# The View From Beijing on Black Lives Matter: Why do Black Lives Matter for Beijing?

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## Abstract

Why and how has China covered the Black Lives Matter (BLM), a movement with emerging themes closely related to its domestic issues? To what extent does the Chinese media build a unified discourse on sensitive themes that underpin the BLM? These are important questions given China's complicated history with ethnicity, race, and protests. This article argues that Chinese media uses BLM as a multi-faceted propaganda tool to foster cohesion at ideological level. NVivo-powered coding and thematic media analysis show that mainstream media, including official, semi-official and commercial media, and we-media do not present a uniform discourse on BLM. While they generally converge on criticism towards "protests" and "police" action, they display a nuanced "anti-US" and "Greater China" discourse. Moreover, the BLM coverage is used to undermine the US and strengthen by comparison the party-state's legitimacy. In the absence of a reflective discussion on race, racist undertones emerge in Chinese we-media.

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## Introduction

On 25 May 2020, the Minneapolis police arrested George Floyd, a Black man accused of using a counterfeit twenty dollars bill to buy cigarettes at a local store. The police brutality used in his arrest proved fatal and his name was added to the long tally of Black Americans who died in police custody. George Floyd's death reignited the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, a civil rights movement founded in 2013 that examines racial profiling, practices in law enforcement practices, and structural inequalities and calls for an end to racism and discrimination in the name of freedom, liberation, and justice. In this article, we use 2020 and Floyd's death as the entry point for our research into China's engagement with the BLM movement.

The Chinese propaganda apparatus was unusually active in covering the BLM movement. Issues related to BLM ranging from police brutality to riots ensuing across the US dominated the nationalist tabloid *Global Times*' headline for eight days in the first two weeks after Floyd's death. Hua Chunyin, the spokeswoman of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, tweeted "I can't breathe," the coined phrase of the BLM movement, to refute foreign criticism on China's national security law imposed at that time on Hong Kong (Feng, 2020). China, as a non-democratic state, generally criticises protesters for the chaos and instability that they may bring or avoids covering protests directed against the establishment altogether. For example, the revolutions that swept Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen in 2011, prompted the Chinese authorities to highlight the unsuitability of the "Western democracy model" for developing countries and to tighten control over non-governmental organisations, dissidents, and human rights activists (Ching, 2005; Lam, 2011). In 2014, the Chinese authorities also censored online news about the Hong Kong Occupy Central Movement and reported that protests were driven by an illegal minority wanting to destabilise the country (Inouye, 2017). Chinese political elites are highly vigilant to any potential revolutions or protests that may disrupt their own rule. They strive to stave off foreign influences, maintain control over domestic unrest, and "guide" public opinion.

The BLM has relatively low stakes and sensitivity compared to issues related to democratisation, but it still poses sensitive topics for the Chinese government, such as the relationship between protests and police, racial and ethnic disparities, and human rights. China has frequently come under international scrutiny for its lack of police transparency and the use of excessive force to suppress protests. Moreover, China has a record of racism and xenophobia against both Black people (Sautman, 1994) and ethnic minorities in Xinjiang and Tibet, the latter two of which it considers domestic matters. These issues and sensitivity to BLM were further amplified by several factors: (a) The Covid-19 pandemic which augmented China's xenophobic and racist behaviour towards Black residents, raising concern from some of its own African allies (Pai, 2020; Williamson and Wang, 2020); (b) China's handling of the 2019 Hong Kong protests, the proposed extradition bill, and the granting of new sweeping powers to police forces to violently oppress protesters; (c) China's "re-education" of its ethnic minority people, the Uyghurs, in Xinjiang province, which is condemned as "genocide" and human rights abuse by many western countries (Smith Finley, 2021; Zenz, 2021).

From the perspective of China's propaganda apparatus, reporting on BLM is therefore a complicated matter. When exposing US' pitfalls and defending its own record, China needs to weigh the benefits of reporting negative issues in other countries, against the risk of bringing certain sensitive issues before its domestic audience. The questions this article therefore asks are: "Why and how has China covered the BLM, an event with emerging themes closely related to its domestic issues?" and "To what extent does mainstream media and we-media build a unified discourse on sensitive themes that underpin the BLM and what does this signal?"

In propaganda studies on China, little attention has been paid recently to differentiating between information sources, including official and non-official media, internet-based media and traditional media, independent online key opinion leaders (KOLs), and party-affiliated news outlets. Stockmann's research provides a clear distinction between official, semi-official, and commercial outlets, but her discussions of mass media did not take into consideration the online dynamic (Stockmann, 2010), which has grown significantly since her study was published. In contrast, Zou's research discusses the digitalisation of official media, but does not pay attention to other types of media (Zou, 2021). Regarding KOLs, they are often viewed either as intermediaries between mass media and society who pass on ideas they derive from the mass media to their peers (Lazarsfeld et al., 1968) or as embodying certain values, competence, or societal position (Katz, 1957). In China, online KOLs are individuals with a large number of followers who are able to influence public opinion (Chen and Fu, 2016). Huang and his colleagues' research found that Chinese netizens tend to trust less on KOLs who are viewed as agents of official media (Huang et al., 2018). However, their research does not investigate the differences in content produced by the two different types of media actors. Investigating such differences is significant as it furthers the inquiry on the tension between commercialisation and propaganda in China's news industry (Zhao, 1997), which is what this article aims to do. Furthermore, by comparing news content across different media, we also contribute to the literature on China's media convergence, that is, the Chinese state's efforts to shape (online) discourses (Creemers, 2017; Zhang and Ma, 2021), and its limitations (Xiong and Zhang, 2018).

This article is divided into four sections. The introduction is followed by a review of the literature on media and propaganda. Then, the methodology section explains the selection of the data and the analytical strategy. The last section presents the findings and contextualises them, before concluding.

## Propaganda in Media as a Cohesive and Multi-Faced Tool

While propaganda can be employed through multiple means, this article focuses on propaganda through media. Particularly in a non-democratic setting, propaganda can be key in constructing hegemony through mass media (Chan, 2007). The party's desire to guide the media and its expectation that the media would serve the party (Zhao, 1998) has been no secret. Under Xi Jinping this became even more evident; in February 2016, when Xi visited the CCTV headquarters, a slogan conspicuously

displayed behind him proclaimed that the media must be "surnamed party" (Rudolph, 2016). The arm of the party's propaganda machine is long reaching both in the traditional media (Stockmann, 2010) and on we-media (DeLisle et al., 2016). China's BLM coverage prompts us to investigate the various purposes of propaganda and how far its messages are echoed in different media outlets.

Propaganda is a multi-faceted tool employed with the aim to persuade audiences, manage sentiments and foster identity, divert attention from sensitive topics, signal obedience, particularly in authoritarian regimes, and ultimately strengthen regime legitimacy and build cohesion within a state (Edney, 2015; Huang, 2015; King et al., 2017). Propaganda as a persuasion tool can be effective if it presents the opportunity to criticise rivals while boosting one's image by comparison. An illustrative example is the way in which the USSR played the racial card throughout the twentieth century. The Comintern perceived Black Americans as potential vehicles for spreading the communist revolution to the US. The Soviets presented themselves as defenders of racial and class equality, which superseded ethnicity and nationality. The segregation and oppression of Black people in the US throughout most of the twentieth century offered the ideal opportunities for the USSR to bash the US for its perceived capitalist exploitation and imperialistic views, and by comparison to augment its own image (Ioffe, 2017; Matusevich, 2008). Although the USSR did not raise to the standards that it preached, propaganda played a key role in this ideological warfare.

Propaganda can also be a useful tool in managing sentiments and fostering nationalism in moments of crisis (Perry, 2017). The 1989 pro-democracy student movement made Beijing realise the need to employ propaganda work with a fresh emphasis on nationalism and economic prosperity, both of which soon became the new pillars of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) legitimacy (Rawnsley, 2015). The party also accused Western countries of orchestrating the Tiananmen protests through direct "reactionary elements and CIA agents" (Gittings, 2001) and cultivated anti-Western sentiments by promoting a plethora of cultural materials (Brady, 2009). A decade later, incidents such as the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 and the Hainan collision incident between a US and Chinese aircraft in 2001 exhibited this anti-foreign nationalism. Recent years have seen a further deterioration of relationship between China and the US. This was driven on the one hand by the Sino–American "trade war," the Western concern for human rights abuses in Xinjiang, the change of status quo in Hong Kong, and military threats issued by China over Taiwan, and on the other hand, by China's desire to uphold national security, non-interference and sovereignty over what it perceives to be its domestic affairs. The tense relationship saw a ramping-up of propaganda work on China's side by breathing new life into anti-Western nationalism.

Another propaganda technique is the "diversionary framing," which shifts the focus of the audience away from issues that could be harmful to one's reputation and instead frames the discussion by attacking the legitimacy of others (Freudenburg and Alario, 2007: 158). This approach allows the government to set the agenda (Chan, 2007). For example, Brady (2012) argues that the CCP's hosting of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games was a campaign of "mass distraction" to divert people's attention from foreign

criticism and domestic problems. Likewise, by examining newspaper reports during the 2005 anti-Japanese protests, Stockmann (2010) concludes that the Chinese government made efforts to cool down nationalism sentiments by downplaying negative reports related to Japan and giving more coverage to other issues. In other words, what is absent from news reports is as significant as what is salient.

Regardless of the propaganda toolkit used, ultimately, it is the concept of "cohesion" (凝聚, *ningju*) that sits at the centre of the broader propaganda strategy. Cohesion for the party-state means a "broad social consensus that reflects the public's acceptance and internalization of the key aspects of the official discourse" (Edney, 2015: 6). When applied to propaganda, cohesion plays an important role at two levels. At the ideological level, cohesion strengthens regime legitimacy by promoting nationalistic and pro-regime messages to the public. At the information management level, cohesion helps achieve news convergence on certain issues (Edney, 2015). This article presents evidence at both these levels through the prism of BLM coverage.

# Methodology

## Data

Stockmann's differentiation of "official, semi-official and commercialized" mainstream media is still relevant (Stockmann, 2010), but it is essential to consider the online presence of mainstream media, that is, their websites and official Weibo accounts; digital-only news outlets such as *Pengpai*; and we-media operated by KOLs in the online space, known for their ability to shape online public opinions or even challenge the official discourse (Nip and Fu, 2016). These online developments have undermined official media's monopoly of covering sensitive issues due to its unprecedented dissemination speed and reach (Lorentzen, 2014). Based on these categorisations of traditional and online media, we selected four mainstream news outlets and four we-media accounts. The media outlets selected (*People's Daily, Global Times, Pengpai*, and *Caixin*) fit within the official, semi-official and commercial category, have a nationwide readership, an archive available online, and a live account on Sina Weibo. *People's Daily* is the official newspaper of the CCP, reflecting the party's tone and priorities in news coverage. *Global Times* and *Pengpai* fall in the semi-official media category and indicate the party-state's successful adaptation to the market economy and information era. *Global Times* is known for its nationalistic tone and is well-read by China watchers. *Pengpai* is managed by the CCP's Shanghai party branch, but it is known for its ability to tiptoe the party line and bring forward original and incisive reports. It is also China's first digital-only news outlet and has proved to be widely successful with its app having been downloaded over 150 million times (*Netease*, 2019). Overall, *Pengpai* represents what Repnikova and Fang (2019) rightly called the government's latest "new-media experimentation." *Caixin* magazine is a commercial outlet and one of the few authoritative investigative magazines in China – it features bold and incisive reports revealing social problems and has more than 340,000 weekly readers (*Caixin*, 2019).

As a sample for analysing the coverage of BLM in Chinese media, we selected forty BLM-related articles and online posts each from *People's Daily*, *Global Times*, and *Pengpai,* and all of *Caixin*'s twenty-five articles. The sample was extracted from each day over the first two weeks after George Floyd's death, that is, 28 May to 11 June, to avoid the risk of collecting a cluster of articles from a few days only. All the selected articles are in-house and exclusive reports published by the four outlets. Based on the ensuing analysis, we believe that code saturation was achieved and that the sample was sufficient.

When selecting we-media accounts, we considered several criteria. First, we searched BLM-related content on Weibo and identified multiple accounts listed in the "hot topic" section, which indicates the most popular content according to Weibo's algorithm. Second, we followed previous studies' approach in identifying key opinion leaders on Weibo based on the number of followers, number of (re)posts, as well as whether the user is verified (Chen and Fu, 2016; Wang et al., 2020). A verified user is recognised by the "V" label Weibo adds to their account. When recording more than 50,000 followers and around 1000 posts, the user is considered a KOL (Nip and Fu, 2016). Third, based on account profiles that state bloggers' field of expertise, by using Weibo's "hashtag" function, we further singled out those focused on commenting on "social" and "political" issues, relevant to the BLM topic. As shown in Table 1, selected KOLs have been active on Weibo for at least nine years and issued more than 5000 posts, which supports their authenticity as users. Despite some KOLs' small number of posts published on BLM, their posts are lengthy and allow for rich analysis.

## Analytical Strategy

Our data analysis strategy is a thematic analysis focused on the qualitative reading of the data to interpret the meaning of the text and illustrates certain semantic relationships

**Table 1.** Choice of We-media.

| | No. followers | No. posts | No. Black Lives Matter (BLM) posts | Weibo hashtag | Registration time |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Chairman Rabbit (兔主席, *tuzhuxi*) | 1,700,381 | 7715 | 3 (8577 words) | History scholar | 5 June 2010 |
| Chu Yin (储殷, *Chu Yin*) | 1,577,185 | 23,268 | 15 (1771 words) | Professor of international relations | 1 November 2011 |
| Yashal (押沙龙, *Yashalong*) | 2,458,538 | 9632 | 2 (3708 words) | Writer | 21 November 2009 |
| Lu Kewen (卢克文, *Lu Kewen*) | 389,481 | 6007 | 3 (2569 words) | Military commentator | 12 November 2010 |

between elements of the text (e.g. Carley, 1993). The posts retrieved from mainstream media were grouped in codes and themes via NVivo, a software that aids and automates qualitative data analysis. Once all articles were collected, we took a deductive approach to coding, driven by themes that had already been highlighted in the literature; we nevertheless allowed space for inductive coding and look for new themes that may emerge from the raw data.

We also quantified part of the qualitative data to aid with the identification of patterns and trends. The quantification strategy was only applied to mainstream media because China's online KOLs vary in their distinctive rhetoric, narration styles, and productivity, all of which make quantifying the data cumbersome.

## Findings and Analysis

### Themes

Four key themes emerged from the NVivo analysis conducted on the 168 media articles we sampled.

*Protests.* Under the theme "protests," we coded descriptions of scenes of protests and protesters. We included three sub-codes: "negative description," where protests are depicted as violent, "positive description," where peaceful protests are covered, and "neutral description," where protests are not qualified.

The party-state is particularly sensitive to protests which pose a threat to "social stability" and its rule. Protests, therefore, are either subject to strict censorship or are framed in accordance with the party's official line. It is typical of China's propaganda apparatus to stress that the country should avoid "chaos" brought by protests and maintain stability at all costs. Consequently, the "protest" dynamic reflected through BLM in Chinese media through the BLM movement should be carefully examined.

*Police.* Portrayals in relation to the US police were coded under this theme. We used two sub-codes to capture Chinese media's depiction of the US police – "negative description" for "police brutality" containing specific references to violent actions, and "positive description" where the police are described as empathetic or fulfilling their duties.

In the context of China, in line with the theme "protest," "police" is also linked to the issue of "social stability" because they are often considered part of the establishment, and the Chinese media tends to defend the police actions in protest-related reports. The need to side with the police as defenders of law and order seems especially crucial when the Hong Kong protests still linger on the public's mind. It is thus compelling to observe how Chinese media reconciles the tension between defending the Chinese police in relation to Hong Kong protesters and criticising the US police forces in relation to BLM protesters.

*Anti-US.* We coded negative representations of the US that appeared in Chinese media posts related to BLM as "anti-US" discourses. Specifically, we identified "ideology,"

"Trump administration," and "racism" to be frequent sub-codes of the "anti-US" discourse.

This theme operationalises the anti-foreign sentiments and ideological contestation resulting from the tense Sino–US relationship, which helps to foster the "us vs. them" dichotomy. To China, the US' major rival, BLM is more than an issue related to race and social justice. It is an opportunity for undermining the US by exposing fundamental faults in its political system and ideology. Having long rejected the US socio-political vision under liberal democratic ideology, the Chinese media takes advantage of the BLM movement to prove the pitfalls of democracy.

*"Greater China".* "Greater China" theme refers to Mainland China, as well as Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Taiwan, all of which China perceives to be part of its territory and domestic affairs. China has often been criticised by the US for the handling of Hong Kong protests and suppression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang province. It is therefore unsurprising that China redirected this criticism by pointing fingers at the US' management of Black minorities. This availed China's propaganda organ of a good opportunity to foster the "us vs. them" dichotomy and further undermine the US, while strengthening the cohesion of "Greater China."

## Codes by Themes Across Media Outlets

The analysis of the four outlets selected reveals a range of different framings of the BLM and purposive usage. The importance of each outlet allocated to the topic of the BLM can be seen from a simple count of the number of occurrences and posts. Table 2 quantifies the themes broken down into codes.

Each news article represents a coding unit. Each of these identified articles was coded once or more under each of their themes. For example, if an article that made reference to police behaviour was identified to include both negative and positive descriptions, then it was counted twice; similarly, the same article could simultaneously be included under the codes of "US racism" and "ideology." This approach of dissecting themes and quantifying them helps identifying similarities and disparities between outlets' coverage of BLM, and whether one cohesive dominant discourse is promoted, as discussed next.

## Propaganda and Cohesion via BLM Reporting

*Police and Protests.* Chinese authorities did not put a tight lid on BLM reporting and instead took an active approach to frame the issue according to its official line. The themes of "police" and "protests" were consistently presented in an overwhelmingly negative tone in the Chinese mainstream media. The significant criticisms towards the US police were not particularly surprising due to the nature of this incident. What stands out though in the Chinese media is the high proportion of negative portrayals of protestors. Despite the fact that the BLM protestors are pursuing social justice, they are rebranded as "bandits," "rioters," and "troublemakers" through the party-state's propaganda lens. Scenes of protests are often described as "chaotic," "set on blaze,"

**Table 2.** Coding by Themes in Mainstream Media: The Number of Posts in Different Media Outlets Including Specific Themes.

| | People's Daily | Global Times | Pengpai | Caixin |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of Black Lives Matter (BLM) posts | **210** | **476*** | **148** | **25** |
| Number of sampled posts | 40 | 40 | 40 | 25 |
| **Police** | **25** | **39** | **32** | **24** |
| Negative (brutality) | 20 | 26 | 27 | 17 |
| Positive | 1 | 2 | 5 | 8 |
| **Protest** | **23** | **30** | **23** | **23** |
| Negative (violent) | 14 | 15 | 13 | 15 |
| Positive (peaceful) | 6 | 8 | 12 | 10 |
| Neutral | 10 | 12 | 18 | 12 |
| **Anti-US** | **12** | **25** | **13** | **10** |
| US racism | 7 | 14 | 9 | 9 |
| Trump Administration | 2 | 17 | 7 | 7 |
| Ideology | 7 | 13 | 5 | 1 |
| **Greater China** | **5** | **16** | **0** | **2** |
| Hong Kong | 4 | 11 | 0 | 2 |
| Xinjiang | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Taiwan | 0 | 4 | 0 | 0 |

*This is based on Global Times.

"war-torn streets," and "severe clashes between protestors and the police" (*People's Daily*, 2020). Mainstream media's negative attitude towards protests is generally shared by KOLs too. Chu Yin mocks protestors' efforts as "futile" and "a waste of energy." Yashl, taking a more moderate tone, remarks that the movement only has "limited capacity" to solve the "fundamental problem" that plagues the US, and he remains "pessimistic" on how much this movement could achieve.

The overwhelmingly negative narratives around police and BLM protestors reinforce the party-state's regime legitimacy by instilling the "stability trumps all" conviction into the audience. As the police stands for the law enforcement, tasked with maintaining order, the negative portrayal of them as brutal and incompetent reinforces the idea that the US, underpinned by a faulty political system and government, lacks the stability China has. This is best captured by *Global Times* (2020) which announces that "The so-called 'beacon of democracy' now becomes dim and lacklustre." Similarly, by reporting excessively negatively on BLM protests and protestors, the Chinese media underlines an association between social movements and the "chaos" and "instability" they can bring, which has been long favoured by the party-state. This is in line with previous studies that show how protests are often censored or selectively reported in the Chinese state media to maintain stability and where possible boost the party's legitimacy (Burcu, 2023). In other words, the description of heightened tensions and unrest at the scene of protests in the US indirectly consolidates the party-state's regime legitimacy by "validating" and reinforcing its "stability" discourse.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that not all actors examined "speak in one voice" on the issue of "protests" and "police." Although the two themes are presented overwhelmingly negatively across all media outlets, *Pengpai* and *Caixin* provide more nuanced accounts through more positive reports on both themes. In some instances, *Pengpai*'s describes peaceful protestors and highlights their vigilance against coronavirus. It is noteworthy that *Pengpai* calls on Black Americans to follow Dr. King's non-violent approach, but it also acknowledges that "it would be an extremely slow process if African Americans seek social justice through legal channels" (*Pengpai*, 2020). *Caixin* even legitimises the protest, saying "Maybe sometimes, destruction is the start of rebuilding" (*Caixin*, 2020a). As the outlet having most positive posts on the "police" theme, *Caixin*'s reports are more humane, describing, for example, the awkward position of African American police officers in the protests, as well as depicting "a moment of understanding and tolerance" between a group of police and protestors engaged in dialogue.

Different mainstream media outlets ultimately convey alternative interpretations of the BLM to their readers. In contrast, none of these more moderate narratives towards the police or protesters are displayed in the selected we-media.

*Anti-US.* The death of George Floyd and clashes between the police and protesters revealed some fundamental problems in the US society. The Chinese media and we-media capitalise on this opportunity to maximise their criticism of the US on multiple grounds, including racism, values of "democracy" and "liberty" that underpin its political system, and government structure. News outlets take different approaches in their attack on the US. *People's Daily* considers US racism as "the most deep-rooted problem of US society" and frequently uses the term "systematic racism" (*People.cn*, 2020). *Pengpai* and *Caixin* take a more people-centric approach and focus on people's everyday suffering due to racism. For example, *Caixin* quotes a protestor who condemns the US racism:

> People keep telling me "you Black need to work hard." This is just like telling someone in an unfair economic system that he or she should work hard. We are not solely responsible for our situation, but few seems to be aware of this. (*Caixin*, 2020b)

Beyond these narratives though, Chinese mainstream media does not engage much with the concept of race, but KOLs do and they tend to use racism-laden messages to assert China's superiority both as a country and race.

The dichotomy between China and the US, indirectly, is expressed at times through unapologetically racist messages that depict Black people as an undesirable "other," lazy, rude, and dangerous, in comparison with the desirable "us," referring to Chinese or Asian people in general. A racist hierarchal dualism is formed in Chu's posts by juxtaposing the Black "other," who is not willing to "work hard" but simply "rely on their privileged identity and holding the banner of anti-racism to ask for compensations from the state," and the Chinese "us," who are "clever, more diligent and more optimistic than black people," despite "even suffering more discriminations than them [Black people]." Other KOLs' messages also contain degrading messages about Black people

and accolades for the superiority of China and its people. Taking a more implicit tone, Yashl justifies the US police's "aggressiveness" towards Black people because in his view "certainly" one would behave more belligerently when facing "more dangerous people." He goes on to say that "thank God" that China has a "more peaceful and stable" social environment, reinforcing the message of stability that the state media has been promoting so diligently. Reposting one Weibo post showing BLM's mass rally in front of the White House, Lu's contempt is more explicit in his comment: "I don't see any point of doing so. Sheer waste of energy." Lu appears to share Chu's contempt and cynicism on the BLM movement and Black people. He then goes on to praise the Chinese people for being more rational and disciplined than Black people.

Mainstream media largely do not publish racially charged texts, which may be explained, among others, by the fact that it is subject to stricter editorial checks, unlike we-media. One of the rare articles that contain racist connotations published in *Global Times* notes that "Some African Americans are accustomed to blaming others for their own problems instead of reflecting more upon themselves or making substantial changes"; it further cites several examples such as Black students laughing at "hardworking but nerdy Asian students" and criticises them for "being hard to discipline" (*Global Times*, 2020b). The nationalistic tabloid devotes most of its articles not criticising the issue of race in the US, but the Trump administration; one belligerent post reads:

> Although everybody in China is aware of that fact the Mr. Trump is the chief culprit for this series of chaos in the US from the coronavirus outbreak to the violent protests, he and his supporters are still shamelessly blaming China for their own fault. (*Sohu*, 2020)

*Global Times* also repeatedly stresses the "failure of US political system" and "dysfunction of US values" (*Huanqiu*, 2020a) and hints at the superiority of China's system over the US' by touting "tremendous progress made by China in recent years" compared with "pandemic and riots raven" US (*Global Times*, 2020a). It even labels the US society as "a typical example of social Darwinism where the 'underdogs' are treated like nobody" (*Huanqiu*, 2020b). *Global Times* also spares no effort in undermining the US' human rights and democracy. It lambasts the US for using democracy as an "excuse" for interfering in other countries' affairs and degrades its democratic system as "big-money game" and "elite politics" (*Global Times*, 2020a). In its attack on the US, *People's Daily* accuses the US of using "double standards" towards other countries on issues related to "human rights and freedom," especially minorities' rights, press freedom, and religious freedom. Its harshest criticism towards the US refers to its refusal "to fundamentally reflect on its own racial problem and system but blaming other countries," questioning "Where is the US's promised human rights?" (*Weibo People's Daily*, 2020).

Both *Pengpai* and *Caixin* criticise extensively racism in the US and the Trump administration. *Pengpai* blames Trump for "intensifying racial conflict," "abusing power," and "glorifying violence" (*Pengpai*, 2020). *Caixin* expresses pessimistic feelings on the future of the US democracy, which risks "perishing" under Trump's presidency.

*Caixin* also calls Trump "reckless" and "encouraging white supremacism" and putting his country "in jeopardy" (*Caixin*, 2020b). Unlike all other outlets, *Caixin* shows no interest in criticising the US at the ideological level.

Similar "anti-US" themes are reflected in the we-media. Chairman Rabbit blames the US election, separation of power, and free media for worsening its racism. For him, a "democratic government" even encourages police brutality because the police are the embodiment and carrier of the state violence whose authority is sanctioned by the people. Adopting a sarcastic tone, Yashl mocks the "robustness" of the US system, which is too "stubborn" to change.

The fierce attacks on the US from the Chinese media serve three main functions. First, the strong ideological language is meant to "expose" China's major rival, the US. The criticisms often go beyond the immediate context of BLM and point to the fragility of the American political system, and its "liberal" and "democratic" political values, which can be persuasive to domestic audiences. As discussed earlier, Chinese media's criticisms on the US do not constitute a serious reflection on the issue of race, but merely a propaganda exercise. The issue of "race," which should have received the most extensive and deep coverage, did not surpass the topic of "ideology" or "Trump administration" in *People's Daily* and *Global Times*. On the contrary, when on 7 June 2020, the US consulate in Guangzhou hosted sixty participants to discuss the BLM movements, *Global Times* accused the US of trying to incite "unrest" (Shen and Lin, 2020).

Second, in relation to the US, Chinese media also forges an "us vs. them" dichotomy by highlighting the "chaos" of BLM and the "evilness" of the US, as opposed to China's stable situation and "civilised" handling of Hong Kong protests. While media reports refrain from directly asserting China's superiority over the US political system or ideology, they carefully craft a "us vs. them" dichotomy through references to Hong Kong. Many outlets draw a parallel between the protests that erupted in Hong Kong as a result of the anti-extradition bill, a controversial law that allows for the extradition of Mainland China fugitives from Hong Kong, and the BLM movement. The following post is a vivid example of such "us vs. them" dichotomy:

> Why does the US whitewash the Hong Kong separatists, terrorists and rioters as 'heroes and fighters', but treat its own domestic protestors as gangsters? Why does the US criticise the civilized law enforcement of the Hong Kong police, but shoot its own citizens and even deploy upon them its national guard? (*Weibo People's Daily, 2020*)

*People's Daily* argues that US police forces are brutal while Hong Kong police are restrained and "civilised," and warns that the protesters, both in the US and Hong Kong can turn violent. This is a disguised rebuke towards the US criticism of the Chinese Government's handling of the Hong Kong protests, which stood accused of sending paramilitary troops and gangs across the border to disperse the protests and instil fear (Torode et al., 2019).

Similarly, when a CNN journalist was arrested during the BLM protests in the US, Chairman Rabbit confidently argues that arresting an innocent journalist in full daylight

under the excuse of "obstructing police work" would be unimaginable in Hong Kong and unpalatable to the public; moreover, he continues, it would be impossible to happen because it would infringe legal norms and the powers that police were vested with through democratic elections. He does not, however, report on the disproportionate use of force by Hong Kong police against unarmed protesters, including firing rubber bullets at students, mistreatment of detainees, and the lack of an independent investigation into other abusive allegations during the 2019 protests. Such points of reference and comparison are also difficult to identify given China's highly filtered and framed news of Hong Kong in the mainland, which only refuels the party-state narrative. Another key opinion leader Lu Kewen also compared BLM protestors in the US with Hong Kong anti-extradition bill protestors, featuring a conspiracy tone. Lu clearly echoes Beijing's repeated claim that "foreign black hands are behind Hong Kong" in helping them organise protests. Through the sharp contrast between the "righteous China" and "evil US," the "us vs. them" narratives appeal to the audience's nationalist feelings and further consolidate regime legitimacy.

Thirdly, the Chinese media plays use harsh criticism of the US to distract the domestic audience's attention away from domestic issues and onto US issues. The focus is shifted away from what was happening in China at that time, that is, the spread and government's handling of the Covid pandemic, the treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, and the trade war with the US which had negative economic repercussions on both parties. This diversionary media function is further accentuated by the avoidance of a deeper engagement with the issue of race and the absence of references to China's own ethnic minorities, as discussed further in the next section.

*Greater China.* The "Greater China" theme displays the least convergence among media sources. One finding that warrants attention is that compared with Hong Kong, Xinjiang was mentioned far less times by both mainstream media and we-media. This may be explained given that at the time of George Floyd's death and while the BLM protests were spreading, the abuse of ethnic Uyghurs in Xinjiang camps came out in the press and the US imposed its first round of sanctions on senior Chinese officials in response. Taiwan is also mentioned only several times by *Global Times*. The newspaper "calls out" President Tsai for reacting "completely different[ly]" to US and Hong Kong protests: "Ms. Tsai and her associates' silence on the US police brutality and human rights abuses just prove how hypocrite they are" (*Huanqiu*, 2020c). In another post responding to Taiwanese media's accusations of the government in Beijing deriving pleasure and capitalising on BLM, *Global Times* doubles down its aggressive rhetoric calling them "bottomless and shameless (…) thugs" (*Huanqiu*, 2020d). In contrast, *Pengpai* and *Caixin* make no attempt to connect BLM to "Greater China."

## Discussion

Thematic analysis on China's domestic coverage of BLM firstly showcases violent protest scenes and police brutality, constantly seeking to undermine the conceptualisation

of "protests" as a useful tool of political and social change. Secondly, it shows how the Chinese media repeatedly undermines the US political system and ideology, while it defends China's own record on the issue of Hong Kong and conceals Xinjiang.

The notion of "cohesion" sheds light upon China's BLM coverage as a cohesive tool in three aspects. As a propaganda strategy, "cohesion" consists of a range of tactics including diversionary framing, appeals to nationalism, and manufactures convergence on key issues between different media outlets, which ultimately consolidate the party's legitimacy. The overwhelmingly negative portrayal of protest scenes strengthens the regime's legitimacy by reinforcing the stereotype of protest as "chaotic" to its audience. In terms of "distraction," while China criticises extensively the US, it hardly ever presents detailed information about the criticism it receives from the US about its own handling of ethnic minorities, human rights, and protests. However, Chinese media's diversionary framings are drastically different on the issue of Hong Kong and Xinjiang, as references to Hong Kong are far more frequently mentioned than Xinjiang. A possible explanation may be that Hong Kong is an agenda that has already been "set" in Mainland China's information environment, facilitated by the overwhelming pro-regime discourses produced over the years, particularly during the 2019 protests. The reason for the party-state to shun away from similar proactive tactics in Xinjiang might be the absence of noteworthy "foreign" actors in Xinjiang or major foreign condemnations at the time point of BLM, which makes it difficult to advance the "black hand behind scene" discourse through which public sentiments could be directed to foreign countries and patriotism triggered. The sheer complexity and sensitivity of ethnic problems may also prevent China from doing so (Elliott, 2018; Karmel, 1995). Therefore, we argue that China's BLM discourse reinforces the party-state official stories on Hong Kong "riots," while maintaining silence on Xinjiang. Interestingly, the party-state does not fear to bring up the Xinjiang topic in the context of refuting the force labour sanctions imposed by the West, but it steers away from connecting Xinjiang with the issue of race and minorities' rights, promoted by the BLM.

These strategies aimed at building cohesion among the Chinese public align with the propaganda style revived under the Xi Jinping administration with a renewed emphasis on nationalism and ideological purity. The anti-US theme, in particular, is well illustrated through the comments of chief propagandists Wang Huning and Huang Kunming under Xi, who are well known for their nationalists and hawkish stance towards the West. In December 2019, Huang rejected international values when the US Congress criticised China over its handling of Hong Kong and Xinjiang. He insisted that "the development of the cause of human rights must and can only be promoted in accordance with the national conditions of each country and the needs of the people," indirectly accusing the US of using human rights to interfere in China's internal affairs and violating Chinese people's rights (*Xinhua*, 2017). The anti-US theme identified in BLM coverage is therefore a continuation of an older recurrent theme in China's discourse under Xi.

As a measurement of divergence–convergence between different outlets' rhetoric, the level of cohesion of China's BLM discourses varies. Within mainstream media, "police brutality" and "violent protests" stand out as the two most prominent themes covered by all four outlets. However, these outlets diverge when it comes to criticising the US, race

and ideology, and "Greater China" discourses. The CCP mouthpiece *People's Daily* and the nationalist tabloid *Global Times* adopt a more belligerent and ideological rhetoric on all three issues, which are often narrated interweavingly (e.g. the US's racial problem are jointly discussed with the faults of its system) with a keen focus on undermining the US and glorifying China. On the contrary, both *Pengpai* and *Caixin* play down ideology in their BLM reports, taking a much more moderate "anti-US" stance and hardly mentioning "Greater China.". Furthermore, even on the themes of "police" and "protests" where greater convergence is observed among traditional media, we still find that *Pengpai* and *Caixin* are more likely to cover the positive sides of both issues in comparison with *People's Daily* and *Global Times*.

These findings related to different outlets' divergence–convergence levels complicate Stockman's (2010) argument that official and semi-official media tend to have more leeway in reporting sensitive issues than commercial ones. Though both *Global Times* and *Pengpai* belong to the category of semi-official media, *Pengpai*'s silence on "Greater China" discourses, a potentially sensitive type of discourse, is noteworthy. One possible explanation is that the party-state is keen on diversifying its news styles within a permissible range. Part of the CCP's "digital experimentation" to "revolutionize persuasion" (Repnikova and Fang, 2019), *Pengpai* offers an alternative to *People's Daily* and *Global Times*'s ideological-oriented articles, providing more objective and fact-based reports instead. Placed on a spectrum, *People's Daily* and *Global Times* are clearly more closely aligned and lean towards a more nationalistic end where media is more powerfully employed as a propaganda tool, while *Pengpai* and *Caixin* take a more centre ground. For example, *Global Times* clearly stands out as the most nationalistic media outlet out of the four, through its extreme criticism of the US in the context of BLM and by frequently linking BLM and the theme of "Greater China."

One key difference identified between we-media and traditional media is their discourses on race, especially on attitudes towards Black people. Findings show that we-media is more likely to contain racist messages towards Black people than traditional media. In our sample, only one traditional media (*Global Times*) contains racially charged messages. In contrast, three of the four-selected KOLs made derogatory racist comments. A more intriguing finding is the link between racism and ideology, as noted in the we-media. More specifically, by being a supporter of BLM, one risks being labelled as a supporter of "liberalism," and their political loyalty towards the "Chinese system" and their "Chineseness" is immediately called into question.

Racist and xenophobic feelings have long existed in China before the proliferation of the internet (Leung, 2015). Similarly, concerns have previously been expressed in relation to uncontrolled and non-censored nationalism which can turn xenophobic and to denounce as "traitors" those who challenge the mainstream narrative (Burcu, 2023; Koschut et al., 2017). The fact that the state tolerates such racially charged messages in relation to BLM potentially contributes to the proliferation of such narratives and risks stifling debates. While heavy censorship exists in China, as we discovered in this article, race and ethnicity are not a topic heavily censored. A report composed by China-based scholars analysing grassroots Chinese anti-Black racism on Weibo finds

that the platform would not censor racist messages unless reported by others, and some posts still survive the censorship (Anonymous, 2021). Such selective censorship risks contributing to a lack of critical discussion on race and racism in China. Additionally, mainstream media's reticence of tackling the topic of "race" or glorifying the "Chinese race" may be explained by the sensitivity that the topic presents, which inevitably links to China's ethnic minority problems. Despite the government promoting "ethnic unity and harmony" among China's fifty-six ethnic groups, the Han Chinese have been often seen as the undisputed representation of the "Chinese race," while others such as the Uyghurs and Tibetans have been at best marginalised, at worst oppressed. The official propaganda machine carefully avoids triggering a backlash among its own people. Furthermore, the displays of intolerance and "witch-hunt" towards grassroot BLM sympathisers are likely to be encouraged by the high proportion of anti-US narratives and the silence on China's own racial justice.

## Conclusion

To sum up, our research presents three main findings. Firstly, Chinese media coverage of BLM mainly serves its domestic agenda of generating cohesion, a key task of the propaganda work (Brady, 2012; Edney, 2015). As a multi-faceted propaganda tool, the BLM coverage confirms key findings from Chinese propaganda studies – it promotes "stability triumphs all" (Sandby-Thomas, 2010) by highlighting the chaos associated with protests; it distracts the public's attention from undesirable and sensitive news (Brady, 2012) by avoiding discussing Xinjiang, race, and ethnicity within China, and by actively criticising the US instead; and it constructs a "us vs. them" dichotomy (Burcu, 2023; Luqiu, 2018) by taking an aggressive anti-US rhetoric and glorifying itself.

Secondly, this article highlights varying degrees of convergence and divergence on different themes among mainstream media outlets, as well as between mainstream media and we-media. It shows how media convergence works in China's context-while the official media sets a baseline on crucial issues, it cannot ensure the homogeneity of narratives across different outlets. These findings link to the literature on China's media convergence, which highlights the tools and limitations of Beijing's ambitious propaganda programme (Xiong and Zhang 2018; Yin and Liu, 2014). Though we agree that media convergence contributes to sustaining the political dominance of the party, the more nuanced approaches on the US criticism and clearer divergence on "Greater China," compared with notable convergence on "protest" and "police" suggests a more complex picture, despite the party-state's ambitious media convergence strategy to manufacture public support (Zhang and Ma, 2021).

Finally, despite a significant reporting on BLM in the Chinese media, BLM in relation to the politics of race and ethnicity in China remains a topic not broached. Composed of fifty-six ethnic groups and on the backdrop of brutal campaigns in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, ethnicity continues to be key to the maintenance of China's long-term stability and international affairs (Brady, 2012). Internationally, the mainstream media's nominal support for Black people and condemnation of racism echoes with China's long-

standing historical support for developing countries, including African countries. Its refusal to address the issue of race at the domestic level and outside the context of "US racism" reflects the fact that "anti-US" rhetoric has priority. The Chinese mainstream media refrains from connecting the racial debate in the US to its management of Xinjiang affairs, although a solid defence of its management of Hong Kong is expressed.

A degree of "ignorance" on "race" is promoted in the sense that the Chinese media uses a selective framing when reporting on race. Chinese authorities deliberately put a tight lid on this topic and attempted to stifle public debate on racial inequality by framing it as an inherent problem of the US, rather than one that many societies are facing, including China. Therefore, instead of triggering a healthy debate on race and minority rights, China's coverage of BLM provides KOLs, in particular, with an opportunity to promote racially charged views.

Thematic analysis conducted through NVivo only allowed for the analysis of a limited sample of media posts. We encourage further systematic research that incorporates larger media samples, including online readers' comments and interactions to depict a more comprehensive picture of the Chinese media propaganda tools and its framing of race. Alternatively, comparative research on Chinese media's coverage of BLM protests with other protests, such as the US Capitol Riots or Myanmar anti-coup protests, would shed more light on how the propaganda apparatus works in relation to protests. Finally, China's BLM discourses could be compared with other authoritarian regimes' racial/ethnic discourses across different historical periods, especially the Soviet Union's propaganda on Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s. This would also further inform our understanding of how authoritarian propaganda evolved over time to exploit pitfalls in liberal democracies and reinforce regime legitimacy.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

## Funding

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