Editorial and Critical Reflections on the future of identity moments and social media in China and beyond

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Abstract
This Special Issue of Global Media and China responds in part to Stuart Hall’s famous 1996 invocation, ‘Who needs identity?’ – to study ‘specific enunciative strategies’ utilized within ‘specific modalities of power’ so as to consider identity discourses of the present and of the future. This issue draws upon empirical observations presented and debated at the 2019 Chinese Internet Research Conference held in Singapore in May 2019, as well as theoretical contributions in identity politics and social media, the chosen site or ‘modality of power’. This editorial and critical essay reflects upon, complemented and supported by the papers in this issue, the critical and conceptual frameworks that are emerging to critique the global and local complexities, diversity and dynamics resulting from the deeper integration of social media into the everyday lives of Chinese Internet users. It presents an overview of the 2019 Chinese Internet Research Conference proceedings in terms of how social media is used to wrap personal politics into a widening range of identity groupings around gender, class, citizens, pop culture and religion in ways that signal the future of newer forms of identity politics among Internet users in China. Since social media posts and exchanges, while geographically sourced and situated, often transcend their boundaries, the arguments presented here goes beyond China and are global. The shareability of identity mediated by individual, state and public discourses on social and ‘anti-social’ media during the COVID-19 pandemic within China, Singapore and Australia leads to novel ways of understanding identity politics in globalizing China and strategic uses of Chinese identity.

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**Introduction: identity discourses**

Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and are thus more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity – an ‘identity’ in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation). (Hall, 1996, p. 4; parentheses in original)

The late Stuart Hall, widely regarded as one of the pioneers of cultural theory, authored perhaps one of the most influential essays dealing with the subject of identity back in 1996 (in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Hall & du Gay, 1996). Simply entitled ‘Introduction: Who Needs ‘Identity’?’, Hall (1996) argued convincingly that identities are ‘increasingly fragmented and fractured’, and they are ‘never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices, and positions’ (p. 4). Above all, they are ‘subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation’ (Hall, 1996). Hall’s key message, which resonated with many global media and cultural studies scholars since, was that identities are constituted within, not outside of the sphere of representation. It follows therefore that to make sense of identity (or identities, in plural), we need to look at specific historical and institutional sites to ascertain and make sense of how, when, where and why identities form and emerge.

This Special Issue of *Global Media and China* responds in part to Hall’s (1996) invocation – cited in the opening quote to this editorial article – to study ‘specific enunciative strategies’ utilized within ‘specific modalities of power’ so as to consider identity discourses of the present and of the future. This issue draws upon empirical observations presented and debated at the 2019 Chinese Internet Research Conference (CIRC 2019) held in Singapore in May 2019, as well as theoretical contributions in identity politics and social media, which is the chosen site or ‘modality of power’ in this instance. Specifically, this editorial article, complemented and supported by the papers in this issue, seeks to provide critical and conceptual frameworks to critique the global and local complexities, diversity and dynamics resulting from the deeper integration of social media into the everyday lives of Chinese Internet users. It presents an overview of the CIRC 2019 proceedings in terms of how social media is used to wrap personal politics into a widening range of identity groupings around gender, class, citizens, pop culture and religion in ways that signal the future of newer forms of identity politics among Internet users in China. Since social media posts and exchanges, while geographically sourced and situated, often transcend their boundaries, the arguments presented here goes beyond China and are global.

Globally, 57% of people are now connected to the Internet, with Internet users spending more time on social media than on other digital activities in 2019 (Kemp, 2019). With more than two-thirds of the planet using mobile phones, we live in digital, networked societies (Castells, 2000) in which people are ‘permanently online’ (Turkle, 2008). Internet-enabled social media platforms are communicative, open and participatory, support communities and provide connectivity for people across cultures, national borders and markets (Siapera, 2018). Connected by new media platforms, Internet users form, engage and actively participate in virtual communities in a variety of ways.
(Rice & Fuller, 2013). Internet users communicate their individual and group identities online, create and share digital media and manage their relations with diverse others online in ways that may extend or differ from their sociality in offline settings, cultures and national identities (see Birnie & Horvath, 2002; Hung, 2002).

Under the larger – and arguably primaevan – discourse of identity, some Internet studies scholars explore the fluid nature of self-identity (e.g. rise of selfie culture; Couldry’s (2012) notion of ‘presencing’), such as gender, and ethnic identity that reproduce or challenge traditional social hierarchies (Senft & Noble, 2013; Wajcman, 2010); and also, new forms of sociality (e.g. computer-mediated social communication) and virtual communities (Calhoun, 2002). Others focus on diasporic uses in Western societies (e.g. Parker & Song, 2007; Siapera, 2007) or participatory media of fans in the West (e.g. Jenkins et al., 2013) and in China (Zhang & Mao, 2013). However, few studies touch on how social media use affects these aspects of identity, social relations and participation in larger, loosely networked social movements among Chinese netizens.

For this Special Issue that emerged out of the 17th Chinese Internet Research Conference held in Singapore on 28 June 2019, we seek to plug this critical ‘identity’ gap. We examine the impact of Chinese users’ engagement with social media tools and apps that speak to the discourse of identity formation, movements and community interactions, particularly among contemporary Chinese and diasporic Chinese communities. There are two reasons for this, both of which are historically and institutionally grounded (Hall, 1996). First, China’s rising global economic power and dominance in information and communications technology (ICT) industries make it pertinent to study digital cultures emerging in China (Zhang, 2016). It is a rapidly developing country that has embraced new ICT and social media technologies across the country in less than two decades, which is a relatively short period of time. The Chinese state’s cultivation of a giant ‘walled garden’ of Internet infrastructure has provided an impetus and incentive for growing Chinese social media platforms and apps such as RenRen, Wechat, Weibo, Douban, Sohu, TikTok that are an alternative universe to Western-dominated technology and new media giants Facebook and Google, in the global Internet space outside of China. This mirrors the Chinese IT industry’s growing leadership in building 5G infrastructure and networks, as well as a host of other digital communication technologies globally. Second, China as a society is going through dramatic changes due to the political, economic and technological shifts the country is experiencing (which is now poised to intensify in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic that swept through the world in the first half of 2020).

Early predictions are that China’s Internet users will continue to increase their average daily time spent from 3 hours 25 minutes to more than 4 hours in 2021 (Dolliver, 2019). However, with the unexpected impact of COVID-19 pandemic, globally, extraordinary levels of information and media content are flowing through all communication channels including social media engagement increasing by 61% and web browsing rising to 70% (KANTAR Media, 2020). Web users have forcibly become accustomed to working from home, learning online and navigating new iterations of e-commerce services. In other words, much of their daily experiences will be mediated through Internet activities on multiple screens. This increased multi-screen time is expected to magnify existing tensions and complications wrought by juxtaposing their past and the present memories, traditional and the modern modes of influence and social relations, exemplified in part via a Chinese versus global cultures online discourse. This provides an opportunity for us to examine the contrasts and similarities that Chinese and diasporic Chinese online communities have on the formation of Chinese identities, group behaviours and distinctively online Chinese communities. Rich insights into emerging social movements, Chinese fandoms, new ‘micro-celebrities’ and digital sub-cultures may illuminate new ways of thinking and seeing China and Chinese cultures and deepen understanding diasporic notions of ‘Chinese-ness’ in places outside of China. Hence,
while the papers featured in this issue may be China-centric, their identity implications of ‘sameness’ extend far beyond just China.

The papers included in this Special Issue understand social media platforms, apps and tools from the audiences’, users’ and participants’ perspectives, rather than at a technological level. This is important because discourses of identities and identity movements are generated by human interactions and enunciations; they do not reside in technologies per se. Each of the papers presented in this volume tackle the challenge of identifying what the real-time features of China’s evolving digital cultures are and seek to better understand Chinese Internet users as online communities, (inter)active audiences and critical meaning-makers.

Social media and identity movements: issues emerging from the papers

This Special Issue examines how virtual communities and new ‘social movements’ use China’s social media apps to galvanize civic participation and influence social relations as a form of identity discourse to address their aspirations, anxieties and fears. It interrogates how ‘Digital China’ (Schneider, 2018) is complex and constantly changing in terms of how Chinese Internet audiences use digital technologies to respond strategically to global social changes from those reflecting more conservative to more liberal worldviews.

Examining the nature of virtual communities in digital China, the first paper takes on a gender-based push for modernity in the #MeToo feminist space in China, coupled with digital capitalism (see Han, 2018; Wang & Driscoll, 2019). While many attributed the contemporary #MeToo movement to the landmark revelation of the sexual harassment, assault and abuse of women to the prosecution of the infamous Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, the phrase has its origins in 2006 on social media (Grady, 2020). It was created by an African-American activist Tamara Burke who encountered many young ordinary American women who had been subjected to sexual abuse and exploitation by men (Olheiser, 2017). However, gender exploitation can develop in surprisingly complex ways. In the paper, ‘The Big Women: A Textual Analysis of Chinese Viewers’ Perception towards Femvertising Vlogs’, Duan Xu evaluates viewers’ perception of female vloggers’ authenticity on social media against the backdrop of a consumption-based ‘attention economy’ in China. Video blogging – commonly referred to as ‘vlogging’ – is a type of self-recorded short video that documents people’s daily lives that has become an emerging form of digital cultural production on social media platforms in China. Small groups of vloggers have taken to becoming ‘new-rich’ micro-celebrities, also known as influencers in other social media contexts, by developing a following of viewers who identify with their lifestyles and aesthetics. This study helps us understand how Chinese viewers make sense of vlogs that perpetuate the myth of female (self-)empowerment through consumption on sites like Weibo. Among other things, it argues that many of these vlogs enunciate a symbolic, yet ephemeral, form of relationship between content creators, brands and consumers who claim to promote women empowerment. This paper reflects a more pro-active, nuanced understanding of Chinese social media users’ own subjectivities of conformity and individualism, playing on elements that are common but important in gender politics.

Virtual communities mediate the effects of pop culture as online groups use digital technologies to play and share their social affiliations (e.g. Zhang & Zhang, 2015). Through consuming content about entertainment celebrities, religion and expensive cars, the community members’ digital media use affects their attitudes and behaviour towards other Internet users. The papers that follow
examine the identity politics around motivations, uses and challenges faced by these Chinese social media ‘produsers’ (Bruns, 2007, p. 2) to define and contest the boundaries around their online activities. The second paper is a comparative analysis of Chinese and Russian social media posts entitled ‘Online Scrutiny of People with “Nice Cars: A Comparative Analysis of Chinese, Russian, and Anglo-American Outrage”’, co-authored by Qian Huang, Rashid Gabdulhakov and Daniel Trottier. The paper shows how online community criticism of Internet users posting ‘nice cars’ on various social platforms leads to both similarities and contrasting online viewpoints. Such outcomes are made possible by increasing media platform connectedness, and the ubiquity of mobile recording devices, allowing social media users to conduct near-constant mutual scrutiny. Such mediated scrutiny sometimes escalates to public denunciations online and even mediated or embodied interventions and digital vigilantism (Trottier, 2017). A recurring theme of such scrutiny can be observed not only on Chinese social media, but also on social media in Russia and elsewhere, in which hostility is openly expressed towards people with ‘nice’ (i.e. late model, luxury, foreign) cars. In these cases, nice cars are not merely a ‘fact’ provided by participants in their denunciations; they also serve as an implication of the privileges the owners might possess, such as capital, status and social connections. One of the strengths of this piece is in the juxtapositioning of cases in China against other geopolitical contexts to examine how online scrutiny is expressed and used to regulate and moderate against perceived attempts to assert social-economic hierarchies online. Included in this paper are comparative analyses of media content and public discourses on the subject on platforms such as Sina Weibo (China), YouTube (Russia) and Facebook (United Kingdom; Australia; Canada; United States). The research demonstrates the various forms of critical and populist sentiments that are shaped by unique socio-cultural identities and political contexts, and how they share both commonalities and differences in expressions of identities.

Extending popular culture into fandom of an esoteric realm, the third paper in this issue – ‘Social media, religion and shifting boundaries in globalizing China’ by Sng Bee Bee and Francis Lee – takes an innovative approach to the study of the social media use, religion and China. It examines how and why religious communities use social media and the Internet to share various issues surrounding religion in China. Importantly, it considers the responses to the formation of online religious communities or perhaps socio-religious networking sites. This study engages participants to discuss the components of such identities – akin to applying the discourse of ‘presencing’ (a la Couldry, 2012) – of such a sense of belonging, communication and interaction as well as norms, beliefs and conformity in the online group. As the authors contend in their paper, the use of social media and the Internet for religious purposes also raises several socio-cultural and practical issues. First, it gives rise to the debate around how the actual contours of private and secular boundaries are drawn, particularly since lines are blurred or not distinct in the online space. In social networking sites, users typically move seamlessly in talking about various issues like politics and current affairs, with religion included when it is conveyed as a form of popular culture. In communicating about their beliefs, along with associated social and cultural activities, members of these social media and networking sites ultimately seek to construct group solidarity and forge their identities.

Sng and Lee’s paper leads us back to an examination of how public opinion in social media spaces is sustained by discussions in more traditional media channels. The fourth paper, entitled ‘The “Implied Truth, Complementary Media Practices and Successful Atomized Activism in China” by Xi Yipeng, discusses how Chinese social media, along with traditional media, acts as a complementary space for voicing citizen opinions and mobilizing social support. In doing so,
social media interventions facilitate the mobilization of participants at the initial stages of collective and atomized activism, which conforms to research that shows that social media has great potential for collective mobilization by lowering the costs of information acquisition and participation. However, the paper cautions against thinking that the popularity of social media renders mass media irrelevant to collective mobilization, even though mass media are often regarded as government mouthpieces, especially in authoritarian contexts. To investigate the roles of social media and mass media on collective mobilization, the paper analyses a citizen self-mobilization (CSM) case in Guangzhou, China, through in-depth interviews to conceptualize the interconnected relationship between social media and mass media from the perspective of resource mobilization. Instructively, the paper reveals that it is the in-depth reporting, and subsequent meaning-making, by the mainstream mass media that sustains the discussion of social issues, and gives the CSM as a movement its own discursive identity.

The four papers, along with this editorial research article, critically engage with the broader theme looking at ‘the future of social media and identity movements in China and beyond’. They combine to offer glimpses to a critical and conceptual framework to critique the global and local complexities, diversity and dynamics resulting from the deeper integration of social media into the everyday lives of Chinese Internet users. Reading these pieces aid our understanding of how social media is and can be used to wrap personal politics into a widening range of identity groupings around gender, class, citizenship, pop culture and religion, in ways that signal the future of newer forms of identity politics among Internet users in China, and beyond.

To be sure, there are myriad ways that Chinese people, as media proxies for people from many other countries and cultures, are able to enunciate their Internet and social media preferences to stake their social, cultural and political identities. What we can see in the selection of papers are that each reveals a piece of the emerging digital mediascapes of online communities in a Chinese digital culture that is locally ascribed, but also rapidly globalizing. The common and critical thread emerging from the various research projects is that the experiences of social media users in China often mirror those that lie beyond China. Indeed, we find that many Chinese users are adopting practices online that are similar to globalizing cultures of neoliberal capitalism, and data surveillance that Western social media participation brings (Boyd, 2015; Trottier, 2012). From using digital technologies and social media platforms to influencing political participation, to shifting attitudes towards gender and religious representation, conspicuous consumption and audience responses to celebrities and stars online, this Special Issue demonstrates the breadth and depth of how Chinese social media platforms can re-order and re-regulate society through re-constructing identities. Moreover, based on empirical data collected from Chinese Internet users, this issue further illustrates how human anxieties, desires for community engagement and social forces can shape various Internet applications and uses and expand their influences. When this happens, new forms of identity movements would emerge and once again transform and challenge our notions of identity. In response to Stuart Hall’s question from back in 1996, ‘Who needs identity?’, we all do. As the concluding section that follows would suggest, we are sparked to defend ‘identity’ when called upon to do so.

**Shareability of identity in COVID-19**

In the social media-infused world that all of us inhabit in the current era, where a range of identities – from personal, to social and national – are presented, performed, shared and shaped continuously
by a variety of state and non-state actors, we are prompted to ask what has social media provided that is social, and perhaps, anti-social? Or in the context of this article, we seek to begin interrogating what we might refer to as the shareability of identity. Indeed, the Web 2.0 social cognitive tools of sharing on social networking sites – such as the use of Facebook ‘like’, Twitter ‘re-tweet’, emoticons and virtual stamps on Instagram, Weibo and TikTok, virtual polls, crowdsourcing and more – can all be used to exchange ideas, create use-values, maintain communities and work together (see Fuchs, 2014). But at the same time, social media tools are actively used – and increasingly algorithmically driven – to not only frame and reframe news stories but also seek to influence users’ attitudes towards current affairs and social issues, either in negative or positive ways, or sometimes a combination of both. In the process of participating in social media discourse, many users end up sharing views that either overemphasize their identity status or do not accurately reflect their identities at all. For example, China Internet studies scholar Florian Schneider (2018) argues that it can be problematic when Chinese social media users raise sensitive issues mixing race, ethnicity and nationalism on their anti-Japanese posts, stoking flames of racism, framed as expressions of personal, identity politics online.

At the time of putting together this Special Issue (in the first half of 2020), the Novel Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), subsequently named COVID-19 by the World Health Organization (WHO) in February 2020, began to infect most parts of the world. The popular consensus in January 2020 was that the onset of the virus came from wet markets in Wuhan, China, which traded in live wildlife. News and media reports intensified rapidly thereafter, resulting in China, as a collective whole, being branded and seen as the epicentre of a global pandemic. It was not long before questions and representations of identity – specifically Chinese identity – took hold in many parts of the world, many of them taking place and emerging from social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. It would not be too far off to suggest that the Chinese identity discourse has become somewhat embedded within the very mention of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The progressive fallout of COVID-19 meant that most countries have had to respond to the health crisis by limiting physical movements, especially in most major cities around the world. By the time lockdowns, both fully and partially depending on government edicts, were instituted in most parts of the world, the health crisis morphed into an economic crisis which affected most major economies around the world from April 2020 onwards. During this time, identity politics began to rear its ugly head when words about physical and verbal assaults of anyone who looks remotely ‘Chinese’ – but may instead be of Korean, Filipino, even South Asian, descent – began circulating online. Identity discourses thus became extremely shareable online because they had the effect of either sparking outrage or reinforcing social stereotypes. When categorically labelled in a negative manner online, such toxic news stories and social media posts end up exacerbating the already difficult COVID-19 health crisis. Opportunistic web users would even seek to exert petty or grandiose notions of social justice, feeding upon online conspiracy theories by trying to link the virus to bioweaponry experiments emanating from Mainland China. While many have simply denounced these as ‘fake news’, these examples of anti-social behaviours that usually begin online are effectively spawned by negative discourses of Chinese identity, most of them having taken shape well before the COVID-19 pandemic struck.

As early as in January 2020, mainstream media outlets in Australia began calling out racist attitudes against people of Chinese descent. The Australian multicultural broadcaster, Special Broadcasting Services (SBS), reported on 31 January 2020 how Chinese-Australians were witnessing increased levels of hostility and overt racist behaviours since the coronavirus outbreak began
This took place at a time when the pandemic was not yet declared global, and when there were 8100 known cases globally, with 170 deaths and a mere nine confirmed cases in Australia. This was also a moment of identity consciousness, with many Chinese-Australians, some of whom were Australia-born and have not lived in Asia, beginning to articulate their fears over being out in public places. Indeed, the SBS news report also made the point that such identity-based racism was also found in places like Japan and Singapore. In Japan, a shop in the town of Hakone prompted an apology from tourism authorities after it posted a sign reading, ‘No Chinese are allowed to enter the store. I do not want to spread the virus’. In Singapore, over 100,000 citizens and permanent residents signed an online petition calling for the government to ban Chinese nationals from entering the country (which they did by mid-February) (Young, 2020).

It was telling, however, that while there were online comments, digital vigilantism and apologies issued during this period of time, formal or official condemnations were few and far between. As a result, anti-China sentiments (which are problematic in the first place) morphed into anti-Chineseness, which in turn became lumped into a convenient anti-Asian identity discourse. Most of these encounters either took place within social media, or were enunciated on social media, sparking exchanges that were mostly hurtful and unedifying, but they are nevertheless highly instructive in demonstrating the fact that identity movements and discourses of representations have always been critical, and are just as significant on social media, even if they seem out of sight and out of mind.

It was not until April 2020 when Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison explicitly condemned racist abuse levelled at Chinese-Australians in an interview with SBS News (Mason, 2020). On 15 April 2020, one day after the Prime Minister made those comments, disturbing video footage of two girls ‘of Asian descent’ being yelled at and physically attacked by two other women began circulating on various social media sites; one of the girls was seen being dragged to the ground by her hair, kicked and beaten, in what appeared to be a racially motivated attack which took place near the Queen Victoria Markets in Melbourne, Australia (Ayling, 2020). It was subsequently reported that the victims of racial and identity abuse were ethnically Chinese from Malaysia and Singapore, respectively. The Singapore tabloid The New Paper became the first overseas newspaper to report this matter 5 days later, on 20 April 2020, expressly referring to the violent confrontation as a ‘racist attack’. It was noted that Melbourne’s Channel Nine News reported that the students were also told to ‘go back to China’ and were attacked when they responded to the taunts (Sun, 2020). As this particular incident was seen as a crime that affected on the identity consciousness not just of being a Chinese national (which both victims were not), but also of the risk of being identified as such, it became one of the most widely reported racist episodes during the COVID-19 pandemic, certainly within the Asian region.

This issue sparked sufficient outrage that a series of comments and condemnations began to emerge within Australia, with the following sets of official statements made by various authorities and associations crowding further discussions and debates on the matter:

- **Victoria Police** condemned the act and moved very quickly to arrest and charge a 21-year-old Melbourne woman in relation to the case.
- **The University of Melbourne’s Vice Chancellor Duncan Maskell** identified the victims as international students of the University and condemned the attack: ‘This is a disgusting and unprovoked attack on two of our female students. These senseless and vicious attacks on two young women must never be tolerated in our community. The people who did this are a disgrace’ (Sun, 2020).
Singapore’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) issued a statement on 19 April 2020 that it was aware of the latest incident, and that the Singapore High Commission in Canberra was already in touch with the Singaporean student to render consular assistance. The MFA added that ‘the High Commission is also reaching out to local authorities to ensure the incident is investigated and dealt with in accordance with the law’ (cited in Sun, 2020).

The Malaysia and Singapore Society of Australia (MASSA) was the first scholarly association – and appropriately so, given that the two victims were Malaysian and Singaporean, respectively – to issue a statement condemning the act. The full statement, issued on MASSA’s social media (Facebook) page, even offered a recollection of the incident as follows: ‘MASSA expresses our concern that there has been an increase in overt racism against Asians and Asian international students in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. On 15 April 2020, two “ethnic Chinese” international students were racially abused and assaulted on Elizabeth Street in Melbourne. This racially-motivated attack was reported by newspapers and television stations in Australia and Singapore, including *The Age*, *Seven News*, *ABC News*, *SBS News*, *The Straits Times* and *The New Paper*. The incident was largely reported as an attack on “Chinese students” but both of them are actually ethnic Chinese students from Malaysia and Singapore. This unwarranted attack on the two students on the basis of their ethnicity is not acceptable in a country that emphasizes its multicultural character. Asian-background students – whether international students or Australian – should in no circumstances be threatened in such a way. International students come to Australia not only to study but to experience and appreciate living in this great country. We condemn the irresponsible and racially-motivated attack on the two students. We trust the police will fully investigate this incident’.

The Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA) issued a statement on 7 May 2020 which took specific note of ‘recent reports of attacks and intimidation directed against people of Asian backgrounds in Australia in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the attribution of blame by some people to Chinese and, by extension, all Asian people, for the virus’. The ASAA undertook a historical approach in framing its condemnation of racism and prejudice by enunciating how such ‘blaming of people of Asian background for a global pandemic recalls long histories of racism and exclusion in Australia’. The President of ASAA, Edward Aspinall, as signatory to the statement declared, ‘As an Association whose members work towards achieving greater understanding of Asian societies in Australia, we affirm our absolute commitment to opposition to all forms of racism and discrimination, and deplore these incidents. Such attacks have no place in a tolerant and inclusive society such as we seek to build in Australia. Racism is deplorable under any circumstance but is particularly damaging at a time of global crisis when people of good will are called upon to work together to confront our common challenges. Noting that some of these incidents have been directed at students from Asian countries, we express our particular support for international students and the role they play as a vital and positive part of Australia’s higher education system and community. The Association calls upon all members, universities, relevant authorities and members of the wider community to stand against racism and to work together in pursuit of an inclusive and diverse society’.

Perhaps, the most noteworthy response by the Australian Asian community was an online petition titled ‘Denounce racist attacks on Asian-Australians: #UnityOverFear during Covid-19’ which was launched on the popular website change.org on 14 April 2020.
Chinese Australian Forum (CAF), a non-partisan body established in 1985 to provide the Chinese community with a voice in the Australian political process, and it sagaciously utilizes the shareability of identity and of social media to mobilize Asians in Australia, and arguably elsewhere, to call out for social and political action against anti-Asian – and therefore, anti-Chinese – sentiments. Within a month of its launch, the petition – itself a form of identity movement that is enhanced by social media – had recorded more than 55,000 signatures.

When the Australian Asian community responded to the anti-Chinese-ness that bears ethnical, cultural and historical underpinnings, the audiences, users and participants of the Internet in Mainland China almost synchronized these events into their own identity discourse and movements, which showed a strong nationalist twist. ‘The fragmented and fractured’ identities seemed to be organized, at least momentarily, under the heightened consciousness of being a (both politically and culturally) Chinese. Besides reporting the attacks, condemning the predators, sympathizing with the victims and confirming the identity loyalty, some social media discourses went overboard to fabricate fake news to advocate for nationalist sentiments (Huang, 2020). The specific historical and institutional sites of Chinese social media, as revealed by the papers in this Special Issue, help to understand this nationalist movement in virtual communities during the pandemic. Social media content creators (see Xu, this issue) perpetuated consumption (of both physical goods and immaterial products) through forming a para-social relationship with their audiences. The emergence of nationalist content in Chinese social media partially followed this logic – the content was sold to the audiences as a product that makes them feel good about their nationalist identity, especially when the identity faced severe external challenges. The lines between multiple identities are indeed blurred in the online space, as suggested by Sng and Lee’s (this issue) piece. Religious identity could be discussed as a form of popular culture. Nationalist identity could be presented as a piece of fan object, in which fans (or Chinese citizens) invest their passion and money. However, what distinguishes the blurring of identity boundaries during this pandemic is the high shareability between social media and mass media discourses. As Xi (this issue) argued, without the reporting and meaning-making by mass media, the discussion of a certain social issue (e.g. nationalist movement) cannot be sustained. The ‘blame game’ between Chinese official voices and the United States (Boxwell, 2020) was widely covered by both Chinese social media and mass media, with an emphasis on ridiculing the American side. The mutual scrutiny was largely mediated by the Internet, as evidenced in how spokesmen from both governments used Twitter to lay their blames. Such mediated scrutiny (see Huang et al., this issue) was done by social media participants too; but the scrutiny was by no means balanced and comprehensive. Rather, the scrutinized information was often truncated and interpreted to fit into the existing ‘enunciative strategies’ and ‘modalities of power’ in the local contexts.

Conclusion

It would be remiss for us to conclude this editorial article in a negative light because identity discourses can be very positively social too. In a positive turn online during the COVID-19 pandemic, ‘feel good’ news stories, and social media posts – especially those paying tribute to health professionals, cleaners and other front-line workers battling the health pandemic – have swung to the other extreme, promoting online solidarity, displacing racial divisions with other forms of identity. In particular, humour, satire, inspirational and personal stories play on our identity politics on social media as well, connecting with web users’ daily realities, projecting citizens’ hopes, frustrations and feelings in a positive, reaffirming way.
After Wuhan and other Chinese cities were featured in the online news media with balcony-singing, midnight karaoke sessions cheering their citizens on, other major cities like Hong Kong, Italy and London followed suit. In Singapore, ground-up initiatives inspired by social media posts saw a British expatriate Martin Verga, who has been living in Singapore for a decade, successfully organize a ‘Clap For #SGUnited’ mass-applause event on 30 March 2020 via Facebook. He had been inspired by a similar event in the United Kingdom, #ClapforNHS, which saw millions of Britons, including Prime Minister Boris Johnson, applauding National Health Service staff (Goh, 2020).

A less officious version of such online movements is the popular Singaporean comic blogger turned YouTuber ‘Mr Brown’, who uses his alter ego ‘Kim Huat’ to share videos commenting on his WFM or ‘work from home’ experience during Singapore’s euphemistically named ‘circuit breaker’ period between April to June 2020.4 Appealing to Singaporeans primarily, the satirical videos would make light of real daily challenges of working from home, using local vernacular in the form of dialects and ‘Singlish’ (a brand of Singapore English), while also appealing to people to adhere to government-instituted lockdown restrictions for the sake of everybody’s health. By sharing his identity as a fellow citizen who has to adhere to government edicts, while practicing ‘social distancing’ and other health measures, ‘Mr Brown’ was in essence engaging in ‘social presencing’ by speaking – both directly and indirectly, explicitly and implicitly – to the unified, personal concerns of every digital and social media user. After all, the global pandemic that is COVID-19 is a personal one, which can infect and affect anyone and everyone. Because social media makes identity expression and identity movements shareable, Stuart Hall’s question of ‘Who needs identity?’ in the context of this article and journal issue is an easy one to answer. Anyone and everyone.

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Notes

1. This statement was issued via the Facebook page of MASSA, signed by Yeow-Tong Chia (President) and Jason Lim (Secretary-Treasurer), dated 22 April 2020: https://www.facebook.com/groups/120889542112480/.
2. The full statement is lodged on the website of the Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA), with the direct link retrievable here: http://asaa.asn.au/news/asaa-statement-on-recent-racist-attacks-in-australia-a-message-from-the-asaa-executive/?mc_cid=7df7f1a97d&mc_eid=239598881b.
3. https://www.change.org/p/denounce-racist-attacks-on-asian-australians-unityoverfear-during-covid-19.
4. Mr Brown, whose real name is Lee Kin Mun, describes himself as ‘Blogfather of Singapore, satirist, writer, traveler, podcaster & boss of new media company’. His YouTube videos are available on his website: mrbrown.com.
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