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Traditional Chinese medicine works: a politicised scientific debate in the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic provoked public attention to medical treatments across the world. In China, a debate on the efficacy of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) took place amid the government's active promotion of it for COVID-19 patients. Rather than addressing such a debate from the perspective of medical science or health communication, this paper explores how TCM was politicised on Chinese social media. The research is based on a case study, collecting data from the most popular Chinese community question-answering (CQA) site – Zhihu. By triangulating content analysis (CA) and thematic analysis (TA), we reveal how nationalist sentiments and dissenting opinions are expressed through approval or criticism of TCM among the Zhihu community. The research findings uncover the political momentum behind the debate by shedding light on how Zhihu users engage with public affairs through medical commentaries. This paper thus contributes to understanding the politicised discourse of TCM in China in the wake of the global pandemic.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic swept across the world in 2020. In its wake, the relationship between science and medicine was placed under the media spotlight. In the United States, then-President Donald Trump advocated the use of an anti-malarial drug – hydroxychloroquine; this intervention led to criticisms from the scientific and medical community when tests found it ineffective for treating COVID-19 patients, together with dangerous side-effects (BBC, 2020). In China, meanwhile, the government advocated the use of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) for patient treatment. In late January 2020, the Chinese Academy of Sciences announced tests purporting to show the potential of the Shuanghuanglian Oral Liquid – a patent drug extracted from Chinese herbs for inhibiting COVID-19 (Zou, 2020). Within hours of the announcement, the drug had sold out on all major Chinese e-commerce platforms. However, because the scientific basis of the tests was not widely accepted by the science community,

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the announcement was soon questioned by the media. This provoked public concerns, prompting a debate on traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) in Chinese society. In the wake of the pandemic, the debate went viral, as evidenced by commentaries on Chinese social media platforms (Zou, 2020).

Public criticisms of TCM have the potential to challenge the Chinese government's public health policy. The TCM debate, therefore, requires some contextualisation against the backdrop of the government's COVID-19 responses. In late May 2020, the Beijing local government tabled a controversial consultation draft, which attempted to criminalise 'defamation or slander of TCM' (Cui, 2020). The censorship placed upon criticisms of TCM can therefore be understood as measures adopted by the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to cope with dissent, while shutting down scientific debate over medical treatment.

In this paper, we make no attempt to examine the controversy surrounding TCM through a scientific or health communication lens. Instead, the paper explores the current TCM debate among Chinese Internet users by analysing the political motives behind their postings. Considering the symbolism of TCM in Chinese culture and the framing of modern medicine as a Western concept in the Chinese language (Zheng, 2006), the debate provides an opportunity to foreground how nationalist sentiments and dissenting opinions play out at the intersection of political and scientific discourses in China today.

We explore relevant postings retrieved from the most popular Chinese community question-answering (CQA) site – Zhihu. The paper proceeds with a contextualised discussion of the historical contingency and socio-political logic behind the controversy surrounding TCM, which sheds light on the politicisation of the current debate. We then explain the reasoning behind the use of Zhihu as the data repository and detail the analysis methods we adopted in the research. This section is followed by a systematic analysis of the empirical data to demonstrate how political views are articulated via medical commentaries in the Zhihu community. We conclude with remarks on the socio-political implications of the TCM debate in the context of the pandemic and beyond.

The political debates on traditional Chinese medicine

The recent public attention to TCM provides a case study to investigate the clash of nationalist sentiments and dissenting opinions on the Chinese-language Internet. As mentioned above, the TCM efficacy debate in China is historically entangled with politics. High-profile sceptics of TCM included Sun Yat-Sen – widely considered the founding father of the modern Chinese nation, who was reported to have refused such treatment in the very last moment of his life (Schiffrin, 1970). Sun argued that 'some Chinese drugs might be effective, [but] knowledge of a [biomedical] diagnosis is lacking [in TCM]' (Lei, 2014, p. 1). However, as Lei (2014) discusses, Sun did actually take Chinese medicine to show his allegiance to the nation, even while he was dismissive of its efficacy. During the early twentieth century, the emphasis on his refusal of TCM treatment by China's state propaganda machine was not of a purely scientific ground but involved a degree of political symbolism. It fed into the revolutionist ideology of Sun's successor – Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-Shek) by underscoring how his attempt to

rebuild China's political infrastructure was articulated through modern western medical commentaries.

The anti-TCM sentiments in the pre-communist Chinese regime did not alter the fact that TCM was supported by many Chinese people. In fact, China's revolutionary leader Mao Zedong was instrumental in TCM's rehabilitation and legitimation. It is worthwhile noting that while the knowledge system of TCM is not compatible with the paradigm of modern scientific inquiry (Wang & Farquhar, 2009), many medical studies have proved the efficacy of some Chinese herbs (Scheid, 2002), with the Chinese scientist – Tu Youyou's award of the Nobel Prize considered by many as an acknowledgement of TCM's credibility among the scientific community (The Nobel Prize, 2015). As such, while TCM's unique knowledge system continues to be an obstacle in the scientisation of TCM (Wang & Farquhar, 2009), many Chinese people evidently take a rather pragmatic approach to public health, by accepting the 'empirical and time-tested value' of TCM treatment without questioning its scientific basis (Rogaski, 2014, p. 305).

With its strong social basis, TCM, thus, comprises an important component of China's public health system. In contrast with the public health sectors of major Western democracies, China utilises a dual-track system, in which both traditional and modern medical treatments are institutionalised (Scheid, 2002). The establishment of the dual-track system is often attributed to Mao, who curtailed the calls to abolish TCM (Zheng, 2006). The institutionalisation of TCM in China's public health sector can therefore be viewed as a political legacy of the Maoist era. This legacy no doubt encourages the CCP to continuously promote TCM treatment, cementing its connection with the legitimacy of the Party-State polity.

The politicised nature of the Chinese authority's official endorsement for TCM is particularly prominent in the times of COVID-19. Since February 2020, the leading Chinese medical expert, Zhong Nanshan, has called for scholarly attention to the value of TCM in treating COVID-19 patients (China Daily, 2020). Zhong's opinion is supported by a number of fellow Chinese scientists, who claim to have proof of the efficacy of TCM treatment (Li, Lu, & Zhang, 2020; Ren, Zhang, & Wang, 2020). These expert opinions further substantiate the government and the CCP's positioning in the TCM debate (National Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine, 2020). TCM is no longer an alternative to modern medicine. It is repackaged as a political symbol with notable indigenous features in line with an emphasis on Chinese cultural identity. Accordingly, TCM has been promoted through official propaganda channels to show the government's effective handling of the pandemic through medical commentaries.

Yet, the official endorsement is not without controversy. The Chinese Academy of Sciences' promotion of TCM-extracted drugs for COVID-19 patient treatment since late January 2020 has prompted intense public attention to the long-standing controversy surrounding the efficacy of TCM. As a collateral consequence, the wider social debate on TCM has impacted the reputation of Zhong Nanshan – a heroic figure in the eyes of Chinese people in the 2003 SARS outbreak (Sina, 2020). This scale of the debate has captured high-level attention, which explains the Beijing local government's subsequent attempt to criminalise 'defamation or slander of TCM' (Cui, 2020).

The current TCM debate is situated at the intersection of the government's pandemic response, broad socio-political governance, and views expressed on the Chinese-language Internet. The local authorities in Wuhan, where COVID-19 was first

discovered, suppressed whistle-blowers' early warning of the danger of this novel disease, and this suppression is widely acknowledged to be one of the causes for the escalation of the initial outbreak (Zhang, 2020a). Yet, the central government's handling of the pandemic was relatively effective. This effective crisis management was made possible by draconian lockdowns in association with the employment of contact-tracking technologies and broader digital surveillance to control both people's physical mobility and their access to information (Rodrigues & Xu, 2020; Yang et al., 2021). Such measures, which ensure that a collective response to the pandemic is achieved within the borders of the Chinese nation-state, are predicated on authoritarianism and securitisation (de Kloet, Lin, & Chow, 2020). Amid the pandemic sweeping across the outside world, the government's pandemic response has encouraged nationalist sentiments, with both paid commentators and self-motivated pro-regime citizens mobilised to generate acclaim for the CCP's leadership on social media platforms (Zhang, 2020a). Yet the pandemic has opened up opportunities for wider social debates (Peng, Zhang, Cummings, & Zhang, 2020). In this sense an analysis of the TCM debate on social media allows us to unpack the interplay between medical commentary and political ideology in the restrictive Chinese digital environment.

Research methods

The research in this paper explores the nexus of medical commentary and political discourse in the current TCM debate, using the most popular Chinese community question-answer (CQA) site – Zhihu as the data repository. Zhihu enables Internet users to post original content by asking and answering questions. Zhihu is branded as a social media platform for knowledge-sharing and this branding has effectively encouraged the participation of middle-class intellectuals (Peng, 2020). Marketing research reveals that 'typical Zhihu users are university students and professionals living in [...] cities, with 80% possessing a bachelor's degree or above' (Zhang, 2020b, p. 96). Due to the user demographics, the posts circulated on Zhihu generally feature 'quality, argumentative, and information-rich', and they often relate to trending topics on current socio-political affairs (Zhang, 2020b, p. 96). In this way, Zhihu provides a valuable data repository for exploring the current TCM debate.

Guided by a textual analysis-based, case-study research design, we sampled a question, titled '*do you recognise the use of Chinese medicine for COVID-19 patient treatment?*' (你认可中医在治疗新冠患者中所起的作用吗), posted on Zhihu on 6th March 2020. The question was asked after the pandemic became global and invited users to assess the efficacy of TCM in COVID-19 patient treatment. It was phrased in a generally neutral

Table 1. A summary of the dataset.

general counts	answers	followers	views
	369	443	205,601
posting date	earliest	latest	
	1st March 2020	7th June 2020	
follow-up comments counts	least	most	average
	0	322	7
follow-up likes counts	least	most	average
	0	316	8

manner and attracted many users' participation, evidenced by the numbers of followers and views of the question (see Table 1).¹ Compared to other TCM-related questions, which were either asked before the pandemic or phrased in a way that limited the direction of posting, the sampled question was expected to aggregate relevant posts by users who hold different opinions on both politics and TCM. In the meantime, the number of participants attracted to the question was at a medium level, meaning that it was less likely to trigger the attention of the government's propaganda organs. We collected all answers to the sampled question, which resulted in 369 posts retrieved from Zhihu.

The research addresses the following research questions.

- (1) How do Zhihu users assess the medical use of TCM?
- (2) How do Zhihu users link their assessments of TCM to an evaluation of Western-style democracy?
- (3) How do Zhihu users' sub-textual political commentaries intersect with their views on the CCP's pandemic response and beyond?

In the data analysis, we employed a mixed-methods approach, using both content analysis (CA) and thematic analysis (TA). CA is a quantitative, replicable data-reduction method used for compressing large volumes of texts into specific categories (Neuendorf, 2017). In the CA process, the sampled posts were coded according to the general attitudes towards TCM, as well as the mentions of Western democracies and domestic politics. This provided an initial account of the general trends in the dataset, which guided further, qualitative scrutiny of Zhihu users' postings.

To provide insights into the textual data, we used TA, a representative qualitative research method. This method departs from simply 'counting explicit words or phrases' by 'identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data' (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2014, p. 9). Using this method we randomly selected a smaller sample of 50 posts, including 25 with likes and/or comments and 25 with none of them from the dataset for in-depth analysis. The smaller sample was created to account for different types of posts that attracted differing degrees of engagement in the Zhihu community. The TA process uncovers the themes established in the textual production of the posts.

CA results

The CA coding scheme consisted of two independent variables: whether a post was (1) liked or (2) commented, and three dependent variables: attitudes revealed in the post towards (a) TCM, (b) foreign countries, and (c) the Chinese government. Whether a post was liked was coded according to the like tag displayed underneath the post (0 = no; 1 = yes). A total of 194 (52.6%) posts were classified as the 'liked' category. The same rule was applied when each post was coded for whether it was commented (0 = no; 1 = yes), and 162 (43.9%) posts belonged to the 'commented' category. We also coded each post, based on the criteria of whether a positive attitude towards TCM was revealed in the narrative (0 = negative; 1 = positive; 2 = N/A). While 227 (61.5%) posts were detected to contain a generally positive evaluation of TCM, 97 (26.3%) were found to be the opposite, with an additional 45 posts (12.2%) coded as 'N/A'. The

same rule was applied when we coded each post for its evaluation of foreign countries. We found that 51 (13.8%) posts belonged to the ‘positive’ category, and 67 (18.2%) showed the opposite; N/A was 68% (251 posts). We used the same scheme to code whether or not posts showed a positive evaluation of the Chinese government; we discovered that 62 (16.8%) of posts belonged to this category (negative: 3.8%, 14 posts; N/A: 79.4%; 293 posts).

As shown in Figure 1, a largely positive attitude towards TCM was detected. It appeared that the question encouraged the participation of Zhihu users who approved of TCM. With the controversy that TCM was sparking in the pandemic, the question aggregated a huge number of posts; more than one-fourth were critical of TCM. Their voices were not as sonorous as those who approved of TCM but were nevertheless important to gain a complete picture.

Interestingly, while a relatively ‘apolitical’ question was selected to elicit responses, we discovered that 32% of the posts somehow involved evaluations of international politics and 20.6% either explicitly or sub-textually assessed domestic politics. This phenomenon points towards the politicisation of the debate in the Zhihu community. When considering the participatory nature of the site, we anticipated that politicised posts were more likely to encourage interactions between Zhihu users and used chi-square tests of independence to determine whether such correlations existed.

As shown in Table 2, certain attitudes expressed in a post generally corresponded with increased interactions between Zhihu users. Specifically, Zhihu users tended to like a post expressing a positive evaluation of TCM ($\chi^2 = 4.262$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$). This tendency was in line with the largely positive voices regarding TCM, showing that positive commentaries on TCM were more likely to receive peer users’ endorsement. The analysis also showed that a post tended to attract follow-up comments if it expressed a negative attitude towards TCM ($\chi^2 = 4.021$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$) or a positive attitude towards the Chinese

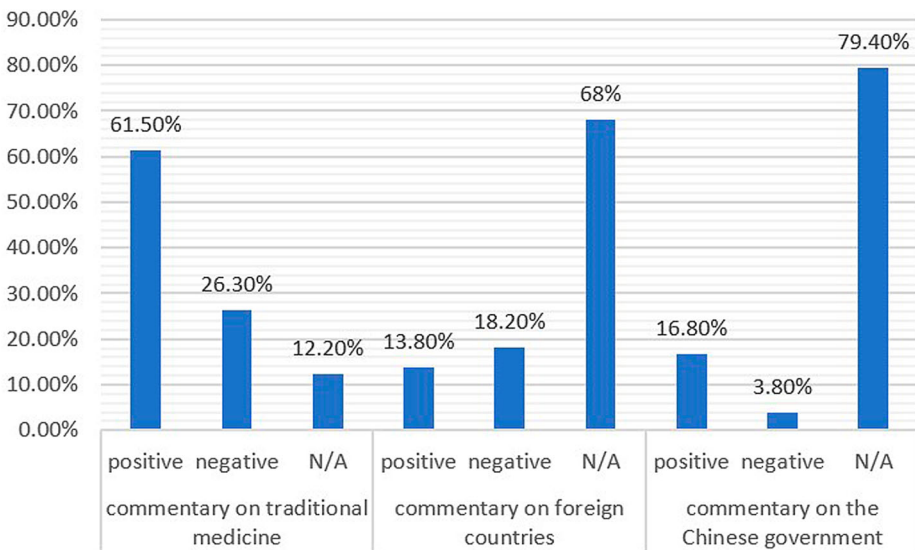


Figure 1. General trends of the attitudes involved in each post.

Table 2. A summary of chi-square tests of independence results.

variable	likes	yes (%)	no (%)	chi-square	p-value
attitude towards TCM	positive	118 (52.0%)	109 (48.0%)	.083	
	negative	53 (54.6%)	44 (45.4%)	.225	
attitude towards foreign countries	positive	22 (43.1%)	29 (56.9%)	2.122	
	negative	38 (56.7%)	29 (43.3%)	.563	
attitude towards the Chinese government	positive	40 (64.5%)	22 (35.5%)	4.262	*
	negative	9 (64.3%)	5 (35.7%)	.800	
variable	comments	yes (%)	no (%)	chi-square	p-value
attitude towards TCM	positive	96 (42.3%)	131 (57.7%)	.622	
	negative	51 (52.6%)	46 (47.4%)	4.021	*
attitude towards foreign countries	positive	28 (54.9%)	23 (45.1%)	2.928	
	negative	30 (44.8%)	37 (55.2%)	.025	
attitude towards the Chinese government	positive	37 (59.7%)	25 (40.3%)	7.530	**
	negative	9 (64.3%)	5 (35.7%)	2.455	

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

government ($\chi^2 = 7.530$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$). This revealed that posts containing negative opinions on TCM and positive evaluations of the CCP often stood out in the community because they appear to encourage follow-up commentaries from other users.

TA analytical discussion

In light of the CA results, we employed TA techniques to scrutinise the dataset and identified the following themes, including (1) an expression of nationalist sentiments, (2) a comparison between China and the West, and (3) ideologically driven arguments, in the posts retrieved from Zhihu.

Medical expert opinions

In reflecting on the scientific relevance of the question and the knowledge-sharing platform branding of Zhihu, it was not altogether surprising to see considerable participation by medical experts.

A-7, 1st April 2020: Ginsenoside [a type of herbal extract] [...] could help cure pneumonia patients through its anti-inflammatory function. [...] However, the current evidence [provided by Chinese medical experts] is a bit bizarre, as it was based on 710 cases using [...] Western-Chinese mixed-methods treatment.

The extract from A-7's post is representative of professional commentaries. The post stands out because of a series of specialised medical terms that are cited. In general, specialised terms constitute an important meaning-making vehicle, which may be used to signal the professional identity of a communicator in social interactions. In the above extract, the employment of medical terms endorses the professionalism of A7's commentary. Alongside an academic writing style, which offers a relatively balanced account of evidence, it facilitates the user's professional engagement with the TCM debate from a scientific viewpoint. The Zhihu profile described the user as a medical practitioner.

A-7's posting reveals the participation of a small but representative group of Zhihu users – medical experts. In the times of a global public health crisis, we have seen the

science community actively producing intellectual knowledge to combat COVID-19. The engagement of medical experts often persists in their everyday lives with many using alternative channels to communicate their professional opinions. As the most popular Chinese CQA site branded as a knowledge-sharing hub, there is probably not a better platform than Zhihu for such a purpose. Yet, considering the novelty of COVID-19, a consensus on patient treatment has not been reached within the science community. While some recent studies seem to have confirmed the usefulness of TCM (Li et al., 2020; Ren et al., 2020), many medical experts remain sceptical. TCM is rejected by many practitioners trained in the modern scientific paradigm, and this is due to TCM's perceived incompatibility with modern science (Wang & Farquhar, 2009).

Nationalist sentiments

With the topic's socio-political relevance, many users without medical training were attracted to the debate. Their participation turned the TCM debate into a form of personal-opinion expression with insufficient acknowledgement of its scientific nature.

A-165, 23rd March 2020: In Chinese history, was there no mass outbreak at all before Western medicine and Western medical treatment introduced to our country? [...] Why Chinese medicine, this old gentleman (这位老人), has to make the way for Western medicine now?

In the above extract, A-165 offers support of TCM without any concrete evidence. Instead, by devising a series of rhetorical questions, the pro-TCM opinion of this person relies on a rather emotionally expressive pattern of communication. To a certain extent, A-165's argument holds true in the sense that many plagues did occur in ancient China and ingenious historical records indeed documented how TCM practitioners of that era saved lives (Qiu, 2011). However, such an opinion, either intentionally or ignorantly, overlooks the 1910–11 Manchurian Plague, in which TCM 'failed miserably' because the outbreak was never contained until the authority started adopting modern epidemiological approaches to combat infectious diseases for the first time in Chinese history (Lei, 2014, p. 21). The omission of scientific evidence in A-165's commentary reflects Rogaski's (2014) observation of the pragmatic assessment of TCM among many Chinese patients, who generally accept its efficacy in clinical practices based on mythical accounts.

A-165's posting is particularly informative because the phrase, 'old gentleman', is used as a metaphor to personify TCM. This metaphorical association resonates with many other pro-TCM Zhihu users, who also linked TCM to the wisdom of the 'ancestors' (老祖宗) of Chinese people. As previously mentioned, the narratives of Chinese history are upheld by the country's ancient glories, typically including its once world-leading role in both philosophical inquiry and scientific invention (Tang & Darr, 2012). TCM is a highly indigenous academic discipline built upon both empirical research and speculative philosophy (Scheid, 2002). While the unique knowledge system of TCM hampers its modern scientisation (Wang & Farquhar, 2009), it provides the grounding for its symbolism in China's ancient achievements. By framing TCM in relation to these achievements, pro-TCM Zhihu users' postings were no longer limited

within the context of a scientific discussion but the controversy offered opportunities to pledge allegiance to their national identity. In this way, the TCM debate became entangled with state politics, despite its apolitical semblance.

A-227, 22nd March 2020: The contributions [of TCM in the pandemic] would be noted in the history book, reminding our children never to *worship and have blind faith in foreign things* (崇洋媚外) again.

As shown in the above post, A-227 exploits the opportunity to voice support for TCM. The user's communicative strategy relies on a strong emotional appeal, devising highly affective wordings to remark on the role TCM played in COVID-19 patient treatment in China. In the post, such a role is described as worthwhile documenting in history books in order to remind future generations of Chinese people of their national pride. This pattern of posting corresponds to the nationalistic rhetoric rooted in the narratives of Chinese history, by explicitly referring to a seemingly out-of-context concept – 'foreign' (洋).

The word – 'foreign' often connotes major Western democracies by default in the Chinese language. Rhetoric evoking this term is associated with an imaginary of the West, which does not fit the indigenous Chinese context (Liu & Self, 2019). While A-227's commentary does not verbally address this imaginary, the lexical choice involves an implicit process of othering modern medical science as a Western construct. This feeds into the long-standing indigenous discourse of TCM, which detaches it from the paradigm of scientific inquiry (Wang & Farquhar, 2009). Such a discursive practice is indicative of the acceptance of a Western-Chinese dualism long-established in China's nationalist worldview, which facilitates comparison between China and the West in the context of the pandemic.

A Western-Chinese comparison

China's rise on the world stage is unprecedented. Its achievements and its growing influence in global forums have captured attention. Many Chinese commentators, and even members of the general public, now desire to change the historically constituted order of international politics (Cong, 2009). The recent pandemic, in particular, offers scope to fulfil this desire by facilitating a comparison between China and Western democracies through differing approaches to pandemic crisis management (de Kloet et al., 2020).

A-52, 24th March 2020: Western medicine is so amazing. When the COVID-19 outbreak started, the situation in Wuhan was much severer than that in Italy. But you can see the mortality rate in Italy now.

A-52's post is informed by such a political assessment, that is, by comparing the crisis situations in Italy and Wuhan. Wuhan is the Chinese city where the first COVID-19 patient was discovered, and where local people's lives were worst hit. At first glance, A-52's commentary is praising modern medicine. Yet, the user's seemingly positive note is nothing but sarcastic rhetoric that mocks the Italian public health system's ineffective response to local outbreaks. A-52's commentary has its logic in the sense that medical researchers and practitioners indeed struggled to find an effective treatment for COVID-19 patients

when it emerged in Europe due to the novelty of the disease. Yet, A-52's argument simply blames modern medicine without providing critical scrutiny of TCM under the same criteria. In particular, the user's lexical choice is in line with the referential strategy in everyday Chinese-language communication, referring to modern medical treatment as 'Western medicine'. By linking this referential strategy to the crisis in Italy, a political assessment surfaced, which defines the crisis in Italy as the failure of the entire Western democratic politics. This feeds into Chinese national pride for their home nation's relatively better pandemic response, a phenomenon that has evidently become widespread in Chinese society since March 2020 (de Kloet et al., 2020; Zhang, 2020a).

In China, the general public's perceptions of the government's handling of the crisis are complex and fluid, informed by the process through which the initial small outbreak became an unprecedented pandemic (de Kloet et al., 2020). In late January and throughout February 2020, many people were highly critical of the initial coverup. This momentum reached its peak when Li Wenliang – one of the whistle-blowers, who first warned his family and friends of the danger of COVID-19 and was subsequently silenced by the local authority, died of the disease in February 2020 (Zhang, 2020a). The incident led to a wave of criticisms of the government on social media platforms (Kuo, 2020). Yet, following the Chinese government's implementation of strict lockdowns and intensive health care for infected patients, the spread of COVID-19 has shown signs of fading away since March 2020 (Zhang, 2020a). In the meantime, amid major Western democracies' poor crisis management, the achievements of the government's pandemic response provided huge political capital for the CCP, effectively fuelling its domestic support (de Kloet et al., 2020). This was especially the case after the Chinese authorities started fully mobilising the government's propaganda machine and proactively using the existing censorship system to squash dissenting expressions after the Li Wenliang incident (Zhang, 2020a).

A-182, 22nd March 2020: Have a look at the mortality rate in European countries now [...]. Please go find your beloved American daddy if you do not believe that Chinese medicine helps combat [COVID-19 ...]. I am afraid that our country has no space for you at all.

Following A-52's politicised posting, user A-182 also relies on a performance-based assessment of China and major Western democracies, which portrays the home nation as an exemplar of pandemic crisis management. Yet, instead of focusing on public health per se, the user's commentary is explicitly ideologically driven; the assessment of the West is extended to a comparison between Chinese and Western political systems. While the pandemic is described as a test that Western democracies failed, faith in TCM is simultaneously linked to national identity, which is affirmative of loyalty to the Chinese state. In this way, critics of TCM are rhetorically branded as submissive to Western powers and cast as not in harmony with the entire Chinese population. With the participation of Zhihu users such as A-182, the current TCM debate was turned into an ideological battleground, its scientific relevance completely ignored.

An ideological battleground

Perceived as an ideological battleground, the TCM debate facilitated the spread of polarised views. Despite notes of discord, the general trend was an overlapping of

support for TCM and pro-CCP voices, as well as an alignment between criticisms of TCM and dissenting opinions, as evidenced by the CA results. Our further TA scrutiny reveals that while the pro-CCP voices were generally blunt, their dissenting counterparts are often expressed in a more nuanced manner on Zhihu.

A-78, 21st March 2020: If the supremo says ‘yes’ (上曰可), does anyone dare to say ‘no’?

In the above extract, A-78 uses a literary Chinese style of writing, suggesting that criticisms of TCM are forbidden because of the ‘supremo’s attitude towards it’. A-78’s commentary appeared to be out of the blue. However, contextualised against the current political climate, it becomes apparent that the post involves a sub-textual reference to the CCP’s recent official campaigns for TCM treatment, in which the most senior party leader – Xi Jinping personally acted as the speaker (National Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine, 2020). The writing style used in the posting imitates the manner of speaking in China’s imperial age. The lexical choice, which uses the word – ‘supremo’ to refer to Xi, implicitly associates the leader with the monarchy. This contains a humorous, sub-textual commentary on the dictatorial characteristics of China’s political infrastructure, which have been on the rise in Xi’s presidency (Keane & Su, 2019). A-78’s sub-textual way of political expression is not an isolated example but showed a degree of consistency with how other leaders, such as the former president – Jiang Zemin, were mocked by political dissidents on the Chinese-language Internet (Fang, 2020). This mode of political expression is, in part, engineered by the CCP’s tightened control over the freedom of speech (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2017), which paradoxically encourages Internet users to use creative means to raise anti-establishment political agendas on social media platforms.

A-159, 31st March 2020: [I] do not acknowledge [the use of TCM for COVID-19 treatment ...]. Chinese medicine is even to be blamed if it were proved that COVID-19 came from pangolins [...]. The tradition of wildlife eating was derived from dietetic invigoration in Chinese medicine.

[...]

B-159, 4th April 2020, follow-up comment: China and the US are engaging in public opinion warfare now, and critics of Chinese medicine are great! [You] simply ignored our national interests by accepting the blame.

With critics of TCM and political dissidents now identified in the debate, commentaries critical of TCM were targeted by Zhihu users inhabiting the pro-regime spectrum. Unsurprisingly, an exchange of words between Zhihu users with differing political views turned the debate into a messy argument, derailing its scientific essence. In this regard the extracts above are representative. The instance involved two Zhihu users; the debate took place underneath the comments of the original post. The follow-up postings started with A-159 declaring an objection to TCM by associating it with the origin of COVID-19. Many believe that the COVID-19 virus was originally found on bats and the jump of the virus to human bodies was possibly a result of wildlife-eating habits in Chinese society promoted by aspects of TCM (). While A-159’s commentary shows no ostensible political opinion, the claim is denounced by user B-159 for being politically insensitive and tarnishing China’s international reputation. A self-motivated

performance of national identity then surfaces from the thread of B-159's engagement in the TCM debate.

B-43, 6th April 2020, follow-up comment: Please take off the masks that the CCP requires you to put on and move to Europe or America to breathe the sweet, luxurious air there without masks on.

C-43, 6th April 2020, follow-up comment: What on earth does the accuracy of wearing masks prove the usefulness of Chinese medicine? [...] Can you use Chinese medical theories to prove wearing masks could prevent one from being infected with COVID-19?

B-43, 6th April 2020, follow-up comment: I cannot wake up one who pretends to be asleep [...]. You and your fellow banana men, please do not come back to China!

In the same vein, intentional politicisation of medical commentaries is revealed in comments following user A-43's criticisms of TCM. Without the involvement of A-43, the follow-up commenting space is hijacked by B-43 and C-43, who specifically target each other in the argument. In particular, B-43 evokes a referential strategy, labelling C-43 and the critics of TCM they represented as 'banana men'. The term banana men is a racist concept internalised by the East-Asian community, which stigmatises its members, who self-identify with Western rather than their indigenous culture as 'white on the inside' (Trieu, 2019, p. 2). By asserting that critics of TCM betrayed their national identity, a political distortion of the debate is once again manifested in B-43's posting. With no consultation between the two ideology-driven camps, interactions between Zhihu users such as B-43 and opponents like C-43 moved the current debate in a completely irrational direction.

In the present research, we detected more posts that approved of TCM beneath the sampled question on Zhihu – a phenomenon in line with the strong belief in the efficacy of TCM treatment in wider society. Following the entanglement of the TCM debate and state politics (Zheng, 2006), it was not surprising to see a small number of anti-TCM users being assaulted by members of the larger pro-TCM camp, who often happened to be supporters of the CCP as well, in the Zhihu community. This, in part, explains the CA results in terms of the heightened interactions underneath posts critical of TCM. In such interactions, multiple layers of the imaginary of TCM are constructed in relation to Zhihu users' political standpoints. They provide a glimpse into how both pro-regime nationalists and anti-establishment dissidents argue their political opinions on Chinese social media platforms, in this case through medical commentaries in the pandemic.

Conclusion

This paper has analysed the politics behind the TCM debate on Chinese social media platforms. Based on a case study, we discovered a general alignment between supporters of TCM and pro-CCP voices, as well as that between critics of TCM and dissenting opinions, in Zhihu users' postings underneath a seemingly apolitical question. With the supporters of TCM forming the overwhelming majority, the debate appears to have mainly facilitated the expression of nationalist sentiments on Zhihu. While dissenting opinions were also voiced on the CQA site, they often represented notes of discord in the debate and were targeted by the larger camp of pro-regime supporters. Shaped by the

interactive design of the site, the conflicting opinions between the two camps often turned the follow-up commenting space of posts critical of TCM into an ideological battlefield. Such a phenomenon provides a glimpse into how politicisation played out in the TCM debate. A large cohort of Chinese Internet users utilised medical commentaries to pledge their loyalty to the nation, and a small number of their opponents exploited the opportunity to sub-textually express dissenting political opinions in a politically restrictive digital environment.

An emerging body of literature has noted the growing popularity of the CCP amongst the Chinese population, which is influenced by how the Chinese government and major Western democracies' pandemic responses are assessed as the pandemic continues (de Kloet et al., 2020; Zhang, 2020a). Building on their observations, we reveal an overlapping of TCM supporters and those supporting the CCP. This political momentum, to a certain extent, may rationalise both the regime's active, official endorsement for TCM treatment and its attempt to suppress voices critical of it. It adds another layer of evidence confirming the widespread politicisation of public health affairs in the pandemic across the entire world (de Kloet et al., 2020).

It should be noted that this paper does not address the TCM debate from a scientific perspective. Moreover, without the benefit of a large-scale survey, we have no intention to assess the acceptance of TCM in Chinese society through a health communication lens. Instead, the research analyses textual data retrieved from the most popular Chinese CQA site to reveal the political momentum behind the TCM debate during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research methods determine that we cannot rule out the possibility of the larger number of pro-TCM commentaries detected on Zhihu being a consequence of the CCP's political control over freedom of speech on social media platforms. Based on a case study conducted on Zhihu, the research findings cannot be overgeneralised to represent the demographics of the entire Internet-literate Chinese population either. In particular, as Keane and Su (2019) reveal, Chinese people are increasingly conditioned to use digital technologies, but this renders them more susceptible to behavioural modification by algorithms. In the context of the Zhihu community, the largely positive sentiments towards the CCP and TCM might also be a consequence of the CQA site's algorithmic design, which privileges certain type of commentaries. Yet, in association with recent studies unveiling the rise of nationalist sentiments in China during the pandemic (de Kloet et al., 2020; Peng et al., 2020; Zhang, 2020a), the research findings indeed shed light on how the intersection of scientific and political discourses plays out in Chinese digital cultures in the times when public health affairs become ever more important. To appreciate the intersecting vectors in the Chinese digital environment, we encourage future research to move beyond textual analysis-based research by engaging with both Internet users and government officials.

Note

1. Retrieved on 2nd July 2020, from <https://www.zhihu.com/question/377284208>.

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