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Nationalisms on China's evolving internet

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Abstract

As China's internet has matured, from its initial web-based origins through innovative '2.0' and '3.0' innovations, so too have the community sentiments that criss-cross the People's Republic of China's networked society. A perennial issue has been the question of how Chinese nationhood has been constructed and reproduced through digital technologies and how the evolving affordances of internet technology have contributed to China's many nationalisms. This short essay reflects on this history. It discusses how early internet forums and blogs allowed users to coordinate their sense of Chineseness, how these processes later changed when communication moved to widely adopted microblogging platforms and what we can expect of the future, as China's media environments shift their focus towards short-messaging applications and video-sharing platforms. What will happen to Chinese nationalisms as China's platformisation enters its next phases?

Keywords

China, ICT, internet, nationalism

As China's internet has transformed over the past three decades, so too have the community sentiments that criss-cross the People's Republic of China (PRC's) highly networked society. A perennial issue has been the question of how Chinese nationhood has been constructed and reproduced through the internet and how the evolving affordances of digital technology have contributed to China's many nationalisms. What can we learn from the ways that internet users coordinate their sense of Chineseness, be it through early forums and blogs or later social media platforms? In this short essay, I reflect on the social, political and technological factors that have shaped China's many nationalisms, and I ask: what can we expect, of Chinese nationalisms, as China's internet development enters its next phases?

To fully appreciate what nationalism has been doing to China and what China has been doing to nationalism, it is worth recalling what nationalism is. While scholars such as Anderson (2006), Smith (1993), Gellner (2006) and Billig (2009) have debated the many nuances and controversies around this contested concept, a general understanding of nationalism has emerged from these debates in which nationalism refers to the construction, through communication and social practice, of group sentiments

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that place the idea of an imagined national community at the centre of modern political autonomy, mobilisation and action. Area-studies scholarship has shown how important this construction process has been in the making of modern China (Duara, 1997; Mitter, 2004). Politics in the PRC then also drew from these historical practices to create the New China after 1949, and nationalism has remained a key facet of Chinese politics ever since.

Nationalism in PRC politics has been intimately tied to the ruling Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) legitimisation practices, and this is where nationalism and information and communication technologies (ICT) powerfully connect: the introduction of the internet coincided with tumultuous transformations in China during the late 1980s and early 1990s, in which China's first (mostly academic) internet users navigated China's opening-up to the world, the activities of China's nascent pro-democracy movement and ultimately the state's reassertion of power. Especially after 1989, did the CCP leadership emphasise nationalism as a core justification of its mandate to govern, and as a means of glueing China's increasingly diverse society together under the banner of one-party rule. The central authorities' vision of a state-led nationalism (Zhao, 2004) has been visible in patriotic education and propaganda campaigns that emphasised a 'century of humiliation', which China, in the eyes of CCP leaders, had now finally overcome (Wang, 2012). This top-down modernist narrative, along with its nationalist symbolic resources, has been a staple of political communication in China ever since, creating a ubiquitous reference system for the authorities and the public alike.

It is before this backdrop that we should understand early 'Web 1.0' internet interactions. As bulletin boards proliferated, so did the background assumptions about how to make sense of China in this newly interconnected world. While early imaginations of the internet still viewed online activities as part of a 'virtual' world, separate from the realities of 'offline' contexts, the connections between Chinese forum discussions and in-real-life practices already offered a glimpse into the ways ICT would later shape, and be shaped by, embodied activism 'on-the-ground'. An example of this was the nationalist reaction to the 1999 NATO bombing of the PRC

embassy in Belgrade, which led to widespread mass protests in China. As scholars of such events have shown (Gries, 2004), this new form of public outrage was not solely engineered top-down by the authorities. Certainly, CCP leaders benefitted from anti-American sentiments and tried to channel them to their advantage. However, the ability of Chinese citizens to communicate online and mobilise in support of nationalist agendas also showcased the growing relevance of bottom-up, popular nationalism.

Much like other activism (G. Yang, 2009), such popular nationalism found fruitful spaces in China's expanding online spheres, such as on the then-popular bulletin board 'Strong Country Forum' (强国论坛) (Hung, 2003; G. Yang, 2003). Activists would later establish their own online outlets, for instance to address perceived slights against the Chinese nation (Xu, 2012). A prominent example was the student-founded website 'anti-CNN', which aimed to counter negative China reporting in foreign media, specifically following criticism of the PRC's handling of Tibetan riots in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics (Lin & Zhao, 2016).

Such web-based activism was accompanied by vibrant discussions in China's blogs – a communication format that took the PRC by storm in the 2000s. The activities of celebrities like Han Han illustrate how blogging became an important part of public debate and how such debates were intimately linked to diverse understandings of the Chinese nation. A particularly insightful episode was Han's discussion of Google's departure from the PRC internet in 2010: in an analogy to the Shanghai World Exposition, Han playfully (and: colourfully) argued that the expo's mascot Haibo did not feature a butt crack (in Chinese: *gugou* 股沟), and that much like China without Google (the homophone *Guge* 谷歌), it would consequently have to process its excrement internally (Schneider, 2019, p. 39). This sardonic assessment of the PRC's national internet illustrates the popular discussions about the state's techno-nationalist politics, anticipating later popular debates about China's so-called Great Firewall and the state's regulatory role in the PRC's nascent platform economy.

Much of the scholarship about such discussions of the Chinese nation and its nationalism focused primarily on the discourses that internet users

constructed online and on the ability (or inability) of the authorities to ‘guide public opinion’ (*yulun daoxiang* 舆论导向). As online nationalism started to proliferate on novel ‘Web 2.0’ social media services such as Sina’s microblogging platform Weibo (Gries et al., 2016), assessments increasingly turned to the technological affordances of such platforms (e.g. Brussee, 2022). China’s ‘digital nationalism’ is today a complicated set of practices that emerges, often unpredictably, from the interactions of users, state and commercial actors and technical features like interfaces and algorithms (Schneider, 2018a). These socio-technical practices span the gamut of media types and genres available in China’s hybrid media ecology, ranging from older blogs, websites and forums to social media, video-sharing platforms and ‘mega-apps’ like Tencent’s Weixin, where they sit on top of commercial and political incentives that facilitate particular kinds of group sentiments and behaviours (Schneider, 2021, 2022).

With internet communication now ubiquitous across China’s highly connected and largely mobile publics, the full diversity of Chinese nationalisms has moved into view. Depending on the respective issues and platforms, nationalism can come to be shaped by disgruntled middle-aged and older men (Schneider, 2018a, ch.7) or the much-evoked disillusioned ‘angry (male) youths’ (*fenqing* 愤青; see L. Yang & Zheng, 2014); by urban young women (the ‘little pinks’, see Chen, 2023) or by men who hijack those women’s online discussions (Fang & Repnikova, 2017); by those who support the Xi Jinping administration and those who oppose it (Han, 2021). All throughout, internet users demonstrate their substantial literacy and competency with digital tools: especially the advanced organisational capacities that Chinese fans of popular culture and celebrities have demonstrated in their (often toxic) promotion of idols have come to inform how nationalist activism functions today, whether domestically or in attempts to influence politics abroad (Liu, 2018; Zhang, 2016). If these developments illustrate anything, it is that nationalism has become the universal shared language through which China’s digitally savvy, contentious publics negotiate their diverse politics.

What, then, are some of the lessons that this experience with nationalism in Chinese online spheres

can teach us? First, the lens of nationalism aptly illustrates the state’s role, not just as a regulator of the national internet and a source of nationalist discourse, but as a ‘strategic nexus’ (Creemers, 2018) that sits between public and private interests. And as much as it may be tempting to view the state as a single, monolithic entity with a consistent plan for China’s internet spheres, regulators are largely muddling through the technological transformations that shape China’s nationalism, at times through pragmatic actions, at others through dogmatic reactions, but always in dialogue with the socio-technical complexities that idiosyncratically emerge from China’s digital networks.

Second, the history of China’s digital nationalism illustrates the power that the capitalist rationales of China’s political economy exert over digital interactions (Fuchs, 2015; Hong, 2017). As commercially driven platform providers monetise networked interactions, they push usage in directions that loop back on themselves, promote virality and amplify at times toxic patterns. Related to this, we must keep in mind that technology is never merely a neutral tool but is steeped in, and consequently an expression of, wider socio-political structures; this is visible in the network effects that platforms leverage for their commercial gains, and which accelerate certain nationalist discourses; it is visible in the algorithms that push eye-catching content to the fore, and the interface designs that encourage or discourage particular kinds of interactions, always in the interests of monetisation.

China’s internet, and the nationalisms it enables, is then primarily shaped by two major sources of power: the state and the market. In this, the Chinese internet – despite all its unique features – is not that dissimilar from internets elsewhere. But we must not overlook how these powers intersect with a third: the digital affordances of the technologies themselves. This then is the third lesson that China’s digital nationalisms can teach. We can loosely map the parallel developments of, on one hand, PRC internet techniques and, on the other hand, the affective publics they enable.

Early interactions, for instance, largely played out in idiosyncratic forums, websites and blogs, which were characterised by the way their hyperlink

activities integrated into older ‘one-to-many’ communication rationales. The results reproduced the structural features of the web, like the ‘power law’ of networks (Shirky, 2003), in which a small number of nodes (usually established actors and their affiliates) became centrally important, contrasting with a ‘long tail’ of negligible activities by fringe actors. Effects such as these were then amplified by the linking and content-creation practices of media users who had been socialised in legacy mass-media environments, and for topics of national importance, for instance reflections on China’s history of war, this led to sheltered corners of web presentation that were steeped in the elite understandings of PRC historiography (Schneider, 2018b).

Such early communicative activities were still very much committed to an archival approach in which users curated the singular ‘correct’ understand of the nation’s memories, with little space for non-mainstream nationalisms (Schneider, 2018b). Later social media activities enabled far messier, and at times more explosive, online interactions. The introduction of Weibo and the later popularity of Weixin have then also prompted Chinese media scholars to speculate about the kinds of sociality each platform, with its respective design features, would enable. As Yu Guoming (2014, pp. 4–7) has argued, Weibo is effectively a personalised broadcast medium that allows users to shout out into the void, often anonymously, whereas Weixin relies on pre-existing social relations that consequently prompt more considerate discourse. As I have shown elsewhere (Schneider, 2018a, ch.7), that assessment correctly draws attention to the power of design, but it misrepresents the degree to which Weibo’s model lifted elite actors like celebrities to the fore of discussions, allowing them to intervene in and soften otherwise aggressive nationalist sentiments. The assessment of small-group apps like Weixin also deserves to be nuanced, as the relations that these apps leverage introduce socio-psychological pressures that move groups towards conformity. While this may prevent some communities from voicing radically divergent discourses so as not to offend the sensibilities of personal contacts, it may also create walled gardens of like-minded users in which toxic attitudes and false information remain unchecked. Indeed, one could argue that the diversity

of nationalisms in today’s China is in part the result of the fractured platform environment and the many decoupled realities and echo chambers that this environment has spawned (Schneider, 2023).

In sum, the most recent trends suggest that these various factors collude to hinder serendipity and instead facilitate parochial nationalist expressions and activism. It is then also fair to conclude that nationalism will continue to act as one of the core ideological and emotional frameworks through which Chinese internet users make sense of the world and its politics. It is then less a question of *whether* new ICT innovations like advanced automated decision-making systems, new platforms and apps, or artificial intelligence, will filter and facilitate Chinese nationalism. They already do: on 2 April 2024, Xinhua news published an anti-American satire video on the foreign social media platform X, which it proudly presented as ‘artificial intelligence generated content’ (Xinhua, 2024). As new ICT become integrated into the complex nationalist interactions between the state, the citizens and the various digital platforms (domestic or foreign), the question is which, if any, of China’s many nationalisms will come to define the mainstream, who will benefit from this and what the implications will be, not just for China, but also for the rest of the world.

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Florian Schneider, PhD, Sheffield University, is Chair Professor of Modern China at the Leiden University Institute for Area Studies. He is the managing editor of *Asiascape: Digital Asia*, the director of the Leiden Asia Centre and the author of three books: *Staging China: The Politics of Mass Spectacle* (Leiden University Press, 2019, recipient of the ICAS Book Prize 2021 Accolades), *China’s Digital Nationalism* (Oxford University Press, 2018) and *Visual Political Communication in Popular Chinese Television Series* (Brill, 2013, recipient of the 2014 EastAsiaNet book prize). In 2017, he was awarded the Leiden University teaching prize for his innovative work as an educator. His research interests include questions of governance, political communication and digital media in China and East Asia, as well as international relations in the region.