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# Online Chinese Nationalism

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# SUMMARY

- Within the proviso that one party rule should be maintained, Chinese politics is becoming more pluralistic. The internet is playing a key role in facilitating this increased articulation of interests.

- There is no strong evidence to date that this is leading towards Western-style democratisation. Instead, popular online discussions are dominated by broadly-defined nationalist concerns.

- Internet nationalism tends to be largely event driven and responsive (though with some signs of a move towards agenda setting). The main sources of internet nationalism relate to external interference in issues of Chinese sovereignty and/or perceived external criticisms of the Chinese state or its people.

- The USA and Japan provide the main focus of attention. Relations with the USA are often a key determinant of how other countries/regions are perceived in online communities.

- There is evidence that internet nationalism has a real, albeit limited, impact on policy making and international relations. The spread of Chinese internet nationalism is reaching beyond China and increasingly relating to other public opinions or political processes.

## INTRODUCTION

In June 2010, the Chinese government produced its first White Paper on the internet.[1] This document explains how the government has supported and funded the expansion of the internet to reach 384 million users at the end of 2009 – roughly 30 per cent of the population. Whilst part of the purpose of this expansion is to allow the internet to become 'part of the state information infrastructure', the White Paper also pointed to the freedom that Chinese citizens have to use the internet to freely air their opinions:

> 'China's websites attach great importance to providing netizens with opinion expression services, with over 80% of them providing electronic bulletin service. In China, there are over a million BBSs [bulletin board systems] and some 220 million bloggers. According to a sample survey, each day people post over three million messages via BBS, news commentary sites, blogs, etc., and over 66% of Chinese netizens frequently place postings to discuss various topics, and to fully express their opinions and represent their interests'

It was presumably no coincidence that this White Paper emerged in the midst of a highly publicized and contentious debate over Google's operations in China,[2] which reignited debates over the ethical challenges of working with the Chinese authorities.

The White Paper and the Google disputes also renewed interest in the relationship between the expansion of the internet and political change in China. As the internet began to develop in China in the mid-1990s, there was a suggestion that this would have a liberalizing impact on Chinese polity, perhaps leading to democracy and/or regime change. At the risk of oversimplification, the argument was that the expansion of internet access would:

- lead to uncontrollable access to information and ideas from across the world;

- allow people to air their grievances and interest;

- create a platform for association, agitation and mobilisation - a virtual 'public sphere'

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1 An English language version is available at
http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7093508.htm

Yet the Google affair seemed to suggest that access to information was very much controllable, and by accessing email accounts, it might even be easier to trace dissident activity than before.

Our findings[3] suggest that the internet is playing an important role in changing the nature of political debate and activity in China, but that it is not leading to Western style liberalisation or democracy. For example, the articulation of the 'valid' concerns of the population is encouraged as a means of re-connecting the people with the party-state. On another level, the internet has become an arena for the articulation of popular nationalist sentiments – some of which go much further than official policy in asserting Chinese interests and condemning those who are perceived to threaten these interests.

## The internet and popular participation in policy making

Using the internet as a means of commenting on government policy and performance, or to propose new policy initiatives, has become almost a totemic example of a 'new' style of Chinese politics. Perhaps more correctly, it is an example of the image of how the new politics works that the leadership wants to depict.

Despite economic successes, these leaders are aware that the party-state has come to be mistrusted by many. When the SARs outbreak first came to light, for example, officials seemed to act to protect themselves from potential criticism rather than acting to defend the health of the people. When tainted baby milk killed six children in 2008 and harmed nearly 300,000 more, investigations revealed that safety regulations were often ignored as officials sought personal gain instead. Many officials seemed to be bound up in corruption, while rigid bureaucratic structures staffed by the very people that were often the source of complaints made it extremely difficult for normal citizens to raise their grievances. In short, the party-state seemed to be serving itself rather than the people.[4]

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2 Having originally agreed to Chinese regulations, Google reported that it might withdraw from China in January 2010 after the hacking of email accounts and the blocking of some Google owned sites. Its license to operate in China was finally renewed in July 2010/
3 Some of these findings are based on the contributions to our edited collection, Simon Shen and Shaun Breslin (eds) Online Chinese Nationalism and Chinese Bilateral Relations (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010).
4 This phrase, used by Mao in 1942 as the benchmark for all party members, was repeated in a damning report on its own 'ruling capacity' by the communist party in 2004. Central Committee, 中共中央关于加强党的执政能力建设的决定 Zhonggong Zhongyang Guanyu Jiaqiang Dangde Zhizheng Nengli Jianshe de Jueding (The Party Central Committee Decision on Strengthening Governing Capacity Construction), available at http://www.china.com.cn/chinese/2004/Sep/668376.htm (in Chinese).

As internet usage began to expand, it seemed to provide an excellent means of creating new channels of interaction between the people and the party-state. Hong Yu is widely credited with being the first delegate to the National People's Congress[5] to set up an online presence designed to listen to popular views and to receive suggestions for policy changes (in 2004). Today, similar sites are commonplace, with individual officials and organisations establishing myriad forums and discussion groups to interact with the general public. It is also rapidly becoming the norm for China's top leaders to host internet question and answer sessions before major meetings (and to be filmed and photographed doing so).

So embracing the internet is part of a wider strategy designed to convince the people that the party-state really has their interests at heart. It is an attempt to pluralise decision-making and create a responsive, predictable, listening form of one-party state. The intention is that the internet will not lead to the end of communist party rule but will strengthen it.

Crucially, only valid critical comments are encouraged, namely those intended to make the current system work better rather than comments challenging one-party rule. Thus, the internet has been used by individuals and groups to claim rights that they are legally entitled to but which in practice they have been denied. For example, Hepatitis C sufferers have been particularly active in highlighting the illegal discrimination that they feel they suffer. The failure to enforce environmental law is also an officially encouraged arena of activity. Writing wrongs and exposing corruption is encouraged by the central leadership, if not always by local officials who are often the targets of such action. Guobin Yang has shown how internet postings helped bring to light a number of miscarriages of justice where people were not prepared to simply accept the official version of events, eventually forcing higher levels of authority to act.[6]

Internet discussions can also at times move into more critical territories. For example, around the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen incident in 2009, it was not uncommon to find calls of support for the 'Tiananmen mothers'.[7] Allegories and homophones are also used to get round censorship software: the Chinese for 'river crab' has the same sound as 'harmony' (though with

5  China's parliament that meets in full session once a year each spring
6  Guobin Yang (2009), 'Historical Imagination in the Study of Chinese Digital Civil Society', in Xiaolong Zhang and Yongnian Zheng eds., China's Information and Communications Technology Revolution, (London: Routledge) p.20.
7  A group of relatives and friends of those killed in 1989 who are campaigning for an pen investigation into what exactly happened, and also for freedom for themselves from surveillance and persecution.

slightly different tonal inflection) and is used to refer to the current leadership's emphasis on the importance of building a harmonious society.

The importance of these developments should not be exaggerated. The internet remains under relatively careful surveillance and control. Comments that go beyond the permissible are either not allowed to be posted or are quickly removed. And at times the parameters of valid participation are unclear. Indeed, they can and do move if what starts as acceptable and loyal criticism develops a momentum. In particular, anything that appears to stray from individual to collective action causes considerable concern.

Moreover, it is not always clear what truly 'independent' internet activity is. Discussion threads are controlled and organised to ensure that the 'Hot Topics' are the ones that fit best with current policy. There are suggestions that the threads might actually be started by what might be called 'official China', perhaps to test public opinion, to rally the people around a preferred cause or to distract attention from other issues.

## Nationalism(s) as the primary online political discourse

Chief amongst these hot topics are issues that fall under the broad heading of 'nationalism' – particularly discussions over perceived slights against China or potential threats to China's national interest. The importance of nationalism in these online debates reflects the real interests and concerns of normal Chinese people. To be sure these nationalist sentiments might have been nurtured by the official emphasis on patriotism in media, education and even entertainment. Indeed, one of China's most popular online forums, *qiangguo* or 'strong country' (强国), was set up specifically to provide a platform for the articulation of anti-US opinion.

But this does not make these popular sentiments any less real. The state promotes nationalism and patriotism, which finds support within the general population, who then articulate their interests and make demands on the state to defend China's interests. Thus nationalism is both a top-down and a bottom-up phenomenon. It is not something that can simply be dictated and controlled by the leadership. Online discussions can create problems for policy-makers:

(i) by being hyper-critical of other countries and potentially undermining official relations with that country;

(ii) by being critical of 'official scholars' who are closely related to the policy process;

(iii) by being critical of state policy itself

And because nationalism is such a legitimate arena for popular debate, clamping down on it is not easy.


## 'Othering' China/Chinese Exceptionalism

By and large, though, online nationalism is regime reinforcing. In particular, it helps to cement the idea that the state, the leaders and the people are one and the same thing; and that they are subject to unfair criticism and attacks from the rest of the world that simply does not understand China. So if foreign demonstrators express support for the Dalai Lama, this is taken as an attack not just on the Chinese state, or of the policy of China's leaders, but as an attack on China as a whole including the Chinese people. Such criticisms are often described as 'hurting the feelings of the Chinese people' 伤害中国人民感情 (shanghai zhongguo renmin ganqing) – something that one Chinese blogger calculates happened 115 times between 1946 and 2006.[8]

Most of these slights over the years, and the inspiration for much online discussion today, have their origins in foreign criticisms of either Chinese claims to sovereignty over Tibet, Xinjiang and Taiwan or criticisms of China's human rights record and lack of democratisation. Human rights and sovereignty issues typically come together in external criticisms of China's role in Tibet. Whilst the online response is often that foreigners simply don't have a right to intervene in what are internal Chinese matters, the idea that foreigners simply don't understand China and its unique history and culture is also a frequent complaint. The understanding that the West is too powerful in the global order and that China is not fully able to enforce its views and visions (yet) is also a recurring theme.

Underlying much of this discussion is the idea that China is 'different'. It has a different (and much longer) history than the West and has different belief systems and mores. In addition to meaning that China's domestic political system is different from what the West thinks it should be, this also means that China will be a different kind of global power. Its shared history of colonisation and oppression with other developing states means that China will be a responsible partner rather than a colonising imperialist great power.

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8  By searching through the on-line archives of the People's Daily. Fang Kecheng's blog, posted 09/12/08 at http://www.fangkc.cn/thought/donot-hurt-chinese. We were alerted to this blog by a comment on it  in Joel Martinsen 'Mapping the Hurt Feeling of the Chinese' posted 11/12/08 on http://www.danwei.org/foreign_affairs/a_map_of_hurt_feelings.php

## Targets of Nationalism

Just as there is a strong correlation between people and state in China, so this understanding is often (though not always) applied to those who are critical of China. Thus, the actions of private citizens during the Olympic torch relay through France is perceived as being in some way a French attack on China. In the same vein, if France is being critical, and given that Carrefour is a French company, then Carrefour becomes the subject of a Chinese consumer boycott (even though Carrefour sources the vast majority of its goods in its Chinese shops from China itself).[9]

The Olympic torch relay is a good example of how online discussions are primarily event driven and responsive. There are, however, some latent issues that do not need much to generate a response; and some countries that are under much closer scrutiny from China's online community than others. These fit into three different layers.

The first layer is occupied by Japan, the United States and Taiwan. The fiercest comments and suggestions are reserved for Japan, with memories of wartime occupation still very much alive. Such is the extent of hostility from some that even plans to use Japanese bullet train technology and the suggestion that Japan might send troops to help after the Sichuan earthquake resulted in extensive online debate. Here, the target was partly Japan, but also partly the Chinese government for its relations with Japan. Since the spate of anti-Japanese demonstrations in China in 2005, some of the heat and intensity has gone out of online condemnations of Japan, but it remains a keen focus of discussion.

Given the extent of debate over China's rise in the USA, there is a relatively steady stream of comments and publications that seem to give credence to the idea that China is being demonised to prevent it from developing. The actions of the US in other parts of the world are taken of evidence that the US is the unipolar enforcer of its interests and values on others, with the war in Iraq a particular hot topic for Chinese netizens. Taiwan plays a slightly different role. It is most important as an issue in relations with others; anything that looks like an implicit acceptance of Taiwan as being a separate independent country generates criticism. Taiwan becomes the focus of criticism (rather than an issue) when political debates in Taiwan return to the possibility of independence; particularly in the run up to elections.

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9  For more details see Winnie King (2010) 'Online Chinese Nationalism towards the European Union: Economic and Diplomatic Implications of the Olympic Torch Relay Protests' in Simon Shen and Shaun Breslin (eds) Online Chinese Nationalism and China's Bilateral Relations (Lanham: Lexington), pp177-198.

The second layer of countries that receive much less attention but can emerge in response to events are those in Europe and Asia.[10] The countries in this region do not receive the same level of attention as the first layer countries. If something happens that receives news coverage (such as the Olympic torch protests) then the online community will respond. But they are not the focus of day-to-day attention. Each country's relations with the US plays a role in how they are perceived. In particular, the way that countries lined up either with or against the US in the Iraq war seems to play a role in establishing underlying perceptions of each country's fundamental trustworthiness. Historical relations with China also matter – those European states that previously colonised parts of China are still often considered to be untrustworthy.

The third layer that receives even less attention is the developing world. Here, relations with the US are again important. Those countries which seem to be searching for quasi-socialist alternatives to the US-dominated neoliberal paradigm gain considerable praise. The diplomatic recognition of Taiwan by some developing states can act as a catalyst for debate. There is an extent to which discussions of other developing states plays a role in reinforcing pride in China's own development. The continued poverty and corruption of Africa and the failings of liberal economic reforms in Latin America are seen in stark contrast to China's success.

These countries are rarely visible in China, and there is little knowledge about them. This often results in aggregation and stereotyping. Thus, for example, it is not uncommon for Africa to be referred to as a single unit of analysis (though this is not a uniquely Chinese phenomenon). Stereotyping at times can cross the line into racism and almost xenophobia – Africans, for example, are sometimes depicted as lazy and promiscuous, and a danger for Chinese women.

## Actors and Impact

Access to the internet continues to expand in China. People in the countryside do get involved in debates and post opinions but younger urban dwellers are the most likely to be online and posting comments. The individual nature of most internet activity that is required to keep it legitimate (as opposed to collective action) has resulted in considerable diversity of

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10  Including Australasia.

opinion. A key conclusion is that there are multiple voices and multiple nationalisms in China.

There is some evidence that this has had an impact on policy. The criticism of using Japanese technology for the high speed train network is a case in point. Online debate politicised what had previously been a specialised technical issue; it was brought into the realm of high politics and resulted in a reversal of policy.[11] But often it is impossible for the authorities to respond to internet demands for action, because different things are being demanded – and sometimes the demands are mutually contradictory.

Having said that activity is largely individual, there is some evidence of coordination and planning, during the April 2005 anti-Japanese demonstrations for example. Some of the response to the protests against the Olympic torch relay also appeared to have coordinated – but mostly amongst Chinese communities overseas. And this raises the importance of online Chinese nationalism outside China. This coordinated activity in response to the 2010 protests was designed to influence audiences in the UK, France and elsewhere. There is a considerable Chinese presence on sites like YouTube, where a search on the phrase 'the truth about Tibet' uncovers a range of different postings, with comments on the videos sometimes running into the tens of thousands (with many of them less than polite on both sides of the debate).[12] Online Chinese nationalism, then, may have a political impact way beyond China's boundaries.

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11  Although the fuss had died down, the Japanese input came back onto the agenda.
12  Somewhat ironically, YouTube was blocked in China in March 2009 and at the time of writing was still unavailable.

## CONCLUSIONS

The world did not begin with the invention of the internet, and neither did popular participation in Chinese politics. People have tried to influence politics by writing books, articles and letters and continue to do so. They also travel to Beijing and local seats of power to air grievances and lobby for change in person. And when popular feeling towards Japan exploded in 2005, it would be hard to claim that internet postings were more significant than the popular demonstrations that in some places turned to violence. Nevertheless, the internet clearly makes it easy to post an opinion; either in response to a news story or to an online discussion. Moreover, threads can develop and expand quickly and take on a momentum that is simply not possible using more traditional methods.

But rather than be a force for democracy and liberalisation, evidence suggests that the internet is actually being utilised by the state to reinforce its position. On one level, the internet is a key tool in the authorities' attempts to convince the Chinese people that it is constructing a fairer, more predictable, and open form of government that has the people's interests at its heart. On another, online nationalism largely chimes with the regime's attempts to construct a new state identity as China as 'different' – a China that the West doesn't understand and a China that faces a hostile international community. To be sure, exuberant expressions of nationalism can at times create some headaches for policy makers, but these debates do not threaten the existing order. With self-censorship restricting the focus of debates, and the state retaining the ability to control who can access what, it is perhaps no surprise that foreign ministry spokesman, Qin Gang, told Western reporters that 'Many people have a false impression that the Chinese government fears the Internet. In fact, it is just the opposite' – and presumably he did not mean by this that the internet fears China.[13]

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13  This quote was widely reported after China banned access to YouTube in 2009 including in Tania Branigan (2009) 'China blocks YouTube: Attack on video showing security forces beating Tibetans' The Guardian, 25th March.

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