Social media and the transformation of 'Chinese nationalism': 'Igniting positive energy' in China since the 2012 London Olympics

Author(s): Shanshan Du

Source: Anthropology Today, February 2014, Vol. 30, No. 1 (February 2014), pp. 5-8
Published by: Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/24030463

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms
In the 2012 London Olympics torch relay (19 May - 27 July), the virtual participation of Chinese internet users sparked a grassroots movement of ‘positive energy’ (zhengnengliang). On 4 July, the first references to ‘igniting positive energy’ appeared in two microblogs commenting on the torch relay: ‘Ignite (dianran) positive energy, detonate microcosm (yinbaoxiaoyuzhou)’ and ‘Ignite positive energy, and be chased by good fortune (huanyuan danghuyesu)’. Within three days, an estimated half-a-million internet users posted, reposted, commented, and sent messages on the subject (Baidu).

The explosive effect of this internet meme continued to intensify after the London Olympics. In January 2013, a linguistics journal (Yaowenjiaozai) recognized ‘positive energy’ as China’s number one catchphrase in 2012. The slogan was also ranked number one among the top 10 new phrases of the Chinese media in 2012. Between 4 July 2012 and 31 December 2013, 104,582,080 original messages concerning ‘positive energy’ appeared on Sina Weibo (the most popular microblog site in China) with many more reposts and references on this website alone.

Most internet catchphrases have limited influence among Chinese communities. Yet ‘positive energy’ has demonstrated an extraordinary, transformative power in the socio-political and globalized landscape of China. Chinese internet users have applied this internet meme to a wide range of social and interpersonal contexts, as exemplified by its powerful deployment as a new humanitarian and unifying symbol in the wake of the Lushan earthquake of April 2013. While continuously developed and disseminated via ‘grassroots’, the Chinese government and the official media have also enthusiastically adopted the ‘positive energy’ concept. Remarkably, not only did China’s new leader, Xi Jinping, embrace elements of the concept after being hoisted high into the air with cables and ropes: the Patriotic Education Campaign led by the state (Zhao 1998; Wang 2008), Confucianism-based nationalism (Callahan & Cheung 2012) as manifested in ‘filial patriotism’ (zhong, ‘love of country [China]’).

Social media and the transformation of ‘Chinese nationalism’

In this article, I focus on how the phenomenon of ‘positive energy’ has transformed mainstream ‘Chinese nationalism’. Nationalism in China is often referred to as ‘wounded nationalism’ (Chung 2001) because it is rooted in and inspired by the country’s century-long history of oppression and humiliation between the inception of the Opium War (1839-1942) and the end of the civil war in 1949. During the post-socialist era, popular nationalism in China has been shaped primarily by three interrelated forces: the Patriotic Education Campaign led by the state (Zhao 1998; Wang 2008), Confucianism-based nationalism (Callahan & Cheung 2012) as manifested in ‘filial patriotism’ (Fong 2004), and spontaneous ‘online nationalism’ as marked by fervent reactions to international events perceived as threatening to China’s sovereignty (Shen & Breslin 2010; Tok 2010).

The following sections will demonstrate how the grassroots ‘positive energy’ movement has fostered an emergent pattern of patriotism that has come to co-exist with previous forms of nationalism. I call this new model ‘transcendental patriotism’ because by highlighting the grassroots moral inspiration in globalization China, it simultaneously injects elements of individualism, transnationalism, and universalism into the existing ideal and sentiment of Chinese patriotism (zazuo, ‘love of country [China]’).

gaojian.asp?gaojianID=1329,

xinhuanet.com/travel/2012-7,

http://www.bbc.co.uk/torchrelay/day57.

Theories of the torchbearers may have been shaped by public representation.


17. To date, such an inaccurate account of the intellectual origin of ‘positive energy’ has yet to be questioned, possibly resulting from lack of access to the English edition of this book in China.


22. The profiles of the torchbearers have been associated with inferiority or vulgarity.  

Alimjan Halik was well-known in China as a ‘grassroots philanthropist (caogen cishanxia)’ even though he grew up in a poor Uyghur family in Xinjiang and never completed high school.  

After his demobilization from the army in 2002, he worked for a year at a collective-owned shop in Guizhou province. However, on losing this job for refusing to extort payments from poor residents to whom he had extended credit, he became a vendor selling lamb shashlik (Russian shish kebabs) on the street. Since then, while living a very thrifty lifestyle, he has spent two-thirds of his limited income on supporting hundreds of impoverished students pursuing a college education.

The ‘panda-blood girl’, Chenbing Mao, is another grassroots torchbearer whose story touched numerous internet users. While being limited primarily to the arenas of entertainment and folk culture, caogen has also frequently been associated with inferiority or vulgarity.

By their overwhelmingly preferential support for the 10 ‘grassroots’ individuals who carried the torch in the relay on 14 July — in stark contrast to the sparse attention paid to the ‘elite’ who relayed between May and June — Chinese internet users established a milestone in the history of grassroots development in China. While one of the earliest blogs on 4 July praised ethnic Chinese elites in England, the limelight in the online ‘igniting positive energy’ movement swiftly turned to ‘grassroots’ from China. The internet fervour was driven by the vigorous support (chaping) for the Chinese torchbearers who were categorized as caogen (‘grassroots’), pinmin (‘ordinary people’), or minjian (‘folk’). Among the 8,000 torchbearers of the London Olympics, 18 individuals represented China, of whom 10 were ‘grassroots’ representatives. The enthusiasm of Chinese internet users over ‘positive energy’ reached a new height around 14 July, when these Chinese caogen joined with torchbearers from the UK and other countries to carry the Olympic flame from Bournemouth to Southampton, England.  

Through reposting and commenting on various social media sites, the news about the grassroots torchbearers, which had already been published months before, suddenly gained the spotlight, providing fuel for the grassroots movement. Transcending the state’s exclusive focus on the elite and the spectacular, the ‘igniting positive energy’ movement generated an alternative Chinese national image, where grassroots individuals were promoted as representatives of China for their embodiment of charity, volunteerism, and public service. Coming from very ordinary backgrounds or disadvantaged circumstances, these grassroots torchbearers, had managed to make an extraordinarily positive impact on their local communities or upon people in need, as illustrated by the following examples.  

Chongwen Tao is a legendary racing champion and a miraculous survivor of severe congenital heart disease, from which he had twice been declared clinically dead during his second year of life. He grew up determined to repay society for the many kindnesses shown to his parents as they struggled to save their young son on a very limited income. After he became a taxi driver at the age of 18, he generously offered free rides and assistance to well over 6,000 elderly or sick passengers, sometimes even carrying them up stairs on his back. At the same time, he also bravely helped local police to successfully crack a number of criminal cases, often declining the monetary rewards offered by the victims. Encouraged to do so by one of his passengers, he participated in car racing in 2001. In 2005, he won the S4 China Rally Championship.  

Chongwen Tao is a legendary racing champion and a miracle survivor of severe congenital heart disease, from which he had twice been declared clinically dead during his second year of life. He grew up determined to repay society for the many kindnesses shown to his parents as they struggled to save their young son on a very limited income. After he became a taxi driver at the age of 18, he generously offered free rides and assistance to well over 6,000 elderly or sick passengers, sometimes even carrying them up stairs on his back. At the same time, he also bravely helped local police to successfully crack a number of criminal cases, often declining the monetary rewards offered by the victims. Encouraged to do so by one of his passengers, he participated in car racing in 2001. In 2005, he won the S4 China Rally Championship.  

Alimjan Halik was well-known in China as a ‘grassroots philanthropist (caogen cishanxia)’ even though he grew up in a poor Uyghur family in Xinjiang and never completed high school. After his demobilization from the army in 2002, he worked for a year at a collective-owned shop in Guizhou province. However, on losing this job for refusing to extort payments from poor residents to whom he had extended credit, he became a vendor selling lamb shashlik (Russian shish kebabs) on the street. Since then, while living a very thrifty lifestyle, he has spent two-thirds of his limited income on supporting hundreds of impoverished students pursuing a college education.

The ‘panda-blood girl’, Chenbing Mao, is another grassroots torchbearer whose story touched numerous internet users. As a junior in a vocational-technical school in Hangzhou in 2007, she noticed an online message seeking donors of AB Rh-negative blood, needed to save the life of a pregnant rural woman suffering from a massive haemorrhage in Guizhou province where no blood banks carried this rare type. With no money to spare and no long-distance travel experience, she borrowed from her classmates and embarked on a lone journey of over 3,000 kilometres. Weighing only 97 lb, the then twenty-year-old insisted that the doctor draw 400 ml. of blood, the maximum allowed. Having fainted after only 240 ml. had been drawn, she requested that the doctor complete his procedure just as soon as she regained consciousness.

Inspired by the stories of these caogen torchbearers, Chinese internet users bestowed upon them honours that outshone those accorded to the jingying (elite) at the London Olympics. Most dramatically, while the vast majority of these ‘grassroots’ were far from athletic, they attracted more fans and more ardent cheers from Chinese internet users than the medal winners themselves. The overwhelming support for these grassroots torchbearers was reflected in a multitude of microblog comments, including: ‘People’s eyes are as bright as the snow. Positive energy is in the midst of ordinary people’; and ‘Little people, huge radiance, positive energy!’

In addition to their inspirational stories of ‘little people making a big difference’, most of these torchbearers continued to charm many Chinese internet users by remaining caogen even after they had received domestic or international acclaim. For example, Alimjan Halik continued to sell shashlik even after appearing on CCTV as the winner of the 2011 Touching China Award, and Chenbing Mao held an ordinary job even after being hailed as one of the
Chang, M.H. 2001. Return nation with the elite, these internet users have collectively challenged the extreme marginalization of the caogen. Synchronized with each other in the online grassroots movement, their individual voices became increasingly amplified, eclipsing the monopolizing voice of the state in defining the national image of China. Specifically, competing with the cookie-cutter ideology and moral rhetoric of the state, they collectively promoted a folk theory that attributed the qualification of the 10 ordinary Chinese as Olympic torchbearers to their unique and individual manifestations of ‘positive energy’. As summarized by Baidu, ‘Public opinion holds that it is the value of positive energy glowing from the grassroots torchbearers themselves which has greatly improved their good fortune, bringing them the once-in-a-life-time opportunity to become Olympic torch bearers and to be invited on this glorious journey to far-away London to personally carry the torch’.

Such a belief in the potential for ‘little people’ (xiaorenmen) to generate positive energy, make a difference, and be rewarded with cosmic ‘fortune’ also empowered countless ordinary Chinese individuals to aspire for qi, a traditional Chinese conception of physical, mental, and cosmic energy which has been popularized in the West through the qigong movement in China since the 1980s (Chen 2003; Palmer 2007). In contrast, Chinese folk theories generally attribute the foundation of ‘positive energy’ to positive psychology, which emphasizes the inner potential and strength available to each individual, having positive attitudes which enable them to thrive amidst adversity and bring positive change to the world around them. Specifically, Rip it up: The simple idea that changes everything (Wiseman 2012), a popular book on psychology, was innovatively translated into Chinese as Positive energy and advertised as the world-class master scholarship on the subject (Baidu).

Transnationalism and universalism in ‘trascendental patriotism’

Besides introducing an element of individualism, the ‘positive energy’ movement further transcended mainstream ‘Chinese nationalism’ by immersing transnationalism and universalism in the sentiment and ideal of ‘love of China’ or ‘love of country’ (aigzuo). Such a hybrid model of national pride surpasses the geopolitical and cultural boundaries of nation-state which constitute the ideological, political, and sentimental foundations of nationalism. Notwithstanding its spontaneous nature, the ‘positive energy’ movement was largely shaped by transnational forces in China’s globalized market, especially by Samsung, a multinational conglomerate company headquartered in South Korea. As a major sponsor of the 2012 Olympics, Samsung sponsored its global search for grassroots torchbearers, innumerable internet users proudly identified them as unique and inspiring individuals representing positive images of China on the international stage.

This movement has further transformed ‘Chinese nationalism’ by the indigenization of foreign symbols, blurring the symbolic boundaries between ‘Chinese’ and ‘foreigners’ in particular, and those between ‘us’ and ‘them’ in general. Most dramatically, Chinese internet users creatively emshrined the physical torch of the London Olympics as a mascot and enthusiastically indigenized it as a symbol of ‘positive energy’ and good fortune. As acclaimed as ‘a marvellous spectacular’ in the history of the Olympics’, 5,000 pricey replicas of that torch were quickly snapped-up, mostly to be given away to friends and loved ones in order to uplift their ‘positive energy.’ One internet user commented that, after queuing for an entire week, he/she finally obtained the much sought after object to give to a friend who had been going through extremely tough times, because it was ‘the most inspiring and encouraging gift possible’. After all, ‘the theme of this Olympics happened to be “inspiring a generation” and the Olympic torch had become a symbol of “positive energy” on the internet’.

To a certain extent, the undercurrents of this grassroots movement tend to prefer the transnational over the national, as manifested in the development of folk theories of ‘positive energy’ after the Olympics. On rare occasions, positive ‘energy’ (nengliang) was identified with positive qi, a traditional Chinese conception of physical, mental, moral, and cosmic energy which has been popularized in the West through the qigong movement in China since the 1980s (Chen 2003; Palmer 2007). In contrast, Chinese folk theories generally attribute the foundation of ‘positive energy’ to positive psychology, which emphasizes the inner potential and strength available to each individual, having positive attitudes which enable them to thrive amidst adversity and bring positive change to the world around them. Specifically, Rip it up: The simple idea that changes everything (Wiseman 2012), a popular book on psychology, was innovatively translated into Chinese as Positive energy and advertised as the world-class master scholarship on the subject (Baidu).

Transnational engagement in this movement reached a new height eight months later, when the Hollywood movie Iron Man 3 was released in China through TCL Corporation, a Chinese multinational electronics company.11 Entitled ‘You are my hero’, a website created by TCL in April 2013 aimed to provide an ‘interactive platform to spread “positive energy”’ by inviting Chinese internet users to recommend grassroots (moral) heroes around them. Promoting the movie by connecting its superhero with the ‘positive energy’ of Chinese grassroots, the pictures of some of the caogen individuals were posted side-by-side with the image of Iron Man on billboard advertisements placed in bus stations and other public places. Many grassroots heroes (pinmin yingxiong) ‘played the leading role’ at the premiere ceremony held in Beijing on 2 May 2013. By placing grassroots at the centre of such a privileged and spectacular social space normally dominated by movie superstars, this marked an unprecedented step in the globalized film industry of China. Similar to the popularity of the 2012 London Olympic torch, the connection between Chinese grassroots heroes and the Hollywood figure, Iron Man, also signified the immersion of the pride of Chinese identity within the globalized and transnational space of China.
In the ‘positive energy’ movement, universalism goes hand in hand with transnationalism. By promoting a de-politicized ideal of moral universalism, ‘positive energy’ further transcends conventional nationalism, which centers on the geopolitical and cultural divisions between groups. While hailing the grassroots torchbearers as individuals representing the pride of China, Chinese internet users focused on the universalistic values they embodied: ‘They are embracing/embodying by their actions the big love of humanity (renyuan da ai), and annotating with their own exemplary behavior the value of truth (zheng), kindness (shun), and beauty (mei) in life. The value of positive energy emanating from these torch bears bestows positive energy upon the entire society, pressing for social morals to move in a positive and healthy direction’. Notably, moral universalism tends to outweigh ‘Chineseness’. Corresponding to the marginalization of the Chinese concept qi, discussions concerning the moral ideals of ‘positive energy’ have also downplayed their association with Chinese religious philanthropy (Jankowiak 2004; Lali bert et al. 2011), which promotes similar ideals of humanistic love and caring.

A strong emphasis on moral universalism in the ‘positive energy’ movement sharply distinguishes itself from populism, which tends to interwine radical nationalism with grassroots resentment against the elite. From its inception, this online movement tended to bridge the gap between the grassroots and the elite, rather than polarizing and politicizing their divisions. In fact, one of the earliest ‘positive energy’ messages actually called for online support of the two (ethnic) Chinese torchbearers chosen by their local communities back in the UK: ‘Ignite positive energy so that more elite (jingying) with state for solutions to its mounting predicaments, the emergent social categories of “positive energy” and “grassroots” have been incorporated into mainstream media and into the Chinese government as well. The socio-political potential of internet technology (Zhou 2006; Yang 2009), the influence and flexibility of the Chinese state (Ong & Zhang 2008), and the diversity among Chinese internet users, manifested in the ‘positive energy’ movement, constitute significant subjects worthy of further investigation.

Notably, the moral universalism in this movement is embedded in what I call ‘hybrid cosmo-psychology’, in which the ‘scientific’ appeal of positive psychology is mixed with that of new age spirituality, traditional Chinese religions, and Christianity. In the overwhelming rhetoric of moral decay in an age of steep profits and shallow relationships amidst radical social change (Yan 2011), the ‘positive energy’ movement offers many Chinese a symbolic space for healing, re-connectedness, refreshment, and empowerment. According to Baidu, China’s Wikipedia, ‘At this point, the Chinese people label as “positive energy” any individuals or events that are positive, exuberant, inspiring, empowering, and hopeful. It has become ... a remarkably meaningful symbol, deeply attached to our emotions, serving to express our yearnings and hopes’. As it has emerged in the larger social context of increasing protests against corruption and injustice, the ‘positive energy’ movement offers a moral and psycho-cosmic perspective to the almost exclusive focus on political economy in the ongoing debate over the multi-layered crises of rapidly-changing China. Without any coherent ideology and political agenda, the grassroots rhetoric of ‘positive energy’ tends to reject violence in interpersonal, domestic, and international interactions. Accordingly, such pacifist voices are often ignored by both the liberals and the Maoists in their fierce online battles. The number of microblog messages concerning ‘positive energy’ dropped startlingly during the summer of 2013, when “the energy of violence and sickness” (lizhi) in both the social media and in real life struck China with shock (see Fig. 6). Nevertheless, the societal significance of cultivating ‘positive energy’ continues to increase as the popularity of this internet meme serves as a weather vane indicating Chinese public sentiment towards the rapid transformation of morality and interpersonal connectedness in the country.

**Concluding remarks**

The online movement to ‘ignite positive energy’ in China emerged from the massive and fervent support for the Chinese grassroots torchbearers during the 2012 London Olympics. By expanding and transforming the Chinese category of ‘grassroots’ (caogen), the active and powerful participation of Chinese internet users provided an alternative model for making national images of China. This grassroots-oriented movement has generated a ‘transcendental Chinese patriotism’, in which patriotism is intertwined with individualism, transnationalism, and universalism. The ideal and sentiment of this hybrid Chinese patriotism stands in stark contrast to mainstream ‘Chinese nationalism’, which has been characterized by scholars as various forms of reactive collectivism derived from state authority, Confucian tradition, and the wounded memories of China’s recent history.

Beyond transforming Chinese nationalism, the grassroots movement of ‘igniting positive energy’ has also been effective in shaping the socio-political landscape of China. Being identified with cosmo-psychological molestics that can bring about constructive transformation to both individuals and to the society as a whole, ‘positive energy’ offers a discourse of hope to many ordinary Chinese citizens frustrated by the myriad of societal and environmental crises encountered in China today. Echoing the search of the post-socialist state for solutions to its mounting predicaments, the emergent social categories of ‘positive energy’ and ‘grassroots’ have been incorporated into mainstream media and into the Chinese government as well. The socio-political potential of internet technology (Zhou 2006; Yang 2009), the influence and flexibility of the Chinese state (Ong & Zhang 2008), and the diversity among Chinese internet users, manifested in the ‘positive energy’ movement, constitute significant subjects worthy of further investigation.

**Notes**


4. Kleinman, A. et al. (2005). “At this point, the Chinese people label as “positive energy” any individuals or events that are positive, exuberant, inspiring, empowering, and hopeful. It has become ... a remarkably meaningful symbol, deeply attached to our emotions, serving to express our yearnings and hopes”. As it has emerged in the larger social context of increasing protests against corruption and injustice, the ‘positive energy’ movement offers a moral and psycho-cosmic perspective to the almost exclusive focus on political economy in the ongoing debate over the multi-layered crises of rapidly-changing China. Without any coherent ideology and political agenda, the grassroots rhetoric of ‘positive energy’ tends to reject violence in interpersonal, domestic, and international interactions. Accordingly, such pacifist voices are often ignored by both the liberals and the Maoists in their fierce online battles. The number of microblog messages concerning ‘positive energy’ dropped startlingly during the summer of 2013, when “the energy of violence and sickness” (lizhi) in both the social media and in real life struck China with shock (see Fig. 6). Nevertheless, the societal significance of cultivating ‘positive energy’ continues to increase as the popularity of this internet meme serves as a weather vane indicating Chinese public sentiment towards the rapid transformation of morality and interpersonal connectedness in the country.

**Figure 5.** Chenbing Mao, the ‘panda-blood’ girl, at the Olympics torch relay.

**Figure 6.** Number of Sina microblogs containing ‘positive energy’ between 1/1/2010 and 31/12/2013.