resist foreign criticisms and repair China's national image (Yu, 2022). Furthermore, the Chinese government's commitment to providing free vaccinations domestically and affordable vaccines internationally is utilized to instill 'vaccine nationalism,' generating greater confidence in the authoritarian regime and fostering pride in China's global leadership (Zhang and Jamali, 2022; Zhao, 2021). This expression of nationalism is blended with globalism, constructing a binary between "us" and "them" (Yang and Chen, 2021).

While previous studies have touched upon the emotional management strategies of the Chinese government, primarily focusing on formal news formats of main official news outlets, the expressions of Chinese official propaganda on social media platforms have been relatively underexplored. This article fills this gap by examining the emotional management strategies employed by the nationalistic tabloid *HQSB* through an analysis of its WeChat posts. The study seeks to answer the following question: How does *HQSB* enact emotional management through nationalistic discourse?

Data collection. This research examines the impact of Chinese state-funded propaganda's affective governance during the Covid-19 pandemic by analyzing coverage of the pandemic on the *HQSB* WeChat platform from the start of 2020 to the beginning of 2021. *HQSB* was chosen as a case study due to its affiliation with People's Daily, China's most authoritative party press, and its reputation as a Chinese equivalent of "Fox News" (Larson, 2011). *HQSB* uses provocative commentaries, eye-catching headlines, and a "crimson banner" style to engage a wide Chinese-speaking audience, effectively shaping public opinion (Hatef and Luqiu, 2018). Thus, *HQSB* provides a useful lens for researchers to investigate the Chinese government's mobilization of nationalistic sentiments.

Data for the study was collected from *HQSB*'s official WeChat account, given the platform's widespread popularity and *HQSB*'s

significant presence on it. With over one billion monthly active users worldwide, WeChat has become a crucial infrastructure that shapes people's political, economic, and social lives in China (Stancheva, 2021). To compete for attention in this highly competitive environment, Chinese state-funded propaganda, including *HQSB*, has adapted to a sensationalized information style, incorporating clickbaits and emotionally evocative expressions in their WeChat public accounts (Lu and Pan, 2021; Zou, 2021). *HQSB*'s public account, launched on the WeChat platform in 2013, consistently ranks as the most popular "current affairs" account on Newsrank's daily and weekly rankings (an independent social media monitoring agency) (Newsrank, 2022). Therefore, the coverage of the pandemic on *HQSB*'s WeChat account holds significant value in elucidating the affective governance strategies employed by Chinese propaganda during the pandemic.

To address our research question, we compiled a sample of 158 articles from *HQSB*'s public WeChat account between January 1st, 2020 (the day after the World Health Organization was first informed of a cluster of cases) and February 16th, 2021 (the date when our data collection ended). This period covers the transformation of Covid-19 from a local health crisis to a global pandemic, during which the Chinese government's affective governance strategies evolved in different stages. We conducted the following steps to screen the WeChat posts: firstly, we used the keyword "新冠" (Covid) to retrieve articles and saved 227 articles that contained at least one mention of a foreign country to ensure their international focus. Secondly, as our objective was to investigate *HQSB*'s emotional management, we reviewed our database and removed 69 news bulletins without emotional content. The reason we include commentary and screen news bulletins is that news bulletin tend to convey neutral news without emotional or attitudinal message. As we intend to examine the utilization of emotion in domestic propaganda, we excluded out news bulletins due to their limited containment of emotional expression. We then uploaded the remaining 158 articles that exhibited emotional content to NVivo for further analysis.

Data analysis. To identify patterns of emotion distribution in the corpus, we coded the texts using seven emotions. Our codebook (see Supplementary Appendix) was based on Ekman's (1992) classical emotion classification, supplemented by Luo and his colleagues' (2014) Sinicized operationalization. Ekman's research identified six types of emotions in facial expressions: happiness, surprise, fear, sadness, anger, and disgust. Building upon this taxonomy, Luo and his team added "praise" as a new category to capture emotions such as respect, trust, praise, liking, and well-wishes. Customizing Luo's (2014) coding scheme, we developed our codebook to identify emotions in *HQSB*'s coverage of the pandemic. The first author and second authors each coded 40 articles, yielding an intercoder reliability coefficient of 85%. The second author then continued to code the remainder of the dataset, leading to the identification of a total of 325 occurrences of emotions. We created a table describing the frequency of the seven emotions and a figure depicting their temporal distribution to provide an overview of emotions in our dataset; these will be presented in the next section.

Discourse analysis enables us to uncover implicit implications, connections, strategies, and underlying rules or principles in media messages (van Dijk, 1983). To further unpack *HQSB*'s emotion mobilization strategies, we conducted a discourse analysis of the coded extracts. We thoroughly examined the extracts coded with emotions and aimed to identify *HQSB*'s strategies in using emotions to advance its nationalistic agenda. After several rounds of discussions, we identified six main

Table 1 Emotions in the corpus.

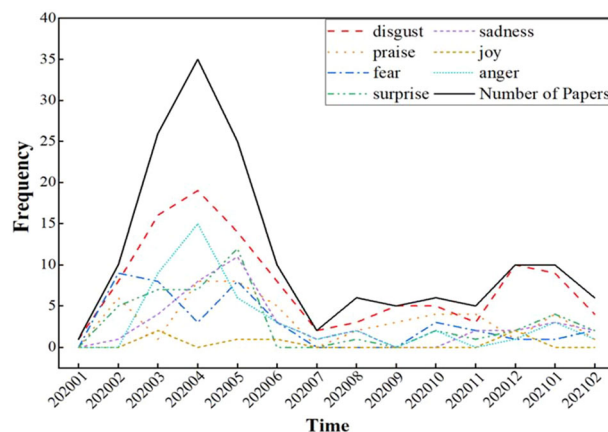| Name	Number of articles	Number of occurrences	Percentage of articles
Disgust	75	107	47%
Surprise	40	42	25%
Praise	39	47	25%
Sadness	39	40	25%
Anger	38	43	24%
Fear	31	40	20%
Joy	6	6	4%

Fig. 1 The temporal distribution of HQSB's posts and emotions. Note: The frequency is calculated based on the number of articles that contain certain emotions each month.

emotion management strategies, one for joy and praise and one for each of the other five emotions. These strategies are driven by two nationalistic narratives. To present our qualitative findings, we selected representative extracts from each strategy and translated them from Chinese into English.

Findings

The temporal distribution of various emotions. An examination of the overall frequency of emotions in our dataset reveals that the emotional tone of *HQSB*'s WeChat posts leans towards negative valence. Among all observed emotions, "disgust" is the most frequent, appearing in nearly half (47%) of *HQSB*'s WeChat posts, while positive emotions such as "praise" and "joy" only appear in 25 and 4% of the articles, respectively. Other negative emotions, including "sadness," "surprise," and "anger," each occur in approximately a quarter of the articles (see Table 1). It is worth noting that the term "surprise" is used to express both positive and negative emotions. Therefore, it is evident that negative emotions dominate the e *HQSB*'s emotional management strategies of during the early period of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In terms of temporal distribution, we observed that the number of *HQSB* posts on Covid-19 peaked in April and then sharply declined before experiencing a resurgence in December 2020. This fluctuation corresponds to the fluctuation in the number of deaths due to Covid-19 in the United States, suggesting that *HQSB*'s coverage of the pandemic may potentially be influenced by the coronavirus situation in the US (see Figs. 1 and 2). Generally, the overall distribution of emotions aligns with that in the number of *HQSB*'s posts, especially for the most powerful emotions, such as "disgust" and "anger." The peak of fear occurred earlier in February when coronavirus outbreaks
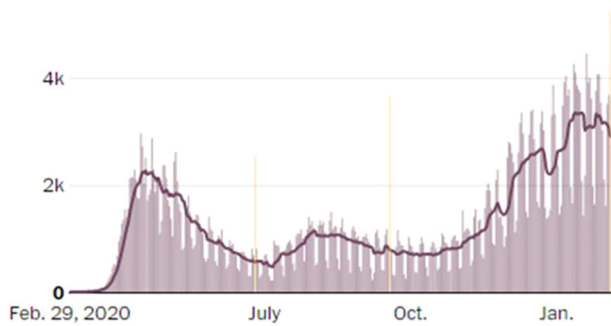
Fig. 2 Daily Covid-related deaths in the US. Notes: Data retrieved from Washington Post: U.S. coronavirus cases: Tracking deaths, confirmed cases by state, https:// www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/national/coronavirus-us-cases-deaths/?state=US. This figure is covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Reproduced with permission of The Washington Post; copyright © 2023, The Washington Post, all rights reserved.

emerged in China. The emotion of fear resurfaced in April and May, triggered by the denial, mismanagement, and politicization of Covid-19 by Donald Trump's administration, which led to global panic and anxiety, resulting in an increase in sadness and surprise. The temporal pattern of the "praise" emotion follows a similar trend to that of "fear," reflecting the complimentary comments about the Chinese government's handling of the pandemic. The analysis of temporal distribution suggests that pandemic containment events in both China and the US may shape the fluctuations in *HQSB*'s coverage of Covid-19.

Defensive nationalism and aggressive nationalism. In the previous section, we provided an overview of emotion distribution in our dataset. In this section, we delve deeper into the texts where emotions underpin different nationalistic narratives. We identified two types of nationalistic narratives employed in *HQSB*'s emotion management: defensive nationalism and aggressive nationalism. Defensive nationalism, as defined by Rabinowitz (2022: 148–149), refers to a movement that prioritizes the nation-state and perceives international forces as hostile, aiming to preserve and protect an existing nation-state.

In the Chinese context, defensive nationalism represents a reactive rejection of external criticisms rooted in a historical sense of insecurity (Shambaugh, 1996). Specifically, the defensive nationalistic narratives in *HQSB*'s coverage of Covid-19 reflect the mediated narratives projected by *HQSB* to justify the Chinese government's virus containment measures and counter internal and external suspicions.

Aggressive nationalism, on the other hand, entails a more assertive expression of nationalistic sentiment through discursively attacking foreign others. According to Whiting's (1983) elaboration, aggressive nationalism is mainly expressed through strident anti-American speech and denunciations of foreign policies. In the context of Covid-19, aggressive nationalism manifests as an active critique of foreign countries for their mismanagement of the virus, unfair judgment of China, and irresponsible vaccine distribution. Fundamentally, the aggressive nationalism in the context of Covid-19 arises from a sense of superiority due to China's achievements in virus containment (de Kloet et al., 2020).

Defensive nationalism: rebuilding confidence for the state and system
Transferring fear into solidarity. Fear emerges prominently during times of crisis, such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and

serves as the primary emotional drive underlying defensive nationalism. As depicted in Fig. 1, fear was the prevailing emotional response during the initial stage of the outbreak in January. This reaction is not surprising, as scientific research has established that fear, stress, and anxiety are the most common emotions experienced by the public during the initial phase of a pandemic (Herbert et al., 2021). *HQSB*'s extensive coverage of Covid-19, which highlights expressions of fear towards China and its containment measures from actors in France, the United States, Australia, Iran, and among Chinese citizens themselves, demonstrates the significant role China plays in the global landscape of fear.

The salient aspect of *HQSB*'s approach lies in its handling of the emotion of fear. *HQSB* endeavors to contain, transfer, neutralize, and ultimately dispel public distrust while simultaneously fostering global support for China. To illustrate, in an article published on February 4th, 2020, Hu Xijin, the then-editor-in-chief of *HQSB*, sought to assuage public apprehension by cultivating an environment of trust.

> We must trust science and **not just panic**……We have to believe that such a large-scale social mobilization can block most of the transmission channels of the new coronavirus but also quickly discover most of the emerging clusters of transmission points. Therefore, we have **built a strong defense network** against this **invisible enemy**… After we have formed a strict national prevention and control **deployment**, the future is already highly certain; that is, we will first contain the surging spread of the epidemic, turn it from completely uncontrollable to controllable, and then step by step, **surround and annihilate** it. (Huanqiu shibao, 2020a)

At the time of the article's publication, Chinese citizens were grappling with a dual sense of anxiety stemming from the coronavirus outbreak. They faced the fear of mortality from the contagion as well as apprehension surrounding restricted personal freedoms and economic stability. To alleviate this two-fold fear, Hu, the editor and commentator at *HQSB*, advocated for the cultivation of "trust" as a counterbalance to "panic". The author urged the public to have faith in strict social control measures such as mandatory quarantine, social distancing, and contact-tracing systems, which he deemed essential and effective in establishing a "strong defense network" against the "invisible enemy"—the coronavirus. To further strengthen the enemization of the virus, the author compared the elimination of the virus to a battle of "surrounding and annihilating" the "enemy". By promising to turn "uncontrollable" to "controllable", the article legitimized the aggressive biopolitical control measures imposed by the CCP government by satisfying the public psychological need for immediate security and promising prospects (Renström and Bäck, 2021).

HQSB utilized the war metaphor to establish a hierarchical power dynamic between the government and the public, positioning the government as a dominant character responsible for protecting the passive and reliant ordinary populace. The use of first-person plural pronouns, such as "we," fostered a sense of solidarity between the author and the audience, enhancing the persuasive efficacy of the discourse (Kinsman et al., 2010). This analysis aligns with de Kloet's (2021: 375) findings that panic, anxiety, and fear reinforced support for restrictive policies, such as lockdowns, home quarantines, and mask mandates, during the Covid-19 pandemic. *HQSB*'s emotional management capitalizes on the sense of security associated with dominant power relations to justify the Chinese government's controversial measures.

Mobilization of joy and praise: cultivating nationalistic pride with external applause. In the official narrative of *HQSB*, positive

emotions such as joy and praise play a significant role in promoting nationalism among the Chinese audience. Chinese people's joy, particularly towards the successful containment of the virus at the end of 2020, is extensively depicted in *HQSB*'s articles, reinforcing the success of the government's measures.

For instance, an article published on December 31st, *HQSB* refutes the *New York Times*'s suggestion to "blame China for the spread of the pandemic", using the first sentence to contest this perspective. Instead, the success of China's containment measures is emphasized, celebrating rather than critiquing China's response to the pandemic. The article elicits feelings of joy and happiness as a means to promote Chinese nationalism, asserting Chinese success in controlling the epidemic and evoking a sense of superiority over other countries. *HQSB*'s discourse cultivates a competitive self-complacency among Chinese people, foregrounding China's national achievement against Covid-19 and creating a clear division from other nations, particularly those in the west.

However, it is crucial to note that "the west" as used in this context does not always correspond with the geographic or political west, and particularly, it does not equate to the United States. This ambiguity becomes apparent when we consider the "external applause" from nations such as Serbia. Traditionally, these countries would be considered part of 'the west', yet in *HQSB*'s narrative, they align more closely with 'us'—they applaud and support China's measures. This perceived contradiction highlights the flexible nature of these labels in the propagandistic discourse. For example, Serbia and its president Aleksandar Vučić are depicted as model admirers of China, with their appreciation and compliments serving to validate China's actions and bolster its image on the global stage (see Fig. 3).

It is important to acknowledge that this portrayal does not diminish the distinction between China and the West in general, particularly the United States, which remains the primary 'other' in the larger narrative. In summary, this section suggests that *HQSB* employs a multifaceted approach in its emotional management, strategically evoking joy and praise to fuel both defensive and aggressive forms of nationalism. However, these strategies are deployed within a complex geopolitical landscape, where the lines between 'us' and 'other' are continually negotiated and redefined.

武契奇专门前往机场迎接中国新冠疫苗

Fig. 3 Picture embedded in HQSB's coverage on January 16th, 2022. This figure is covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Reproduced with permission of Huanqiu Shibao; copyright © 2023, Huanqiu Shibao, all rights reserved. The photo showed Vučić standing at the airport beside the transport aircraft and the national flags of China and Serbia welcoming the Chinese vaccine, the Sinopharm.

For instance, on January 16th, 2021, Vučić was quoted as saying "We came here to welcome the airplane, not because of the vaccine quality, but to express the true friendship between China and Serbia. We truly appreciate China's support to Serbia" (Huanqiu Shibao, 2021a).

The *HQSB*'s citation of Vučić and visual representation of the Serbian president's respectful diplomatic gesture towards the Chinese vaccine adds to the notion of China as a benign great power willing to shoulder global responsibility, with its technological advancement and generousity (Smith and Fallon, 2020). Further, *HQSB* leveraged Serbia's gratitude to China to denounce the West, stressing that "Serbia's approach is gaining support from other countries in the region which have had confidence in the vaccine distribution plan deployed by the EU" (Huanqiu Shibao, 2021b). By employing a "horse-racing" analogy between China and Europe, *HQSB* highlighted China's strength and morality at the expense of the Europe's reputation. Another example that backed this generous/selfish great power dichotomy can be found in an article published on February 3rd, 2021. In this article, *HQSB* referred to a news report by *The Financial Times* to illustrate this point.

According to the report, after being turned away by European countries, some countries in the Balkan Peninsula that have been dedicated to joining the EU have now turned to the East. Among them, Serbia which has received China's Sinopharm Covid-19 vaccine and Russia's Sputnik-V vaccine, has now become 'the vaccination champion' in Europe. (Huanqiu Shibao, 2021b).

In the same *Financial Times* report being cited, a North Macedonian official expressed his government's disappointment towards the EU's delayed delivery of vaccines. He stressed that his government only expected to receive vaccines from the EU as a means of demonstrating their allegiance to the Western community. However, the EU's response was delayed without a reasonable explanation, which left North Macedonian citizens feeling disheartened. *HQSB* used a Western media report to contrast China's efficient provision of urgent medical supplies with the EU's failure to do so. *HQSB*'s portrayal of China as a responsible and resourceful power that can fill the void of global public goods, while also being an authoritarian state with strong resource mobilization capacity, sought to defend China's image in the face of criticism (Zhao, 2021). Through the use of emotional praise and comparison, *HQSB* aimed to cultivate aggressive nationalistic sentiments in its readers, which will be further explored in the following section.

Aggressive nationalism: othering the US as a tool of solidarity building. If the emotions in the previous section legitimize Chinese virus containment measures, then disgust, anger, surprise and sadness are the main emotional registers *HQSB* drew on to develop an aggressive nationalism. This form of nationalism operates by constructing an imagined enemy, typically the United States and other nations, as a means of generating solidarity between the government and its citizens. Through the process of "othering" and attacking the perceived enemy, external criticism of Chinese virus containment measures is effectively neutralized. This approach thus serves to bolster the government's standing among the Chinese populace and reinforces nationalistic sentiments.

The politics of disgust: cultivating immunity against external criticism. Chinese propaganda does not solely consist of favorable coverage in China-related news. Our research reveals that the *HQSB* has refined its affective tactics to adopt a "reveal-and-attack" approach. Notably, *HQSB* confronts international censure towards China without hesitation. Our data shows that China is

predominantly associated with the sentiment of disgust. *HQSB* strategically cherry-picks negative remarks from reputable Western newspapers and crafts rebuttals to challenge such criticisms. This tactic resembles a propaganda technique known as inoculation, as it seeks to preemptively refute potential objections (Compton et al., 2016; McGuire, 1961, 1964). Inoculation seeks to foster attitudinal immunity to specific perspectives by presenting the audience with weakened arguments accompanied by preemptive rebuttals and encouragement to develop voluntary resistance against future attitudinal attacks.

One article entitled "Helping the country to pass through the US is the common mission for all the patriots today" cites American politicians' censures of China without specifying their specific criticisms:

> From Secretary of State Pompeo to National Security Advisor O'Brien to Republican senators like Cotton, it can be said that they take turns to scold China. They scold China on almost everything, from accusing China of "trying to destroy the US economy" to China's "ulterior motives" in assisting Africa, to China's use of Huawei to "monitor the world." So, where did their hatred of China come from? (Huanqiu Shibao, 2020e)

This carefully curated presentation serves to introduce Chinese audiences to American politicians' criticism of China without damaging the reputation of the CCP. However, the specific arguments made by American politicians are concealed, thus allowing the criticisms to be delivered without inviting critical evaluation. Additionally, by using the term "scold" (骂), the criticisms are delegitimized and portrayed as expressions of unfounded anger and hostility. This positioning suggests that these criticisms do not merit thoughtful consideration.

The author employed geopolitical reasoning to interpret the United States' "emotionalized scolding" of China. He asserted that the United States is stifling China in an effort to disrupt break up the aggregated interests of 1.4 billion Chinese people (Huanqiu Shibao, 2020e). By presenting the viewpoint, *HQSB* insinuates that American criticism is not anchored in rational foreign policy debates but is instead an calculated assault against China, undermining both the interests of Chinese people and its government. To counterbalance international criticisms targeting Chinese governmental policies, the author appeals to all patriot readers to understand that the essence of contemporary patriotism is to safeguard the national interests and the rights to improve their quality of life.

The politics of anger: the US against the US. Throughout the pandemic, the emotion of anger has been utilized as a fundamental framework to depict the US as a disappointing and corrupt political entity. Our research demonstrates that, although China provokes and manifests anger towards numerous countries, the United States is the primary target of this emotion, with a considerable amount of anger originating from within American society itself. Notably, our data capture expressions of fury from netizens directed towards American elites, who were ridiculed and criticized for their negative assessments of China. For example, on March 10th, 2020, *HQSB* referenced Republican Congressman Kevin McCarthy's tweets, in which he referred to Covid-19 as the "Chinese coronavirus" (as illustrated in Fig. 4).

Rather than directly accusing McCarthy of racism, *HQSB* deftly emphasized the escalating anger amongst American citizens, including those of Chinese American descent. By incorporating the views of both a Chinese American and an Anglophone netizen (as shown in Fig. 5), *HQSB* aimed to demonstrate the widespread frustration towards the perceived racist rhetoric of American politicians. This strategy enabled *HQSB* to depict a

美国国会一高官发帖使用"中国病毒"，被美国网民骂翻

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> 今天，美国国会一名高官，不知脑子里哪根筋搭错了，突然在自己的社交账号上发帖，将新冠病毒说成是"中国冠状病毒"。
>
> 不过，他的这番种族歧视性的表述，立刻遭到了大量美国网民的抨击。

这名高官，便是美国国会众议院的少数派领袖、共和党议员凯文·麦卡锡（Kevin Mccarthy）。

今天，此人在自己的社交账号上突然发帖说："你需要知道的所有关于中国冠状病毒的事情，都可以在一个日常更新的网站上看到"，并给出了美国疾控中心关于新冠病毒情况的网站链接。

Fig. 4 Screenshot of *HQSB* post—the screenshot of Kevin McCarthy's tweet (Huanqiu Shibao, 2020b). This figure is covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Reproduced with permission of Huanqiu Shibao; copyright © 2023, Huanqiu Shibao, all rights reserved.

因此，麦卡锡的这种言论，也立刻引起了包括许多美国华商在内的诸多美国网民的不满和愤怒。在这则网贴获得的1.24万条评论中，绝大多数都是抨击麦卡锡这番种族主义言辞的声音。

Fig. 5 Screenshot of *HQSB* post—screenshot of tweet of netizens (Huanqiu Shibao, 2020b). This figure is covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Reproduced with permission of Huanqiu Shibao; copyright © 2023, Huanqiu Shibao, all rights reserved.

divided image of the United States, consisting of a group of corrupt and xenophobic politicians attempting to manipulate the virus for geopolitical gain, and a community of ordinary Americans who stood in solidarity with the Chinese people against their morally bankrupt elites. Despite the prohibition of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter in mainland China, *HQSB* actively utilized these platforms to engage with international sources, thus effectively fostering a one-way connection between Chinese readers and overseas netizens, and conjuring an illusionary international digital public sphere beyond China's Great Firewall. This revelation discloses yet

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another mechanism for Chinese government to adapt internet censorship to reinforce authoritarian resilience (Han, 2023; King et al., 2013). By selectively engaging with and presenting the crucial civic discussions from Western social media platform, *HQSB* creates an imagined "we" that binds Chinese people with American populace, positioning the American elites as the despicable "other". Moreover, *HQSB* capitalized on feelings of anger and superiority amongst Chinese readers towards the US government's mishandling of Covid-19, lambasting their incompetence and negligence. As exemplified in an article titled "The Modern Living Hell," where the commentator expressed strong resentment towards federal officials' failure to take urgent measures at the national level:

> If the Covid pandemic cannot be stopped, then America's failure is forgivable, but many Asian countries and economies including China have well contained the pandemic, which means that the pandemic can be coped with. There is no point logically or morally, in America's surrender. (Huanqiu Shibao, 2020d)

The above excerpt illustrates that *HQSB* endeavored to censure and denigrate the COVID-19 response of the United States by juxtaposing it with the efficacious pandemic containment measures implemented by China and other Asian nations.

Surprise: demystifying the American dream. Within our entire corpus, the emotion of surprise constitutes a unique category that encapsulates both positive and negative affective states. When surprise triggers negative emotions, *HQSB* exploits this affective response to dismantle the myth of the American dream and to disabuse broader perception of the West. Various sources, including China, the international community, and its own citizens, directed surprise emotions tinged with negative sentiment towards the United States.

On May 11th, 2020, *HQSB* reported and analyzed an article published by *The Atlantic. HQSB* cited a paragraph of the article:

> When the virus arrived, it found a nation plagued with significant underlying conditions, which it exploited mercilessly. Long-standing issues—a corrupt political class, a lethargic bureaucracy, a merciless economy, a divided and distracted populace—had been neglected for years. We had become accustomed to living with these discomforting symptoms. It required the vastness and immediacy of a pandemic to reveal their severity—to jolt Americans into realizing that we are in the high-risk category. (Huanqiu Shibao, 2020d)

HQSB emphasized that the Covid-19 pandemic unveiled deep-seated issues within American society, portraying it as a political structure beleaguered by corrupt elites, a stagnated bureaucracy, a floundering economy, and societal disarray. By underscoring the shock and surprise experienced by Americans, the author shatters the illusion of a prosperous American society, which is often depicted as a bastion of democracy with a sturdy economy and a harmonious citizenry. This emotional reaction illuminates the disparity between the idealized American Dream and the tangible economic, political, and social issues within the nation.

Contrary to authoritarian states that permit only a single dominant ideology, democratic states, including the US, tolerate dissenting and critical perspectives on social issues. As a form of state-funded propaganda, *HQSB* capitalizes on the plurality inherent to democratic states and employs critical commentary within American society to dissuade idolization of the US among the Chinese populace. By highlighting the startling insecurity among the American people, HQSB strives to instill a sense of assurance and contentment among the Chinese audience with

regard to China as a state and the socialist system imbued with Chinese characteristics. The party-state's fusion between socialism and nationalism that has taken shape in the Jiang Zemin's era has continued to exert ideological power under Xi's governance as the socialist system under CCP's rule has become an integral part of nationalism in China (Guo, 2003).

When the emotion of surprise manifests positively, China has been noted to be a primary beneficiary of this sentiment, particularly from the global community and Russia. For instance, an article published by HQSB on February 7, 2020, referenced a statement by a member of the WHO scientific team, lauding China's commendable transparency during their on-site visit. The WHO scientist noted that "The Chinese side responded to their requests during their personnel visit, demonstrating a surprising level of openness." (Huanqiu Shibao, 2021c)

In response to international criticism accusing China of impeding the global investigation into the virus's origin, *HQSB* leveraged the testimony of the WHO scientist to affirm the Chinese government's transparency. The palpable surprise among foreign observers suggests a deep-rooted bias against the Chinese system, where the Western media's stereotypical depiction of China stands in stark contrast with the reality. Moreover, these surprising reactions support the contention that the investigation of the virus's origin has been politicized on an international scale. Utilizing the credibility of scientific experts, *HQSB* has crafted two contrasting national images. One image casts China as a victim, unjustly vilified and shamed by the West for political purposes relating to the global pandemic, while the other presents China as a competent nation with a transparent and efficient system that outperforms its Western counterparts. In this context, the positive emotional reaction of surprise serves to cultivate national pride among the Chinese population, reinforcing their faith in China's virus containment strategies and socialist political system.

The politics of sadness (particularly disappointment): Imagining a declining US leadership. The emotion of sadness functions in parallel with, and bolsters, the process of demystifying Western society. Within the broader family of "sadness" emotions, disappointment serves as the primary sentiment harnessed by Western countries to reveal inherent societal fractures. For instance, according to an *HQSB* report, the Premier of Ontario, Canada, expressed profound disappointment in the United States due to the Trump administration's decision to halt the exportation of protective masks to Canada by medical equipment manufacturer 3 M. In his statement, Ford remarked "there are no other countries as close as the United States and Canada… I am truly disappointed that the US suddenly suspends the mask supply to Canada… and I think the political trick is unacceptable." This highlights how disappointment functions as a mechanism to expose the deficiencies and divisions within the Western community (Huanqiu Shibao, 2020c) *HQSB* utilizes Ford's public display of disappointment as a means to discredit America's reputation as a reliable partner in international cooperation. By fully displaying Canada's disappointment, *HQSB* effectively delegitimizes American political leadership, casting the US as an egoistic hegemon that lacks compassion for its closest ally and reneges on its commitment to supply public goods during the global pandemic.

Through this method, *HQSB* aims to reduce America's global clout and undermine its capacity to forge and sustain partnerships with other nations. By emphasizing Canada's disappointment, *HQSB* highlights the perceived lack of cooperation and solidarity from the US, thereby reduce America's global clout. This approach effectively contests the US's moral authority and impairs its reputation as a reliable ally, which could potentially result in adverse implications for its relationships with other countries.

Discussion and conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic was a period during which the Chinese government exhibited significant authoritarian resilience, managing to transform public mistrust, grievances, and anger into confidence, solidarity, and even complacency. Our research contends that the emotion management strategies of the CCP are strategically intertwined with nationalistic discourses. We discovered that *HQSB*'s emotional management is underpinned by a binary construction of a "despicable them" and an "innocent us," with the former being represented by the US and the latter being China and its citizens. This dichotomy echoes the Sino-US geopolitical confrontation and represents strategic othering for nation-building purposes.

Our research indicates that *HQSB*'s emotional management is primarily structured by two nationalistic discourses: defensive nationalism and aggressive nationalism. Defensive nationalism seeks to contain public fear and anxiety by fostering a sense of solidarity between the people and the government ("us") against the pandemic virus ("them"). This strategic othering of the virus exploits the fear surrounding it. Chinese nationalistic media distract the public from the government's systemic dysfunction at the initial stage of the pandemic and direct attention toward combating a threatening "other," i.e., the COVID-19 virus. This approach resonates with Zhang's (2022) findings about China's disaster nationalism during the pandemic, intended to engender compliant publics submissive to government control and cooperative with stringent containment measures.

This defensive nationalism operates as a variant of the "positive energy" promotion inherent in Chinese propaganda during public health crises, only seasoned with HQSB's unique jingoistic war metaphors to justify extreme governmental measures. Another pillar of *HQSB*'s defensive nationalism is construed with the emotions of praise and joy. In line with other official propaganda such as *People's Daily*, *Xinhua News*, and *China Daily*, we found that *HQSB* conveys a sense of globalism that championed building a "community with a shared future for humanity" (Yang and Chen, 2021). The only difference rests in *HQSB*'s highlight of foreign voices. Specifically, HQSB appropriates international admiration and gratitude from friendly governments, such as Serbian President Vučić, to bolster political confidence in virus containment measures, the authoritarian rule, and the socialist system with Chinese characteristics.

Aggressive nationalism, compared to defensive nationalism, is a more pronounced tool in HQSB's emotional management campaign, accomplished via strategic othering. By selectively showcasing critical comments from Western politicians, *HQSB* reframes external criticisms against the Chinese political system as concerted hostility driven by geopolitical calculations. The "disgust" emotion projected by Western powers is thus reinterpreted as a strategic containment against China that recalls the collective memory of the "century of humiliation" and calls for collective resistance from the Chinese population (Yu, 2022).

As a news outlet dedicated to international news reporting, *HQSB* uses emotions such as anger, surprise, and disappointment from within Western society to demystify the United States as a model of liberal democracy and a responsible global leader. By tapping into the populist sentiment within Western society characterized by anti-elitism and anti-establishment sentiments (Hameleers, 2019; Homolar and Löfflmann, 2021), the party media exposes the internal divisions and malfunctions of Western democracies during crises, in turn boosting the legitimacy of the CCP's authoritarian rule.

This paper not only explores the intricacies of Chinese propaganda's emotional management mechanisms but also illuminates how these mechanisms are deployed in line with China's geopolitical objectives and in response to its international relations, particularly those with the United States. This contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how international news, especially that pertaining to the US, is converted into domestically relevant propagandistic content in China. The article also furthers the literature on affective governance strategies within Chinese official propaganda during the pandemic, particularly on social media platforms. Future research could delve into the effects of the Chinese government's emotional mobilization during Covid-19 and subsequent public health crises.

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